

TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING THE NEGOTIATION AND DECISION-MAKING
PROCESS OF WITHDRAWAL FROM COLLEGE: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

by

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To Krista and Allison

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research project focused on the interviews of 27 low socio-economic students at a research university in the southwestern United States. The students had already withdrawn from the university or were in the process of withdrawing. The study seeks to provide increased understanding of how students negotiate the decision-making process to withdraw from the first university they attended after high school. The theoretical lenses of student departure theories (Astin, 1993; Bean, 1983; Tierney, 1992; and Tinto, 1993) and decision-making theories (Becker, 1976; Frank, 1987; Kahneman, 2003; March, 1994; Scott, 2000) were combined. The Decision-Making Process Model of Student Departure is offered as a new theoretical framework that combines decision-making theories and student retention theories. This conceptualization is unlike other student departure models because it includes the proposition that forces push at the student from within the institution and forces pull them from outside the institution. In addition, it is different from other student departure models because it includes the discussion about how students think about their process to withdraw – it is not meant to describe their behaviors. Financial, academic and psychological stresses (from both within and outside the institution) influenced how the students negotiated the decision-making process to leave the institution. The students did not seek out institutional agents (advisors or faculty members) for advice when they were struggling academically. They developed their own strategies or went to their family members for advice, many of whom had never been to college.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Almost twenty-five percent of students depart from four-year postsecondary institutions in the United States each year (Braxton, Hirschy, & McLendon, 2004). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2006) reports that four-year public institutions had an almost 77 percent persistence rate. Even though ethnic minority students have access to college at a higher rate than forty years ago, their departure rates are greater than Caucasian students (Braxton, Hirschy, McClendon, 2004; Karen & Dougherty, 2005). The six-year departure rate for African Americans students entering college out of high school is 60 percent and the six-year departure rate for Hispanic students is 53 percent. These percentages are significantly higher than the 39 percent six-year departure rate for Caucasians (Braxton et al., 2004).

The Common Data Set (Office of Institutional Research, 2008) at the research site (public, four-year university) for this study reports that the overall withdrawal rate for the 2002 cohort of freshmen for the six-year period from 2002 to 2008 is 43%. Of the 5613 students in the 2002 cohort, 2404 withdrew within six years. The Common Data Set reported that as of December 18, 2008 there were a total of 6331 students enrolled as first-time full-time freshmen in the 2008 cohort. If the trend stays the same, this means that approximately 2723 of the freshmen that were welcomed to campus in the fall of 2008 will not graduate within six years. Where will they go and why did they leave? Is there a process in place to find out? It is problematic that longitudinal data supported by both qualitative and quantitative analyses has not been collected in a methodological and consistent way, institutionally and nationally, about student departure, drop-out, stop-out

or transfer decisions. Assuming that an institution wants to improve its retention rate, a candid transparent assessment of the pre-entry attributes for those admitted and those who leave and for what reasons, might reveal interesting results. It might not be a surprise that the most academically qualified students graduate and the least academically qualified transfer or leave. A simple attempt at accounting where the students went and for what reasons might reveal that students are continuing on elsewhere, should not have been admitted in the first place if academic support was not intrusive for the at-risk students, or maybe that an 80% retention rate is the standard departure rate for large public universities. Juxtaposing quantitative analysis with qualitative inquiry as an institutional policy and practice, at the student's moment of departure, would be the opportune time to collect data.

The explanations for student withdrawal are complex, divided into overarching categories suggested by Vincent Tinto, such as economical, interactional, organizational, psychological, and sociological (Braxton, 2000; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). In the 1980s, Vincent Tinto conceptually compared withdrawal to suicide (1986). William Tierney (Tierney 1999; Braxton, 2000) countered this claim saying that Tinto ignored the student's cultural perspective by suggesting that a student had to commit cultural suicide through the process of integrating into university life. Student integration models suggest that students have the responsibility to integrate into the college community or become an educational mortality statistic, otherwise known as drop-outs. According to Tinto (1993) and Alexander Astin (1993), successful integration into the college community supports positive educational

attainment. This complex issue is hard to relate to the individual student's experience. The overarching topic of student departure is a puzzle and very complex. This research sought to find out how many different factors are involved in a single student's relationship with one institution.

The positive benefits to obtaining education beyond high school are associated with both economic and noneconomic individual gains. Higher job satisfaction, higher income and employment stability are some of the measurable outcomes of postsecondary attainment (Grubb, 2002). It is important to understand the implications of college student departure for ethnic minority (oftentimes the low socioeconomic group) students because, even though ethnic minority students have access to college at a higher rate than forty years ago, their departure rates are greater than Caucasian students (Braxton, Hirschy, McClendon, 2004; Karen & Dougherty in Orfield, 2005).

Production of an educated and skilled workforce contributes to better employment opportunities and economic possibilities for states and regions within the United States (Turner, 2002) especially if the college educated remain close to home in their proximate geographic area. It is important then to admit, retain and graduate students from the local regions. The predicted outcome would be individual economic gains and an improved state work force. If an institution has stated publicly through presidential messaging that one of the university missions is to improve outcomes for the underprivileged in their region, then understanding the individual perspectives regarding the barriers to educational achievement are important. Providing the necessary support services to facilitate academic success for low socioeconomic students from the state could increase

persistence. An institutional mission to provide access to higher education for the students predicted to drop-out (usually believed to be low socioeconomic students from poor school districts where students are less academically prepared for rigorous college coursework) becomes complicated when economic returns to the institution in the form of net tuition revenue are lost because this subset of students graduates at a lower rate (Ehrenberg, 2003).

Statement of the Problem

The issue of college student departure, as evidenced by the massive amounts of literature published on the subject, suggests that it is an important topic. Even though student departure has been studied extensively, surprisingly little research has focused on how students themselves subjectively experience their decisions to withdraw from a particular college or university. Analyzing the individual experiences will add meaning and depth to existing quantitative and qualitative results. Additionally, by combining decision-making theory with student departure theory, a new theoretical approach to qualitative inquiry is offered. Elements that contribute to student success or departure (Arbona & Nora 2007; Astin, 1972; Berger & Milem 1999; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Fischer, 2007; Hu & St. John 2001; Lounsbury, Saudargas, & Gibson 2004; Potts, Schultz & Foust 2003; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld 2005) describe students' characteristics oftentimes using pre-enrollment data and then correlating them to withdrawal outcomes. What remains unexplained are the students' perspectives on how they negotiated the decision-making process to leave a postsecondary institution and what their subjective understandings were of why they left.

There are multiple hypotheses and propositions that implicate discrete student or institutional characteristics that contribute to withdrawal. They range from loneliness, social support and living arrangements (Nipcon, Huser, Blanks, Sollenberger, Befort & Kurpus, 2006); to the student's first impressions at an orientation/transition program (Edward, 2003); or the impact of a freshman's major on persistence (Leppel, 2001). According to Burton Clark, institutions admit students and then perform a cooling-out function (Clark, 1960), for example, through a process of gateway courses that students are academically under-prepared to pass. An example of this would be the requirement that freshmen take advanced math and science courses during their first semester of college that are requirements to enroll in specific academic major tracks. In the community college setting, students choose vocational classes over an academic curricular track and therefore are less likely to transfer to a four-year institution (Clark, 1960). Bryant and Astin (2008) researched factors that led to spiritual struggles and whether the struggles affected college students' physical and psychological health during college. Higher education personnel misunderstand cultural differences and institutional barriers that inadvertently create tensions, for example, with Native American students' close ties with their families (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). When students tell their story and describe their withdrawal, what or who influenced their decision-making the most? Academic advisors, faculty members, and counselors are institutional agents and when acting as gatekeepers, might interrupt the process of withdrawal or might be implicated in hastening it along. Pressures within the college environment, whether academic or psychological might be pushing the student out from within while at the

same time forces outside the college environment might be pulling them away. Additionally, there might be a simple clear reason for departure and then again, there might have been a very complicated and hard to articulate reason. The story that the students share and the understanding and meaning they attach throughout their decision-making path to leaving is under-researched.

Statement of the Purpose

The first purpose for this research project is to contribute to the student departure literature by including decision-making theory as a part of the conversation. This is a novel approach to student departure literature. Qualitative inquiry and analysis will add to the student departure literature by providing information about the decision-making process regarding withdrawal from the student's perspective and not by describing their behaviors.

The second purpose for this research is to inform student affairs administrators about how students negotiate barriers and constraints despite having been offered extra programs and resources predicted to help them succeed in college. The students who will be interviewed for this research will have been involved in an access and success program at a public, four-year research institution in the southwestern United States. The effectiveness of the resources provided will potentially become subject to increased scrutiny and evaluation if the programs do not result in increased graduation rates. The only way to find out what support systems the students feel they need is to ask the students directly. Increased understanding of student decision-making and thought processes regarding departure should result in institutional practices and policies that

improve retention, or minimally, acknowledgement through empirical reasoning, that the departure rates are steady and reasonable.

Research Questions

The purpose for the research regarding student withdrawal is to gain understanding about how students who withdraw from college negotiate the constraints and barriers surrounding departure and how they ascribe meaning to their decision-making process. The research questions are designed to increase the conversation between departure and decision-making theories. The questions that include push-pull factors (symbolized as conflicts/constraints) and institutional agents are included to uncover the possibility that the interactions and pressures associated with them, between the students and other actors (family, advisors, faculty members, counselors, etc.), influence the decision-making process.

1. What were the push-pull factors that contributed to students leaving the institution?
 - a. Why did the students say they left the institution?
 - b. What pulled them from the outside, away from the institution?
 - c. What pushed them out from the inside?

2. How did they negotiate the decision-making process?

How and when did alternate pathways to perceived success surface and become an option?

3. How did institutional agents (withdrawal counselors, academic advisors, faculty members, financial aid advisors, etc.) and agents outside the institution (family and friends) influence this process?

Methodology

In order to obtain answers to the research questions, it was necessary to build rapport with the subjects through an interactive one on one interview approach (Maxwell, 2005). There is ample quantitative data describing students who withdrew from colleges (Bensimon, 2007). The qualitative inquiry in this research project considered the decision-making processes of the students who withdrew or were considering withdrawal. This combination of decision-making theory and student departure theory is a novel theoretical approach. The qualitative and interactive design (Maxwell, 2005) will provide the flexibility for the interviewer and subjects to explore concepts that may differ from the variables most often researched using quantitative design. For example, asking about alternate pathways to success as a decision to depart postsecondary education might lead to a discussion regarding higher education not paying off in our current economic climate or leaving as a result of family financial constraints and responsibilities.

Instead of relying on the prevalent results from quantitative research, some of the following points should be considered (Bell, 2002).

- Narrative allows researchers to understand experiences.
- Analysis of stories allows researchers to analyze hidden assumptions.
- Narrative allows for temporal understanding of events, at possible intervening stages.

The responses to semi-structured interviews based on questions developed from the prominent departure and decision-making theorists will either provide data that

corroborates prior findings or new data will emerge that provides new insight into the students' decision-making processes that resulted in departure from the initial institution where they enrolled.

Significance of the Study

This research is significant because it adds a new theoretical approach to student departure theory by combining decision-making theory with student departure theory and analyzing the students' thought processes instead of their behaviors. Another reason that it is significant is because it will inform practices and policies in regards to support and intervention of students at risk of not graduating from postsecondary educational institutions.

Organization of the Study

This research project is organized into five chapters. Chapter One contextualized the study by introducing student departure in postsecondary institutions as the foundation for the research. The problem, purpose, methodology and its significance to the student departure literature will be offered. Chapter Two provides a review of pertinent literature and the literature that supports the novel theoretical framework that includes student departure theory and decision-making theory. Chapter Three will present the research design including methodology, positionality, participant selection and recruitment, data collection and analysis techniques. Chapter Four presents the qualitative interview findings. Chapter Five contains conclusions that emerged from the study, implications for higher education and recommendations for further research.

Summary

It is an incomplete proposition to suggest that students depart a postsecondary institution because they did not successfully integrate into the campus culture. Are the reasons that a student leaves the institution the opposite of why others stay? This research pushes against the idea that students with specific pre-entry attributes (goals and commitment for example) who then integrate academically and socially are not necessarily different from the students who withdraw, drop-out, stop-out or transfer. I propose that students can be goal-oriented, originally committed to the institution, show integration behaviors and still leave. Something seems to be missing from the framework. Even though student retention, most often based on Vincent Tinto's theoretical framework, has been studied for over 40 years, there have not been obvious or substantial improvements in retention rates, especially for low socioeconomic students and students of color. The research assumes that there is an institutional goal to improve retention and graduation and that might not be the case. It is a persistent and complex dilemma.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to review existing student departure and decision-making theories to lay the foundation for combining them to develop increased understanding about how students negotiate the process of withdrawing from a university. After a brief synopsis of the student departure writings from the early 1900s, the consequent literature will be organized according to Vincent Tinto's organizational categories (economic, interactional, organizational, psychological, sociological, and additionally, cultural). Tinto's categorization of the literature is a response to what he describes as a difficult path to understand and make sense of the "complex interplay of forces" (Tinto, 1993, p. 3) that inhibit the successful efforts to improve retention rates. He writes that the literature is filled with misleading stereotypes that suggest that there are students who lack important attributes necessary to graduate from college. The push/pull concept and alternate pathways to success as applied to higher education will be reviewed and their relationship to this research will be explained. Finally, in order to explain the theoretical lens, rational choice theory and bounded rationality are intersected with student departure theory.

Early Research

Student institutional mortality was the term applied to dropping out early in the twentieth century. As early as 1937, John McNeely researched college student mortality for the United States Department of the Interior. The questions he sought to answer are similar to the ones asked currently. What is the extent of student mortality? What are the causes of student mortality? What are the factors involved in student mortality and what

is the relationship between academic achievement and student mortality? His study (McNeely, 1937) pulled seventy-five data elements from student records from twenty-five cooperating universities from across the United States. He described the students who left (refer to study for detailed results) but was unable to answer the question articulated again three years later by Louise May Snyder, “Why do they leave?” From her analysis of drop-outs from Los Angeles City College, she summarized that she found no particular profile and no clarity regarding the underlying causes for withdrawals (Snyder, 1940). She described student characteristics that correlated with drop-out but also stated, “some of the reasons for withdrawal definitely challenge the college” (Snyder, 1940, p. 28). She posited that underlying the actual stated reason for leaving was a complex decision-making process that was more than the actual summary reason that the student gave, such as dropping out to work. Snyder challenged that colleges should approach each student and their situations individually and provide resources, which she concluded to be overwhelmingly the need for academic support, early in the student’s career.

Student Retention Literature

Vincent Tinto Departure Framework

A discussion using Tinto’s framework that organizes the departure literature into five categories, with the addition of a cultural category, follows to emphasize the level of detail and granularity to explain the complex problem of student withdrawal. Examples from each of Tinto’s organizational categories (economic, interactional, organizational, psychological, sociological, see Table 1) and in addition, a cultural category will be

provided. Table 1 is a summary of the theorists and scholars that Tinto included in his categorization. Because the amount of literature on student departure is very extensive, refer to individual studies for detailed analyses. Examples are provided within each organizational category and I will provide different examples from those listed in the table in the following literature review. This literature review seeks to compile an informed base from which to ground the questions asked to students who have departed or considered leaving a postsecondary institution.

The table below provides a brief description of each theory type and related theorists and researchers according to Tinto.

Table 1
Student Departure Theorists by Type

<i>Theory Type</i>	<i>Distinguishing Characteristics</i>	<i>Theorists/Scholars</i>
Psychological	Emphasizes the role of individual psychological attributes within the departure process.	Summerskill (1962), Heilbrun (1965), Rose and Elton (1966), Marks (1967), Hanson and Taylor (1970), Hannah (1971), Waterman and Waterman, (1972), Rossman and Kirk (1976)
Sociological	Environmental theories that address influence of social and economic forces on students' behavior.	Duncan (1972), Karabel (1972), Sewall and Hauser (1975), Pincus (1980)
Economic	Like economic theories: weighing of costs and benefits of investing scarce resources.	Jensen (1981), Iwaii and Churchill (1982), Manski and Wise (1983), Voorhees (1984)
Organizational	Effect that organizations have on student behavior.	Kamens (1971), Bean (1980)
Interactional	Student behavior reflects individual and organizational characteristics.	Tinto (1975-2008), Pascarella ((1983-2006), Tierney (1992-1999), Terenzini (1997-2005)

SOURCE: Tinto, 1993

Economic

The financial nexus model, presented by Michael Paulsen and Edward St. John (2002) is an example of an economic theory, one that problematizes how students weigh

the costs and benefits of investing scarce resources that affect the college-choice and persistence of students. This model places student behavior in contexts that consider cultural diversity and makes comparisons between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, their perceptions of financial constraints, and how finances impact continued enrollment. This is a quantitative study that measures student perceptions without asking them directly; the results are based on student background, their financial reasons for choosing a college, their college experience (measured by achievement), aspirations, and finances. One of the findings that Paulsen and St. John say merits attention is the result that low-income students whose mothers had a college education were more likely to persist than those whose mothers only attended high school. Their interpretation that follows is what merits attention for this study. How can they make this claim? “Clearly, for low-income students, having a mother with a college degree had a motivational value regarding persistence in college.” (Paulsen & St. John, 2002, p. 216) It seems a leap to conclude that a mother with a college degree equals motivation. The finding that better matches their methodological approach is that low income students who enroll at a college where they can work and manage their living costs are more likely to persist. A sophisticated cost benefit analysis as the basis for a student’s decision to remain at or depart from an institution must include an understanding of how students define the costs and benefits. Being awarded significant levels of financial support does not guarantee retention. It is important to consider how students understand and utilize these resources. St. John, Cabrera, Nora, and Asker (Braxton, 2000) push against Tinto’s integration theory by suggesting that complex factors such as students’ understanding

about their ability to pay for college, their understanding about the financial aid they receive, how the costs of college affect and strain the family resources, and tuition costs that continue to rise, directly influence and complicate the decision-making process when a student (and their family) weighs the costs and benefits of remaining at a particular institution. St. John et al. (2000) point out that there are two components to the economic perspective, the tangible factors (ability to pay) and the psychological factors (the student's perceptions regarding their ability to pay). This research project posits that both can be stressors to low-income students whether or not they receive a full scholarship package even though St John et al. (2000) and Cabrera, Nora, and Castaneda (1992) suggest that this influences their commitment and integration into the institution in a positive way. Nevertheless, substantial financial aid is a component of the cost and benefits analysis of staying or leaving and, once given the resources, low socioeconomic families need to understand how to budget the sometimes large sums of money that are disbursed at the beginning of each semester. Evidence of this will be presented in the findings.

In addition to applying the economic model to financial aid, it has been applied to the academic perspective of the impact of college major choice on persistence in a variety of majors and the differences between male and female academic discipline choices. Karen Leppel's study used basic economic theory as her theoretical foundation (Leppel, 2001). Applying logit analysis and least squares regression to analyze data from the 1990 survey of Beginning Postsecondary Students, Leppel posited that students proceed through a series of economic decisions. First, they weigh the present and future costs and

benefits when they decide whether to attend, persist or leave college. A student then weighs the options regarding type of institution and program of study with an understanding that there are higher paying jobs that result from particular fields of study. After enrollment, the student navigates the cost/benefits analysis and makes persistence decisions depending on their academic struggles, time to degree, financial struggles and family responsibilities. Leppel found that persistence rates varied by academic discipline and along gender lines. Men were more likely to persist in business majors and women were more likely to persist in education and health fields. In addition, male and female students with undecided majors performed poorly academically and were more likely to depart the institution (Leppel, 2001). Stated another way and as a reference to this particular research, the institution has a responsibility to identify students with financial and academic frailties and provide guidance and resources.

Interactional

This category of theoretical frameworks for studying student departure is comprised of the most often cited scholars in the field: Vincent Tinto, Ernest Pascarella and William Tierney (who critiques the model). Interactional models suggest that the degree to which a student integrates academically and socially into an institution reinforces degree attainment behaviors and conversely, weak integration posits student departure.

Tinto's model is designed to longitudinally describe and explain the interaction between the student and the institution. He describes his model of student departure as primarily sociological and interactive. Tinto asserts that students enroll in college with a

set of pre-entry characteristics including academic skills, personal and family patterns of behavior, intentions and aspirations, and commitment towards a goal of graduation. Tinto's model will be further discussed in the theoretical framework section of this chapter.

Byung-Shik Rhee's article is an example of the continuing impact that Tinto's theory has on college departure research. Rhee's study (2008) includes the psychological dimension of diversity at the institutional climate level into the reformulated multilevel approach to Tinto's model. The study had mixed results and contradictory findings. Institutional diversity through minority recruitment led to higher stop-out rates and institutional emphasis on diversity led to higher stop-out rates. Rhee was unable to explain these findings and what this literature review suggests is that a mixed methods approach might have provided some clues why students stop-out, drop-out or transfer.

Ernest Pascarella tested, reconceptualized and expanded upon Tinto's model and suggested that parts of Tinto's model are supported but others are not. For example, in Pascarella, Duby and Iverson's study at a non-residential institution (1983), there was consistency at both residential and non-residential academies measuring academic integration as the central concept. At the same time, Tinto's concept of social integration into the institution was found lacking when applied to other types of institutions besides residential colleges. Another issue that this study addressed was another of Tinto's central concepts – commitment to the institution. Their explanation for the insufficient applicability of commitment is that commitment is a pre-entry attribute. Possibly pre-entry commitment shifts towards the concept that the student's attitude and satisfaction

with the organization during the freshman year encourages commitment with the focus on satisfaction and not commitment (Bean, 1980). John Bean will be discussed within the organizational category.

William Tierney's contribution to the departure literature is the awareness that he brought about the inclusion of cultural context and student perceptions into the theoretical frameworks that describe attrition or conversely integration. He openly criticizes Tinto's misuse of cultural rites of passage as a metaphor for integration and also that Tinto's model does not fully address the lived experiences of non-white students (Tierney, 1992; Tierney, 1999; Braxton, 2000). Furthermore, Tierney asserts that individuals leave an institution, not collectively, as assumed in anthropological terminology that is collective in nature and not individualistic. Another argument he makes is that rites of passages are intracultural and not crosscultural. Tierney's focus on sensitivity to minority students is important to note for this research project for two reasons. The first is that the participants are from minority groups and second, that they are from the lowest socioeconomic strata at the institution – which is very unlike traditional middle or upper class Caucasian students.

Organizational

The organizational conceptualization of student departure focuses on the institutional actors (faculty, staff, and administrators) and how they affect student behavior. Institutional commitments to integrity and to student welfare are instrumental in how they proceed to reduce student departure (Braxton et al., 2004). John Bean introduced organizational departure theory to the college context. He formulated a

student attrition model based upon results from studies about employee turnover in work organizations. His assumption was that the reasons people leave organizations are similar across different types of organizations, for example, colleges, universities or workplaces. He relates what was learned from industrial turnover (Bean, 1983) and situates it in a psychological framework. He describes institutional attributes that increase participation and enhance retention through reward systems such as grades or campus jobs. This model provides a framework for researching different types of institutional structures and many components within the academy that explain the behavioral response of leaving. Bean's thesis is that organizational determinants affect student satisfaction that then influence withdrawal. He includes the student's background variables to reflect pre-enrollment characteristics that shape the student's interactions with the university. Both Bean's causal model and his psychological model include student perception and belief constructs that arise from personal characteristics and although linear, a pathway to interpret how they assess their situations and then study the pursuant behaviors. Successful negotiation with their environment presumably leads to academic and social integration, institutional fit, self-efficacy and commitment to persist (Bean & Eaton in Braxton, 2000).

Joseph Berger and John Braxton (1998) examined the role of organizational attributes to revise Tinto's interaction theory. Berger and Braxton suggest that a revised lens through which to look at student departure is necessary because the interactions between the students and the organization have been overlooked. Prior research described the demographics of the postsecondary institution and not its personality

(Berger & Braxton, 1998). The data for their study was collected at a private, residential Research I university and they defended this choice by saying that theory can be informed by studying what happens at the extreme ends of the spectrum. They combined variables from Tinto and Bean's models and additional measures of faculty behaviors, student involvement, satisfaction and stress, and perceptions of the college's climate. They combined student background characteristics, the student's initial commitment, social integration, and organizational attributes and finally the student's intent to reenroll. Berger and Braxton (1998) concluded that the role of race could be an important finding for this type of institution but "it is difficult to interpret these findings, but they clearly indicate that race plays an important role in this environment." (p. 115) Overall, they defended their model as an improvement and elaboration of Tinto's theory. The addition of organizational attributes explains social integration, a student's institutional commitment and departure decisions. This study is an example of interweaving models and explaining departure by combining student and institutional characteristics without including student meaning making or perspective which is fundamental to this research project.

Psychological

As stated before, the psychological theorists take into account the role of individual psychological attributes within the departure process. Alexander Astin's input, environment, and outcomes college impact framework is perhaps the most influential and durable model (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) conceptualizing student change in college. The three elements of his guide are inputs, environment and outcomes. Astin's approach

ascribes importance to the institutional environment where its role is to provide the academic and social opportunities for student involvement. The student's responsibility is to take advantage of the opportunities that are provided and then change and develop through the involvement mechanism. His theory simply stated is that students learn by becoming involved (Astin, 1993). Astin (1984) describes his model's appeal:

I have not needed to draw a maze consisting of dozens of boxes interconnected by two-headed arrows to explain the basic elements of the theory to others. Second, the theory can explain most of the empirical knowledge about environmental influences on student development that researchers have gained over the years. Third, it is capable of embracing principles from such widely divergent sources as psychoanalysis and classical learning theory. Finally, this theory of student involvement can be used both by researchers – to guide their investigation of student development – and by college administrators and faculty – to help them design more effective learning environments. (p. 297)

The following examples are an examination of the Big Five personality traits that can potentially affect student withdrawal (Lounsbury, Saudargas, & Gibson, 2004) and a quantitative analysis about stereotype threat (Osborne & Walker, 2006). Lounsbury et al.'s purpose was to focus on what they describe as the five normal personality traits of agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, extraversion and openness. At the beginning of their article, they wrote that they were unable to draw on any one theoretical model to frame their research so they included elements of Tinto, Bean and Metzner and McDaniel and Graham (see Lounsbury et al.'s study (2004) for discussion of the inclusion of the preceding mentioned elements). In their discussion, they connect their results to Tinto's by saying that Tinto's labels of adjustment and isolation (Tinto, 1993) are logically related to the two personality traits of emotional stability and extraversion. Lounsbury et al., then connect their qualitative findings to Chickering and Reisser's

developmental vectors of student development. The point to be made from including this research is that there is a tendency to connect results to Tinto's theory instead of allowing the results to stand alone. What was interesting was their suggestion that admissions officers might want to consider using personality measures in their application process just as the corporate world does to screen job applicants. They surmise that using personality traits in the admissions process would lead to more ethnic and cultural diversity on campus compared to ACT and SAT test results (Lounsbury et al., 2004).

Another qualitative study that fits into the psychological category is Jason Osborne and Christopher Walker's (2006) research that connects stereotype threat to withdrawal by successful students of color. Claude Steele's (1999) stereotype threat hypothesis posits that negative stereotypes about the intellectual capacity of stigmatized groups influences the actual academic outcomes through psychological means. For example, highly successful students of color feel more anxiety and insecurity about their academic abilities than do Caucasian students. Chronic anxiety in an academic setting can lead to two different responses: dis-identification with superior intellectual and academic ability or withdrawal from the anxiety-producing environment. Relating this to withdrawal, Osborne and Walker (2006) predict that students of color who are strongly identified with high academic ability will have an increased risk of drop-out and conversely, strongly identified Caucasian and Asian students (who are not stigmatized by intellectual inferiority) have a decreased risk of withdrawal. Their longitudinal quantitative study, for a group of high school students, supports Steele's stereotype threat theory.

Sociological

To review, sociological theories as defined by Tinto are environmental theories that address the influence of social and economic forces on students' behavior. A study that addresses social and economic tension felt by Hispanic students is Consuelo Arbona and Amaury Nora's (2007) research about college degree attainment and the type of institution first attended after high school. Arbona and Nora argue that even though the number of minorities attending college has increased it is not enough to say that this is the only measure that is important. The discrepancy between enrollment and graduation, and the disproportion of minority students attending two-year colleges suggests that access to college is not providing the gateway to a bachelor's degree for this set of students. They reason that Hispanic students attend two-year institutions more often because of lower tuition, closeness to home, less travel expense incurred, and on-campus residence is not required. Hispanic students attend two-year colleges more often because of financial constraints and because the social environment at community colleges does not support or embed transfer processes into their institutional practices and policies. Hispanic students that start at a four-year institution are faced with significant challenges (Arbona and Nora, 2007). They pursue college part-time or stop-out with the intention to return, which very rarely occurs. This relates to this study because the students choose to go to a two-year institution as the next step or as a strategy to supplement their coursework in a more favorable academic environment.

Choosing the type of postsecondary institution is one consideration for low-socioeconomic students but also feeling a sense of belonging once there has strong

implications for retention. Ostrove and Long (2007) examine how social class affects persistence through the mechanism of belonging. They surveyed 324 students at a liberal arts college in the Midwest. They found that class background was significantly related to academic adjustment and a sense of belonging. They found the results were significant using both objective (family income, parent's occupation and educational level) and subjective (self-identification with a social class group) measures. The sense of belonging/not belonging was supported in a case study at the University of Texas Pan American. Salinas and Llanes (2003) hypothesize in their conclusion that when students are on probation or suspension that instead of proving to the university that they belong there, they give up and leave. Their other hypothesis is that this set of students is unable to make up the academic deficit during summer school because they have to work and are unable to re-enroll. This is important to know for the purpose of planning programs and interventions that can alleviate the student's sense that they do not belong and by providing an opportunity for students to steadily improve their academic situation; evidence will be presented in the findings that this is the case at the site for this research project.

Cultural

The research on student departure has progressed from the initial studies using traditional age Caucasian students as the subjects to culturally sensitive and complex frameworks that take into account other ethnicities (Fischer, 2007; Hu & St. John, 2001; Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002; Osborne & Walker, 2006). Critics argue that Tinto's (1993) theory that does not include cultural variables, is problematic when used as a lens

to address departure issues related to minority students, under the assumption that there might be cultural differences (Guiffrida, 2006). William Tierney (1992, 1999) argues that the premise that students integrate by committing cultural suicide by breaking away from their past connections to family and cultural background is detrimental to understanding and providing support for a culturally inclusive environment that bolsters retention rates for minority students.

The importance of family connections has surfaced as a determinant of retention or withdrawal. Aggregating and studying different cohorts of students has contributed to the understanding of why certain groups of students leave college. Native American students usually attend two-year institutions within their tribal college system and represent less than 1% of enrolled college students (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). Regardless of their small numbers, Native American student success in the education pipeline deserves attention. Guillory and Wolverton (2008) point out that the traditional models (Tinto, Astin, Pascarella) of student retention only partially explain the barriers for this set of students and they certainly do not take into account tribal differences. The Family Education Model is introduced in Guillory and Wolverton's study and argues its applicability to the Native American population. It is an indigenous-based higher education persistence model that includes strategies for action to reduce attrition. The importance of creating a family-like support system at the institution and acknowledging family as a support system are key concepts to promote persistence. The qualitative results from this study suggest that there is a disconnect between the institution's perceptions about why Native Americans do or do not persist and how the Native

American students describe barriers and persistence components. Institutional agents believed that financial aid was the most important motivating factor for the students, and the Native American students listed family, giving back to their tribal community and on-campus support as the most important persistence factors. Qualitative inquiry provided a richer understanding of how a marginalized population navigates the college process.

Studies such as Attinasi (1989), Wells (2008) and Hu and St. Johns' (2001) contribute to the retention literature by exploring the ways that minority groups perceive their attendance, accumulate social and cultural capital and how they approach and navigate through postsecondary institutions. What Hu and St. John (2001) found that is important to this research project was that inadequate financial aid was not the factor that explained the difference between the persistence rates between ethnic groups. They concluded that financial support was necessary but academic support would improve persistence rates and close some of the gap between ethnic groups. This is important to note because the subjects in this study were awarded an aid package that covers tuition and fees, room and board and books but financial difficulties were not the only reason the students gave for leaving.

Push-Pull Concept in Higher Education Literature

The assumption that underlies this research is that students negotiate multiple pressures, constraints and influences in their process of university withdrawal. This research suggests that a student is influenced from outside the higher education organization and from within the organization and somehow these forces frame their decision-making process to depart an institution. The push/pull concept was introduced

to higher education literature by Philip Altbach (1991) and expanded upon by Tim Mazzarol and Geoffrey Soutar (2002) in the context of international students and study abroad and their interrelationship with the sending country and the host country. The component of Altbach's research that pertains to this study is what he described as the least understood element which is the student's decision-making process regarding their decision to study abroad. The factors he described are similar to reasons why students might choose to attend college, even though they are at a greater risk of dropping out: value of a college degree, family expectations (Pimpa, 2005), better opportunities, and cost (even though misunderstood). In studies of international students studying abroad, the family has a significant influence on decision-making behaviors through the constructs of expectations and prestige through wealth attainment (Pimpa, 2005). This research suggests that families are a significant force for a student in their decision-making process. What is extremely interesting from the Mazzarol and Soutar research (2002) is the similarity of their push-pull factors to the findings to be discussed later. The importance of knowledge and awareness of the host country is similar to help provided by institutional agents in this study. They found that relatives had more influence than institutional agents did and that the institutional environment was likewise important. The significance of the 'pull' factors in this research project is similar to the findings that Mazzarol and Souter (2002) described as options considered in the decision-making process when the student considered alternate choices. Their six defined pull factors are: knowledge and awareness, personal recommendations, cost issues, environment, geographic proximity, and social links (Mazzarol et al., 2002).

Alternate Pathways to Success

It cannot be ignored that the variety of postsecondary options is vast. Movement between types of institutions is an option for students for a variety of reasons. There is always the financial issue (a two-year community college as a less expensive option), the academic expectation and rigor consideration of particular schools, location decisions, type of school (vocational/technical, web-based, proprietary such as The University of Phoenix, Beauty School, med-tech institutes), two-year colleges, law enforcement, or complete withdrawal and entry into the workforce. In addition to the educational vehicles, there is the concept introduced by Breen and Jonsson that there are indirect and unusual pathways to educational attainment that are non-linear and non-sequential (Breen & Jonsson, 2000). There are points along a student's educational pathway where decisions are made that cause the student to take a different path or for those on the traditional path (high school to college to graduate school) to make choices that make it extremely difficult to gain access to certain academic fields. One obvious finding is that the students that arrive at college academically underprepared are more likely to attend vocational or trade schools or if they attend college then they are more likely to leave (Breen & Jonsson, 2000). Embedded in this model are decision points but as this student departure and decision-making research project points out, how and why the student and their family navigates one way or the other down their road is rarely included in American higher education scholarship. Rational Choice Theory has been applied to the educational decision-making model in European college choice where there are dual-system options, one of which is enrolling in a university or not (entering the labor market

instead) and another choice is whether to attend vocational training instead of the taking the academic route (Hillmert & Jacob, 2002). In the German system, the pathways are clearly defined unlike the United States system where the options are vast and confusing.

Conceptual Framework

Rationale for Conceptual Framework

The integration of student departure theory with decision-making theory is the theoretical foundation and conceptual framework that guides this research. Not only will the ensuing conversation include both overarching theories (decision-making and departure) but it will include the argument that in order to understand how students negotiate all the constraints regarding the eventual decision to leave their first institution after high school, the departure theories have to be considered collectively and integrated with decision-making theories.

Theoretical Traditions

This section of the literature review will provide an overview of the models used to frame discourse around student withdrawal and relate them to rational choice theory and bounded rationality. Because the student and their decision-making process is the unit of analysis in this research, the decision-making theories will be discussed first. Next, the departure theories will be reviewed and their compatibility with decision-making theories will be presented.

A search of decision-making theories went to the psychology, criminology, mathematics, economics, and neuroscience literatures and the most frequently mentioned theories were Rational Choice Theory and Bounded Rationality. The reason for

narrowing down the decision-making theories to these two is that they are related to each other with Bounded Rationality adding a layer of description to segments of the decision-making process. Rational Choice Theory has credence for this research project because it is related to individual decision-making founded on propositions that consider alternatives, future consequences, individual preferences and also includes the concept that individuals make different choices at points along the decision-making path – all individuals in a like situation might come to a different solution. Each will be described separately with the inclusion of how each maps out the decision-making process. After the theories are summarized, their relationship to withdrawal theories will be demonstrated. Finally, limitations in the higher education literature that do or do not consider decision-making theories will be discussed.

Rational Choice Theory

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) is a behavioral model where individuals make decisions based on a cost versus benefits analysis. Individual preferences and the consequent outcomes of their choices influence rational choice decisions. In other words, an individual rationalizes their decisions by describing the alternatives they considered and the value they attached to the predicted consequences. It is the dominant model in the study of economic decision-making at the micro (individual) level. In his Nobel Lecture, Gary Becker (1976) describes the usefulness of analyzing rational choice through an economic lens positing that it is an extension of individual choice, with the traditional assumption being that decisions are made to maximize personal welfare. He gives attention to human capital theory, mentioning educational choice as an example of an

economic approach to a social issue. Sociologists and political scientists have applied this framework to decision-making under the assumption that all action is fundamentally rational and people will calculate costs and benefits of their actions before making a decision (Scott, 2000).

The idea of rational has been defined as intelligent or successful with outcomes that are favorable (March, 1994). In the context of decision-making, a rational choice can have negative outcomes as well as positive outcomes. RCT posits that actions are purely rational and calculated, even when they appear otherwise (Frank, 1987; Scott, 2000). Mathematical formulas are employed in an economic fashion to social theories such as crime and marriage (Scott, 2000) and criminology (Paternoster & Pogarsky, 2009). The basic tenet is that “the elementary unit of social life is the individual human action. To explain social institutions and social change is to show how they arise as the result of the action and interaction of the individuals” (Scott, 2000). The decision processes are posited to be consequential and preference-based. A rational decision-making process is inherently embedded in a logic of consequences framework. According to March’s (1994) explanation of rational procedure, the ultimate choice is based on the answer to the following four questions.

1. Alternatives: What actions are possible?
2. Expectations: What future consequences might follow from each alternative?
How likely is each possible consequence depending on the alternative chosen?
3. Preferences: What value does the decision-maker place on each of the

alternatives?

4. Decision rule: How does a person make a choice among the alternatives in terms of the value placed on the consequences?

While this framework is straightforward and logical, if used to study human behavior and decision-making (even though people are presumed to be rational), rewards and punishments and conditioned responses test the assumption of pure rationality. Rational Choice Theory says that rewards and punishments can be equated to costs and benefits.

Rational Choice Decision-Making Process

Paternoster and Pogarsky (2009) present the following features of thoughtfully reflective decision-making:

1. Collect information about the problem that requires a decision.
2. Brainstorm alternative solutions to the problem.
3. Systematically deliberate the alternatives, their merits and which might be the best.
4. In retrospect, analyze how the problem solver performed in the situation.

Criticisms and Benefits of Rational Choice Theory

A criticism of Rational Choice Theory is the recognition that not all decisions are rationally made, but Robert Frank (1987) outlines the defense that conscience, emotions and moral choices are not outside the utility-maximization framework but enrich understanding when an individual evaluates and rationalizes their choices. He concludes that including emotions, for example anger, clarifies behaviors that rational choice as a utility function alone cannot explain. Some decisions are based on intuition, cultural

background, moral reasoning, and some are habitual. There are short term consequences to behaviorally based decisions and long term consequences that go unconsidered. An example of this is alcohol and drug abuse. In a study of thoughtful decision-making in adolescents, Paternoster and Pogarsky (2009) found that youth who were thoughtfully reflective were less likely to be involved in gang activity, alcohol or drug abuse and more likely to expect to graduate from college. An additional criticism is that Rational Choice Theory is dehumanizing. If people coldly calculate the personal profit to be benefitted from making a particular choice, then why would anyone ever choose to do something that benefitted society? This theory does not take into account that individuals join organizations that represent collective action – for example, a trade union.

Unlike Frank who defended adding psychological constructs to Rational Choice Theory, Tversky (2004) and Kahneman challenged Rational Choice Theory and offered theoretical models that include risky choices which they say violate utility theory. What they offer are the components of Bounded Rationality that are discussed in the next section.

Bounded Rationality

Bounded rationality theory was developed as a response to the limitations of Rational Choice Theory. The notion that all information is available to make a completely pure informed decision was critiqued as impractical in the real world. Rational theories of decision-making posit that decision processes are consequential and preference-based. A rational procedure is logical (March, 1994) but studies of decision-making show that not all alternatives are known, preferences chosen and all

consequences considered. The fundamental notion of bounded rationality is that individuals intend to be rational but are hindered in the process because of incomplete information and limited cognitive ability (March, 1994). The background of Bounded Rationality Theory (BRT) will be explored, the components described, examples provided and the framework analyzed.

Daniel Kahneman (2003) maps bounded rationality into five components and each will be summarized. They are: intuition and accessibility; framing effects; changes or states: prospect theory; attribute substitution; and prototype heuristics. The description of the five following components will inform the students' decision-making processes and how they described arriving at the withdrawal decision.

Intuition and Accessibility

Kahneman (2003) posits that intuition and accessibility are the two generic modes of cognitive functioning. Intuitive decisions and judgments are made rapidly and automatically. The controlled mode, accessibility, is characterized by a slower and more deliberate decision-making process. Accessibility is the core concept that helps us to understand how some thoughts come to mind easily and effortlessly, while others take effort. The dimension of accessibility includes the different aspects and elements of an event, different objects in the scene and the attributes of the object. It is an overall impression. If the stimulus is arousing, motivational or emotionally significant than it is more accessible to cognitive processing.

Framing Effects

Basically, the framing construct says that individuals passively accept the presented formulation. The power of this argument is best illustrated by the following problem posed by Tversky and Kahneman (1981, cited in Kahneman, 2003).

The Asian Disease

Imagine that the United States is preparing for the outbreak of an unusual Asian disease, which is expected to kill 600 people. Two alternative programs to combat the disease have been proposed. Assume that the exact scientific estimates of the consequences are as follows: If program A is adopted, 200 people will be saved. If program B is adopted, there is a one-third probability that 600 people will be saved and a two-thirds probability that no people will be saved. Which one of the programs would you prefer? (p. 702)

The majority of the respondents respond to this scenario by choosing program A which suggests risk aversion. However, when presented with the following options, Program B is chosen more often.

“If Program A is adopted, 400 people will die. If Program B is adopted, there is a one-third probability that nobody will die and a two-thirds probability that 600 people will die.” (p. 702).

The certainty of saving people was acceptable and the certainty of deaths was unacceptable. The point here is that the framing of the situation altered decision-making.

Changes or States: Prospect Theory

Prospect Theory, developed by Kahneman and Tversky (Kahneman, 2003; McDermott, 1998) describes how people make decisions when there are risks involved. Risky decisions can have unknown outcomes or they can be problems presented with known probabilities. According to McDermott (1998), one of Kahneman and Tversky's crucial findings was that when presented with almost any rational model of decision-making, people systematically violate rational choice at least some of the time. What

they also found is that decision-makers avoid risky choices when they expect returns over their target more often than if they expect a loss below their target (March, 1994).

Prospect Theory is based on the premise that perception is reference dependent.

Attribute Substitution

Attribute substitution related to decision-making is complex but can be illustrated simply in the scenario when people, confronted with a difficult question, sometimes answer an easier question instead. An example here that relates to withdrawal might be if a student is asked about the content of a difficult course in which they were enrolled and they might respond by saying that the professor had an accent and was hard to understand.

Prototype Heuristics

Prototype heuristics is described as the substitution of an average for a sum. This dimension illustrates the conditions under which the reasoning system prevents or reduces judgment bias. The attributes that are targeted in these scenarios are low in accessibility and therefore fit into the heuristic judgment category. An example of this would be: in a set of 30 lawyers and 70 engineers, what is the probability that someone described as charming, talkative, clever and cynical is one of the lawyers? (Kahneman & Frederick, 2001)

Criticisms and Benefits of Bounded Rationality

Bounded Rationality clarifies perceived limitations of Rational Choice Theory. It is based on the assumption that a decision-maker does not always have complete information or enough time to make a purely informed decision. Distinguishing between

cognitive processing types was another contribution to decision-making theory by Kahneman and Tversky. Cognitive processes, according to Kahneman, can be either intuitive or reasoned depending on reaction to a stimulus. The decision to stay or leave an institution is complex for the student going through the process when academic, family, or institutional pressure are influencing their decision-making. The subtleties included in Bounded Rationality (framing, attribute substitution, and Prospect Theory) assist in the explanation of forces on the students.

The Intersection between Decision-Making Theories and Withdrawal/Retention Higher Education Literature

The intersection of decision-making theories and the withdrawal/retention literature will be analyzed in the context of a student's decision-making process to withdraw from a university. The aforementioned theories (Rational Choice Theory and Bounded Rationality) will be discussed in conjunction with the Astin's IEO framework, Bean's Organizational Model of Departure, Tierney's Culturally Sensitive Model, and Tinto's Integration framework. First there will be a short review of the withdrawal/retention scholarship of each theorist and then a discussion about how the decision-making theories are complementary to the higher education theory. They are ordered alphabetically by higher education scholar.

Alexander Astin and Decision-Making Theories

Astin's theory of student involvement is widely used to conceptualize and analyze college impacts (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) and voluminous research has grown from his model. The overarching construct of his model is that student involvement and the

strength of a student's devotion to expending his psychological and physical energy towards academic and social participation presumably predicts institutional commitment and educational attainment behaviors. Below is a summary of his five basic postulates.

1. Involvement equals the investment of psychological and physical energy.
2. Involvement fluctuates by degrees through time. Students manifest different degrees of involvement with different experiences at different times.
3. Involvement has both qualitative and quantitative features. Time spent studying can be measured (quantitative) but a student would describe (qualitative) daydreaming while studying.
4. The quantity and quality of a student's involvement in a program is directly proportional to his learning and personal development.
5. Increased student involvement is how effectiveness of programs and policies are measured.

There is room in Astin's model to integrate decision-making theory, specifically when and where the student decides to become involved. A reaction to the institutional environment through a reasoned decision to become involved via a Rational Choice framework of decision-making is plausible to include in Astin's model. Astin's model appears economic specifically in his postulate that equates involvement and investment and also the postulate that he states that time spent studying or involved in a program is quantitatively measurable.

John Bean and Decision-Making Theories

As a review, John Bean formulated a student attrition model based upon results from studies about employee turnover in work organizations. His assumption was that the reasons people leave organizations are similar across different types of organizations, for example, colleges, universities or workplaces. Both Bean's causal model and his psychological model include student perception and belief constructs that arise from personal characteristics and although linear, a pathway to interpret how they assess their situations and then study the pursuant behaviors. Successful negotiation with their environment then presumably leads to academic and social integration, institutional fit, self-efficacy and commitment to persist (Bean & Eaton in Braxton, 2000).

If any of the higher education scholars leaves an opening for consideration of student decision-making, it is within Bean's Causal and Psychological models. Bean's Causal Model appears linear and at first glance fits with Rational Choice Theory. I suggest that it is not because it includes variables that have qualitative aspects, such as distributive justice or measures of the value of institutional quality. At the minimum, the intervening variable satisfaction is emotion-based which weakens the connection. Bounded Rationality includes emotional response, risk-averse behaviors and includes the recognition that people are biased and adjust their conception of events. Bean's Psychological Model includes flexibility and feedback loops similar to Kahneman's circular reasoning (that he defends as 'not' circular). Bean's psychological model of retention could be adapted and further complicated by including decision-making feedback loops as intermediary processing steps, especially in the self-efficacy columns.

Bean's psychological model fits well with Bounded Rationality; especially when a student is navigating the coping and approach/avoidance processes of interacting with the organization.

William Tierney and Decision-Making Theories

William Tierney's contribution to the study of college student departure is his emphasis on considering cultural perspectives; this is his direct critique of Tinto's theory (Tierney, 1992 & Tierney, 1999). His framework emphasizes the construct of culture and how it influences views of student departure. He posits a model critically examining power and community and suggests that this model be used to intervene with students who are at the highest risk of departure, have low socioeconomic status, and are urban students of color. Tierney defines cultural integrity in the schooling context. He suggests an academic environment where teaching strategies and school-based programs are designed to acknowledge and embed racial/ethnic backgrounds into the pedagogy and by honoring students' backgrounds, students gain empowerment to act as social agents for their own success (Tierney, 1999). Tierney argues that to suggest that minority students divorce themselves from their cultural traditions and support systems and attempt to integrate completely into the institutional system is theoretically flawed and potentially harmful.

Tierney's culturally sensitive approach to student departure highlights a limitation in all of the decision-making theories. None of them address ethnicity, gender, cultural backgrounds, age, or ability. Rational Choice theory is so rigid and linear that variations in background, gender or cultural approaches to decision-making are variables that

should have no influence on the process. “The classical theory of perfect rationality leaves no room for regrets, second thoughts, or weakness of will” (Simon, Dantzig, Hogarth, Plott, Raiffa, Schelling, Shepsle, Thaler, Tversky & Winter, 1987).

Alternatively, there is room in Bounded Rationality Theory for cultural, gendered, dispositional attributes to frame the decision-making process. Tierney’s regard for cultural sensitivity and recognition that individuals should be considered as a product of their background complements the flexibility and variety of Bounded Rationality.

Vincent Tinto and Decision-Making Theories

It is necessary to understand Vincent Tinto’s integrationist theory because a vast amount of research tests his theory either to reinforce his findings or to suggest that there are other ways to view student persistence. He is repeatedly referred to in the literature as paradigmatic by virtue of how often he and his writings are cited, more than 775 times (Braxton, Hirschy, & McLendon, 2004). In order to distinguish the student departure theories meaningfully, Tinto categorized them into five different types of theories: psychological, sociological, economic, organizational and interactional (Tinto, 1993).

In addition to suggesting that student departure can be looked at through a variety of lenses and should be studied in a longitudinal manner, he created a model of institutional departure through which many researchers frame their studies. Tinto’s model is designed to longitudinally describe and explain the interaction between the student and the institution. He describes his model of student departure as primarily sociological and interactive. Tinto asserts that students enroll in college with a set of pre-entry characteristics including academic skills, personal and family patterns of behavior,

and intentions and aspirations and commitment towards a goal of graduation. As students negotiate the social and academic community of the institution, they adjust and integrate to varying degrees. Successful and rewarding relationships intensify the student's commitment to stay, or conversely, if ties are weak and unrewarding, the student departs.

Vincent Tinto's model of student integration is focused on how the student acts in reference to the institution and not how the institution might accommodate and understand the student. Tinto's longitudinal model of student departure meshes with a Rational Choice Model of decision-making behavior. Other than the pre-entry attributes that Tinto's model allows for some variance, the integration and success process posited is similar to the very reasoned and rational model proposed by March (1994). A particular type of student (with pre-entry characteristics that favor attainment, (Tinto, 1993)), has an intention and a goal to graduate. The student makes the logical and beneficial choices to integrate into the institution, which has provided academic and social opportunities to the student, and then rationally and intentionally takes advantage of them, and through increased commitment, persists and then graduates.

Bounded Rationality Theory has multiple ways of approaching decision-making. To include the concept that individuals intend to be rational (but many times are not through lack of information) does not support the part of his model that posits that the institution provides the academic and social opportunities for the student to succeed. Tinto's model does not include subtleties such as intuition or framing effects and especially not Prospect Theory, where risks are weighed. The student must choose to

adapt and integrate without reservation or the end result is departure because of failure to commit and weak intention on the student's part.

Limitations in the Higher Education Literature with Respect to Decision-Making Theory

The search for literature in the higher education literature that included consideration of postsecondary student decision-making behavior was frustrating. The theory, research and practice handbook, *Student Development in College* (Evans, Forney, Guito-DiBrito, 1998) contained no references to decision-making behavior in the college student population. The book begins by describing the role of theory and how it is important to link it to practice (Evans, et al., 1998). There is plenty of discussion about a variety of identities and I will argue that many of the student development theories describe types of students not their thought processes and how/why and who influences the decisions that they make. In the management science and business literature there were articles that discussed decision style on decision-making behavior (Henderson & Nutt, 1980) and morality and ethics in decision-making (Miner & Petocz, 2003). These considerations of decision-making behavior are applicable to student development theory.

Braxton's books about student departure were analyzed for the purpose of this research through the lens of decision-making theory, because Braxton (2000) and Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon (2004) critique the major models and research done on student departure. In Braxton's *Reworking the Student Departure Puzzle* (2000), there was a chapter about self-efficacy and motivation, which are attributes to describe student characteristics. The chapter that discusses psychological models of student retention

includes attribute-like theories regarding attitude, coping and locus of control. It would seem that students make choices along their college path that lead them to make a decision to go or stay. In Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon's *Understanding and Reducing College Student Departure* (2004), they suggested that for future research, the college environment should be studied to understand how it affects student perceptions which then affect their behaviors. This comes closer to recognizing that students are engaged in a process where they make choices based on their surroundings. Braxton et al., (2004) do not suggest that students be asked how they made their choices based on their context.

Finally, the collection of literature about retention and departure for this dissertation research was reviewed to see if student decision-making was studied by higher education scholars with respect to retention. An article about withdrawal and decision-making in the higher education literature was Glowgaska, Young and Lockyers' (2007) multi-method study about student retention in a nursing program in the United Kingdom. The authors concluded that the reasons that nursing students gave for either staying or leaving the program were complex and as this research will illustrate, were influenced by many push and pull factors. Other found literature regarding student decision-making referenced discrete decisions such as choosing a career path (Harren, 1979), enhancing the decision-making of extroverted college students (Kreitler, Danereau, Barth & Ito, 2009) and decision-making behavior in college student binge drinking (Goudriaan, Grekin & Sher, 2007). The search was widened to other disciplines and the theories (Rational Choice Theory and Bounded Rationality) described earlier

surfaced in other academic disciplines, these two in particular in the economics literature. In conclusion, using decision-making theory in conjunction with student departure theory to study student withdrawal will be a contribution to the literature and will provide an increased understanding about how students formulated their decision to withdraw and how they made choices along the way.

Placement of Decision-Making Theory within Departure/Retention Theories

The purpose for the following section is to suggest where decision-making theory fits in Astin, Bean and Tinto's departure/retention models. William Tierney's conceptual perspective and approach was discussed earlier. Tierney suggests that retention/departure should be viewed through a culturally sensitive lens; he does not offer a theoretical model where a decision process could be embedded as Astin, Bean and Tinto's models provide.

Astin

Alexander Astin's model of student departure (I-E-O) has three overarching constructs; they are inputs, environment and outcomes. The inputs (I) are generally described as the demographic characteristics and the academic and social experiences that the student had prior to college enrollment. The environment (E) construct includes the experiences that the student has while in college, for example, institutional programs, policies, and personnel that shapes the student's environment. The outcomes (O) are the post-college student characteristics. Students negotiate the decision-making process as a response to the college environment and that is where I suggest that decision-making theory fits into Astin's model. I hypothesize that students respond to institutional characteristics (Astin, 1993) such as the following in his model:

- Institutional characteristics (type, size, student-faculty ratio, etc.)
- Curricular measures (core or major dominated, evaluation systems, etc.)
- Faculty environment (satisfaction factors, perceptual factors, teaching techniques, political orientation, etc.)
- Peer environment (selectivity, socioeconomic status, reliance on financial aid, etc.)
- Individual involvement measures (pre-entry characteristics; involvement characteristics after entry)

I propose the following linear illustration:

Inputs (I) affect how a student interacts and perceives their environment (E) which leads to different decision paths (D) which influences the student outcome (O).

$$I \rightarrow E \rightarrow D \text{ (persist or depart)} \rightarrow O$$

Bean

John Bean's psychological model of student departure includes pre-entry characteristics, institutional environmental factors (like Astin's) that influence academic, bureaucratic and social interactions and additionally, psychological processes and psychological outcomes that influence feelings of institutional fit and commitment which directly influence intent to persist. Bean's model includes feedback loops.

I suggest that the decision process should be inserted during the stage where the student is reacting to the institutional environmental factors that are part of the psychological process that, depending on student choice, influences their feelings of commitment to the institution. Entry characteristics (EC) ground reactions to

Institutional Environment (IE) that influence decision-making (D). Decisions made affect academic and social integration (AI & SI). The student's attitude (SA) about their fit and commitment (C) to the institution directly affects their intent to persist (P).

$$EC \rightarrow IE \rightarrow D \rightarrow AI \& SI \rightarrow SA \rightarrow C \rightarrow P \text{ (persist or depart)}$$

Tinto

Vincent Tinto's model posits that individuals depart from an institution through a linear and longitudinal process that arises from the interactions between an individual student (with specific pre-entry attributes) with institutional systems (academic and social). Their consequent interactions lead to an intention to persist when positive, or when negative, reinforce departure behaviors. There is similarity once again with several components of the aforementioned models of student retention. Vincent Tinto's model includes pre-entry attributes (PA), goals/commitment (GC), institutional experience – academic and social (EAS), integration – academic and social (IAS), respondent goals/commitments (GC), and outcome (O).

I propose that decision-making occurs at multiple junctures in Tinto's model – prior to both goals/commitment stages and before the academic and social integration stage.

$$PA \rightarrow D \rightarrow GC \rightarrow D \rightarrow EAS \rightarrow D \rightarrow IAS \rightarrow D \rightarrow GC \rightarrow O \text{ (persist or depart)}$$

Astin, Bean and Tinto's theoretical models are strengthened by considering the individual decision-making process.

Qualitative Inquiry and the Literature

Using qualitative inquiry to study student withdrawal in combination with decision-making theory is an important contribution to student departure literature. Academicians and student affairs practitioners will better understand how students who left a postsecondary institution negotiated the process of withdrawal and how the students framed their decision-making. In addition, the proposition will be made that student's stories are complex with much of their decision-making and process left unexplained by only considering discrete components of their situation. Perna and Thomas (2006) reviewed almost 200 articles about student success in college and 91% of them used quantitative methodology. Student departure is an individual event where the actor negotiates multiple conflicts, tensions and pressures and it is important to include the student perspective or the meaning they attach to this process. The argument put forth in this research suggests that analyzing the individual's experiences will add meaning and depth to existing quantitative and qualitative results and offer a new conceptual framework. The new framework will combine decision-making theory with student departure theories.

Theoretical Framework

The integration of student departure theory with decision-making theory is the theoretical foundation and conceptual framework that guides this research. Not only will the ensuing conversation include both overarching theories (decision-making and departure) but will include the argument that in order to understand how students negotiate all the constraints regarding the eventual decision to leave their first institution

after high school, the departure theories have to be considered collectively and integrated with decision-making theories. The interview protocols (refer to Appendix B and C for interview protocols) were developed from the literature on student departure (Tinto, 1975-2006), institutional agents (Bean, 1980; 1983), student involvement (Astin, 1984), and cultural considerations (Tierney, 1992; 1999) and rational choice (Becker, 1976; Scott, 2000) and bounded rationality decision-making theories (Frank, 1977; Tversky, 2004). The research questions are designed to increase the conversation between departure and decision-making theories. The questions that include push-pull factors - symbolized as conflicts/constraints (Altbach, 1991) and institutional agents (Bean, 1980; 1983) are included to uncover the possibility that the interactions and pressures associated with them, between the students and other actors (family, advisors, faculty members, counselors, etc.), influence the decision-making process.

Vincent Tinto (2006), in an article about what is next for research and practice in student retention, said that the debates over the use of different theoretical models of student retention have provided a “more sophisticated understanding of the complex web of events that shape student leaving and persistence.” (Tinto, 2006, p. 1) Scholars and government agencies wanted to find out why students were leaving in 1937 (McNeeley, 1937) and the research has only become more complex because of additional historical developments in higher education such as attention to access and success issues, cultural sensitivities, geographically defined choices and constraints for low socioeconomic students, gender issues, financial aid issues, and recent economic crises. Regardless, these are tensions that the individual student has to negotiate and it is possible that

institutional agents such as academic advisors, the faculty, residence hall advisors or financial aid advisors will miss those windows of opportunity for intervention of which they are unaware. Goldfinch and Hughes (2007, in Baldwin) posit that by focusing on how the student needs to fit our institutions, maybe the institution failed to adapt to the student's circumstances.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Fundamental to the process of conducting qualitative research is to place one's design within one of the frameworks of the traditions of qualitative inquiry (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The methodological approach that I used to design my data collection and analyses is constructivist using narrative inquiry to probe into the decision-making processes that students engaged in when they decided to withdraw or when in the process of making the decision to leave or stay at college. My purpose was to gain understanding about the meaning that students attribute to a major decision in their lives. The constructivist tradition afforded me the flexibility to probe during the interviews when I suspected that the participant had something additional to add after answering the interview protocol questions. In order for the participants to feel comfortable discussing this emotional and stressful subject, they had to accept and trust my role with them (Bogdan & Biklin, 2007).

Research Questions

The purpose for this research regarding student withdrawal is to gain understanding about how students who withdraw from college negotiate the constraints and barriers surrounding departure and how they describe their decision-making process. The research questions are designed to enrich the theoretical frameworks of Astin, Bean, Tierney, and Tinto and connect them to Rational Choice and Bounded Rationality decision-making theories. My interview protocol and data analysis coding are guided by my research questions which follow.

As a review, the research questions are repeated below.

1. What were the push-pull factors that contributed to students leaving the institution?
 - a. Why did the students say they left the institution?
 - b. What pulled them from the outside, away from the institution?
 - c. What pushed them out from the inside?

2. How did they negotiate the decision making process?

How and when did alternate pathways to perceived success surface and become an option?

3. How did institutional agents (withdrawal counselors, academic advisors, faculty members, financial aid advisors, etc.) and agents outside the institution (family and friends) influence this process?

Methodological Stance

In order to obtain answers to the preceding research questions, it is necessary to build understanding through an interactive qualitative, one on one interview approach (Maxwell, 2005). Qualitative inquiry will consider the decision-making processes of the students who withdrew and students going through the decision-making process of leaving and the combination of decision-making theory and student departure theory is a novel theoretical approach. This qualitative and interactive design (Maxwell, 2005) provided the flexibility for the interviewer and subjects to explore concepts that may differ from the variables most often researched using quantitative design. For example, asking about alternate pathways to success as a decision to depart postsecondary education might lead to a discussion regarding higher education not paying off in our current economic climate.

Instead of relying on the prevalent results from quantitative research, some of the following points should be considered (Bell, 2002).

- Narratives allow researchers to understand experiences.
- Analysis of stories allows researchers to analyze hidden assumptions.
- Narratives allow for temporal understanding of events, at possible intervening stages.

The responses to semi-structured interviews based on questions developed from the prominent departure theorists was designed to provide data that corroborates what has been explained statistically or allow new data to emerge that provides new insight into the students' decision-making processes that result in departure from the initial institution where they enrolled.

Participants

Participants

The students recruited for this research were participants in an access and success program in a public four-year university in the southwestern United States. The program provides financial aid and retention programming to students who are in the lowest socioeconomic group in the state. Their family income has to be less than \$42,400 and they have to be eligible to receive federal funding in the form of the PELL grant. The rationale for recruiting these students is that they are a defined cohort that is participating in multiple research projects as part of grant funded criteria and are the set of students most likely to withdraw, which has been my research interest for five years. The demographic breakdown is 61% female and 39% male. The ethnic breakdown is

Hispanic – 43%; Caucasian – 36%; Asian American Pacific Islander – 10%; African American – 6%; American Indian – 4%; first –generation college students – 61%. They are first-time fulltime freshmen so their age is 18 to 19.

Interview Participants

The breakdown of the interview participants whose interviews were coded for this project is: 5 males and 22 females; 2 Asian-American; 2 African-American, 8 Hispanic; 2 Native-American, and 13 Caucasian. Below is a table that gives information about each interviewee that will be referred to in the findings section. Data was included about how far the student's home is from campus and a concise description about their family situation because those two factors emerged as important during analysis.

Table 2 Pseudonyms and Attributes

Pseudonym	M/F	Ethnicity	Enrollment status	Miles from home	Family situation
Adele	f	Caucasian	transferred	hometown	divorced - lives with mother
Ashley	f	Caucasian	transferring in a couple years	317	divorced - father substance abuse
Beth	f	African American	yes time frame will take a while	292	extreme poverty
Claire	f	Caucasian	transferred	126	divorced - lives with mother
Courtney	f	Caucasian	transferred	260	father - substance abuse - father suicidal
Crystal	f	Hispanic	withdrew	hometown	father absent - lives with mother
Daniel	m	Caucasian	transferring	hometown	emancipated minor since 8th grade
Danielle	f	African American	transferred	126	father absent - lives with mother
Elise	f	Caucasian	transferred	82	strict parenting
Estevan	m	Native American	transferring	65	father absent - lives with mother
Ginnie	f	Asian American	transferring	135	father absent - lives with mother
Hana	f	Caucasian	transferring	107	brother - health issues
Joseph	m	Hispanic	transferring	116	father absent - lives with mother
Kelly	f	Caucasian	transferring	106	father - died in car accident
Krista	f	Hispanic	transferred	hometown	father - died two years earlier
Marina	f	Hispanic	withdrew	hometown	father absent - pregnant
Michelle	f	Hispanic	withdrew	25	divorced - pregnant
Natalie	f	Native American	transferred	291	father absent - lives with mother
Rebecca	f	Hispanic	transferred	hometown	father - health issues
Sarah	f	Caucasian	seriously thought about leaving	91	father absent - lives with mother
Shelley	f	Caucasian	maybe for financial reasons	116	father absent - lives with mother
Tanya	f	Caucasian	transferred	99	father absent - lives with mother
Teresa	f	Hispanic	transferring at end of year	135	parents created stress
Vanessa	f	Hispanic	withdrew	130	father - died
Ward	m	Asian American	transferred	317	father and mother absent - lived with grandparents
Willa	f	Caucasian	transferring	116	father - died; large family: six children
William	m	Caucasian	transferred	hometown	divorced - father absent - lives with mother

Recruitment

Two cohorts of students were recruited for participation in this study. The first cohort has 598 students and the second cohort has 775 students but 13 were eliminated because they were under the age of 18. Cohort One began their college experience in the fall of 2008 and Cohort Two started as freshmen in 2009. Because the overarching topic of research for this project is withdrawal, I only contacted the students from Cohort One who withdrew from the university. There were 123 students who withdrew sometime during their first year of college from Cohort One.

Cohort One Recruitment

The email and mailing addresses for the withdrawn students from Cohort One were provided by the retention programming staff. As soon as the Institutional Review Board approved the project, I mailed the invitation to interview and a contact information sheet for the students to fill out and return. I included an envelope that was already stamped and addressed. On October 10, 2009 I mailed 123 invitations to Cohort One. Participants responded to my emails immediately and I began interviewing on October 20, 2009. On October 31, 2009 I sent emails to Cohort One participants and invited them to contact me for interviews. On November 1, 2009, I mailed a second round of interview requests to the students who did not respond. Fourteen of the packets were returned stamped by the post office as unable to forward. Either the address was incorrect or the forwarding order had expired. Six of the participants had changed their email address and I was unable to contact them through email. One mother called me and told me that her son was on a mission and that he was unable to participate. Another

participant called me and said that she had been in a serious accident and did not have the strength to take part in an interview. Ten withdrawn students agreed to interviews and I scheduled them throughout the fall.

Cohort Two Recruitment

The recruitment and interview invitations for Cohort Two happened in two phases. I was given permission to recruit for interviews during retention programming workshops that Cohort Two students were required to attend as part of their programming. I attended 17 workshops. Because not all of the students attended the workshops where I recruited, I sent an email in mid-November with an invitation to contact me for an interview. 25 students from Cohort Two responded to my email invitation to interview because they were planning to withdraw or were thinking about withdrawing. I interviewed 25 students from Cohort Two throughout the fall semester.

Incentives

The Institutional Review Board approved the following incentives. The participants were told that they would receive a gift card to an eating establishment if they agreed to be interviewed. They were not told the monetary value of the gift card. The actual amounts were \$10 gift cards to Rubio's, La Salsa, In-N-Out, Paradise Bakery, Starbucks, their choice.

Informed Consent

An informed consent was reviewed with the participants prior to the start of any interview. They were asked to sign the final page and were given a copy to take with them (Refer to Appendix A).

Methodological Procedures

Interview Protocol for Cohort One

The interview protocol (refer to appendix for final interview protocol) was developed from the literature on student departure (Tinto), institutional agents (Bean), student involvement (Astin), and cultural considerations (Tierney) and rational choice and bounded rationality decision-making theories. Two interview protocols were presented to a higher education research design class for testing and critique. The first approach began by asking the subject when they began to have doubts about their enrollment decision and ended by asking about the withdrawal process. The second interview approach began by working backwards from the withdrawal process and then progressed to more specific questions. The questions were also tested on a student who had departed the university. The initial interview protocol was revised after the class critique and after the interview. The feedback from the class and the interviewee helped inform the revision. The class offered advice about making sure that my questions were non-judgmental and suggested that I do not use negative language. The pilot interview participant asked me, after the tape was turned off, why I did not ask her the reason that she went to the original university in the first place. Her comment informed my first interview question and seemed to work well.

Pilot Interview

To test the interview protocol and collect sample findings I contacted a student who had withdrawn from the university within the past year. The preliminary findings for this research are from the pilot interview (recorded) and a discussion that continued after the recording was stopped. The female subject (who attended the site university and transferred out of state) was contacted and interviewed by phone. The interview and discussion afterwards led to a revision of the interview protocol. Perspectives that came up were “not a new chapter in my life”; “it was a little too informal”; and “sometimes I wonder”.

Not a new chapter

The student lived and worked on campus and was involved in Reserve Officer Training Corp. She talked about hanging out with friends from high school at the original college and always saw people she knew between classes or at the student union. Amy said that going to the school in her hometown with people around her that she knew did not feel like a new chapter in her life. When she left after her first semester, she transferred to a small liberal arts college. She compared the two institutions. “It’s a lot smaller...just the entirety of the Site School was too big and I felt lost even though I had connections.” She described meeting people at the college where she transferred and finding her place in a smaller environment.

It was a little too informal

Multiple times throughout the interview, the participant talked about the informal and cursory withdrawal process. She did not understand why the only paperwork that she

filled out when she withdrew was an “eight or ten” question online survey. She barely remembered the questions but upon recall said that they were about the institution and their performance. She said that the process felt too informal and that “I feel like you should have to meet with someone other than just submitting some form. Just not registering for classes and leaving.” She described working at the dean of student’s office where she transferred and described their withdrawal process. Students were required to meet with an academic advisor and fill out paperwork. She felt like their “intent is to keep more students enrolled; sort of fix what they can.” When asked if she thought procedures were important she said that it would be good for a college to ask why students left, to address and fix what they could, especially if many students are dissatisfied with something. She said that also there are things they cannot fix and maybe it would be good to have that information anyway. After the tape was shut off and conversation continued, Amy made a comment about not feeling valued.

Sometimes I wonder

When asked about her experiences at the university, she said that she wonders what would have happened if she had not left. She talked about keeping in touch with her original university friends on Facebook and she talked about not being there but knowing what is going on “even though I’m not there.” At the end of the interview, Amy’s voice got shaky when she said, “I think that I made the decision that I needed to make at that time. (pause) Yeah.” Then she stopped talking until I probed her for any additional information that she would like to share about anything at all. The last subject

she talked about before the tape was shut off was about the lack of withdrawal procedures at her first university.

Discussion: Amy's story

How does departure theory fit into Amy's story? She lived on campus and was familiar with her surroundings. She was involved – she worked on campus and was in an organized leadership program. She did not have academic difficulties and complained that the general education classes she was required to take did not appeal to her because she already knew what she wanted to study. She did not change her major when she transferred. What would she look like quantitatively? She was a Caucasian female with a high GPA who never registered for classes her second semester and was gone.

Interview Protocol for Cohort Two

The protocol for Cohort Two was a revised version of the protocol for Cohort One (refer to appendix for interview protocol two). The sentence tense had to be altered because the students were still attending the university but considering departing.

The following questions were pertinent to Cohort One and not Cohort Two.

- Did you transfer? (If yes. Probes: tell me about your new college, how is it different?)
- Are you coming back to this university? (Why or why not?)
- How do you feel about your decision to withdraw?

The following question was asked to Cohort Two and not Cohort One.

- Do you feel confident that you will graduate from this university?

Interviews and Interview Transcriptions

Thirty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted and tape-recorded, lasting from 20 to 65 minutes in length. The interview questions are ordered in a way so that rapport developed between the interviewer and interviewee. The first few questions were very general and allowed the subjects to describe the study university and why they chose to attend. This follows the semi-structured interview style (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) where a few general topics are explored purposefully to elicit the subject's views meanwhile respecting how he structures the responses and guides his perspective on his personal decision-making process. All interviews except one were conducted in person.

Because I learned from prior interview experiences, I realized that first impressions and the first question are very important. As suggested in Seidman (2006), I was alert to being friendly but did not attempt to develop a friendship. Because the topics at times were emotional, very private and quite sensitive, I also had to be careful not to act as a therapist. The interviews did become painful at times with the subject breaking down and crying and it was a challenge to remain in the interviewer role and not be the helper that I am professionally. There were times when I knew that the participant did not want to share family details and I respected that. Some of the participants were extremely shy and the conversations went slowly with a lot of filler words and pauses. This did not take me by surprise.

I discovered that wherever the interview took place, within a short period of time, no more than five minutes, outside distractions disappeared. The topic of our discussions seemed so important to the participant to share to someone who would listen that airplane

and traffic noise, music or news shows in the background did not cause problems with the interview (even though it did in transcribing). All participants were allowed to be interviewed wherever they chose. I suggested an office at the university, a coffee shop or the public library and all locations were chosen. The participants appeared to be comfortable in all locations.

The most important piece of this relationship to me was that after the interviews were over, I was able to disclose my role as a university administrator and offer to help them in any way that I could, whether they had already left the institution or were in the process of leaving. It turns out that one of the findings was exactly that: they were looking for an institutional agent who would offer support and guidance in the process of leaving and to help them strategize returning to a university.

Locations

I knew that there was always the option of conducting phone interviews but after having been involved in qualitative research projects over the past few years, I believe in the added value of interviewing face to face. Body language, eye contact, visible discomfort, emotional responses, and laughter are additional cues that are missing from phone interviewing. One participant agreed only to a phone interview. The participants that lived out of the study city assumed that I would conduct phone interviews but when I told them I want to meet them in person, they all agreed immediately. I traveled to two cities in the north of the state and conducted two interviews in a city 120 miles away. The rest of the 31 interviews were done in the study city, except for the one phone interview. One interview took place at a public library. One interview was conducted at

the school where the student transferred and 28 at the study university. Four took place at a coffee shop and one in the food court at a grocery store. As far as the interviews went, as I described earlier, the noise distractions did not seem to affect the interview in any way except at times it almost seemed like the noise was a comfort and a blanket and protected us from being heard by other people around us. Whether in public or in my office, participants responded with emotion. The noise issue was more of a problem for the transcriptionist than for me. I went over every transcription at least twice and remembered the conversations very well, so I was able to fill in missing words. The phone interview was very interesting because the subject had a very bad experience at the university and possibly felt very comfortable venting over the phone. Her emotions came across quite noticeably.

Transcriptions

In the interest of moving the research project along, I employed transcribers for the interviews. They were completely unrelated to the study institution or any of the subjects. Twenty-seven of the thirty-five interviews were transcribed. Eight of the interviews were eliminated because the participants wanted to discuss the possibility that they might transfer some day and a few came to the interview process and told me they were happy at the school and were not thinking about withdrawing. Approximately 18 hours of interviews were transcribed. The shortest interview was 20 minutes and the longest was 65.

Data Analysis

Coding

The interviews were organized and coded using NVivo software. The interview questions were informed by theoretical perspectives that include integration, interaction, decision-making, and institutional agents, in addition to questions that sought responses regarding how students navigate through the complications and complexities (push/pull factors) of withdrawal from college. The interviews were read for emergent themes and grouped according to aspects of decision-making and departure theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and grouped together by research question.

Research Question One Coding Categories

The following codes were used to group themes based on Research Question One (RQ1), repeated here as a review.

- . What were the push-pull factors that contributed to students leaving the institution?
 - a. Why did the students say they left the institution?
 - b. What pulled them from the outside, away from the institution?
 - c. What pushed them out from the inside?

The following categories emerged as themes pertinent to addressing RQ1.

- Academic difficulties
- Did not feel welcome
- Disliked emphasis on social scene and Greek system
- Disliked the organization
- Family responsibilities

- Felt different from other students
- Financial struggles
- Frequent visits home
- Have not found my niche
- Homesick
- Living off campus as a barrier
- Location of school
- My fault
- Original dream
- Program unavailable
- Stress and health issues

Research Question Two Coding Categories

The following codes were used to group themes based on Research Question Two (RQ2), repeated here as a review.

How did they negotiate the decision making process?

How and when did alternate pathways to perceived success surface and become an option?

The following categories emerged as themes pertinent to addressing RQ2.

- Decide to go back home
- Justifications and rationalizations
- Options considered

- Pressures with decision process
- Strategies
- Timeline
- When I decided to leave
- Who I went to for advice
- Worried about sharing

Research Question Three Coding Categories

The following codes were used to group themes based on Research Question Three (RQ3), repeated here as a review.

How did institutional agents (withdrawal counselors, academic advisors, faculty members, financial aid advisors, etc.) and agents outside the institution (family and friends) influence this process?

The following categories emerged as themes pertinent to addressing RQ3.

- Advisor
- Family
- Friends
- Institutional agent absent
- Institutional environment/people
- Mentor or other
- Mom
- Professor influence

Themes that Emerged

- Extreme family issues
- School did not care

The data analysis for these interviews was based on the theoretical approaches (student departure and decision-making) but also allowed for flexibility during collection and coding so that unexpected themes could emerge. For example, when planning for the coding, I did not expect the following:

- The number of participants that described either a missing or dead father
- Dad issues that caused them stress
- Feelings of a very strong tie to their mother
- How many students described how frequently they went home

Marshall & Rossman (1999) advise that the researcher be guided in the data collection and analysis stages by their initial concepts but need to maintain flexibility to shift and modify their understandings of the data through the process.

Positionality

My relationship to the topic of student withdrawal is both personal and professional. Similar to the students in this research study, I come from a low socioeconomic family and I am a first generation student who went down a long and interrupted path to educational attainment. I will be the first in my family to obtain a graduate degree. I transferred between schools and school types for a variety of reasons, one of which was to leave to support my family while my husband finished his college

degree. My daughter had a rocky start at the first institution that she attended after high school. Even though my parents stopped their education with high school diplomas, I was very aware of the importance of higher education and knew its value. During the time when my children were in elementary school, I spent over eight years volunteering at the magnet schools that they attended in a very low income neighborhood. Witnessing the school track that had high school graduation as the goal was frustrating. It is no mystery where learning to be underprepared for the rigors of college happens.

When I had the chance to return to school after being out of the educational system for almost twenty years and having previously accumulated three years of undergraduate credits, I was terrified to start at a university and reentered the system taking computer programming classes at the local community college. I became employed at a four-year institution and took advantage immediately of the tuition reimbursement benefits that the school provided. Within a few years I completed my bachelor's degree and with the encouragement and support of a mentor, applied to the PhD program in Higher Education, which is a perfect fit for my educational passions – degree attainment and also my professional goal - to help others gain access and succeed in college.

For the past nine years I have worked in admissions, new student orientation, marketing, enrollment services and recently in student retention at the site for this research project. While working for enrollment management marketing, I witnessed the tensions between enrollment management staff, who by presidential directive were supposed to increase the size and quality of the incoming class, and the retention staff,

who by presidential directive were supposed to increase retention and graduation rates. In order to increase the incoming class size, admissions standards were relaxed which usually means that less academically prepared students were admitted. To increase net tuition revenue, there was an increased emphasis on recruiting out of state students who pay more for tuition and become a more important and lucrative group to admit and retain. The reason for describing these tensions is because it shaped my fundamental beliefs about the institution's responsibility for providing resources and support to the students they admit. An articulated and transparent mission to provide appropriate support services for admitted students should be a very public accountability measure that would be difficult to hide.

My professional goal is to support students at risk of withdrawal and provide intervention programming or help them understand options and then assist them in designing a plan that gets them to their goal – whether transferring to another type of school or developing a plan that promotes their academic success. I write this because there are many stresses, pressures and difficulties for the subset of students who have little financial support and come to a four-year institution academically under-prepared but as I mentioned in my positionality section, the school admits them and I believe that a partnership exists between the school and the student (and oftentimes their family).

Validity and Ethical Consideration

The purpose for the in-depth interviews collected for this research is to add to the richness of prior research in an attempt to understand the experience and decision-making process of students who decide to leave college. The goal is to gather information in

such a way that the participants describe their process without feeling that they are being judged negatively for making the choices they made. The interview questions are not designed so that a student describes failure. The questions are designed so that the student can describe their process and how they negotiated influences along the way. All students will be approached in a manner that asks them to give advice about the withdrawal process and what they would offer as suggested improvements to enhance institutional intervention or to offer insight from the student perspective. The researcher will present the conversation in such a way that is open to the possibility that there were alternate pathways for the student's success that made sense to them.

The validity of the instrument (interview questions), data collection, and data analysis will be addressed in the following ways.

- Interview questions: They were written using well-tested theories by major theorists in the retention/withdrawal field. The questions were submitted to three higher education professors and they offered feedback. The questions were presented to a higher education research design class for feedback, implications, and critique. Suggestions were collected and the questions went through three phases of rewording and re-ordering before the pilot interview and then revised again.
- Data collection: All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. I will rely on the digitally recorded interviews in order to not make my note-taking a barrier or distraction to the process.

- Data analysis: Data will be organized around the major theoretical frameworks and outlier concepts that differ from the major theoretical constructs will be collected and sorted. As much as possible the words of the subjects will be used to label the codes. The outlier data will be considered as additional perspectives that were not considered in the original coding.
- This research proposal was approved by the University of Arizona Human Subjects Committee. Signed Subjects Consent forms were collected from all interviewees. In order to protect the identities of the interviewees, pseudonyms and number identifiers will be used. Thus, confidentiality will be maintained.

Limitations

Once a student leaves an institution it is difficult to engage them in an extended conversation about their departure process. Even though the study participants for this research were part of an established cohort of students at the site university, I thought it possible that they would not choose to participate in interviews. Because of this, an incentive system was used at the outset, but as stated before, no monetary value was revealed to the participants for the gift card for food.

Another limitation of this study will be lack of generalizability to college students at other types of institutions. The subject pool is predominantly comprised of low socioeconomic students at a public four-year university. The barriers to their success at this university will likely vary from the middle to upper class Caucasian students attending the same college. In addition, all of the study participants were residents of the state where the study took place. It is quite likely that out of state students, whether from

low socioeconomic groups or not, would have very different answers to the same questions.

Summary

Based on the departure and decision-making theories as my theoretical foundation, I designed my qualitative study with a constructivist perspective. I conducted 35 interviews and narrowed them down to the 27 that were pertinent to this research. The qualitative findings of this study are presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The purpose for this chapter is to share the findings from the research collected about the decision-making process to withdraw from a university. Scarce qualitative data has been collected over the years from students who departed or are planning to depart an institution. The purpose for this research is to add qualitative data findings to the conversation between student departure literature and decision-making theory. Filling this gap in the literature was a goal for this research.

Decision-Making Process Model of Student Departure

The Decision-Making Process Model of Student Departure (Figure 1, page 85) is offered as a new theoretical framework that combines decision-making theories and student retention theories. Figure 1 is a visual representation of the variables that emerged from data analysis. This conceptualization is unlike other student departure models because it includes the proposition that forces push at the student from within the institution and forces pull them from outside the institution. These stresses influence how students negotiate the decision-making process to leave an institution. In addition, it is different from other student departure models because it includes the discussion about how students think about their process to withdraw – it is not meant to describe their behaviors. This model illustrates that pushes affect other pushes, pushes affect pulls, and these forces act upon the decision-making process.

Figure 1

Decision-Making Process Model of Student Departure

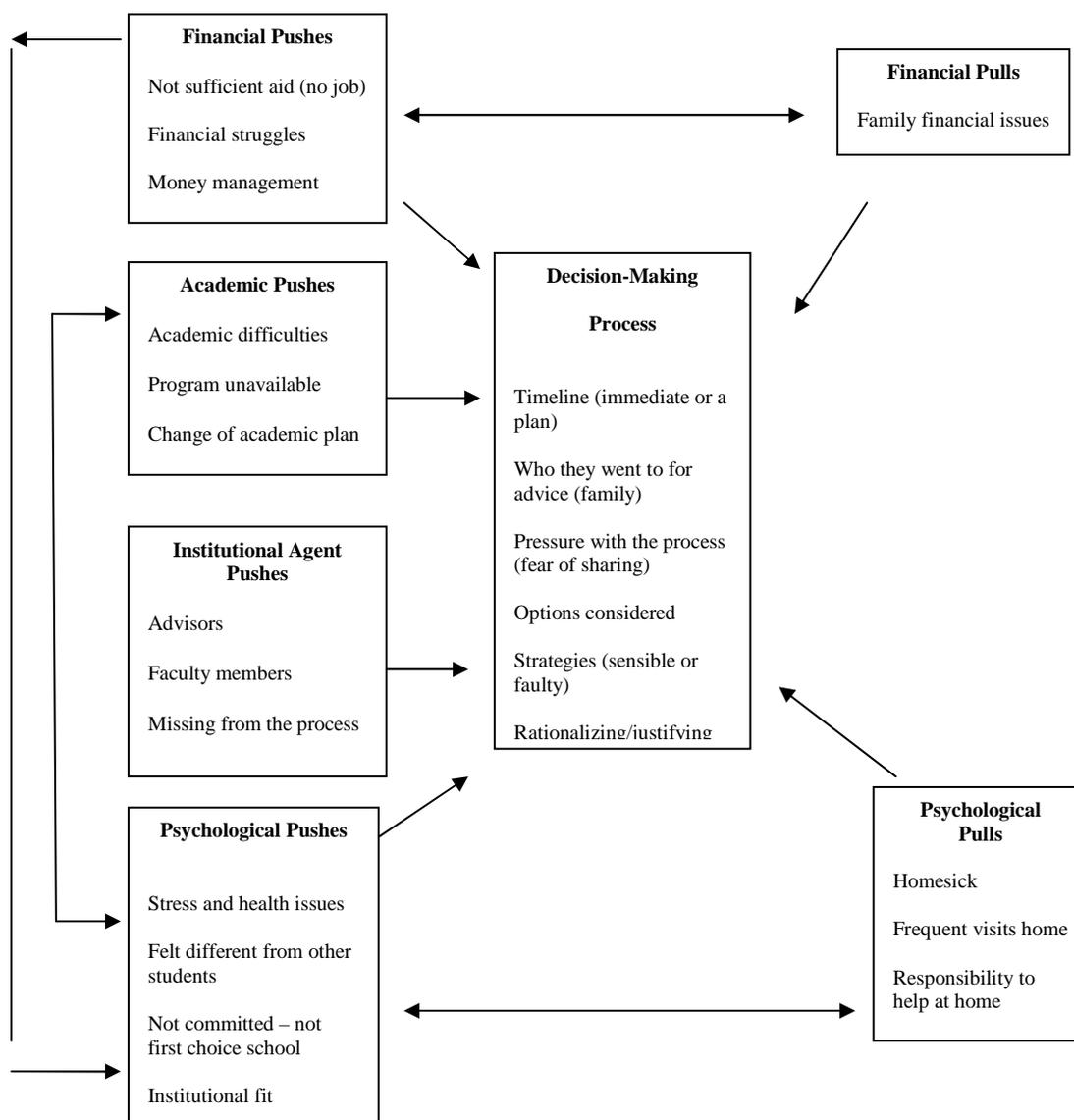


Figure 1. How push and pull factors affect the negotiation and decision-making process of withdrawal from college

The discussion will be presented in the following order:

- Pushes
- Pulls
- Decision-making process

Findings

This chapter begins by sharing with the reader the student voices describing the reasons why the students left the institution (Part One), what pushed them out from within the institution, and what pulled them from the outside away from the institution (Part Two). Following these discussions will be the section that describes how the students made their decisions, who they went to for advice, what they described as pressures in the process, the strategies they used, and their rationalizations (Part Three).

Throughout the findings chapter, I share personal stories that are at times more poignant when the reader knows the gender, ethnicity and where the student's family lived. Some participants had a clear story and a rational response to solving the situation in which they found themselves and others cited multiple options.

Part One: Pushes

The following section will provide descriptions of reasons that led to student withdrawal, transfer, stop-out or drop-out from the institution, and the ways they were pushed out from the inside. This section of findings is divided into four broad categories. The major categories are financial, academic, institutional, and psychological.

Financial Pushes

Like the end of the first semester I realized that I was in the hole and I was gonna have to start working more than I already was and I was already working a lot and it started to really stress me out. Like it made classes a lot more difficult to get up and go after being at work all night. It was just a lot more, it was really stressful to be in debt, be a full time student and be working full time. It was a little bit too much for me. (Elise)

I don't have a meal plan because I don't have like a steady income and I know you can do that like commuters one. It's the whole income thing. (Vanessa)

As a reminder, all of the participants in this research study were part of an access and success program at the site school and were in-state residents. They were awarded funds for tuition and fees, books, and room and board based on their family income and eligibility to receive a Federal PELL Grant. Presumably, this removed the financial barrier as a threat to their enrollment. It was clear that among the interviewees, financial stress still affected them. Financial issues were great for these students.

Financial aid at the research university is transferred into the student bursar account the week before school starts at the beginning of each semester. If there are charges on the student account, for example, tuition, fees, and room and board, those amounts are subtracted from the total award. If the student lives on-campus their residence hall is paid, but if they live off-campus then there is a significant amount of money (sometimes thousands of dollars) that appears as a credit. Within a week after funds are disbursed to the student account and the outstanding balances paid, the university transfers the balance to the students' personal bank accounts. The students then have to know how to budget this money to pay bills for the remainder of the semester.

Misunderstanding or having incomplete information about the financial aid award and the inability to find an on-campus job funded by the federal work-study portion of their award package became an obstacle for many of the students and they became discouraged. Teresa thought that the program was a completely free higher education opportunity with no loan debt incurred. It took her by complete surprise when she received a bill for her residence hall. She owed two thousand dollars and had to take out a loan. Shelly was in the same situation as Teresa and was unable to find a job on campus. Shelly interpreted messages delivered by representatives from the scholarship program that the university was legally bound to provide financial assistance to cover all costs and in addition, provide a work-study job on campus. When asked who gave her that message, Shelly was confused and could not remember who presented the information about the school being legally bound to cover all costs and provide her with a job on campus.

Shelly, Ginnie and Beth were unable to secure work-study jobs on campus, which shorted their financial aid package for the year by approximately \$2000. Shelly described her situation:

At the beginning of the year when I was budgeting like everything I needed for like rent and food...I factored in the money that I was going to get from work study because I thought I was going to have a job but now, I don't have a job, I don't have that work study. (Shelly)

At the time of the interview, with over a month still left in the semester, Ginnie only had \$30. Beth did not have the money to pay her December rent. Shelly was struggling to find the funds to pay her utility bills for December. Shelly said that she would have to transfer at winter break and go to a community college or leave school for a semester and

move back home if she did not find a job. Beth worked in upper management at a fast food chain during high school and considered leaving college to go back to her fulltime job so that she could pay her bills.

The stress from lack of funds manifested in academic difficulties and health issues. “It has been like consuming like everything I think about all day.” (Shelly) Even though it was a financial hardship, Krista paid for private tutoring for her classes because she did not get the academic support that she felt she needed from her professors on campus. Crystal talked about needing her job in spite of how it interfered with her academic success and considered a less stressful option – transferring to the local community college.

When I saw my grades come in, my [biology] test and my math test, and then just realizing I have to work cause I have to pay for my car and I have to drive all the way over here...I have to either drop a class or go to something that’s going to be easier for me because there’s no way I can quit my job or like do less hours so I kind of figured...when I got to the point where you know maybe if I go to [the local community college] it’s going to be easier and I can just do it at my pace and not have to be so stressed. (Crystal)

Not having the funding to cover expenses transpired another way, in addition to the inability to find a job. Money management and budgeting was an issue for some of the students. Elise admitted that after her tuition was paid that she spent the extra money left over for “things that I didn’t need and that created debt that I had to work off.” She worked after school every day and on the weekends and said she had little time left to study or sleep. Daniel described how he unwisely used the financial aid award money that was transferred to his personal bank account. He said he bought useless items and created debt that put him in a financial hole.

I go back and I look and I have a goldfish bowl and no goldfish and this was like 50 extra dollars...I'm trying to remember what I bought and I can't even remember. It was some clothing...I had enough clothing...I kind of screwed myself there because now I'm in a financial hole and I'm the only one digging myself out and it like it's piling on faster than I could take it off. (Daniel)

The students and their families needed budgeting guidance prior to receiving their financial aid allotment. At times, the money was spent before textbooks were purchased.

Concluding this section is Beth's story about how not having extra money at the end of the semester affected her. Beth detailed how she carefully budgeted her financial aid funds for food, rent and utilities. She looked down and told me that she was not going home for Christmas. I asked her why not and she said that she could not afford the transportation cost to go home which was approximately 300 miles away. She said that it did not really matter because her family was not materialistic. It was apparent during the interview that she was sad (she got very quiet and looked at her shoes) that she could not afford to go home for Christmas, but she did not say that. She reframed her situation by mentioning the materialism of Christmas and did not mention the loss of spending time with her family. She talked about making a pan of enchiladas for the week instead of going out to eat with her friends. She said that she thought about her financial situation every day and tried to figure out what she had money for and that was why returning to her management position at a fast food chain was desirable at times.

Academic Pushes

Started out really good you know, first semester was nice. And then that first big shock after the first semester totally threw things out of whack. It's like a flying airplane cruising along and then all of a sudden out of nowhere you get hit with a meteorite and your wing gets hit off and you're just spiraling. (William)

Tinto's theory (1975) posits integration into two broad categories: academic and social. Academic integration as a persistence measurement in his framework is measured by the students' academic achievements. If we accept this as our basic assumption then for this particular set of students this is true, but I suggest that it is the wrong perspective. The reality for these students is that they enrolled under an assumption that they were admitted to succeed. Their experiences damaged their egos and their feelings of adequacy. A theme that emerged repeatedly from the interviews was that of shock, surprise and feelings of inadequacy when the first English paper or results from the first tests were graded and returned. Ward said that he loved school but what was "harsh" was adapting to the engineering major that he did not take classes for in high school. Ward said, "It was something I had as a hobby"; and feeling unprepared was "definitely the major crash of what happened for my first year." Multiple students realized that they arrived at college academically underprepared and they felt hopeless. "How am I supposed to do this?...the biggest shock and it was in the first two weeks. I'm really unprepared for this." (Joseph) Teresa described the grade from her first English paper as a "slap in the face" and felt that her professor "pretty much told me that I sucked." Crystal studied every day for a week before her first biology test and got an F so she dropped biology because she predicted that she could never study enough to get a C. Ward dropped two classes so that he could focus on calculus but failed it anyway. There are two issues here. When students enroll in classes that they either fail or drop, they do not complete enough course hours to remain eligible for the scholarship program. The second issue is that the failed and dropped classes compromised their eligibility because

their grade point averages dropped below the minimum 2.0 grade point average requirement.

Math was problematic for many students in this research project and it is likely that their difficulties mirrored those of the student population at the university. Regardless, it was a topic that created anxiety in this set of students and threatened their academic success and consequently their persistence at this school. The students in this research project exemplify Cliff Adelman's findings that the completion of advanced math in high school doubles the odds for bachelor's degree completion (Adelman, 1999). They were underprepared for higher-level math and their persistence was compromised because they were failing college-level math. Even though many stated that they felt underprepared, when they took the experimental online math class it caused difficulties in unexpected ways. Ward had tremendous difficulty with online math computations – he was used to writing his computations and solving them on paper. Daniel just gave up.

The only class that I've given up on just completely is math because I did the math and I realized I added up everything. I did the subtractions and...realized that no matter what I do for the class, I could get 100% on the final and not even pass the class with a C. (Daniel)

Students figured out their own strategies to compensate for failing classes (this will be discussed in the strategies section) and because they were at risk for losing their scholarships and becoming academically disqualified from school, they hid their difficulties from their families. It felt risky to tell their families. William's mom said she was disappointed in him when she found out that he was academically disqualified from attending the university. Ward's grandmother called him daily when she found out that he was on academic probation and his grandfather threatened to sign him up for the

military. Ward, William and many other students realized after classes began that they were academically underprepared for college level curriculum. Their financial aid package was dependent on their academic success and when they noticed that they were failing they kept it from their families as long as they could, sometimes until after they were disqualified. Students that did share this with their families felt ashamed, or were afraid of the consequences imposed by their parents, siblings, or grandparents.

Institutional Agent Pushes

The institution as an organization and the institutional agents in particular, had notable influence when the students navigated through their academic and personal issues at the university. Bean's causal and psychological models include student perception and belief constructs that arise from personal characteristics. Students interpret and assess their situation through a linear pathway. Successful negotiation with their environment then presumably leads to academic and social integration, institutional fit, self-efficacy and commitment to persist (Bean & Eaton in Braxton, 2000). Advisors, faculty members, mentors/other agents and "missing agents" will be discussed.

Advisors

I was kind of mad about that cause I wanted to talk to [my academic advisor] and I wanted to tell her...that I was having problems with my major and I wanted to change it but she wasn't really willing to have an appointment with us. (Crystal)

It is unknown what the following students really expected from their academic advisors but by analyzing the overall content of their remarks it seems that the students were looking for a more personal relationship with advisors. The participants in this research project made negative comments about their academic advisors when asked who

they went to for advice about academics at the university and about the withdrawal and decision-making process. Krista “was almost scared to ask [the advisor] questions like cause I didn’t want her thinking that I was going to switch out of that college.” Whether true or not, she expressed that her advisor knew nothing; “like I had to correct her a couple of times on like the classes I was taking. She didn’t really know me and I went in there a lot.” Joseph sought advice from his fraternity brothers instead of his academic advisor. “With the counselors I really ask for their opinion but I don’t base everything on them because a lot of like, the people that I know...have already gone through what they need to get to medical school and they’re telling me what do.” Teresa sought advice from her advisor even though she had repeated bad experiences. “I was supposed to meet with her before I registered but she said that she wouldn’t meet with us because we had to do group advising which is like with other people in your group...I went there. I went to her office like three times and they would always tell me that she couldn’t [see me].”

I think they kind of just group them together...Well when I went to see my advisor um he kind of just gave me classes that I should be taking ...around this time but not for like my particular situation um because...I withdrew from Bio so he hadn’t really like explained when I should go and take Bio or if I should wait until next year or if I should try it during the summer so I was kind of still lost.
(Crystal)

Crystal was unhappy about the impersonal advising where all students were grouped together and particular situations were not addressed.

Hana described her advising interactions as pivotal. When she went to her advisor at her first university to pick up a transcript for the school where she transferred, she said that nobody asked her why she was leaving. When asked how that made her feel she said, “Oh I was like oh ok whatever it was just like most of the other people I’ve

talked to you know... I just kind of feel like...I'm another number so why should they care...that's kind of the feeling that I've gotten just from the university just everywhere.”

When asked if she would feel differently about staying at the university if anyone would have responded to her differently, she said that her advisor could have made a difference. A theme that will be repeated is that the students needed personal attention and acknowledgement that they belonged at the school. It is possible, because many are first-generation students, that they are seeking validation from university agents and that their needs differ from students coming from families that have college experiences in their repertoire.

Elise compared and contrasted advisors at her first school and the school to which she transferred. Elise entered her first school out of high school with almost two years worth of dual-enrollment credits so she was placed in higher level business classes her very first semester. She complained that the advisor did not check with her to see if she was comfortable with that. “She just put me in all the pre-business classes that she could cram into my schedule and said you're gonna need um another year of foreign language and so she just put me in every pre-business thing I needed and my foreign language and was like ok finish that and I'll see you next semester.” Elise said that even though she failed classes and performed horribly her advisor emailed her with a list of classes without considering what had happened the first semester. “Yeah she looked at my grades and said you may have to retake some of these but go ahead and move on with second semester and we'll worry about them later.” Elise rationalized that it was her own fault for not asking more questions and pressing the situation. I posit that students at risk

should not blame themselves, especially after pointing out their situation to their advisor, for receiving inadequate guidance. Elise understood about traditional relationships with professors when she said, “with the professors the more you ask for help the more you’re going to get.” Elise felt differently about the community college advisors.

At any time during the day, they’re sitting in their offices... you can go talk to anybody in the advising center and they’re there as long as the school is open so um it’s a lot easier to get a hold of people and get the information that you need...They walk you through it step by step and there’s always somebody there even if it’s not the same person. (Elise)

Elise described advising at the community college as more accessible because there was someone in the advising office whenever the school was open.

This research suggests that the advisor/student relationship should be welcoming, approachable and comfortable for students who do not have prior knowledge (more than half in this study are first-generation students) about navigating the academic advising system.

Professors and Faculty Mentors

*It’s like they’re always so busy or it like doesn’t work in my schedule sometimes.
(Vanessa)*

As a probe to one of the interview questions, the participants were asked if they went to professor’s office hours if they needed help with their classes. What emerged from the answers was that, similar to how they described their relationships with their advisors, their needs were not being met Willa said that her comparative religions professor was the head of the department and that she did not think that she should bother him because of his position in the department. This might be a cultural issue where those in a position of power are not to be disturbed. Further research could explore this nuance

to see if a representative sample of all university students reacted in the same way and then furthermore, what meaning they attached to the message that the professor was too busy or too important to meet with individual students. Sarah said that the professor's office hours conflicted with her schedule and that was a problem for her when she needed feedback on a "big paper" that was due. She said that the professor "doesn't really have time to answer these questions like in a classroom type setting." Some students were unable to attend office hours because of their work schedule and felt that their need to meet with the professor was subjugated by the professor's inflexible schedule.

I absolutely hated it. I had the probably the worst experience with the education. I had teachers who...just didn't care at all um no matter how much I asked for help or wanted to meet with them. You know they would try and make appointments and be like well I can meet with you for 5 minutes...I think the teachers could've [made a difference in my decision] if they show more interest in their students. I really kind of felt like they were just there for the money that you know that they really just did not have an interest in us at all. (Krista)

Krista defended the academic credentials of her community college teachers and said they had PhDs just like her professors at the university, but unlike the professors at the university, they took time to communicate with her individually through email. Krista recognized the PhD distinction as a metric of a professor's credibility and felt her potential was validated when the community college professors paid attention to her personally by offering her an internship.

Hana scheduled a conference with her professor to get help with an essay. Hana took an economic view of the situation and was not impressed with the scholarly research in her professor's portfolio. She just wanted help.

I did have a conference with her...I've only had one because I had a very bad experience with it. The whole time I was with her she seemed like she had

something else on her mind and then she was just like hurrying me out of the room...I'm not going to be going to her office hours because she doesn't seem to care if who the student is or what the questions are...and she's always talking about all of the research she's doing with with her I guess her thesis or something like that and she's always talking about that so she seems like she's taken too much on her own plate to handle her students as well. (Hana)

Hana felt that she was a consumer of education and that she was not receiving what she purchased. This is a paradox because with the financial aid package she received, she was not actually purchasing her education with her personal funds, unless she had to take out a loan. "That really kind of upsets me that you know a professor would act that way because I mean I'm paying to go here. You know I mean we the students are basically paying for her job and you know she should be more outgoing and more friendly."

(Hana) She indicated that she wanted the relationship to be more personal by saying that she would like her professor to be friendly.

The most frequently mentioned academic barriers discussed were about math and the math professors at the site school. This was the perception of students that were underprepared academically for college math and this is an example of attribute substitution where the student focused on characteristics of the math department and math professors and ignored their own deficiencies. Estevan's comment sums this up; "Everyone just has nothing good to say about the Department of Math here and my grades can reflect that." To Estevan, his poor grades meant that the professors were inadequate and it was not his abilities. Crystal had problems understanding her Polish math teacher's accent and found it impossible to understand the method she used to teach math. Crystal went to math tutoring and was unable to reconcile the different approaches

to the same academic content. "You get kind of confused if they're teaching you different ways to do it."

Daniel had problems understanding course content because he felt that his professor's style of teaching was confusing.

You don't learn anything from that class because you see it, you hear it, but you don't understand it because you can't ask questions or you can't really think about it too much because he's talking, the power point's changing, he goes on tangents, you just can't really follow along too well, and it really gets confusing. (Daniel)

Daniel felt belittled by his professor; "the way that the instructor looks at us, well you have to do this because this is what the university is expecting of you." Beth felt that she did not have ready access to her professor in her large lecture class. She felt that "the point is to know that we are getting it not that we are getting the form of it...I don't care if she's learning. She didn't get this right. She didn't double space or she used Calibri instead of Times New Roman...that's one of the issues I don't like." Many of the comments appear to be complaints or excuses for having done poorly. Feelings of confusion, being ignored or frustration (not anger) with the system was the content of the conversation. Some of the students blamed the system but others knew what they needed and described their attempts at asking for help.

A few students mentioned faculty mentors as institutional agents that made a difference in their decision-making process. Sarah did not feel special to the mentor assigned to her by the scholarship retention program, because he had a "million other mentees to take care of" and Adele's mentor advised her, "That if I'm going to be here and wishing I was somewhere else, that there's really no point in staying here. That he didn't think I would last... it wasn't an intricate conversation." Again, the students

wanted to feel special, heard and noticed.

Institutional Agent Missing from the Process

No, it was really sad, I just kinda just did it, like I just, kinda just, uh, like... a natural process just leaving the school. (Claire)

During the very first interview, I added a probe to the interview protocol. I noticed that William made decisions about how to proceed with his precarious academic situation using faulty logic and I realized from his answer that an academic professional would not have endorsed his strategies. From then on, I asked the participants to give advice to the institution about services, an office, or a person that they would have liked to talk to or would have gone to for advice, if available. They suggested variations on a theme. Danielle was an honors student with a 4.0 grade point average with a positive attitude but she felt that it made no difference to the school that she transferred. She felt that students who withdrew for any and all reasons should be interviewed for two reasons. The first reason was to recognize the student and assure them that they were valued by the institution. The other reason was that she felt that intervention during the decision-making process might interrupt that process for the students who were vacillating.

Other students suggested related concepts. Students suggested that there should be one office on campus where a student could go to discuss withdrawal, transfer, consider options, or make concrete plans for a future return to the school. Courtney thought it would have been beneficial to learn about other colleges and types of institutions (web-based or community college, for example) where she considered

attending. She did not know if it would have helped her, “but maybe it may have helped someone else who didn’t exactly know what was out there.”

It was kind of odd to me just because I felt like they were like if you’re gonna leave you’re gonna leave so we don’t really need anything from you...they just didn’t really care that they were going to lose someone...if you have a bad experience with your cell phone company...they do everything they can to keep you there... it would’ve felt a little better to me had they consulted with me about maybe why I wanted to leave. I don’t know if that would’ve changed my mind because it didn’t happen, but I think that for other people I think that it definitely, it could possibly make them reevaluate. Especially for those students who are just going off of a whim...If they could consult with somebody and see if some adjustments could be made to make them feel better there then who knows what the outcome would be. (Danielle)

Willa asked for an unbiased counselor who could help her sort through academic programs and school choices.

[I want help to] label out what I want to do and what university would be better... [not] like that sort of bias that I’m getting from like my friends or my family like just that like that general...I think I would really like if someone would um if I could present like ok here’s why I want to go and here’s where I want to you know I’m thinking maybe not. I think that’d be really helpful if I could do that and like be able to not feel like...ashamed that like I still want to do speech and debate. (Willa)

Many of these students felt ashamed to tell their families about their academic difficulties and thoughts about making changes.

Vanessa said she had no idea where to go for help. She said she looked at the school website and searched “transferring” which returned no results. She did not know where to go for financial advice or how to cancel her residence hall. Joseph said that finding resources “is really helpful...but finding them is difficult.” Courtney complained about having to go to offices all over campus and suggested that “if there was some kind of like package or something that you can just turn in and do that would be a lot easier.”

The students sought advice and direction but did not know how to find necessary resources, or more likely, they expected the solutions to be provided to them. The theme that re-emerged was that they wanted personal attention and guidance from institutional agents.

Michelle and Marina, two students who were also parents, asked for an office or programs that would support students with babies. “I have been wondering if there is any like any kind of programs that help you out if you’re like an early mother.” Marina asked for support programs especially for mothers to be or mothers that are trying to get into college.

I tried looking it up but you can’t really find very much that helps with that, cause I know there’s not that many people who come who are pregnant, there’s a very, very small percent but they’re not very focused on...especially right now ‘cause like it was kind of hard for me, kind of stressful, it was just the whole pregnancy that was like my main focus aside from school. Well, cause you can’t avoid it.
(Marina)

Marina recognized that very few students were in the same situation as she was but she still wanted to be included and recognized by the educational system.

Beth felt that student’s mental health issues were not being addressed or if they were available they were not easy to find. Beth described the stresses that were apparent with this set of students who struggled academically, financially, and psychologically.

They don’t really make it widely known...an office about the stresses for school, especially for freshman and just relationship kind of because a lot of us are dealing with first time boyfriends, girlfriends, and like serious relationships...I don’t know if I’m speaking more from personal experience or more from what I’ve seen because I just see a lot of my friends struggling... maybe financial counseling and/or stress management and counseling or psych counseling. (Beth)

Once again, this might pertain to all students at the university but these students described their barriers and needs and that is what this research addressed.

A student who transferred to the local community college took a class on “how to do well” in college. She suggested that the university provide a similar class for freshman. She took the class at the community college and felt that it helped her transition to the new school. Other students did not understand their financial aid package, how leaves of absence worked, how to cancel aid, or how deviations from the original program requirements would affect their financial aid package at another school. Students on academic probation asked for help strategizing how to remain eligible or return to the system. The students easily offered many ideas for an office for transferring or struggling students.

Psychological Pushes

Psychological constructs of student departure are considered in Tinto’s (1986) and Bean’s (Braxton, 2000) frameworks. The reaction to stressful situations manifested in health issues, motivation issues, and feelings of not belonging which contributed to leaving behavior.

Stress and Health Issues

Like something that takes maybe like an hour to do turns into like three hours because like I get like hungry or...I’m just like really tired. (Vanessa)

Vanessa had an accumulation of stresses. She had academic difficulties that she connected to not having the financial resources to buy a meal plan. She was unable to concentrate on her schoolwork because she was hungry and added to her precarious situation was her discomfort at feeling left out when other students on her floor went out

to eat and she could not afford to go with them. Vanessa was truly hungry because her mom could not afford to buy her a meal plan and her bi-weekly trips to get groceries were an obstacle. Vanessa walked to a grocery store (a mile away) every two weeks to stock up on dry goods. She did not have money to ride the bus to the store so she and her roommate walked. They had to check out pots and pans from the front desk in their residence hall to cook in the community kitchen. She said that it was a hassle. Her threats to persistence were academic, financial and health-related.

Inability to sleep because of stress surfaced as a health-related issue. Michelle stayed up all night to complete art projects and it made her feel jittery. Ginny's sleep cycle was "all over the place" and she would finally fall asleep at six in the morning, which meant that she slept through her classes. She said she tried to go to sleep earlier but "it just doesn't happen." Shelly talked about not being able to sleep, and her hair fell out. She said that her sleep problems and hair loss started around midterms and got worse as the semester went on. She said, "Yeah, I can't eat, my hair falls out, I can't concentrate. I think my grades have gone down a bit."

Sarah's stress was related to academics. She said that most of her stress came from not understanding why she performed poorly on exams when she studied for them. "I genuinely don't understand what's going on. It's not because I didn't study. It's not because I didn't work hard. It's because I genuinely didn't understand." Frustration was a common feeling for students when they talked about the inability to comprehend course materials. This was a hard issue to solve for them because many did not feel comfortable approaching professors after class or going to office hours.

Elise described the stress that put her in the hospital three times as a consequence of not knowing how to spend her money, not knowing how to “survive class”, and failing her classes after midterms. She was worried about finances, academics, her personal health issues and how her family would respond if she shared her problems with them. Elise “was trying to do as much as possible without sleeping, without eating.” She was hospitalized three times for what she said were mysterious illnesses; she said she was checked for stomach ulcers and kidney disease. Elise described her family as academically oriented and failing academically was a bigger stressor to her than losing her financial aid. She said that after her family learned about her health problems that they assured her that they would have helped and supported her during her rough times. Elise lied to her family about her academic situation and her self-imposed stress resulted in her health problems.

Marina and Michelle described their determination to stay in school even while struggling with difficult pregnancies. Both had severe morning sickness early in their pregnancies which affected class attendance. Marina described herself as being “paranoid” and said she chose to visit the doctor as often as she could to make sure that she and the baby were fine. She said “that kind of interfered though a lot because I would try not to stress...I have this paper due but I’m really, really feeling sick.” Michelle said she tried very hard to get to school but realized she just “was not pulling that off very well”. Marina and Michelle both withdrew after one semester and hoped to re-enter the higher education system eventually. Both realized that it might mean that they would have to return to higher education part-time at a community college. Marina

and Michelle wished that there was an office on campus that would support pregnant or new moms (as discussed earlier). In all of the aforementioned situations, there are at least two and usually three threats to academic persistence and the outside forces pulling the students away from the institution have not yet been revealed.

Feel Different

Many of the other students um are very integrated into college life and I feel like my foot is kind of in the door but not exactly. (Willa)

The answers to the question do you feel like other students at the site school connected to most of Tinto's organizational categories – students felt unlike others around them for economic, integration, cultural, academic, psychological and sociological reasons. To measure how students felt about themselves in relationship to the institution and their fellow students, they were asked to describe how they were alike or different from other students. Some of their responses follow. Whether or not most incoming students feel different from those around them in the general student population is unclear but with this subset of students, it was quite apparent. Willa articulated financial, social and family differences.

Many of the other students um are very integrated into college life and I feel like my foot is kind of in the door but not exactly...when I compare myself to other students...they have like meal plan. They'll go out to dinner all together...and then there's the football games and stuff that I don't go to because I can't afford a [sports pass]. So it feels like those kind of set me apart I guess from other people...I don't go to parties or anything so I think that aspect maybe sets me differently...and also I think that I have like a lot of responsibility more than other college students to go home...just like not doing as many like college activities as like other people. I think my biggest obstacles are probably like social maybe. Then maybe like financial. Because many people um have don't like worry so much about those...financial situations but that's a big obstacle of mine. (Willa)

Willa said her biggest obstacle at the school was social (it was also financial) because she could not afford tickets to sporting events or a meal plan and was unable to go out to eat with other students. She felt social isolation because she felt a responsibility to go home more than the other students around her did, and she chose not go to parties.

Estevan said the first difference he felt at the school was cultural identity. He was proud of his Tohono O'odham heritage and was frustrated because even though he looked Caucasian he identified as Native American. He pushed verbally against other students who questioned his ethnicity. Natalie talked as a spokesperson for Native Americans. Even though she said that she had never thought about being different from other students around her, she went into an extemporaneous speech about the differences.

I think it's different for me being Native American because there are so many stereotypes about being Native American...there are so many things that people want to say about us, and say that you can't succeed, you can't do this, you can't do that, and I think it's different here because when you come across another Native American you know that you have set those standards for yourself.
(Natalie)

Natalie's first response was a quick "no" to my question asking if she felt different from students around her. She paused for a short time and then described stereotypes about her race. She went on to describe some differences between Native Americans and Caucasians in the classroom.

When you ask a lot of the Native American students what made you want to come to college, a lot of them say well I want to finish and get my degree and get my doctorate and return home and help my you know community...when it comes to that, the Native American population are the minority population, it's a little easier for me to connect to but as for you know, the Anglo population it's a little different you know, it's hard to you know think that because they're so outspoken, most of them are, they just can say whatever they want... they are able to ask a lot more questions and I guess it's different cause you know for Native Americans. (Natalie)

Marina, Natalie and Estevan were very aware of their differences from the Caucasian students around them and they all embraced their backgrounds. Marina found a group at work that she felt comfortable with who understood and spoke Spanish. Estevan pushed against those who questioned his ethnicity and Natalie observed the interactions around her and accepted ethnic differences. This is a push against Tinto's proposition that a student has to commit cultural suicide (cut the ties to their family and cultural background) to persist (Tierney, 1992). They all left or were planning to leave the university but it was not because of cultural differences.

Embedded in Vanessa's answer to the question about feeling different from other students were feelings regarding academic, psychological and economic differences. She laughed when she said, "I just feel like everybody else understands what's going on in class and just like sometimes like (pause) like in discussion I know like everybody has like input and I just like sit there cause I just don't know what to say or how to respond to certain things." She felt like everybody around her was doing well academically and her evidence was that they talked in class. She described staying silent and hiding her hardships and felt uncomfortable when she overheard conversations about what others were planning to do the upcoming weekend or what they did the prior weekend. As a reminder, Vanessa is the student who could not afford a meal plan and had no extra money for entertainment. She was on the verge of tears when she described her financial difficulties but laughed when she talked about academics. Crying about finances but laughing about academic difficulties is a puzzle. I posit that her financial difficulties were more painful to her than her academic challenges.

Five interviewees discussed their discomfort with the social and Greek system at the school. The root of their distress was unclear.

I think that a lot of the students there go there for the social scene. Especially Greek life. I found that that was like a very prominent aspect there and that's something that I'm just not really interested in and I haven't really been a partier throughout my whole high school and college career. It kind of left me lonely sometimes. (Danielle)

Sororities were not organizations that these five participants aspired to join, possibly because they knew the costs associated with joining a sorority were unaffordable. The cliquish atmosphere irritated them and left them feeling lonely (Danielle) or different (Hana). Hana said, "I don't really have um that many people that I have kind of bond with here so I'm not really sure. Girls in my dorm, the mass majority are like partiers and sorority girls and so I don't really have anything in common with them cause I don't drink or smoke." Adele described people partying Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday in addition to the weekend. She transferred because she was looking for more of a balance between the academics and social systems and expected it to be different at the small private school on the east coast. Krista dreaded going to school because she "hated" the Greek system. She did not join clubs or organizations because she dreaded that they would be full of sorority girls. She said she could not stand how loud they were. "Drives me nuts." Claire lived in a female residence hall and thought that would be a great way to meet girls but it did not turn out that way for her. Many of the girls were in sororities so they were not at the residence hall very often. Not fitting in because one does not want to party, drink or belong to a sorority is an unfortunate reason for students to leave because they feel different from those around them and especially embarrassing to the

institution when students recalled their peers attending class drunk. In their experiences at the site university, the sorority girl behavior stood out as a vivid memory and uncomfortable to these five participants. Further research and probes would need to address where the discomfort was rooted, possibly from media sources, preconceived notions gathered from conversations about college-going, or possibly feelings about not belonging because of socioeconomic reasons.

Not First Choice School

Original intent to commit to the institution in the upcoming cases supports the idea that if a student does not want to attend an institution at entry then overcoming barriers and obstacles (despite having a full financial aid package) weakens persistence. The following six students attended the study university because of the scholarship program and all six either transferred to their original dream school or were in the process of doing so. Elise's original plan was to go to a school out of state that had a hospitality and event management program but instead enrolled in the business program at the site school and was eventually academically disqualified. At the time of the interview, she was taking classes at the local community college to prove that she could perform successfully and had applied to the school out of state. Joseph was waiting to find out if he would receive a scholarship package to attend Brown University where he was admitted his senior year in high school. He originally declined the offer because the high tuition cost worried him. The small class sizes, academic reputation and ability to "connect with other students and connect with the teachers and hear the materials better" were what appealed to him. Rebecca was waiting to find out if she was admitted to a

small liberal arts school on the east coast where she had been waitlisted previously. Ginnie wanted to move back to her hometown and live with friends, work at the drycleaners where she had in high school and go to the large state school where she wanted to go originally. Adele was pressured by her father and her brother (who worked at the site university) to attend because of the scholarship program. Adele was admitted to Fairleigh Dickenson on the east coast but not awarded enough scholarship money to attend so she stayed in town and was miserable. Her grandma “kinda stepped up and said she’d pay my tuition” so Adele left after one semester. Courtney enrolled at the site university because she thought taking architecture classes would lead her to her desired profession, interior design. She moved back home because of family issues but was headed to a school on the east coast that had the program she wanted originally. She said, “Well my idea is, well I’ve made a round circle. I’m thinking about interior design again... because it’s something that I really do a lot of.” The students had mixed feelings before entry to the site school. Their desire to attend their first choice school was suppressed because of the family’s socioeconomic status and inability to pay for out of state or private college tuition. The students were not committed at enrollment and through various pathways returned to their original plan and were looking for ways to fund their education.

Institutional Fit

It’s all about environment and atmosphere for me. (Tanya)

It wasn’t very friendly...the environment is kind of hostile if you’re not used to it like. I went in expecting everyone was gonna be like helpful and tell me where I was supposed to be...It just kind of fend for yourself. They throw you in there. Hope you succeed!” (Elise)

The following examples illustrate Bean's thesis (1983) that organizational determinants affect student satisfaction that influence decision-making about withdrawal. Elise related that it was a culture shock coming from a small town to attend a large school in a large city. Krista described the apartment shuttle driver as one of the few people at the school who knew her name and her birthday. "That was the best part [of going to school at the site school]. That was the hardest part for me to leave that school (laughter)." She "just hated it and I dreaded going to school." She became depressed. She felt the teachers were not welcoming, showed no interest in the students, and that they were there for the money. Hana took it very personally.

I gave the university a fair chance...I think by the end of the semester that you would know if you actually like the university or not and I think by the end you would actually start forming a little bit of a bond with people...I'm ready to move back...I had to stay here this weekend and the whole time I was like I want to be at home. (Hana)

The participants in this research project craved personal attention. While most students at the university would probably not expect institutional agents to know their birthday, few would probably feel that it is necessary to inform the resident assistant of their whereabouts.

The site institution is a Research I university in a city of almost one million people. It is in the southwest – winters are mild but the summer months can be very hot. Some of these students based their decisions to leave partially on their physical environment and that is what makes these factors interesting: lack of trees and grass (Adele and Daniel both made college visits to the east coast), tired of desert (Daniel, from the city where the site university is located), desolate (Danielle, lives 120 miles away in a

hotter city), no music scene (Ginnie) or feeling unsafe (Hana, from a larger city 107 miles away). Consider Danielle's description of the atmosphere at the university.

When I think about the [site school], I think that it's a great school. I mean they have some really great professors. There's a lot of help offered there. Umm one downfall to it I would think is the location. You know I don't know, I had just a feeling that it gave me. It was just kinda driving around. There weren't too many things to see and there weren't too many things for my friends to do off campus and that was something I thought that really could've enhanced my college experience over there. And that's something that I just didn't find. It was just kind of in a desolate place. I found that I just didn't really like [site city] too much. (Danielle)

Even though these reasons appear superficial, it is important to know that these are some of the reasons that contribute to student departure. It helps to know about them in order to understand college students and on what they base their decisions.

Students felt let down by individual people and by the institution as an entity. Elise was from a "really small town" and described her time there as "culture shock". She said it "wasn't friendly" and it was "hostile". She expected that everyone was going to be helpful and "tell me where I was supposed to be and what I was supposed to be doing and that didn't really happen at all. It's just kind of fend for yourself. They throw you in there. Hope you succeed!" Krista felt that the teachers at the community college where she transferred cared about her more, they knew her name and she was impressed that when she did not attend class the teachers emailed her to invite her to go over what she had missed. The community college was clearly a better institutional fit for her. Hana felt let down by the university in multiple ways, not only was she unhappy with professors and advisors, she met with a faith-based organization for a month and a half and felt they were not welcoming. Hana felt that she went through the negative

experience for a reason and said that later in her life she will not look back and wonder “what if” about her first choice university.

The required general education curriculum at the site university aggravated the students’ commitment to the school. They did not understand (or were not convinced) that taking classes outside of their major emphasis made sense, especially when those classes jeopardized their academic standing.

I realized in college I am allowed a lot more choice about my classes and I found myself taking classes I didn’t really have choices about so I felt like my freedom was kind of being taken in that subject and it was really frustrating to get past.
(Beth)

Beth and Daniel were both frustrated with the organizational academic rules that required students to take general education units that were seemingly unrelated to the major they picked and the subject to which they believed their coursework should be related.

Frequently, the course availability for these classes was a real problem because all students needed them. William talked about trying to sign up for a philosophy class that he needed for his major and there were never openings when he checked. Daniel ranted about the general education concept because the courses were unrelated to his desire to be an elementary school teacher (or a cop) but he believed that “it seems like the general education classes are meant to make you fail...and then they grade it so harshly to where you can’t really get a good grade.” He saw no reason to study medieval Germany or eroticism and love in the Middle Ages because he would never be teaching those topics to elementary school students. Daniel stated “his” statistics and said he was willing to give up a body part to prove his point.

I've asked so many other people and 98% of the people I've asked they say Gen Ed classes are stupid. I mean I could go and ask a survey right now to 100 people to get the even 100% kind of thing. I can almost guarantee one of my ligaments like one of my body parts, I can guarantee a leg that at least 90% of random strangers, people that I don't know, are gonna say yeah I look back and I think Gen Ed classes are stupid because now I'm a math major. When did I need eroticism when did I need the natural science class. Like when did I need to take astronomy? It's just what the university wants you to do and I really think that it's not in good effort to like make all these kids take all these classes and stress them out...I don't really think that they're effective in any way at all, because you obviously gain some knowledge in one field but depending on your major why does it matter? (Daniel)

Beth repeated the sentiment about courses that did not pertain to her major and said that it was hard for her to stay motivated for the classes that were outside of her major and bored her. She said that her friends who were juniors and taking classes in their majors advised her to "like hold out, hold out." Students felt they were delayed when they had to wait for acceptance into a program (architecture, business, pharmacy, or physiology) after a few years of coursework that appeared unrelated to their preferred major.

Courtney said:

The other part that really was kind of nervous to me about the architecture was that for the first four years it's kind of like determining whether you'll actually get into the program and then the fifth year is actually like receiving your degree. And that was kind of wobbly for me because I didn't want to spend four years of my life just not to get into the program and just be stuck. (Courtney)

Additionally, they were worried about investing multiple years hoping to get into a specific (and usually highly selective) program and then not being admitted.

Motivation to persist was threatened by course availability, boredom with required coursework and feeling insecure in the investment of multiple years of coursework that did not necessarily guarantee admission into an upper division program.

The students had a common sense approach to their situation. I posit that this perception

is different from students whose persistence is not threatened financially. They did not want to waste their time on perceived unnecessary coursework.

Part Two: Pulls

The second section will provide examples of the forces outside the institution that were pulling the participants away from the university. Those forces were financial, psychological, and related to the family situations. Collecting qualitative data revealed the student's family context as an important lens that threatened their persistence.

Family Influence – Especially Maternal

I provided a short description of each of the participant's family situations in the methodology section (Table 2, p. 62) because I suggest that their situations are different from the student population as a whole. The amount of single parent families, deceased fathers and family financial and health related situations appeared extreme. Four of the 27 interviewees had a mother and a father living in the same household. Four fathers died and two had substance abuse problems. The participants told stories about their absent fathers and how it affected their families. Only one participant (Ward) avoided saying anything about his mother. Ward mentioned his grandparents, his dad and his aunt when I asked him about his family. The maternal influence was especially strong for many of these students. These findings suggest that by understanding the context from which students arrive at a postsecondary institution, new policies and programs that support them in new and different ways should be created.

Financial Pulls

Financial difficulties threatened persistence for this set of students. They relied on the federal work study allotment in their financial aid award to cover costs because their families did not have the monetary resources to assist them. Some parents were unemployed themselves and asked their students to help them pay their bills at home. Marina applied for welfare for groceries and for the state welfare health program to help cover the costs for her pregnancy.

Ashley felt responsible to assist her mom financially because she had a job and received a substantial financial aid package. She told a story about her mom's business partner swindling her out of her business and her mom calling to ask her for money. Her dad (who lived across the country) lost his profitable business and high salary and was unemployed because he became addicted to online gaming and was an alcoholic. Her brother was in college in another state but felt no ties towards their mother so Ashley felt she needed to help her mom financially. She struggled with the decision to give her mom money because she knew she needed it to stay in college. In Ashley's case, she was pulled home for psychological and financial reasons.

Teresa and her family believed that all Teresa's educational bills would be covered without the need to take out loans. She spent her aid award before her rent was paid so she had to take out a personal loan to cover her \$2000 bill because her parents could not assist her. The families helped when they could but it was by picking the student up on the weekend, feeding them and then returning them to school at the end of

the weekend. At times, the families could not afford the gas to transport the student. The families provided emotional and psychological support instead of financial support.

Psychological Pulls

Homesick/Frequent Visits Home

Thursday evening we go and we come back on Sundays. Like my very first time I felt as if I was on vacation here, as I was going home and like going to stay there. And then like it hit me when I had to come back. (Vanessa)

She [a friend] like talked to me about it over the internet and she was just like she was like 'you don't like it here because you go home every weekend' and I was like no I go home every weekend cause I don't like it here. (Ginnie)

These participants described their frequent need to visit home as homesickness – they were not describing responsibilities at home and what is different about these scenarios is that either the family came and picked them up or they spent time and money on public transportation (shuttles or by Greyhound bus) to get home. The families enabled and supported the student's desire to go home which reinforced the commitment to family and not to the institution. Natalie (home was 291 miles away) went home every other week and because she did not have a car her mom would pick her up and then drive her back on Sunday. She described the trips as a financial hardship. Claire (126 miles) found it hard to readjust after going home frequently to see her family and friends. By the second semester, her homesickness was so severe that she went home every week. Hana (107 miles) went home almost every weekend. She took a shuttle, got rides with people from her dorm, or if she was not able to make those arrangements her parents would pick her up and take her back on Sunday. Teresa (135 miles) did not have a car but went home every weekend. Her parents picked her up every weekend while her

father was unemployed and then she rode the Greyhound bus home every weekend after her dad secured a job. At first her dad sent her the money for the bus trip but she said, “And then I started working so now I pay for my own bus ride.” When she went home at Christmas she did not want to go back to school. When she got back to school, she had no roommate and said, “God I feel so lonely. It’s just like, I didn’t feel complete.” She followed that by saying that she might have felt better if her parents and sister moved to the city where she attended school. Wishing that the family moves to where the school is located is a novel solution to feeling better instead of attempting to commit and integrate with the school. Teresa was conflicted between the commitment to her family and to the institution. Her initial solution was to bring her family to the school which implies that they are mobile and have the resources to move from one city to another. Her father was unemployed when Teresa began school so she might have been hopeful her dad would look for a job where she was and move the family. The underlying idea that the family connection is extremely important is revealing. It is important to note that Teresa did not intend to integrate but wanted to feel comfortable and not lonely any longer and wanted her family to be close.

Some of the students made conscious decisions to avoid involvement on campus and they finished schoolwork during the week to separate their lives at school from their lives at home. Sarah (91 miles) was self-motivated to get all her schoolwork finished by Friday afternoon so she could go home. “So you know so I work really hard during the week to make sure that I can go home so basically I mean as far as who determines it its mostly my desire to be home that determines it.” Sarah did not “do a lot of free time stuff

on campus, I just go home.” Danielle (126 miles) missed her mom and two younger sisters so much that it factored in her decision to move back home and transfer schools. She said that the first semester she made a conscious effort to stay at school on the weekends. As soon as she decided that she was not going to stay there for four years, she decided that she might as well go home and visit more than she had the first semester. Their motivations were geared towards being at home with family and not integration with the institution. Danielle and Sarah compartmentalized their lives and this makes sense because coming from first-generation families, higher education and family life were not intertwined.

Family responsibilities

It was kind of like my family's mistakes are my motivation. (Sarah)

Tinto's and Astin's theories address the ways that students successfully integrate with the institution. What seems to be a glaring omission from these frameworks is the consideration that circumstances outside the university environment threaten the student's persistence at the academy. The family stories about hardships “at home” were numerous and poignant and it was admirable that the interviewees tried their hardest to negotiate higher education while strong feelings of responsibility towards their family pulled them home. The following stories are examples of how strong the sense of responsibility was that influenced the participants' decision-making process.

Sarah was at a crisis point three weeks into her first semester in college. She failed her first test (She was a straight A student in high school), her boyfriend was in a serious car accident, her mom was going through “another” divorce and her younger

sister had emotional breakdowns.

My younger sister was having a hard time because she wanted to be with her dad and...her dad's house isn't the best place for her and watching her cry all the time, missing her dad...I went through the same thing when I was a kid. My parents got divorced you know I wanted to see my dad. I wanted both of my parents together and kind of watching her go through that again was really hard.
(Sarah)

Sarah went to her advisor, her faculty mentor, retention program staff personnel and took steps to leave school within three weeks of starting classes. She lost weight because she was had trouble eating and sleeping. In addition, she drove home two to three times a week – seventy miles away. She shared that her mom was an emancipated minor at 13 and worked two jobs her whole life to pay bills.

You know my mom she she's a really hard worker. Like she does so much and she never seems to get any benefits from it and watching that really really kills me and I think that's another reason why I decided that I need to finish college.
(Sarah)

Sarah's goal was to break her family's pattern of not attending or graduating from college. Sarah said, "everybody's just like they're so proud...I kind of feel like I have to live up to their expectations to a certain extent which...is kind of hard because you never want to disappoint."

There was no paternal support in Crystal's family and this theme reoccurs in forthcoming stories. Crystal's "main priority is to keep up my grades...my mom's the only one who works, our dad doesn't live with us so she's it's kind of stressful cause she has like me and my sister in college and we have a younger brother in high school so it it's hard. We try to help her out as much as we can." She and her sister were both students at the university; they carpoled to school and parked a second car at one of their

jobs to save money on the parking permit and gas. They had to coordinate their class and work schedules so they could get to work and school on time. Crystal described being annoyed and that her academic situation was stressful. Her brother aspired to community college attendance because of his sisters' difficulties. Crystal considered attending community college because she had a hard time keeping her grades up in addition to working to help with family finances.

Willa felt a responsibility to go home every weekend (116 miles away) to be with her mom because her dad died when she was in third grade. Even though her dad passed away ten years earlier, she had an emotional connection with her mother that became very integrated with her life. Her sisters did not have the same connection to their mother. She understood that the pull home prohibited her from integrating at the site university but her pull home was stronger than her commitment to integrate.

My mom really likes me to go home on the weekends so I feel like that might be a factor that like makes it hard to be integrated...so I do miss out on hanging out with friends on the weekends or being able to be able to just like do whatever like um like I don't know like on weekends I kind of feel like when I come back I miss out on things...it is an expectation but she also kind of like asks so will you come home this weekend so um that's a lot of pressure. (Willa)

She planned to transfer to the university close to home because "I guess there's some worry that she'd be like alone. I kind of have a feeling that maybe being at [school near home] would be better to like keep her company." Willa had two sisters that attended the site school but because she was the one without a job she had the free time to go home. Her mom asked her to go home and help with the remaining three children and she described that request as a direct and personal responsibility. In addition to feeling

responsible to attend to her mother, she wanted to feel “closer” to her siblings at home and for that reason she intended to transfer.

Krista felt responsibility to attend a school that was close to her mom and sister because her father died two years before she started college. She applied to the site school in her hometown but hated it. “I kind of felt like my mom needed me here too and so I just applied to [site school] and I went there but I just hated it. I was so miserable.” Her perception was that she was needed at home to drive her sister to school until she got her driver’s license and she said that was one of the reasons for attending the school close to home.

Rebecca was pulled home to help because her dad was sick and she said that caused her pressure. An extreme story about dealing with an ill father and a pull home follows. Courtney’s home was five hours away from the university on the opposite side of the state. Her mother strongly encouraged her to attend a state school as far away from home as possible. Courtney’s dad had a degenerative disc disease and struggled with chronic pain. When her dad was 38 years old, the family sold their business because of his health. She said her dad was sick all of the time and “there’s a lot of stress that goes on with that and his pain and um his anger behind that pain. And his methods of coping with pain.” She said that a majority of her life she helped her mom with grocery shopping, performing household duties, and driving her younger siblings around while her mom was in the midst of trying to get help for her and her husband. Courtney was in almost daily contact with her mom while she was away at school. She said her mom tried to protect her from what was happening at home and focused on Courtney and her

experiences at college during their phone conversations. Courtney rode the bus home a couple of times (which always took a full day each way) over the course of the semester. She said, “it was hard to move away and like not be part of that but...and then when Christmas time came around, it was hard to not be a part of the understanding of what was going on and being there to help my mom and be there for my mom or my sister or my brother.” She left the state university and moved in with her grandma who lived halfway between home and her first university. Within a month, she moved home even though her mom “didn’t want me to move home right away because there was so much going on and she wanted me to be able to still have my separate life.”

Courtney’s negotiation of her situation and her decision-making path was complicated every step of the way because of circumstances at home. Her mother practically forced her to attend the university on the extreme opposite side of the state to create distance from a painful family situation. Then while at the school, Courtney was in daily contact with her mom who was trying to hide the problems at home by encouraging Courtney to focus on academics and her involvement at the school. Courtney made trips home because she knew the situation was awful. Then once again, influenced by the extreme situation at home, after trying to maintain a shorter distance by attending a community college halfway between the two extremes, she moved home. The family pressures continued to influence her educational process. She attended the local community college taking nursing classes and got a job at the local hospital.

I thought I was going to be a nurse for a while. I worked at the hospital and a couple months ago or about a month ago my dad tried to kill himself and at that point I was like I don’t think I want to be a nurse anymore. I don’t think I want to handle the stress of that. So I decided to change because I don’t want to be I

don't want to be burnt out for the rest of my life and that's how I'm feeling right now. (Courtney)

Maternal influences on the participants' lives surfaced early, often, and were connected to the commitment and integration (or lack of integration) between the student and the school. For unknown reasons, students like Courtney, Rebecca, and Krista were committed to helping their mother or providing their moms with psychological support instead of prioritizing school before family. They were not resentful that family obligations kept them (by choice) from becoming involved at school.

Part Three: Decision-Making Process

The purpose for part three of the findings section is to discuss and analyze the data that was pulled from the interviews regarding the decision-making process, what pressures were involved and who influenced the students' decisions. Some of the students talked about why, how and what was involved in their decision-making process. Some students made charts, some students "thought" it out, and some discussed it with others. Some students thought ahead and were sketching out their futures and a few were not pressured by any timelines. The first part of this section sets up the context in which students made their decisions and then ends with their rationalization and decision-making process.

Timeline

The first day actually I was like this is the university for me. I feel like the first week was a really like a high point where I knew that like yes, this is like gonna be great and then like I felt like it kinda went downhill from there. (Will)

The following paragraphs are grouped into the time periods that participants recalled when they made their decision to depart the university. The findings suggest that

students are vulnerable from even before they start college to the very last moment when the grades are reported each semester.

Adele was unhappy about her enrollment choice during the summer after she had attended new student orientation at her dream school on the east coast and then right after that she attended orientation at the site school. She started at the site school not wanting to be there. Ginnie said that she doubted her decision, “pretty much the first day I came here...I don’t really like it...Like all the people and stuff and...especially at that time I wasn’t in a happy place in my life.” I asked her if her feelings became more or less strong and she said once she decided to leave and did not feel trapped any longer, she looked forward to leaving. Adele and Ginnie did not invest their personal resources (psychological commitment) at entry to the institution.

Vanessa, Hana, Rebecca and Courtney made their decision the first few months into the first semester. Vanessa said that she “didn’t have doubts before coming here. But I have doubts now just because of like everything.” Three weeks into the semester Vanessa felt that she was supposed to be home with her family. Rebecca took steps to transfer within her first few months of school. Courtney’s first few weeks were hard and then she “got used to it and it was nice to be away and nice to be able to understand what was going on with my family but not be part of it and not have to deal with the stress of that. But probably right around October and I just really started to miss home and um definitely November.” Elise realized at the end of the first semester that she was in an academic “hole” and that she had to work harder than she already was to stay enrolled.

The winter break was a fragile time for students in their decision-making process. For Claire, her need to go home and see her family and friends intensified after Christmas break. She said that she was doing fine, “everything was going smooth, and then Christmas I went home, and it was like, just being home, and just being ...back to where I was for like 19 years of my life.” Instead of tapering off her second semester she said her feelings got more “severe”. Natalie said that over winter break that she realized that she wanted to be “emotionally” with her grandma who she said was like her mom. Danielle remembered exactly when she realized that she was leaving. She decided, “over Christmas break.”

The reason that students described the second semester as the time they knew they were leaving the school was because of academic problems. William and Ward failed and dropped classes their first semester but not until the very end of the second semester did they comprehend how serious their academic situation was. Ward was worried at the end of his first semester and started “freaking out”. He realized near the end of his second semester that if he did not pass every single class that he was “pretty much done with my college thing.” William was on academic probation his second semester and said that he found out he could not return “about the time my grades came in second semester.” It is hard to comprehend how both of these students misunderstood their enrollment jeopardy, but they did. If the student and the academy operate in an environment where two-way communication is valued and institutionalized, then academic early alert systems or communications from professors and advisors might have

interrupted William and Ward's ignorance or complacency regarding the academic threats to their persistence.

A natural conversational probe when the participants were asked about their decision-making process was asking them about their timeline for making their change – transferring, stopping out, and even when they planned to graduate. A mathematical understanding regarding how many units one had to take per year to graduate in four years was missing from their timeline rationale. Some students were rational decision-makers weighing costs and benefits (Becker, 1976; Scott, 2000) and some exemplified the bounded rationality framework that considers intuition, framing of the situation, risky choices, and attribute substitution (Kahneman, 2003). Failing and dropping classes, transferring programs, taking community college classes, changing schools, without even taking into account necessary work hours did not mean to some of the participants that it might take them longer than four years to graduate. Others were fully aware of the traditional four-year timeframe and as Estevan said, “It helps, for me it helps to see the big picture. And, but of course I can only do it once, one piece at a time.”

Hana laughed when she talked about her timeline. She planned to transfer back and forth between three different institutions and still finish in four years. Her four-year plan was destined for failure unless she planned her coursework precisely and consciously with the help from academic advisors at all three schools.

Next semester I'm going to go to [a community college in my hometown]. It's a lot cheaper and I mean it was under a thousand dollars for the whole semester...I want to go there next semester and then sophomore year as well and then transfer to [other state university] for junior and senior year. I want to be done in four years. I haven't set out like an actual like timeline for it. (Hana)

Shelly planned to leave at the end of the first semester if she did not get a job. She said that she might have to take a semester off just to work but that would be an “inconvenience”. “If I don’t...get a job soon like by Christmas then I’m going to transfer back to [my hometown] and transfer to [other state school] or go to community college or take a semester off.” Shelly knew that she could not afford to stay at the school any longer unless she found a job before Christmas break. Vanessa considered leaving before the end of the semester because she was extremely unhappy but stayed until the end of the semester because she did not want to lose any units. “That was 5 classes for me and I just couldn’t handle it so I limited it down to four, which is 13 credits but now I don’t have a certain specific time limit.” She understood the math of average credits per year and said that she knew she could not handle taking five classes per semester and that was why she no longer had a timeline.

Daniel is an example of a student who did not understand a timeline and what it meant. He failed classes his first semester and had no clear idea about what he wanted his major to be or what the requirements were for any program. He wanted to be a cop or a kindergarten teacher and “definitely land one of those jobs within a year of graduation”. He said that if he did not finish in four years then he “made a mistake.” Mathematically it would be extremely difficult for even a very good student to finish any degree in three and a half semesters; he had already lost one complete semester.

Willa was honest and flexible about her timeline. She considered leaving before the first semester ended but decided to stay at the school for two semesters to make sure she was not making a quick decision. She planned to transfer the next school year. She

said she might transfer again after her sophomore year when she figured out what she wanted to do, “whether that’s acting or maybe something completely different like psychology.” Ward’s plan was to take a year’s worth of community college classes and return to the university that disqualified him within a year. However, in order to earn readmission to the university, he would have to take two solid years at another institution and get grades that would convince an admissions counselor that he deserved another chance at the school that academically disqualified him. The students were processing ideas about returning but their rationale was not based on sound advice from institutional agents.

In contrast, Joseph was relaxed about how long he would stay in the educational system. Not only did he have multiple colleges he wanted to attend as an undergraduate but was willing to wait an extra year to enroll at Brown University. If that did not work out, he said he would “just keep on going and consider another school...I know it’s gonna be awhile so I’m just gonna take my time...it wouldn’t matter if I did like, after 6 years, I’ll be like alright, I need to get this done. But like, four years, five years, it really doesn’t matter.” Crystal realized that classes were more difficult than she expected and that in order to maintain her work hours and pass her classes; she would have to take fewer classes at a time. “It’s probably going to take me little bit longer just to kind of do it at my pace...and make sure that I do well in my classes rather than trying to pack them together...I’d rather do better in my classes and then do bad and have to retake them later on.” Beth was confident that she would graduate but the timeframe worried her. Her mentor was her example so she was aware that a typical four-year plan can evolve into a

six-year plan. “But it’s gonna take me a while...and that was one of those hard blows, like am I going to make it through kind of things. But it’s, I think it’s less about whether I’ll graduate...but it’s when I’ll graduate.” Expanding the time to degree was a strategy that some of the students knew to consider but they did not talk about the financial ramifications of their decision. Financial aid programs do not fund students indefinitely. Extended timelines would put students in the financial aid category where they would be offered only loans to cover their costs. This is an obvious threat to persistence for this group of students.

Who They Went To For Advice

Um, my mom. She, I didn’t want to come here. She really wanted me to come here, she really likes this school...I think she was a big influence for me to come here.

I: Why did she like this school? What were her reasons or how did she convince you?

Shelly: Originally pre-med, and um, it was just a really nice school for that program, and she knows a few people that have gone through the program, and it’s just really highly accredited so, um, she wanted me to be close to home and she didn’t want me to go [other state school] or any of those, so. This is like her obvious choice. (Shelly)

One of the overwhelming findings of this research project was that the family and especially the maternal figure were integral and key agents in all facets of this cohort’s educational process. Whether this is true for all types of students at all types of institutions is unknown but these students looked to their moms and families for advice about decisions regarding college. This does not make sense as a rational decision-making strategy regarding education but it made sense to the students emotionally and psychologically. Many of these students were first generation college students and their parents (usually a single parent) had not navigated the university experience. Some families and the students negotiated the major they chose and where they would attend

school depending on the financial aid award and the perceived income that would result from certain courses of study. They did not understand the academic rigor involved in some programs, especially the pre-medical fields. Shelly deferred completely to her mom's choice of college and her major. What really stood out is how Shelly's attendance at a specific college was "her [mom's] obvious choice."

Two out of the 27 interviewees went to their academic advisor at the site university for guidance about college and one talked to a community college advisor (who was a family friend). From evidence that was presented in earlier sections of this chapter, the students did not feel welcomed by their advisors or comfortable with them. Some students were not confident with the advice their advisors gave them.

Everyone, except for the aforementioned two participants, sought advice from family and friends. Qualitative inquiry adds richness and meaning-making to data collection and the students' voices emerge through their descriptions. For example, Adele, Crystal, Claire, Natalie and Tanya said that they went to their mom for advice. Crystal said, "I ask my mom. She's usually the one who kind of gives me like a set answer. She'll tell me pretty much what she wants me to do usually." Claire said something similar. She said that her mom is the only person that she trusts and that she is the type of person who does not rely on anyone else. Tanya expected her mom and brother to make her decisions for her because "I don't know, they know what's best for me I guess. (laughter) And I'm really indecisive as it is." The moms gave advice but two participants described their dads as someone they considered intellectual and with whom they had debates about decision-making. Daniel said, "[My dad] is really the only

one that has like the most influence on my decisions. It's only because he's really intellectual about things and he kinda thinks he thinks about things a lot." Hana said that she and her dad had debates when she was thinking about transferring so that Hana would consider both sides of the argument about whether to withdraw or stay at the site school. They were asked what kind of advice they would seek from their family members and they answered that they would talk to them about all their problems including academics. The following section will demonstrate how painful this was for some of the interviewees. This could be the reason that they made the suggestion about an unbiased office on campus where they could get advice about their academic career.

Pressures with the Process

[My parents] are just shoving it in my face all the time. We told you not to go that far...this was your fault...they always wanted me to be like a doctor, and I feel like I can't do it anymore. (crying) I can't do this for 12 years and I didn't know how I was gonna tell them. (crying) Once in a while I would like my parents to tell me they're proud of me but they never will it's just how they are...I know if I go back home they're gonna see all my stress. Maybe they'll understand me better and try to tell me that they're proud of me for the first time in their life. (crying) (Teresa)

An interesting contradiction was that the participants went to their families for advice while at the same time they were worried to share what they were going through with their families. Asking for advice was risky and painful. It was painful because many of the students felt that they were disappointing their families and risky because of the consequences, for example, material items taken away as punishment or military enlistment as a threat. Frequently there were multiple issues that the participants were dealing with simultaneously. They realized their chosen major was not appropriate for their academic abilities; they were unhappy at the school; and they were worried about

sharing decisions to switch from a career path that the family had approved. Moms were disappointed that their children were not going to be doctors (Teresa and Estevan) and Elise, Ward and William were worried to share because of the fact that they were losing their scholarships.

Adele was pretty clearly not committed to the school when she first enrolled. She admitted that she did not want to be at the site university before classes started but pressure from her father and brother influenced her decision to attend. She felt anxiety for months about telling them that she was switching schools. Elise and William hid their academic difficulties from their families and lied about how they were doing. Elise and William's families found out that they were expelled by opening the letter from the university telling them they were disqualified. The following excerpts were answers to the question who are you worried about sharing your decision with? Analysis will follow.

- Adele - Dad and brother: I tried to defend myself in that way but my dad is very protective and very...stubborn, so it's hard to continue to argue my points with him, so I just gave up...So what I have to do is tell my dad and my brother that I've made my final decision.
- Crystal - Mom: I think my least support probably would come from my mom if it's something that she doesn't approve of. My sister supports me in a lot of the stuff I do, so I would have some family support.
- Elise - Family: Um for the most part I just kept it to myself cause I didn't want any of my family to know cause I would have been in trouble for losing scholarships...I didn't want to ask for help from anybody...I figured that when I was not doing well at college that I would be in trouble over that they would be upset with me for not doing well... I went home like once a month pretty frequently...I just tried to act like there was nothing wrong when I was home and when they'd ask I lied about my grades.

- Vanessa - Family: Ugh, no... I'm sorry. (crying)...I just don't think they understand (crying)...but like I don't really think they try to understand me like they just think that like I'm being drama like (crying)...it's hard to explain. Like more exaggerating or something...I don't really talk to [my brother] about it cause I don't want to scare him.
- Ward - Grandparents: I was trying to keep them well aware but I knew that if it was like something bad I really shouldn't tell them because they would freak out and start making the problem worse than it really should be and so I was trying to find some kind of balance in between that and trying to find and keep them into what's going on with my life...my grandpa mostly was trying to push onto me going into the military or some kind of service...when I went off the last thing they told me was that if you don't do well then you are going into the military so it's kind of it was hard going off with that kind of pressure.
- William - Mom: When I found out I was on probation, I just kept it quiet cause I thought I would be able to get it back, like it never happened and then...she opened my letter...She opened my letters all the time...She didn't seem surprised...She was disappointed...kinda sucks.

William felt bad about disappointing his mom. He felt it "sucked" because his mom was not surprised. He hung his head and looked at his shoes.

The most emotionally laden part of the interviews was when the participants recalled or were actively going through the process of approaching their family about their decision to make a change in their educational path. Teresa, Vanessa, Ginnie and Ward were either visibly shaken or broke down. Their situations were complex; they had hard decisions to make. They felt they were disappointing their families and they were concerned about consequences. Ward described how his grandfather was going to force him to join the Coast Guard. Ginnie said her sister (who she said was her maternal figure) would take away her car, hate her and stop speaking to her. For Vanessa, she only went to her boyfriend and friends to discuss what she was going through. She felt that her parents thought she was being overdramatic even though it was very obvious that she

was miserable. She was so miserable that she did not want to talk about the college experience to her younger brother because she did not want to “scare” him about college.

Daniel rambled when I asked him about how he made decisions about transferring to another state school and what pressures he felt while making decisions. He described how his mind was like a race track and that he was unable to break the thought patterns going through his mind. He was unable to fall sleep even though he was very exhausted by this process.

I'll be perfectly fine 100% just happy happy happy happy and I'll lay down in bed and try and go to sleep and then bam my mind is a race track, Nascar Indy 500...it's insane. I mean it goes crazy and then that's when everything really just hits me and then I start to think. One thought leads to another thought leads that to another thought that loops back to the first thought and I'm just like well this is just too much. I try and fall asleep. I stay up for three or four extra hours after I try and go to sleep. It's like 2 in the morning already and I'm trying to fall asleep. 4:30 rolls by, my mind is still racing but my body is so exhausted I can't move. I I try and open my eyes to at least look around kinda to turn my mind from thinking about things but then they just close back up and I'm just like ugh I can't even fall asleep. (Daniel)

Daniel was exhausted when I interviewed him and spoke in a monotone for most of the interview. I suggest that he was so fatigued that he was unable to think rationally and clearly.

Courses of action and career decisions were decided by extreme family events and the purpose for telling these stories is to suggest that student affairs practitioners and scholars cannot know why and how students make decisions about leaving unless they ask the students. Why does it matter to find out why students left? It matters if the mission of higher education is to retain and educate students. It might not matter if the mission of a university is to enroll students for net tuition revenue for the institution.

As a review, according to March (1994) who describes the rational procedure, the ultimate choice is based on the answer to the following four questions.

1. Alternatives: What actions are possible?
2. Expectations: What future consequences might follow from each alternative?
 - a. How likely is each possible consequence depending on the alternative chosen?
3. Preferences: What value does the decision-maker place on each of the alternatives?
4. Decision rule: How does a person make a choice among the alternatives in terms of the value placed on the consequences?

Estevan, Teresa and Natalie are examples of how complicated and upsetting the decision rule of Rational Choice Theory was for them. Estevan, Teresa and Natalie and their families set very high expectations for career outcomes after postsecondary education. Estevan and Teresa aspired to become doctors and Natalie a pharmacist. All three came to the university academically underprepared for the curriculum that included high-level science and math courses. They learned early in their first semester that those were very tough academic fields. Estevan said that when he told his mother that he was switching to education that he “was really surprised how she reacted. She was very disappointed.” He said that she was very proud of him when he wanted to be a doctor but when he switched to education she was “very disappointed in him because it was a big drop.” Teresa sobbed when she described the stress and pressure that was involved in making the decision to switch from her goal to attend medical school and become a

pediatrician to changing to a major where she could work with children, not in the medical field.

They always wanted me to be like a doctor...I feel like I have to do something with my life or they're never gonna accept the fact that I didn't do anything. (crying hard) I've always found passion in children. I work in day cares. I volunteered at the Boys and Girls club. I tutor kids now (crying)...I told my mom last week...she was just like, if that's really what you want to do...but you know you're never gonna make as much as if you were a doctor...it brings me down. (Teresa)

Natalie switched from the pre-pharmacy track to double majoring in psychology and nursing because less math was required, which was not her "strongest point". She was afraid to tell her mother who was "kinda skeptic" about psychology because she did not see value in Natalie "just listening to other people's problems and taking that in and having to deal with other people's problems but not your own...., she's like well, I don't want you to go into psychology but I think that's why I'm scared to tell her." Switching career paths and institutions at the same time, while not receiving validation and support from their families, was a huge blow to the students' egos.

Options Considered

If the financial things don't work out then I would have to go to community college and if that were to happen then I would just work and go to community college and save up money so I could go to a four year thing...Like it wouldn't be the worst thing. I'd rather do that than stay here. (Ginnie)

The first step in the rational choice process (March, 1994) is to consider the alternatives and there is evidence to support that the students gave considerable thought to possibilities. There was a clear difference between the students who considered their options and used precise and clear language and those who spoke in terms of

possibilities. Shelly listed her four options: 1) move home and take online classes; 2) move home, take online classes and work; 3) drop-out, work for a semester and then try to be readmitted if she saved enough money to fund her schooling; 4) attend a community college. Beth's options were limited by her financial situation. She worked in fast food management while in high school and saved what she thought was a substantial amount of money to support herself while in college. It was not enough to cover her first year and she realized after experiencing college that now "I know how hard college is that I couldn't do full time management at a store and be a full time student but I know that being full time management I could make enough money to be a full time student so it's really a weighing of the pros and cons but I don't, I don't want to stop going to school." It was hard for her to "not turn back toward that path" because of the money and she was in the process of deciding whether or not to withdraw, work for six months, save money and return to college.

Ward, Joseph, Elise, William, Vanessa, Claire, Crystal, Marina, and Daniel transferred to a two-year community college or were in the process of making that change. This research begs an answer to the question about why this pathway surfaced during the first year of college. Crystal said, "If I keep doing bad in my classes, I probably will go to [community college]. It's too stressful to balance everything out." Many of the students entered the four-year institution academically underprepared and lacked financial resources to support an education that produced negative results right from the beginning. Was reverse transferring an economically rational decision when the costs included disappointing their family and having a negative experience in the four-

year higher education system? Embracing the community college concept or dual-enrollment from the start might have been a better strategy. Elise said that she was pleased with her decision to transfer. She explained that the classes were easier and the tuition was less expensive and she was happier in a smaller setting.

I actually have no desire to go back to [site school]...It was not a good experience for me...I'm at [local community college] right now...I like it a lot. It's a lot easier for me and it's a lot smaller and I think that that's really kind of what I need is a smaller...it's been consistent. (Elise)

Joseph transitioned into community college classes while at the four-year institution and it became his chosen pathway while waiting to transfer to another school such as Brown or Berkeley. He was waiting to hear about the financial aid package from Brown and he admitted his chances were better because of his Native American background. He was in no hurry. "If it doesn't work out then I'll just wait another year." (Joseph) Claire's plan was to continue her schooling at the local community college until her enlistment into the Navy was finalized where she would continue her schooling to become a doctor eventually.

Ward was an interesting case because he stated very strongly what his plan was. In reality the steps to be re-admitted at the four-year university were quite strenuous because like William who was in the same situation, he was academically disqualified. Planning a return within a year would not happen for either of them. In order to return, they would have to take almost two years of transferable community college credits to be considered for readmission which would depend on grade point average. Ward said, "I'm actually plan[ning] to go back next fall...it all depends on whether or not these

classes pan out for the next semester...and over the summer.” He was proud that he “was moving forward” in spite of the resistance he was getting from his grandma.

[Grandma] doesn't even want me to go back to [site university]. She doesn't even think I can or that I will. So just being able to go back if I do next fall would be a big accomplishment for me. (laughs)...Going back to any college any university would be great. I definitely plan to go to a university...I'm moving forward. And even if I can't go back to the university I will probably look at some kind of technical school. So I can get that done. I mean my main goal as an engineer was to do game design, game programming...Whether or not I get back to the university I will still pursue that kind of technical school or something that will help me get it done. (Ward)

Willa, Ashley, Krista, Teresa and Daniel considered other four-year institutions.

Willa planned to experience multiple four-year schools; her interest in speech and drama programs structured her choices. First, she planned to transfer to the other state school that had a speech and debate program while she was waiting to hear from Bradley, which had a mid-tier speech program. Next, she planned to transfer to the top speech program in the country at Northwestern. She said, “Definitely after sophomore year, I want to be able to be where I want to be. I guess at a university.” She included all her options in her plan and she assumed that she would be admitted to all of these programs. The fact that she is from a very low socioeconomic family is a necessary reminder. Her plan was not reasonable or economical.

Vanessa did not want to “step down” to a community college and Ashley considered many options (as you will read in the next section about strategies), one of which was to attend Harvard. Ashley said, “I'm definitely gonna graduate from a university at some point...I mean, it'd be cool if it were this one, but it'd be even more cool if it were from Harvard.” Krista wanted to move out of state so she considered

schools on the east coast and finally chose a Colorado university; her diversion from the four-year site university to the local community college took her back to another four-year university out of state. Teresa chose to transfer from the site university to the four-year university in her hometown and then “I’m going to move to [other state school] for like 2 years...my last year I wanna come graduate from here.” Sarah looked into “all” possibilities including different majors and institutions.

I like a lot of different things so each major has something that I would like and something that I don’t like. So it’s really hard to narrow it down. Like when I first applied to the [site school] I thought I wanted to be a doctor...I found out how ridiculous the well, not the requirements but like how long it would take to become one you know...you go here for four years and then med school for however long that takes and the two years residency it’s like I’d be 30. (Sarah)

There was an obvious lack of comprehension about the transfer process and the costs involved with transferring between schools. Maybe the participants thought that financial aid scholarship programs were as readily available as it was for them at the site university that awarded them the full scholarship program.

Marina withdrew because of her pregnancy and knew that her options were limited for returning especially because of the financial aid package that she would not receive upon her return. She considered two options, community college as her re-entry point or a technical school.

The university is my first goal. I want to come back here for sure but if not I still wanted to make sure that I have those other options...especially on those other schools that are focused just specifically on nursing cause then I can actually be in smaller classrooms and hopefully then that’ll be okay with me, like not stressing out so much. (Marina)

It is possible that no one before these interviews asked the students to outline their plans.

Many of their plans did not make sense and were most likely not vetted with academic

advisors. There was evidence provided earlier that the students did not go to advisors to plan strategies. Many were not based on rational or economical decision-making.

Strategies

The new school in New York might be kinda cool...if they take me...I might just play around with it and just see, just throw some applications out and just see who would accept me and see...like maybe just the first couple years here and then start...seeing maybe what I wanna do...Just kinda keep moving around. (Ashley)

There was a wide range of methods the students used to make their decisions.

They employed strategies to stay (faulty ones) and strategies to leave. This section will break down the strategies students used to remain at the university and then discuss their descriptions of strategies employed when deciding to leave.

Academic Strategies

So now I'm thinking maybe I can stick to the minimum classes...You know four a semester and then do summer and winter classes...You know just do a little bit all the time...Steady...Instead of a lot (laughter) and then nothing...and then a lot...and being exhausted...and then nothing. (Michelle)

Academic advisors, faculty members or even family members were not approached for guidance about how the mathematics of grade point average, number of units and how the number of classes factored into a plan of action to improve the grade point average to stay eligible for enrollment or to recover from a difficult first semester at college. The strategy that multiple students employed was to take extra classes (more than successful students take) or fewer classes that carried more units – for example languages classes or math classes. The ‘excessive unit plan’ contributed to weak performance in all classes and the ‘fewer classes with more units per class’ was risky because the student had to do very well in high unit classes. “Let’s see I was thinking

Chinese. It was a 5 unit class and you know 5 units would...affect my GPA a lot...So I thought well if I do really good in this class...I get an A that will bump up my GPA.”

(William). It did not work for him. Ward retook a class assuming that it would be easier the second time. When it came to the end of the semester, his group project turned into the “make or break” project for a passing grade and the time spent working on that project resulted in poor results in other classes.

I retook my programming class to get a better grade in it and we ended up falling behind on the final project and so we had to do a couple 24 hours in the [computer lab] and so that was really hard because I had classes the next day and I had to study for the tests that was in that class. And so having to try to balance all the time within those last few months and weeks it was just really hard. (Ward)

High unit classes and retaking classes did not work as a strategy for Ward and William. They were academically disqualified and sent letters telling them not to sign up for classes.

Elise gave up on school but she attended classes, took tests until the very last exam and then failed out. Halfway through the semester she realized that she needed to make changes in how she studied for classes. At the end of the first semester she said:

I kind of like gave up hope on the next semester almost and I'm like I'm not sure what I'm going to take. I don't know where I should be going and that's when I went in and talked to the advisor and she kind of put me back on like track for a while and I was doing well at the beginning of that second semester and then um like as soon as like one class started to go, they all started to go. (Elise)

She laughed and said that her brain was on overload because of the combination of school and work. There was another strategy that students could have employed to save their eligibility if they would have talked to their advisors and asked them for guidance. If a student withdraws completely from all classes before the end of the semester, instead

of receiving a failing grade in all the classes, their transcript will show a W for withdrawal. The students can re-enroll the following semester. They lose the semester's worth of units and wasted one semester's financial aid allotment but they can remain enrolled at the school.

Leaving Strategies

Danielle made pros and cons charts and consulted her mom before she finally decided to move back home and pursue the social work major that was offered at the university in her hometown. "When I received my financial aid statement back from [other state university] I definitely compared it with [site school], just to make sure all my finances would be in order...I definitely made a list of pros and cons before leaving...I'm a list maker." Willa was unhappy at her first choice school and instead of leaving mid-semester she decided to "spend this year here to make sure that I am not making a quick decision." When she made her college choice, she said that she made lists of pros and cons but "now that I'm actually experiencing it, it's different... it's more like the vision, like where I can see myself in four years." Shelly considered the benefit of going home so that she could work and take classes online but the cost would be breaking her lease and paying a cancellation fee every month. She said, "we kind of did like a plus and minuses, pros and cons."

Hana modeled rational choice decision-making. She looked at her options, thought about the consequences, considered her preferences and then made her decision. She had a job back home that she could return to which would alleviate the financial pressure and additionally, living at home would save money. In addition, the local

community college was less expensive and close to her job. She then would attend for two years, save money and transfer to a four-year institution. She spoke with her advisors who reassured her that the classes would transfer to the four-year university. Then she looked towards graduate school. She had no idea what her undergraduate major was going to be but found an exploratory computer science curriculum at the community college that she felt would help her find her academic path. She considered leaving mid-semester because she was unhappy but rationalized “I’ve been here half a semester and I’m just going to lose all those credits that I’ve been working towards and I’ve gone through so much with school, with the schoolwork already, I don’t want that to go to waste.” Her parents encouraged her to come home mid-semester because of her negative experience but she reasoned:

I do want to finish, because it almost was would seem like I just quit...I don’t want to do that and I know a lot of people that have quit mid-semester, just went to work and then they never went back to school again because they get used to having a full time job...and so I knew that if I quit mid-semester that I would have gotten into a routine of just going to work and everything and I wouldn’t be as prepared and ready for the second semester cause I was out of the routine of studying and writing papers and all that stuff. (Hana)

Ashley’s choice process was the complete opposite. She considered the site university as a “good baby step” to get out of the house. She went on to say that she felt more independent and more confident and was going to find a school farther away. Her method of choosing the school was remarkable.

Well, there were schools, like just in picking colleges in general...I just kinda really just looked at a map, and I’m like, ok. Where have I been, where did I like? Where have I never been? Where would be the most crazy place I could ever go? (Ashley)

She said she would even consider Harvard. Her decision-making process was the outlier.

She listed random ideas as they came to her, including study abroad.

Crystal and Marina knew that their academic pathways would take longer because of working, pacing their classes so they could pass them while managing their family responsibilities - Marina's to her new baby and Crystal who helped provide support to her mother and brother. They both knew that withdrawing from the university jeopardized the financial award package they received. The award was based on continued, successful enrollment for only four years after first enrollment from high school. "I don't have like those same scholarships that I do now...it's going to be hard cause I can't really pay for college." (Crystal) Marina considered staying in school while pregnant.

And then this next semester, that's why like it's kind of hard because I'm due March and then you have two more months of school so I was like I don't think I can do it. I'm trying to see if I can possibly do an online course at Pima so I can kind of keep up with the school so I don't get out of the swing of things but um I'm still debating on that too because I want to spend as much time with my baby as I can. (Marina)

Critics might say that becoming pregnant was a choice these students made that complicated their academic lives. Marina's mom and sister were pregnant in college and eventually graduated and so she knew that there was a possibility for success.

Justifications/Rationalizations/Explanations

I try not to think that it's like me wanting to go back to familiarity. I think it's me wanting to go back to what I enjoy and what I want to do with my life. (Willa)

I don't regret it...it was a bad experience but it was an experience I needed to have. (Elise)

I feel down and kinda out of the loop...But in a sense I still feel good about myself because I'm still getting school back...I didn't just kinda drop out of college and stop going to college. And my grandma still calls it dropping out of college completely and

not going to college because I'm going to community college. But either way I'm still getting classes and I'm still getting some kind of degree done. (Ward)

I'd be their first to make it through college, and at a university nonetheless, my sister only made it through one semester of community college so what I'm doing here is pioneering. (Beth)

This section addresses the meanings and perceptions that the students attached to their thought processes and lays the foundation for the proposition that in order to promote the success of low socioeconomic students who are at risk academically and financially, student affairs practitioners and faculty need to talk to the students. These conversations would help inform those responsible to provide the support services and resources necessary to interrupt withdrawal, stop-out and departure when possible. Upcoming sections will show that students who considered leaving are not going to institutional agents for advice, support or resources. William blamed his grades and used very interesting phraseology, "I guess it was like a subconscious decision because uhh my grades made me leave." Seeking out academic support was a separate idea from his grades. He considered signing up for classes and did not know that he was ineligible until he received an administrative disqualification letter. Academic advising was certainly missing from his process. He described finding out he was disqualified:

Then they [grades] came in and I was like ah I'm disappointed but nothing happened for a few weeks and I had I had already started choosing a few classes for the next semester and I got a letter and it said you know you're disqualified. Don't register. (William)

Danielle took the advice of her friends and family who suggested that she give it a year and she said:

I think a big thing about college is that or at least I heard a lot from my friends and family is that when you get to a college you know that you want to be there

you kind of feel it and I gave it a whole year just to make sure that it wasn't just me choosing a just to go off of one feeling that I had so I wanted to give it time but it just didn't feel right in the end. (Danielle)

Krista had a similar perspective. Krista "figured" everybody had a hard time as soon as they get into college and "they say that first semester just is awful and so I figure you know I'd give it one more semester and if I didn't like it after that semester then I was done like I was very open to things changing."

Personal responsibilities and psychological difficulties influenced how students described their feelings about the withdrawal process. Teresa was going to transfer after her first semester but only stayed because she felt a responsibility towards her job tutoring children at a local school. After Tanya made the decision to leave, she said she was "probably a little nicer to people I guess than I would have been maybe. I tried to spend more time with people that I probably wouldn't be seeing anymore...as far as school work goes, I didn't really slack off or anything, I just did what I had to do." Claire said that leaving "wasn't a hard transition...the [other state school] has messed with my head so much with financial aid...I just wanna get away from...the mind mess." Finally, Michelle analyzed her college experience as part of the string of "all the struggles that I've faced and all of the you know hard stuff...as long as there's time there's always like time to progress and then get better you know...as far as education and all of this."

Summary

The students in this research project had substantial struggles from both within and outside the university. Academic and financial difficulties were a strain on their psychological and physical health. They made decisions about their college careers and

professional possibilities by going to their families and friends for advice even when it was painful and they were afraid to approach them. Additionally, many of the families had never experienced the higher education system; more than half of the participants were first-generation college students. The difficult piece of this dilemma is that the students did not know who to consult for advice at the school, were reluctant to seek out advice, or did not consider university personnel as an additional consultant or strategist. There was not a single student that was interviewed that did not value higher education and want to pursue it and graduate someday. As the decision-maker in the process of leaving a school, the student has to take the action to connect with an institutional agent for guidance.

I emphasize that if student affairs professionals and faculty members knew the students sitting in front of their desks or in their classrooms and took the time to know them and create a positive communication environment, retention rates would improve at the institution and in the higher education system as a whole. The participants made suggestions that inform the implications for policy and practice in the higher education organization and will be discussed in the next section. The strong family influence that was revealed in these findings will be suggested as an area where there is a need for further research.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The first purpose for this research project was to contribute to the student departure literature by including decision-making theory as a part of the conversation. Qualitative analysis among interviewed withdrawn students added to the student departure literature by providing information about the decision-making process and the push and pull factors that affected their decisions regarding withdrawal from the student's perspective and not by solely describing their behaviors.

The second purpose for this research was to understand how students negotiate barriers and constraints despite having been offered extra programs and resources predicted to help them succeed in college. The students interviewed for this research were in an access and success program at a public, four-year research institution in the southwestern United States. The effectiveness of the resources provided will potentially become subject to increased scrutiny and evaluation if the programs do not result in increased graduation rates. One way to find out what support systems the students feel they need is to ask them. Increased understanding of student decision-making and thought processes regarding departure should inform institutional practices and policies that improve retention, or minimally, acknowledgement through empirical reasoning, that the departure rates are steady and reasonable. In other words, I posit that if data is collected at the individual student level, about whether they are withdrawing or transferring, that we would have a different perspective about retention rates. There would be a distinction between withdrawing from a specific school or from the higher education system at large.

In addition to the institution taking responsibility for the students they admit by saying “You’re In!” (printed boldly and in large typeface on the outside of the admissions envelope), their nod tells the student implicitly (whether honestly or not) that the institution says they belong at the school. This does not mean that the institution is the only responsible actor in the relationship between the student and the institution. The student makes the decision to enroll at a particular academy and is responsible for that decision. When an institution admits a student, ideally both the student and the school believe that the student belongs and will succeed, and that support services will be available when appropriate, necessary, and upon request.

Statement of the Problem

Student departure has been studied extensively but surprisingly little has focused on how students themselves subjectively experience their decisions to withdraw from a given college or university. Analyzing the individual experiences adds meaning and depth to existing quantitative and qualitative results. Additionally, by combining decision-making theory with student departure theory a new theoretical model was offered. What remained unexplained (prior to this research) were the students’ perspectives on how they negotiated the decision-making process to leave a postsecondary institution and what their subjective understandings were of why they left. This research addressed this problem.

The findings addressed the research questions. The research questions were designed to increase the conversation between student departure (Astin, 1993; Bean, 1980, 1983; Tierney, 1992, 1999; & Tinto, 1993) and decision-making theories (Frank,

1987; Kahneman, 2003; March, 1994; Scott, 2000). The questions that addressed push-pull factors (Altbach, 1991) and institutional agents were included to uncover the possibility that the interactions and pressures associated with them, between the students and other actors (family, advisors, faculty members, counselors, etc.), influenced the decision-making process.

1. What were the push-pull factors that contributed to students leaving the institution?
 - a. Why did the students say they left the institution?
 - b. What pulled them from the outside, away from the institution?
 - c. What pushed them out from the inside?
2. How did they negotiate the decision-making process?

How and when did alternate pathways to perceived success surface and become an option?
3. How did institutional agents (withdrawal counselors, academic advisors, faculty members, financial aid advisors, etc.) and agents outside the institution (family and friends) influence this process?

Review of the Methodology

In order to obtain answers to the research questions, it was necessary to build rapport with the subjects through an interactive one on one interview approach (Maxwell, 2005). The qualitative and interactive design (Maxwell, 2005) provided the flexibility for the interviewer and subjects to explore concepts that may differ from the variables most

often researched using quantitative design. This proved to be successful because several topics emerged that were not interview questions or probes to those questions. Examples of this were the tight connections that the students had with their mothers; the frequency that students went home on the weekends (some distances significantly far away); and the recommendation that there be an office on campus where they could get non-judgmental advice about switching schools or career paths.

Summary of the Findings

A new model (The Decision-Making Process Model of Student Departure (Figure 1, p. 85) was presented that combined decision-making theory with student departure theory. I used the framework from the model to analyze the interviews. The model illustrates that there are forces within the institution that are pushing the student away from the inside. “Push” findings were divided into the following categories: academic, financial, institutional fit, and psychological. In addition to push factors, there were “Pull” categories that described forces outside the institution that were pulling the student away from the school. They were divided into two categories: financial pulls and psychological pulls. The push and pull factors affected the student’s decision-making process. The “Decision-Making Process” was divided into the following categories for analysis: the student’s timeline; who they went to for advice; pressures they felt during the process; the options they considered; their strategies (sensible or faulty); and their rationalizations about the decisions they made.

Some of the pushes and pulls (for example, academic and financial difficulties) were stresses that directly influenced the decision to withdraw from the university. Other

pushes and pulls complicated the decision-making process. Examples of this were: students who felt responsible to move back home to help their mother raise the remaining children in the family or to help support the family financially.

One of the findings that emerged from the data was that students sought advice and support from family members (and most often their mothers) instead of utilizing advising resources on the campus to strategize academic, financial and psychological difficulties. This is distinctive because more than half of the students were first-generation students (their parents did not attend college) and this means that the family members were not experienced at strategizing academic and financial difficulties in the postsecondary education system. The question becomes: Why don't students who are withdrawing (by choice or not) seek advice from university personnel?

Many of the students expected validation and personal attention from academic advisors and faculty members, which they said they did not receive. Some of these students were disappointed that they were offered group advising and not individualized advising. Tierney and Venegas (2006) suggest that fictive kin networks support success for students who lack the social capital to access support services. They define fictive kin as human resources outside the student's family and they evaluated peer counselors in their research project. They concluded that a physical location with access to a knowledgeable adult who students could turn to on an informal or formal basis was key to establishing successful college-going behaviors. The students did not find this resource on campus so they relied on their family for support. The families reinforced the student's discomfort at the institution by transporting them home almost every

weekend and then returning them on Sunday. They supported them emotionally and psychologically. The distances that the students traveled to make frequent visits home, were between 70 and 300 miles each direction. This was an additional financial hardship for the families.

The financial difficulties for this set of students were severe. Even though they were awarded financial aid funding that covered tuition and fees, room and board and an allotment for textbooks, they did not know how to budget their funds for the semester and some ran out of money or ended up in debt and needed to take out loans to pay their bills. Complicating this was their inability to secure work-study jobs on campus that were part of their financial aid award package. Student jobs on campus were scarce because of university budget cuts and the competition for them was high. This left many students short of funds - approximately \$2000 for the year.

About one-fourth of the students interviewed attended the university because of the financial aid package, but were not psychologically committed to the school at entry - the site university was not their first-choice school. From the beginning of the school year, they were comparing the site school to their foregone opportunity. For example, Adele (Fairleigh Dickenson) and Joseph (Brown University), who visited their first choice schools, were constantly comparing their “dream” environment to what they were experiencing at the large public university and were dissatisfied. These six students either transferred to their first choice school or were in the process of transferring.

Students struggled academically and realized early in the first semester that they were academically underprepared for college level curriculum, especially those who

aspired to become doctors or were in programs that required high-level math. Instead of meeting with academic advisors to create plans to remain academically eligible, they devised faulty strategies (took a few classes with a high number of units each or took extra classes thinking that they could raise their grade point average). They failed their classes and were academically disqualified. Their academic problems manifested in health problems (inability to sleep, hair loss, illnesses that were serious enough that one student went to the hospital three times) and psychological problems (because they were worried about sharing their problems with their families).

I realized early in the interview process that students were not seeking or finding support services on campus to help them negotiate their decision-making process. I included a prompt asking them for advice for the institution about what they needed or wanted from an office or a person on campus. Their suggestions will be included in the forthcoming implications for practice section.

Contribution to the Literature

This section will describe the three ways that this research project contributed to the student departure/retention literature. As stated before, the original purpose of this research was to contribute to the higher education literature by initiating the conversation that includes student decision-making in the negotiation and decision-making process of withdrawing from a university. There are scarce qualitative studies that asked the students how they made their decisions. Most of the research has looked at their behaviors. The three contributions are:

- A Decision-Making Process Model of Student Departure

- Insertion of the decision process into Astin, Bean and Tinto's linear models
- Qualitative data about low socioeconomic students and their decision process (described in preceding section: summary of findings)

The Decision-Making Process Model (Figure 1 on page 85) is offered as a new model to organize the complex issue of student withdrawal and the cognitive process involved in making a decision to leave an institution. The major constructs (financial (Hu & St. John, 2001; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; St. John, Cabrera, Nora & Asker in Braxton, 2000; Tinto, 1983), academic (Astin, 1974,1993; Bean, 1983; Tinto, 1975), psychological (Astin 1974, 1993; Bean,1983, 2000; Tierney, 1992; Tinto, 1986), and institutional (Bean, 1983, 2000; Braxton et al., 2004)) were derived from student departure literature. This model is a contribution to the literature by virtue of the way that it illustrates the push/pull influences (Altbach, 1991) on decision-making (Breen & Jonsson, 2000; Hillmert & Jacob, 2002; March, 1994; Tversky & Kahneman, 2003) with respect to withdrawal. The impact of the family on the decision-making process emerged from the data, as did the maternal influence on the student and their college-going experience. An additional theme that emerged was the reliance on the family for advice regarding college instead of seeking out institutional agents for strategies about finances and academics.

This research was grounded on major student retention theorists – Astin, Bean, Tinto and Tierney. Astin, Bean and Tinto developed models to diagram the process. This research contributed to the retention/departure literature by suggesting where the

decision-making process belongs in their models. For a complete description, see pages 55-57 in this document. See below for a summary of the contribution.

- Astin: Inputs (I) affect how a student interacts and perceives their environment (E) which leads to different decision paths (D) which influences the student outcome (O).

$$I \rightarrow E \rightarrow D \text{ (to persist or depart)} \rightarrow O$$

- Bean: Entry characteristics (EC) ground reactions to Institutional Environment (IE) that influence decision-making (D). Decisions made affect academic and social integration (AI & SI). The student's attitude (SA) about their fit and commitment (C) to the institution directly affects their intent to persist (P).

$$EC \rightarrow IE \rightarrow D \rightarrow AI \& SI \rightarrow SA \rightarrow C \rightarrow P \text{ (persist or depart)}$$

- Tinto: Vincent Tinto's model includes pre-entry attributes (PA), goals/commitment (GC), institutional experience – academic and social (EAS), integration – academic and social (IAS), respondent goals/commitments (GC), and outcome (O). I propose that decision-making occurs at multiple junctures in Tinto's model – prior to both goals/commitment stages and before the academic and social integration stage.

$$PA \rightarrow D \rightarrow GC \rightarrow D \rightarrow EAS \rightarrow D \rightarrow IAS \rightarrow D \rightarrow GC \rightarrow O \text{ (persist or depart)}$$

The insertion of the decision-process into the aforementioned models resulted in a perspective about withdrawal from the individual student perspective. Interviewing the individual students showed that they were not dropping out from the higher education system but were transferring because they had to adapt to financial, academic and psychological stresses.

Implications for Policy

This study examined the threats to retention for an at risk group. The following recommendations focus on this set of students and their frailties but are good policy and practice suggestions for all students. The focus for this research project was to understand how the students thought about their experiences at the university and how those led to their decision to withdraw. Policy and practice suggestions address changing behaviors – the student's and the institution's. The suggestions that follow are offered as suggestions to relieve the stresses that the students feel; they are not meant to make them feel better but that could become a consequence from reduced stress surrounding their life at a university. Practitioners could make a student feel better without addressing underlying problems. That would not be helpful. The students need academic support services and financial counseling. Those problems do not just vanish by treating someone nicely but students can be treated empathetically while being advised. Various institutional policies emerged as troubling and were obstacles and barriers to student retention and success. The two areas that caused the most stress were academic and financial. Academic policy suggestions will be followed by financial aid and withdrawal policy proposals.

Academic Policies

Probation and Disqualification Policy

The students have to complete 24 units per academic year and maintain a grade point average of 2.0 or above to remain eligible to receive the funding for the scholarship program. This mirrors the need-based financial aid requirements for the entire student body, not just this set of students. Many merit based scholarships at the institution require that the student complete 30 units per year and maintain at least a 3.0 grade point average (some scholarships require a higher grade point average). The requirements for the need-based program seem generous and reasonable but there are some subtle issues that the students should know. The funding for this program lasts for four consecutive years and all the majority of the classes must take place at the site university. The number of units required for graduation at the site school is 120. If a student completes 24 units per academic year, then at the end of four years they are still 24 units short of the graduation requirement. The financial impact of this will be addressed in the financial policy section.

Academic difficulties were prevalent with many of the interviewees. They admitted that they were academically unprepared for the university level curriculum. A student cannot be academically disqualified (at this institution) after one semester even if they performed poorly. They can file a financial aid appeal to receive funds for a second semester. At the end of the second semester they need to have raised their grade point average to 2.0. If they did not, then they are academically disqualified from the

school and not allowed to sign up for classes. Some colleges within the university will allow the student a second chance their second year but most do not.

In order to improve their grade point averages, students engaged in strategies that were destined to fail. They attempted to pass enough classes in one semester to compensate for the ones they failed the semester before. Taking five or six classes was extremely difficult for struggling students. In addition, many of these students worked. Another strategy that failed was taking classes that had a high number of units – four or five. These courses were usually math, language or science classes. Many of the students already struggled with these subjects and to expect to get good enough grades to raise their grade point average was very hopeful.

The policy solution that I present recognizes that students at risk need a reasonable plan to overcome initial academic difficulties so they can remain at the institution and still receive financial aid – *financial* access and *academic* success.

Academic Recovery Plan

1. The student and their academic advisor create an academic recovery plan (this includes a discussion about the course choices). The student signs a contract that they understand and agree to follow the plan.
2. Components of the plan include: Intent to prove mastery in three classes for two semesters. Depending on the student's situation and academic risk, at least one community college class can be added so the student can complete 12 units. Pro-rate the financial aid package to fund the reduced academic load.

3. Student reports academic progress to the academic advisor/retention specialist every two weeks.
4. The student has one year to bring the grade point average up significantly without employing risky strategies (excessive number of classes or high unit classes) that lead to failure. It is mathematically impossible to bring a .5 grade point average up to 2.0 when only taking nine units per semester. The recommendation in this plan is for the student to demonstrate significant improvement that will be determined by the professional judgment of the advisor/retention specialist.

Early Alert System Institution-wide

The university will institutionalize a university-wide early alert system to increase the student's awareness that they are academically compromised.

1. The Early Alert System will be introduced at new student orientation and will be included on all course syllabi. Retention specialists will be available to advise students who feel they are at risk in addition to students who are flagged by the system.
2. Professors will provide graded feedback within the first three weeks of school. The grades will be entered into an electronic grade book that retention specialists can use to pull reports for students at risk. Ds and failing grades will be flagged.
3. Students will be required to communicate with retention specialists.

Summer Bridge Math Camp

It was apparent that math was problematic for many students in this research project and it is likely that their difficulties mirrored those of the student population at the university. It was a topic that created anxiety in this set of students and threatened their academic success and consequently their persistence at this school. Cliff Adelman concluded that the completion of advanced math in high school doubles the odds for bachelor's degree completion (Adelman, 1999). These students were underprepared for higher-level math and their persistence was compromised because they were failing college-level math. The institution can identify students that had low SAT/ACT scores and/or less than college math in high school and offer to them, or require them to take a summer math program prior to the first semester.

Financial Aid

There should be a financial aid policy in place that provides a backup plan for the students who are unable to secure a job that was awarded to them as part of their financial aid package. This is especially pertinent because if the student does not take advantage of the federal work study job during their first year, they are not offered that opportunity their second year, even if the reason was because of lack of jobs on campus. Inability to find a work study job on campus caused health and stress issues and affected academic performance for this set of low socioeconomic students whose parents were unable to provide them additional financial resources. The access and success scholarship program should be very clearly explained to the students and the families. There should be no confusion about how long they will receive the funding and what is and is not covered.

Withdrawal Policies

Qualitative data should be collected to explain quantitative withdrawal data. Information collected from students who leave the institution can inform student affairs administrators about potential institutional areas for concern. Minimally the institution should find out what withdrawer's plans are – where they are going and for what reason.

Provide an office where students can go to discuss their transfer, withdrawal or career plans with a consultant/specialist who will also collect and analyze data about attrition from the university. The suggestion for a withdrawal office came from the students during the interview process. The office should be accessible and easy to find. There are critical times during the first year (after first grades are returned, winter break) that students consider leaving. The consultant in this office will send out communications to students during the critical times, offering guidance to students who are considering withdrawal.

Implications for Practice

Raise Awareness

The academic, financial, health, and family stresses that are part of this set of student's lives compromised their chances for academic success. I am not suggesting that there should be a different set of academic or social expectations for low socioeconomic students who are academically underprepared. The participants had strong family ties and this emerged from the findings. Institutions should embrace the concept that this group of students is very closely tied to their families and understand that many of the students come from single parent families who struggle financially. An institutional environment that recognizes and communicates these threats to persistence with faculty,

staff and student affairs administrators might create an environment where first-generation students feel welcomed, included and feel empowered to go to institutional agents for advice about their academic career.

Budgeting and Money Management

Educate students and families about the most sensible way to utilize their financial aid award – students should not be hungry, worry about rent or have huge debts on their bursar bill. They should be required to complete a budgeting workshop before their financial aid funds are disbursed.

Co-op Residence Hall

I propose that there should be a co-op style residence hall option on campuses that encourage low socioeconomic students to live on campus (as the study university did). The access and success governing board asked the scholarship recipients to apply for dorm housing, citing retention research that suggests that students who live on campus have higher grade point averages. (I posit that these research findings might not apply to this subset of students and studying this phenomenon should be a future research topic.) The participants in this interview group said that they were uncomfortable living on campus for several reasons. They felt different from the students around them who were able to go out to eat every night. The participants also said that they did not like the expensive fast food offerings in the student union. The student (who was unable to afford a meal plan) walked to the grocery store every couple of weeks to stock up on dry goods and said that it was inconvenient to check out pots and pans when she wanted to cook. I propose that residence life create a co-op residence hall where students can grocery shop

and cook meals together. Instead of using the meal plan funds to purchase food in the student union, they can use the money to buy affordable groceries. A resident assistant can drive students to the grocery store in a school van.

Suggestions for Future Research

Topics for future research emerged in the course of the data collection and analysis. They will be offered here as suggestions for future research about student departure and decision-making.

Family Influence

The family influence was strong and embedded in the decision-making process to withdraw from the university and affected the student's integration with the school. Even though it was painful at times, the students chose to seek advice about their educational paths from their family members and friends. Research should focus on the content and quality of the advice that students receive from family members who have never attended a higher education institution, which was the case for many of the students who were first-generation college attendees.

The families supported their students emotionally and psychologically by reinforcing the family ties – many of the students went home frequently on the weekends (distances were 70 to 300 miles each way). Research should focus on how this affects academics and the student's commitment to the institution.

Financial Aid

The participants in this research project were awarded funds to cover their college costs for four years if they remained academically and financially eligible. Presumably

this award was supposed to alleviate financial stress from their college-going experience. That was not the case for many of these students. Many did not know how to manage large disbursements of money and budget the balance to cover costs for the semester. Some used the funds to help their parents pay bills. Research should focus on determining policies and procedures that empower students and their families to use the funds appropriately and wisely, assuming that the student's goal is to persist and graduate and that the financial aid award is necessary to accomplish the goal.

Academic Strategies

Instead of seeking advice from academic professionals, students at risk of failing their classes, and consequently forced to withdraw, employed faulty strategies to improve their grade point averages. Research should focus on two areas: what strategies students employ and what are the success rates; and discover why students do not approach academic professionals to assist them in developing plans to reclaim their academic viability.

Institutional Agents

Participants in this research project wanted personal attention and validation from professors and student affairs professionals (most often advisors) at the university. I posit that students expected the faculty/student and advisor/student relationships to mirror what their teacher/student and high school counselor/student relationships were in high school. Some students felt that they should not bother their professors because of their perceived importance and other students felt that their professors belittled them. Research should focus on how students (different sets: ethnicities, socioeconomic status, etc.) view power

positions and institutional agents at a university and then gauge how these perceptions influence retention or withdrawal.

Decision-Making and Withdrawal Research

The conversation between student departure theory and decision-making theory should be extended. There is much to research. The decision-making process, the ways students rationalize what they are going through, and the stresses involved is a wide-open area for gaining understanding. What stresses affect them more: is it forces from within the institution or from outside the institution?

Comprehensive and longitudinal qualitative data should be collected and analyzed about where students go after withdrawal. Research should focus on why they changed their academic path and how they researched options and made decisions about their next academic step. Did students withdraw from higher education completely or move to another type of school?

Conclusion

Studying student departure has been an academic passion of mine for more than five years. Even before I was admitted to the graduate program, I was collecting information about policies and procedures at other institutions across the United States. I had been working with college students for a couple of years and noticed that students left our institution via a process of simply not signing up for classes the next semester. I looked up the withdrawal procedures where I worked and was surprised at how little information was collected from the students about why they left, where they were going, and how easy it was for students to leave.

I also learned from working with students that guidance and encouragement could make a difference in their persistence. One of the findings validates this concept. Participants in this study did not seek out university personnel for guidance and the participants also felt that they were unimportant to faculty and staff. They expressed that they wanted personal attention and I posit that they wanted validation that they belonged at the school and could succeed.

Students that withdraw from college rarely respond to interview requests – at least that was my assumption. However, my successful recruitment of students for interviews refutes that assumption. Students who left the institution and those in the process of leaving wanted to share their stories. Some of them thanked me for interviewing them and others told me that I was the first person affiliated with the university that showed any interest in why they left. Some of them said that they might have made a different decision if they would have had someone to talk to about options and plans. This validates the finding that students want to be heard and recognized. What I learned from the interviews was significant.

The stories that the participants shared were compelling and affected me deeply. After interviewing Courtney in Flagstaff, I went for a drive in the mountains to decompress. Many students shared deeply personal information. It was not easy for them to tell me that their fathers were dead or substance abusers. Some cried because they felt that they were letting their families down because they would not become doctors or architects. The obstacles and barriers they had to overcome to persist were great. The students felt a great sense of responsibility to their families and this created

academic, psychological and financial difficulties for them. All of the students interviewed valued higher education and every single one of them planned to graduate some day. The problem that I cannot figure out how to solve is how to share these stories with university personnel so that the institutional climate changes and becomes more welcoming to low socioeconomic and first-generation students. Faculty and student affairs practitioners need to understand that the reason some students do not perform up to desired academic standards is not that they lack motivation and drive - it is because they are being pushed and pulled by complicated situations that affect their academics and their persistence.

APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT

FOR INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Towards Understanding the Negotiation and Decision-making Process of
Withdrawal from College: A Qualitative Approach

Introduction

You are being invited to take part in a research study. The information in this form is provided to help you decide whether or not to take part. Study personnel will be available to answer your questions and provide additional information. If you decide to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this consent form. A copy of this form will be given to you.

What is the purpose of this research study?

The purpose of this study is to inform student affairs and retention professionals about how college students perceive and navigate the decision to withdraw from college. Understanding the thought processes behind student decision-making behavior can help practitioners, policymakers and researchers evaluate existing retention programs and initiate policies and programs that increase student retention and graduation rates.

Why are you being asked to participate?

You are being invited to participate because you are a member of the Arizona Assurance Scholars Program.

How many people will be asked to participate in this study?

Approximately 100 students will be asked to participate in the interview process. An additional 800 students will be asked to complete an online questionnaire.

What will happen during this study?

Depending on your availability, you will participate in a face-to-face interview or through a telephone conference. You will determine the interview date, time, location and telephone number if applicable.

How long will I be in this study?

The interview will take place one time for approximately 45 minutes to an hour.

Are there any risks to me?

The interview will have no risk. If any of the questions are stressful or upsetting you can choose to not answer the question or stop the interview immediately.

Are there any benefits to me?

You will not receive any benefit from taking part in this study.

Potential broader benefits of the study include gaining better understanding of how students make decisions regarding leaving an institution of higher education. Understanding the student thought processes in combination with departure theory contributes to the academic literature on student departure theory.

Will there be any costs to me?

Aside from the one hour interview, there are no costs associated with taking part in this study.

Will I be paid to participate in the study?

You will not receive monetary compensation but you will be offered incentives, such as gift cards to local eateries.

Will video or audio recordings be made of me during the study?

The interviewer will make an audio recording during the interview so that we can be certain that your responses are recorded accurately only if you check the box below:

I give my permission for audio recordings to be made of me during my participation in this research study.

I do not give my permission for audio recordings to be made of me during my participation in this research study.

Will the information that is obtained from me be kept confidential?

The only person who will know that you participated in this study will be the Principal Investigator: Mary A. Irwin. Your records will be confidential. You will not be identified in any reports or publications resulting from the study. It is possible that representatives of the Federal Government or the Human Subjects Protection Program that supports the research study will want to come to the University of Arizona to review your information. If that occurs, a copy of the information may be provided to them but your name will be removed before the information is released.

What if I am harmed by the study procedures?

There is no risk related to injury, employability, insurability, or psychological harm for participation in this study.

May I change my mind about participating?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide to not begin or to stop the study at any time.

Who can I contact for additional information?

You can obtain further information about the research or voice concerns or complaints about the research by calling the Principal Investigator Mary a. Irwin, Ph.D. Candidate at (520) 349-3249. If you have questions concerning your rights as a research participant, have general questions, concerns or complaints or would like to give input about the

research and cannot reach the research team, or want to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may call the University of Arizona Human Subjects Protection Program office at (520)626-6721. If out of state, use the toll-free number 1-866-278-1455. If you would like to contact the Human Subjects Protection Program by email, please visit the following website: <http://www.irb.arizona.edu/contact/>.

Your Signature

By signing this form, I affirm that I have read the information contained in the form, that the study has been explained to me, that my questions have been answered and that I agree to take part in this study. I do not give up any of my legal rights by signing this form.

Name (Printed)

Participant's Signature

Date signed

Statement by person obtaining consent

I certify that I have explained the research study to the person who has agreed to participate, and that he or she has been informed of the purpose, the procedures, the possible risks and potential benefits associated with participation in this study. Any questions raised have been answered to the participant's satisfaction.

Name of study personnel (Printed)

Study personnel signature

Date signed

APPENDIX B**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL 1**

Please describe the university that you first went to after high school.

(Probes: was it your dream school, your top choice, how did you decide to attend this school?)

Describe the withdrawal process.

What advice would you give to the school about the withdrawal process?

Looking back, in hindsight, was there anyone who could have made a difference in your decision making process?

Describe when you began to have doubts about attending the university.

(Probes: significant event, prior doubts, pressures, who were you concerned about telling about your decision?)

Can you describe barriers or obstacles when you were a student there?

Tell me about your experience at the university.

(Probes: social, integration, professors, resources, classes, work, involvement, etc.)

How would you describe yourself in comparison to other students at the UA?

Did you transfer?

(If yes. Probes: tell me about your new college, how is it different?)

Are you coming back?

How do you feel now about your decision to withdraw?

Questions such as:

How did that make you feel?

What happened next?

Tell me more.

APPENDIX C**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL 2**

Please describe the university that you first went to after high school.

(Probes: was it your dream school, your top choice, how did you decide to attend this school?)

Is there anyone who influences you when you make decisions about college?

(Probes: family, friends, about classes, your major, how to spend free time, about working)

Do you have doubts about attending the university?

(Probes: significant event, prior doubts, pressures, who are you concerned about telling decisions that you make?)

Can you describe barriers or obstacles as a student here?

Tell me about your experience at the university.

(Probes: social, integration, professors, resources, classes, work, involvement, etc.)

How would you describe yourself in comparison to other students at the UA?

Do you feel confident that you will graduate from this university?

(Probes: if no, then what type of institution might you switch to, if any, two-year, another type of four-year, smaller, away from home, vocational or trade school)

Questions such as:

How did that make you feel?

What happened next?

Tell me more.

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