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Most Likely to Succeed: Which Factors Influence College Students in Completing Their Two-Year Computer Degree and Graduating from College

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MOST LIKELY TO SUCCEED: WHICH FACTORS INFLUENCE COLLEGE STUDENTS IN

COMPLETING THEIR TWO-YEAR COMPUTER DEGREE AND GRADUATING FROM

COLLEGE

by

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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Year Computer Degree and Graduating from College

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Abstract

For many individuals, researching and finding a college to attend is a wonderful experience. Many students explore college and take multiple courses, but do not finish their intended degree. Past and current studies have identified factors and reasons to why students dropout from college. Two well-known theories include A.W. Astin's student involvement theory (1984) and Tinto's (1993) model of college student attrition. The purpose of this study was to identify factors amongst students who graduated and students who did not graduate from a two-year computer degree program. The data derived from the collective stories of those who had experienced it. This qualitative study had a research method that was exploratory in nature. The epistemology component falls under subjectivism as the meaning resides in the students who experienced it. This phenomenological study interviewed seven individuals and investigated the personal educational journeys of four computer program graduates and three computer program non-completers. Prospective participants were emailed to gain interest in the study, and seven participants were recruited using purposeful sampling. After interviewing the individuals, the researcher took the semi-structured data and structured it into codes, themes, and patterns for analysis. This study aimed to find factors of college student success and attrition from non-completers. A sense of belonging and an understanding the purpose of being in college were important factors that were revealed by the participants.

Keywords: College, Success, Motivation, Belonging, Purpose, Time Management

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Diana and our three children, Nora, Isaac, and Ella. Thank you for your support over the past few years. May you each continue to seek and embrace all the learning opportunities that continue to come your way throughout life.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Attending college is an important decision in one's life. For many, the college years end up being the best time of one's life as not only learning occurs, but so does the opportunity to make many life-lasting relationships and find ones-self. To those who succeed in college, an earned degree opens the door to many job opportunities with good pay and benefits and helps pave the way for the future.

However, college is expensive. Moreover, each year college tuition continues to get more expensive. Hanson (2021) stated that college tuition costs have continuously increased, skyrocketing by 1375% since 1978. College debt is a burden incurred by graduates and those who do not graduate. For those who do not graduate, debt can be hard to pay back without a good-paying job. This study aimed to identify factors among students who graduated and students who did not graduate from a two-year computer degree program to inform incoming students and current students about what could help them succeed in completing their degree.

Statement of the Problem

Higher education has many different options for those interested in learning something new, wanting to try a different profession, or wanting to advance in their current career. Students may work toward one-year certificates, two-year degrees, four-year degrees, master's degrees, and doctoral degrees. In a perfect world, everyone that starts a program would complete it. However, that is not the case. Many students borrow money to fund a portion of their college expenses. Each year, 30 to 40 percent of all undergraduate students take federal student loans; 70 percent of students who receive a bachelor's degree have education debt by the time they graduate (Understanding College Affordability, n.d.). Students who take out loans to

attend college but never finish are three times as likely to default, earn lower incomes throughout their lives, and have higher unemployment rates (Council of Economic Advisers, 2016). According to Delbanco (2022), 80% of students enrolled in a community college- around 7 million, the majority from low-income, minority, or immigrant families—hope to earn a bachelor's degree. However, fewer than 15 percent succeed in doing so within six years. When students drop out of college, there are many negative effects. There is a college completion problem in our higher education system across the country. Every year, 20 million students make one of the biggest financial investments of their life to attend an institution of higher education (United States Department of Education, 2018), and every year, taxpayers invest nearly $130 billion to help subsidize this pursuit. Yet, right now, federal law fails to incentivize good outcomes for students (United States Department of Education, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

There are several models and theories that fall into the area of college student success. Vincent Tinto is a prominent scholar in higher education and student retention. The theory utilized in this study follows Vincent Tinto's college student departure model (1993), also known as the interactionalist model of college student departure. Figure 1 provides a graphical summary of Tinto's college student departure model.

Figure 1

Tinto's College Student Departure Model
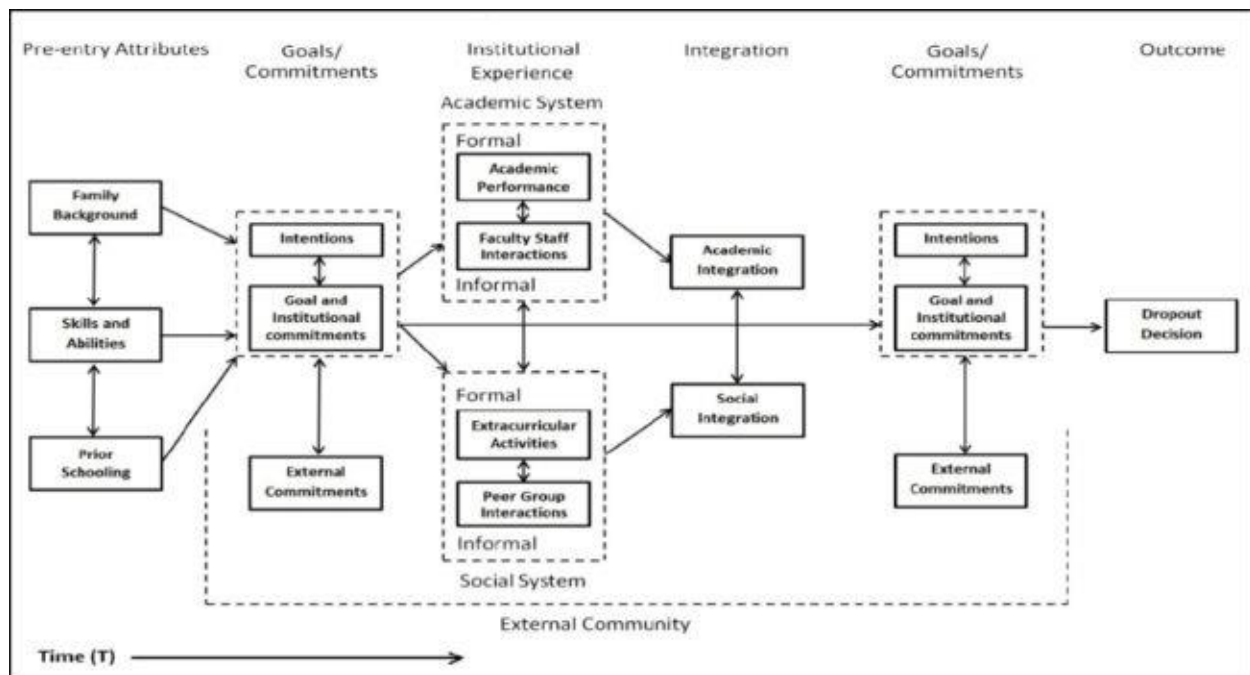
Tinto's model argues that individual departure from institutions can be viewed as arising out of a longitudinal process of interactions from institutions between an individual with given attributes, skills, financial resources, prior educational experiences, and dispositions (intentions and commitments) and other members of the academic and social systems of the institution (Tinto, 1994, p. 113). While focusing on the model, the hope is to review how adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, isolation, finances, learning and commitments can influence student departure from campus.

Tinto argued that the individual's experience in the systems, as indicated by his/her intellectual (academic) and social (personal) integration, continually modifies his or her intentions and commitments. Positive experiences (integrative ones) reinforce persistence through their impact upon heightened intentions and commitments. Negative experiences

weaken intentions and commitments, especially commitment to the institution, thereby enhancing the likelihood of leaving. The model sees the institution and the social and academic communities comprising it as part of the external environment. For students, attending college is a commitment, but it is only one of the commitments that they have to balance over their college career. External commitments can alter a student's intentions (plans), goals, and institutional commitments throughout the college career.

Individuals enter institutions of higher education with a range of different family and community backgrounds, personal attributes, skills, financial resources, dispositions, and varying types of pre-college educational experiences. Given individual attributes and dispositions at entry, the model further argues that subsequent experiences within the institution, primarily those arising out of interactions between the individual and other members of the colleges, student, staff, and faculty, are centrally related to further continuance in the institution.

The model seeks to explain how interactions among different individuals within the academic and social systems of the institution and the communities which compromise them lead individuals of different characteristics to withdraw from that institution prior to degree completion. Tinto's theory contains critical components to college student success. The researcher firmly believes that the principles and factors that Tinto have identified are crucial components of college success.

Purpose of the Study

It is clear from previous research that students drop out for many reasons. There are several reasons for dropping out such as difficulty in balancing school and job together and family-related issues, among others (Eye-opening College Dropout Rates & Statistics, 2021). However, there may be more reasons than just what the existing literature identified as factors to

dropping out. In this study, the researcher aimed to gain knowledge from the students' lived experiences and identify additional reasons why students do not finish college. The researcher hoped that colleges can utilize this study's information to help future students succeed.

Additionally, the researcher intended that information from this study could benefit new students, instructors, and existing departments on campus, such as student services. Since 2020, the researcher has witnessed more college students taking classes in the format of HyFlex, hybrid, and online in synchronous and asynchronous formats. Although that may be a positive change for some, many students interact less with academic advisors, personnel within departments on campus, and course instructors. Information from this study could be widely available to help personnel and instructors at the college level connect with and maintain student relations to facilitate student belonging, thus, retention.

Research Question(s)

The primary question that this study attempted to answer was:

RQ1: What are college non-completers and college graduates' perspectives on factors that led to their success or failure in completing their two-year college degree? With this question as the focus, common themes will be present in hopes of understanding the perspectives of each individual's journey. This research includes the following secondary questions as well:

RQ1a: Of the factors identified, which ones are internal factors and which ones are external factors?

RQ1b: What resources are identified that can help students who are struggling to graduate?

Research Design

This study's goal was to build upon the existing knowledge of why some college students graduate and others do not. Multiple questions were asked in this qualitative study. Creswell (1994) defines qualitative research as "...an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting" (pp. 1-2). Creswell and Poth (2018) refer to phenomenology as analyzing "what" the individuals have experienced and "how" they have experienced it" (p. 77). "Phenomenology is not only a description, but it is also an interpretive process in which the researcher makes an interpretation of the meaning of the lived experience" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 78). The researcher's goal was to listen to each individual about their unique journey in attempting to complete their two-year degree. The students most likely had many different experiences during their journey, and the researcher hoped to get a strong understanding from each of the seven individuals. The researcher aspired to acquire knowledge and meaning from each participant's life. Phenomenological research methods are designed to understand more than what has already been understood by engaging in the process of people interpreting their experiences, how they construct their words, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2009). This approach allowed each participant to share their full story in a comfortable environment. Additionally, it aimed to identify underlying barriers and themes of persistence among each participants' journey.

Definition of Terms

Non-completer- A non-completer refers to any individual who started a two-year computer program but did not finish the program for any reason.

Graduate- A graduate refers to any individual who started and completed a two-year computer program.

Significance

The topic of this study is exciting to the researcher, as he has seen first-hand what a college degree has done for many individuals who have successfully completed their two-year technical degree. This project is invaluable to future potential college students looking at earning a two-year degree because incoming students can be made aware of challenges that previous students encountered and how to deal with those said challenges. The intention is that the emerging themes that emerge can be used for possible future publication. Many computer degree students who complete their degree are successful in the Information Technology (IT) field after graduation and hearing first-hand from students what they believe it was that helped them complete their college degree or what got in the way of their degree is valuable information. There are several pieces of literature addressing possible reasons that students fail in college; this study was designed to support current and future literature and possibly uncover factors sometimes overlooked by faculty and staff within higher education.

Theoretical Orientation of the Study

This research was conducted from the perspective of a college instructor, the researcher's professional field. Interactions with both non-completers and graduates have sparked a drive to find answers and best practices to help students succeed. The researcher has seen many students trying hard and putting forth effort into many second-year courses, but not all of them continue on the path to graduating from the program. The theoretical orientation for this research study followed key points from Vincent Tinto's college student departure model (1993).

Assumptions

Because the researcher was a former instructor to some participants, he reminded all participants to answer the questions as truthfully as possible and not to say things that intentionally sounded good or what the participants thought would make the researcher happy.

Limitations

The design of this study was somewhat limited. As with other qualitative studies, the study relied on trusting memory and perception of experiences of the participants that possibly occurred years ago. Participants noted that it was hard to remember everything or every detail about their experiences from when they were in college.

Summary

This chapter provided an introduction to the many challenges that individuals experience when deciding when pursuing a college degree and the potential value that obtaining a college degree brings to individuals. Secondly, the statement of the problem was defined in hopes that the reader is aware of the low percentage of students that successfully complete their chosen degree. Vincent Tinto's college student departure model was introduced and briefly described, as that model was used as the theoretical framework for the research in this study. The purpose of the study was revealed along with the research questions that the researcher hoped to answer. Lastly, the research design was revealed, key terms were defined, significance of the study was presented, assumptions, and limitations were addressed. The next chapter discusses methods of searching, and the literature review.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

College students have many obstacles to overcome to succeed in college. Students starting a college degree have the best intentions to complete a program, but an alarmingly large number of students do not finish the program they start. College retention is a growing problem in higher education. College dropout rates indicate that up to 32.9% of undergraduates do not complete their degree program (Hanson, 2022). The majority of new students entering higher education leave their initial college of enrollment without completing a degree (Tinto, 1993). When students drop out of college, there are many adverse effects. College dropouts are 19.6% more likely to be unemployed than any other degree holder (Hanson, 2022). Hess (2018) conducted research and found that with dropouts, students become burdened by debt, waste their time, and see their expected earnings markedly reduced. For students, dropping out can mean unrealized potential and lower earnings over their working careers (Millea et al., 2018). Taxpayers ultimately pay for unused grants, subsidies, and federal loans that are unlikely to be repaid. Students who leave before they complete their degrees can cost universities thousands of dollars in unrealized tuition revenue and replacement recruiting costs (Millea et al., 2018). During the research, many factors were found that contributed to college student success. The researcher focused on nine themes or areas heavily discussed in the literature. These nine areas include a sense of belonging, motivation, time management, homesickness, self-efficacy, being a first-generation college student (FGCS), financial stress, social issues, and grit.

Strategies for Searching

Research on this topic began by searching for articles on student success factors. Many articles have been published in this area going back as early as the 1980s. Using the year filters helped find up-to-date articles that seemed more relevant and timely. Keywords and phrases such

as academic dismissal, at-risk factors, degree completion, personal factors, student dropout,

student retention and success factors were used in the searches. The search was expanded to find

articles related to college student success. The advanced search functions narrowed the search

was narrowed using keywords such as college, higher education, and postsecondary. The

research was primarily conducted via online databases, including EBSCO Host, ERIC, Google

Scholar, and ProQuest. The researcher used reference lists to expand the literature base, and

articles were reviewed for related literature and authors which did not appear in initial online

searches. Google was used to learn more about some of the authors.

Sense of Belonging

The role of a sense of belonging is a factor that should be examined when looking at

college student success. Gillen-O'Neel (2019) engaged in belonging and student engagement

research. Their research was quantitative and involved 850 students from five colleges in

Minnesota. Results from Gillen-O'Neel suggested that a sense of belonging is an important

resource for maintaining student engagement among all students, especially among first-

generation students. Gillen-O'Neel claimed that because a sense of belonging operates at both

person and daily levels, schools should work at both levels to improve student belonging.

Baumeister & Leary (1995) proposed a belongingness hypothesis that considered a need to

belong as a general drive to form and develop interpersonal relationships and argued that it is a

fundamental human motivation. Concrete relationships based on regular social interaction

seemed to be vital to belonging in the educational context (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Sense of

belonging has also emerged as an important factor used in understanding social and academic

outcomes among college populations (Strayhorn, 2012). In both experimental (Yeager et al.,

2016) and correlational (Strayhorn, 2012) studies, researchers have found that students who feel

they belong can seek out and use campus resources to a greater extent, furthering their success. Worrying about whether one belongs to a social group and is a valued member represents a chronic stressor that undermines students' motivation and engagement (Yeager et al., 2013). Gilken & Johnson (2019) completed a study that examined how a content-based peer feedback writing intervention contributed to community college students' feelings of belonging. Findings from their research hinted that providing instructors with research-based interventions to support students' feelings of belonging may help support student degree completion. Gilken & Johnson (2019) extended the literature on belongingness to emphasize the connection between "doing" and "being," (i.e., the notion that authentic, active engagement in the community nurtures the individual's sense of belongingness). Gilken & Johnson claimed that participation in the content-based, peer feedback writing intervention, students cognitively combined "doing" with "being" and thus, began to see themselves as valued members and contributors to the classroom community. Belongingness is better fostered by instructional interventions within content-based classes in which students contribute actively to the construction of knowledge, and, in doing so, become engaged participants (Gilken & Johnson, 2019).

Many factors can influence a sense of belonging. For instance, one's family, racial or ethnic group, and religious affiliation can be important sources of social identity belongingness, providing powerful motives for achievement (Cohen & Garcia, 2008). Existing literature suggests the key influences that shape student belonging include: relationships with peers and educators, the campus environment, and willingness to participate in involvement opportunities. There are many theories and models that describe student attrition and dropout among college students. Two well-known theories include A.W. Astin's student involvement theory (1984) and

Tinto's (1993) model of college student attrition. Both models tie into the importance of academic and social integration to succeed in college.

Alexanders Astin's theory of student involvement (1984) explained how desirable outcomes for higher education institutions are viewed in relation to how students change and develop because of being involved in co-curricular activities. The core concepts of the theory are composed of three elements. The first element is student "inputs," such as demographics, background, and previous experiences. The second element is the student's "environment," which accounts for all the experiences a student would have during college. Lastly, there are "outcomes," which cover a student's characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and values that exist after a student has graduated college (https://spartanexperiences.msu.edu/rso-s/Theories.pdf).

Vincent Tinto (1993) identifies three major sources of student departure: academic difficulties, the inability of individuals to resolve their educational and occupational goals, and their failure to become or remain incorporated in the intellectual and social life of the institution. Tinto's "model of institutional departure" states that to persist, students need integration into formal (academic performance) and informal (faculty/staff interactions) academic systems along with formal (extracurricular activities) and informal (peer-group interactions) social systems integration (Key Theories. (2021). www.msu.edu. https://spartanexperiences.msu.edu/rso-s/Theories.pdf).

A study conducted by Ahn and Davis (2019) surveyed 426 students and asked each student to write down up to ten words that come to mind when they think about their sense of belonging at the university. The study's results indicated strongly and consistently that students' sense of belonging to the university is multi-dimensional and that social engagement is the most

salient factor. Although existing literature tends to focus on academic and social engagement, this study identified two more emerging themes: surroundings and personal space. Ahn and Davis (2019) concluded that policies for student engagement in higher education should support the full range of students' experiences. Universities need to develop initiatives that encourage students' engagement with geographical, natural, and cultural surroundings, such as participating in local community events and volunteering (Ahn & Davis, 2019).

Won et al. (2017) examined a sense of belonging and its relations with three indicators of self-regulated learning with 385 college students. The study found that a sense of belonging to school was linked positively to metacognitive strategies and academic time management. Students feeling connected to their institution were more likely to report increased use of strategies for planning, monitoring, and regulating their learning process and strategies for managing and organizing their time for academic work. Regarding a sense of belonging and peer groups, Won et al. (2017) claimed that students who felt more accepted and supported by a peer group tended to report greater use of study groups or other peer-based strategies for learning. In other words, wanting and having secure relationships with other students may allow college students to approach their peers for academic assistance more easily and to encourage their participation in study groups or other learning strategies that rely on social interaction. Alternatively, and to their detriment, college students who do not have good friends at the university or do not feel comfortable being themselves among other students may avoid using effective study strategies that require social interaction (Won et al., 2017).

Motivation

Having a sense of belonging can significantly impact one's motivation. When an individual feels like they are a valued member of a group or community, they are more likely to

be motivated to contribute and participate in the activities of that group. Motivation has been conceptualized in various ways, including inner forces, enduring traits, behavioral responses to stimuli, and beliefs and affects (Schunk et al., 2008). When students are motivated to learn about a topic, they are apt to engage in activities they believe will help them learn, such as attending carefully to the instruction, mentally organizing and rehearsing the material to be learned, taking notes to facilitate subsequent studying, check their level of understanding, and ask for help when they do not understand the material (Zimmerman, 2000). When students are motivated to learn they often find that once they do learn they are intrinsically motivated to continue their learning (Schunk et al., 2008). Wright (2012) identified six key reasons why students are not motivated to perform: (a) inability to do the assigned work due to lack of essential skills required, such as basic academic skills, cognitive strategies, and academic-enabler skills; (b) "response effort" needed to complete the assigned work seems too great, although the student has the required skills; (c) classroom instruction and learning activities do not engage them; (d) failure to see an adequate pay-off to doing the assigned work, such as praise, access to rewards, or other short-term "pay-off" to encourage them to apply greater effort; (e) low self-efficacy, or lack of confidence, that they can do the assigned work in a subject area, activity, or academic task, which reduces motivation; and (f) lack of positive relationship with the teacher.

Trolian et al. (2016) conducted a study that examined the influence of student-faculty interactions on student academic motivation over four years of college. The findings show that several forms of student-faculty interaction, such as quality of faculty contact, frequency of faculty contact, research with faculty, personal discussion with faculty, and out-of-class interactions with faculty, have a positive influence on academic motivation. These findings underscore the importance and potential influence of frequent and varying types of student-

faculty interaction on the academic outcomes of college (Trolian et al., 2016). Komarraju et al. (2010) studied 242 undergraduate students from a mid-size, Midwestern public university. The study examined eight aspects of student-faculty interactions as predictors of academic self-concept, motivation, and achievement. Students who perceive their faculty members as approachable, respectful, and available for frequent interactions outside the classroom are more likely to report being confident in their academic skills and being intrinsically and extrinsically motivated (Komarraju et al., 2010). This study also found that students feeling alienated and distant from faculty members is associated with experiencing a lack of motivation. With an understanding of college students and motivation, we can now turn our attention to the importance of time management for college students.

Time Management

Time management is also an essential aspect of college student success. Some students come straight from high school, where they have a very structured schedule. That structured schedule, and living with their parents, did not allow for much free time. In a study by Britton & Tesser (1991), short-range planning was defined as within the day or the week. Britton & Tesser (1991) found a positive correlation between short-range planning and students' grade point average (GPA), which suggests that students who are actively engaged in time management processes are likely to see attainment benefits. Britton and Tesser stated that short-range planning was a more effective time management technique than long-range planning. They claimed this because short-range planning could be adjusted to fast changes or unpredictable situations, which allowed for flexibility, something relevant in the lives of fast-paced, multitasking modern students, but also something that might not lead to students developing effective study habits. Students who implement short-range planning activities will have a clear

idea in advance of what they intend to accomplish during the next week and will spend time at the beginning of each day writing a list of goals, a to-do list, and a schedule; these planning lists will be informed by setting priorities, with the priorities honored in the implementation of the plan (Britton & Tesser, 1991).

Time management has been defined as "the self-controlled attempt to use time in a subjectively efficient way to achieve outcomes" (Koch & Kleinmann, 2002) and as "achieving an effective use of time while performing certain goal-directed activities" (Claessens et al., 2007). Time for meeting assignment deadlines, attending classes, and studying needs to be factored into a student's schedule to remain in good academic standing and achieve educational goals. Setting goals, planning ahead, and monitoring one's learning are tactics students use to regulate their learning and stay on track with assignments (Cho & Heron, 2015). Self-regulated learning involves time and task management. Self-regulated learning can be difficult when students have competing responsibilities fighting for their time and attention. Wolters et al. (2017) conducted a study involving 446 college students and by investigating whether academic time management could be used to understand their engagement in traditional and active forms of procrastination within a model of self-regulated learning. Results of the study found that students reported that using strategies associated with setting goals, prioritizing, and monitoring their use of time predicted decreased procrastination and intentional delay. Academic time management, (i.e., budgeting time to be used purposefully) increases a students' likelihood of achieving educational goals and is a key aspect of self-regulated learning (Wolters et al., 2017).

Procrastination is common in the collegiate sphere (Korstange et al., 2019). Korstange et al. (2019) published an article that synthesizes research to create a more nuanced view of student procrastination and establish better mechanisms to encourage student productivity. Students

often misestimate both their abilities and the time it takes to complete academic tasks. The result is that students often set themselves up to work in insurmountable timelines-, and do not submit high-quality academic work (Korstange et al., 2019). College students balance numerous tasks, including readings, assignments, and tests, for each of their classes. In addition to academic work, many students add full- or part-time work, co-curricular involvement, and family social responsibilities (Komarraju et al., 2010).

Homesickness

When moving to college, some students adjust well to living on their own and college life. However, others struggle with the new life experience with their changed life of not being physically close to their parents and loved ones. Homesickness in college students is an issue that must be taken seriously, for it can influence one's level of success in adapting to their new lives as collegians (Urani et al., 2003). Homesickness can be defined as mini-grief, -a sense of home-related losses (Stroebe et al., 2002). There are various levels or severities of homesickness experienced by college students. It is a common experience among college students, with documented prevalence rates between 19% and 80% (Stroebe et al., 2015). In addition, each student deals with the change differently. Not all students experience homesickness for various reasons, such as they do not move away from home while attending college or their commute distance is minimal. Overall, homesickness seems relatively common for college students, but individuals differ in the intensity and duration of their homesickness (Stroebe et al., 2015).

The biggest side effect of homesickness is a decrease in the individual's mental health. Homesickness may place individuals at risk for poor adjustment outcomes, such as emotional and social difficulties (Stroebe et al., 2015). Homesickness can negatively affect a college student's ability to adjust to their new social environment. Previous work has documented

various psychological and physical health consequences of homesickness (Stroebe et al., 2015). Students who become homesick upon starting college may have difficulty adjusting to their college setting, leading to social and academic difficulties (English et al., 2017).

Homesickness can lead to lower GPAs (Sun et al., 2016), as students can become less attentive to classes and have trouble concentrating (Burt, 1993). Likewise, homesickness can lead to attrition as students who experience homesickness may withdraw from their classes and opt to return home (Sun et al., 2016). The significance of looking into the academic consequences of homesickness is underscored in college, where a greater degree of academic engagement is necessary, considering the complexity of the curriculum (Binfet & Passmore, 2016).

English et al. (2017) conducted a longitudinal approach to examine weekly levels of homesickness experienced by students across their first term at college and test the effects of homesickness on various aspects of adjustment. Participants in the study consisted of 174 undergraduates who had moved away from home for college and completed at least four weekly reports during the first term of their first year of college. Findings from the study conclude that during the first ten weeks of college, 94% of students reported experiencing homesickness at some point. On average, homesickness decreased slightly across the first term of the first year. These findings help normalize the experience of homesickness for students who feel isolated as they struggle to adjust to their new lives away from home, as this study suggests that their homesickness will likely fade over time (English et al., 2017).

Urani et al. (2003) conducted a retrospective study exploring factors that make individuals susceptible to prolonged homesickness. The study involved 105 first-year college students living away from home. The study concluded that there was a statistically significant

positive relationship between social anxiety and homesickness at the beginning of the semester. Additionally, since individuals with high social anxiety have trouble establishing relationships, they may be especially prone to homesickness. Lastly, Urani et al. (2003) claim that there is an initial level of homesickness to be expected; however, as individuals establish social networks at school, their homesickness remits, and many individuals can function more adaptively. For students, feeling rejected and unable able to develop a sense of belonging within higher education is a key cause of student attrition (O'Keeffe, 2013). O'Keeffe (2013) suggested that the higher education institution must seek to create a welcoming environment where care, warmth, and acceptance are promoted to achieve improved student retention.

Self-Efficacy

Self-Efficacy is also an important aspect of student college success. High self-regulation and self-efficacy are reliable predictors of academic success in courses (Bradley et al., 2017). Bandura (1997) discussed that self-efficacy refers to people's judgment of their capabilities to organize and successfully complete a task. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's perceived capability to perform necessary tasks to achieve goals and can influence the choice of tasks, the level of task performance, the amount of effort put into performing chosen tasks, and perseverance in task performance (Bandura, 1997). Efficacy beliefs influence the particular courses of action a person chooses to pursue, the amount of effort that will be expended, perseverance in the face of challenges and failures, resilience, and the ability to cope with the demands associated with the chosen course. Both Tinto (1993) and Bean (1990) talked about aptitudes and capabilities as contributing to a sense of academic confidence or efficacy that helps to determine goal commitment. Tinto (1993) argued that commitment is the key determinant of persistence and success in college. There are some very good reasons for focusing attention more

closely on academic self-efficacy as a central determinant of the success of high school to university transitions. Bandura (1997) explains that memory provides the necessary information to make judgments of self-efficacy. The emotional state activates articulated memories facilitating the recall of successful experiences (when the emotional state is positive) or failure (when the emotional state is negative), consistently affecting the judgments of personal efficiency. Bandura (1997) stated that beliefs are formulated based on previous experience. If the person has had previous failure experiences, he/she will feel less capable than if he/she has had previous successful experiences (Bandura, 1997). An individual's perceived self-efficacy is believed to influence the choice of tasks, the level of task performance the amount of effort put into performing chosen tasks, and perseverance in the task performance (Bandura, 1997). Bandura (1997) also argued that a high sense of coping efficacy encourages individuals to adopt courses of action designed to change hazardous environments. Chemers et al. (2001) noted:

> "Self-efficacy beliefs are related to an enhanced ability to use effective problem-solving and decision-making strategies, to plan and manage one's personal resources more efficiently, to entertain more positive expectations, and to set higher goals. Very central to these self-efficacy effects seems to be the ability to manage the stressors created in demanding situations by means of a more positive analysis of extant risks and available coping resources, which results in the tendency to see demanding situations as challenges rather than threats." (p.56)

According to Bong and Clark (1999), the nature of self-concept has both cognitive and affective components. However, one important distinction between them clearly separates the two constructs: the type of self-appraisal. Evaluating the self in comparison with others heavily influences self-concept, according to Bong and Clark (1999), whereas evaluating the self in

comparison with one's past performances influences self-efficacy. Thus, self-concept is more of a norm-referenced evaluation, whereas self-efficacy is a criterion-referenced evaluation of self.

Sinclair, McKendrick, and Scott (2010) reported that the career development process also influences educational aspirations. Educational aspirations refer to more self-efficacy and strong self-esteem, and extreme educational aspirations refer to career achievement. Family, personal identities, self-efficacy beliefs and external environment also shape students' career aspirations (Frome et al., 2006). Bandura (2001) claimed that young children, among numerous further changes which happen at the start of their life, develop aspirations about their future linked with their positive aspects of personality and educational outcomes as well as self-efficacy.

Bradley et al. (2017) conducted a study that examined the influence of self-efficacy and self-regulation in online learning. Their study consisted of 266 undergraduate students from a small university in South Georgia. Their findings suggest that high efficacy and positive self-regulatory behaviors are reliable predictors of academic success in online courses. Their study utilized the Online Academic Success Indicators Scale (OASIS), and their findings validate the OASIS as an effective tool for measuring self-efficacy and self-regulation in online instruction. Student self-efficacy beliefs are closely tied to student's ability to self-regulate their behavior, which directly influences academic outcomes (Bradley et al., 2017). Bradley et al. (2017) noted:

> "The correlation between the number of online courses completed and the degree of student self-efficacy is likely explained by mastery experience. Students who were successful in their online courses have evidence that they have what it takes to succeed. On the other hand, students who do not have mastery experiences in their online courses, that is, students who either were not successful in their online courses or have no prior

experience in taking online courses are less likely to feel that they possess the necessary

capabilities to do well in this context." (p.526)

Students in good academic standing reported having higher self-efficacy and adopted

significantly more mastery goals toward learning than students on academic probation (Hsieh et

al., 2007). Among students who reported having high self-efficacy, those on academic probation

reported adopting significantly more performance-avoidance goals than those in good academic

standing (Hsieh et al., 2007). Hsieh et al. (2007) concluded that when students face academic

demands, how they approach academic tasks and view themselves can play a significant role in

their academic success.

A study conducted by Choi (2005) consisted of 230 undergraduate students at a

southeastern university. This study indicated that both academic self-concept and specific self-

concept were significant predictors of term grades. Findings from Cho (2005) indicate that

college students with high self-perception tend to attain higher academic achievement. When

students experience success through completing various course activities arranged at increasing

difficulty levels, they will be more likely to experience increased self-efficacy and self-concept,

which, in turn, improve college students' academic achievement (Choi, 2005).

First Generation College Students

The role of being a First Generation College Student (FGCS) is another factor to look at

when looking at student success. First-generation college students may need better academic

preparation in high school (Dennis et al., 2005). First-generation college students (FGCS)

experience the same challenges as non-first-generation students (NFGCS), but they also face

their own unique stressors, such as a lack of academic preparation, absence of support from

family and friends, and difficult cultural transitions (House et al., 2019). Parents of first-

generation college students lack first-hand knowledge of the college experience; these students

have a significant hurdle to overcome in navigating the educational system (Zalaquett, 1999).

According to Zalaquett (1999):

> First-generation students face unique challenges in attaining a degree, such as conflicting
>
> obligations, false expectations, poor preparation, and lack of support, which may hinder
>
> their success. First-generation students often stand at the edge of two cultures, that of
>
> their friends and family and that of their college. Because college attendance represents a
>
> departure from the pattern established by family and friends, they may become
>
> nonsupportive. (p.417)

Parents of first-generation college students are less likely to help their children prepare

for college entrance exams, accompany them on college tours, seek information regarding

financial aid, or attend information sessions (Engle, 2007). FGCS often are at a distinct

disadvantage "when it comes to postsecondary access—a disadvantage that persists even after

controlling for other factors such as educational expectations, academic preparation, support

from parents and schools in planning and preparing for college, and family income" (Choy,

2001, p. 4). Due to various challenges and barriers, (FGCS) more often exhibit lower levels of

college readiness and reduced rates of college enrollment and retention than their non-FG peers

(Smith, 2015). According to Atherton (2014), FGCS participate less in studying and

extracurricular activities and generally receive lower grade point averages in the first year of

college. FGCS typically interact socially and academically differently in the college setting

(Means & Pyne, 2017). First-generation students typically lack these social ties that transmit

important knowledge about how to be successful in higher education institutions and, as a result,

have "inadequate college-related cultural capital" (Ward et al., 2012, p. 106). They study less,

earn lower grades, and take fewer courses in humanities, arts, and natural sciences (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Demetriou et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study that examined FGCS undergraduate retention using data collected through interviews with successful students from low-income families at a large, public research university in the southern United States. Demetriou et al. concluded:

> The findings include identifications and rich descriptions of the activities, roles, and relationships in the microsystem. In particular, findings describe students actively engaging in coursework, participating in undergraduate research, traveling abroad, participating in student organizations, engaging in community service, and joining a small community. Students are also described as taking on multiple roles including that of undergraduate, researcher, and employee. Important relationships including academic, peer, and employment relationships are described. Finally, because developmental processes are influenced by personal dispositions and attitudes, findings also include attitudes and dispositions noted among participants. (p.23)

A study by McCoy (2014) found that students of color who matriculate from large urban areas to small, rural, predominantly white areas struggled. In addition to struggling with the college transition, they struggled with a lack of knowledge about the admissions process. FGCS of color who attend predominately White institutions (PWIs) may also experience a sense of culture shock, isolation, and individual and systemic racism making their college-going experience difficult and highly stressful (McCoy, 2014).

A study by Covarrubias & Fryberg (2015) examined family achievement guilt among an ethnically diverse sample of FGCs and continuing-generation college students (CGCs), those

whose parents attended college. It tested a strategy to alleviate such guilt. In the study, one student considered "dropping out of college" to better help one's family, while another student confessed to feeling isolated on campus. Continuing to find ways to alleviate family achievement guilt and practical ways of implementing these strategies is crucial to the academic success and psychological well-being of FGCs (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). Covarrubia & Fryberg (2015) concluded:

> While the experience of going to college and navigating a new university system can be a challenge for all students regardless of college status background, FGCs, particularly those from ethnic minority backgrounds, face an additional barrier in this process. As our findings reveal, FGCs grapple with potential feelings of guilt for surpassing the accomplishments of close others, which has consequences for how these students adjust to college. (p.428)

Financial Stress

The role of financial stress is another factor to look at when looking at student success. According to the 2018 Healthy Minds Survey, U.S. college students report their current financial situation as "stressful" (35%), "often stressful" (24%), "rarely stressful" (20%), "always stressful" (14%), and "never stressful" (7%) (Network, 2022). Financial stress is defined by researchers as the inability to meet one's economic responsibilities and is influenced by attitudes, beliefs, and other psychological factors (Northern et al., 2010). Financial stress has been linked to negative consequences across many aspects of life, including health, well-being, academics, and relationships (Northern et al., 2010). The toll of financial stress on students is exhibited in terms of lower campus and social engagement, which contributes to lower retention rates (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Students with higher financial stress are more likely to discontinue college

(Hogan et al., 2013). Hogan et al. (2013) conducted a study at a mid-sized public university in the Northeast U.S. and concluded:

> Students get into financial difficulty for various reasons, some of which have been studied, as discussed earlier in this paper. Once they get into financial trouble they may experience anxiety, which may lead to inappropriate behaviors to alleviate stress such as drinking or shopping inappropriately. These, in turn, may increase credit card balances and heighten anxiety. Or, to cope, students may increase their hours of work to pay off bills - which again detracts from time for studying or attending classes --or take fewer classes (to allow more time to work, or to reduce tuition payments). All of these undesirable academic behaviors and cognitions may affect grades and potentially result in academic dismissal or dropping out, or increase time to graduation. (p.110)

A potential source of financial stress for college students is the cost of tuition and fees, which has grown three times the inflation rate. In today's economy, students would have to work year-round at 55 hours per week to pay for the average public college tuition, whereas a student in the 1960s could have worked 40 hours per week in the summer and 15 hours per week during the school year to pay the same (Bousquet, 2008). According to Joo et al. (2008), financial concerns are a primary stressor for college students, particularly first-year students. Stressors include (a) concerns about the ability to finance their education; (b) stress caused by the need, or perceived need, to work full-time to pay for their education; (c) the costs of commuting to school; (d) the stress associated with finding employment while taking classes; and (e) the stress caused by negative financial behaviors and poor debt management (Joo et al., 2008).

Social Pressures

College life can be stressful and alter the life experience of a student; it is, therefore, vital to be in the company of family and friends while being in college (Trockel et al., 2000). Those students who have difficulty handling stress may struggle to adjust to the many academic and social pressures associated with transitioning to college life. As a result, those students are at risk of academic failure and dropping out (Shields, 2001). During the unsettling and chaotic experience characterizing the first months at university, many cannot establish meaningful social contacts (Romito et al., 2020). Combined with poor decision-making and the pressures of work or family responsibilities, the moments of doubt that many students experience as they cope with the transition to higher education may be sufficient to cause early departure from college (Romito et al., 2020). A respondent from Romito et al.'s study noted:

"I was discouraged. I had no energy for studying. My choice was ok, the circumstances were mistaken. I withdrew after one year. I found a job as a warehouse worker. But I wasn't satisfied in carrying out a life where your brain is just switched off. So I said, let's try one more time. In September I enrolled in Foreign Languages. But after few months I realized I could not make it. I had to continue working of course, because I could not burden my family… I did not have the time and constancy to be part of that world [the university], to study, to go to the lectures. I felt isolated, I did not have any points of reference; not my parents of course, but not even other students… so I passed a very bad period of negativity, depression. Fortunately, after the first semester I found a new job that was a bit more rewarding for me as a person. I felt ok, and I left the university. (Focus group, June 2016. Marco, technical education diploma, working-class background)" (p.466)

Grit

Grit is also an essential aspect of student college success. Duckworth and colleagues (2007) described grit as the ability to approach challenges and face failure while also maintaining the stamina to resist defeat. Duckworth et al. (2007) defined grit as behaving passionately and assiduously to achieve long-term targets despite difficulties. In other words, people with greater levels of grit are more determined when trying to overcome obstacles. These people also persist in maintaining interest to achieve their targets despite failure, difficulties, and lack of support (Arslan et al., 2013).

Wolters et al. (2014) investigated grit and its relations with students' self-regulated learning (SRL) and academic achievement. Their sampling consisted of 213 college students who completed an online self-report survey that included the Grit Short scale, seven indicators of SRL, and their past and present academic achievements. Results indicated that one aspect of grit, perseverance of effort, was a consistent and adaptive predictor for all indicators of SRL, including value, self-efficacy, cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, time and study environment management strategies, and procrastination. A second aspect of grit, consistency of interest, was associated only with the latter two facets of SRL. Perseverance of effort predicted achievement before, but not after, accounting for SRL; hence, students' engagement in SRL may serve as a mediating pathway through which this aspect of grit is associated with improved academic outcomes. Results from Wolters & Hussain (2014) suggest that college students' tendency to self-regulate their time and study environment and to avoid unnecessary delays when completing academic tasks is a critical pathway between personal dispositions or traits and students' academic achievement. The choice of which particular long-term goals assume priority and are most actively pursued appears to be a more direct function of motivational factors such as value, importance, and perceived competence (Wolters & Hussain, 2014). Wolters & Hussain

(2014) also found that grit may influence positive adaptive academic behaviors (e.g., effort, problem-solving, regulation, and attention) and achievement in the collegiate environment.

The indirect effect of grit-effort on academic attainment is consistent with Duckworth & Gross' (2014) proposal that the process by which gritty individuals pursue long-term goals is through consistent effort on goal-directed tasks and behaviors. Hagger & Hamilton (2018) found that high-grit students' effort in out-of-school learning activities set by science teachers contributes to academic attainment in science in the long-term. This finding indicates that gritty students' academic success is, partly, attributable to their tendency to invest effort in out-of-school activities intended to support in-class learning. Although engaging in these activities is not the only determinant of long-term academic performance, it likely plays a key role, consistent with the mediated effect (Hagger & Hamilton, 2018).

Boman et al. (2015) conducted a study that included students at two universities to examine the relationships between grit dimensions and various student outcomes. According to Bowman et al.:

> Grittier students were more satisfied with college, had a greater sense of belonging, engaged in more cocurricular activities, and even reported more interactions with faculty. In each case, perseverance had a stronger relationship than did consistency of interest. These findings suggest that those students who are more prone to "keep on truckin" may better realize the opportunities the college experience affords and be more likely to appreciate them. In turn, these benefits may help explain why grittier individuals attain higher levels of education. (p.644)

Summary

This chapter briefly introduced the literature review by naming some of the factors found while researching college student success. In addition to the literature review area, the strategies of searching was included. Following the strategies of searching, the chapter went into depth on the nine themes or areas that were heavily discussed in the literature. The next chapter discusses methodology, the purpose of the study, the research questions, and the research design.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In trying to comprehend the hardships of college students in higher education, this phenomenological study attempted to understand the hardships and life experiences of college students that occurred throughout their college years. Phenomenology is the best methodological approach in undertaking this qualitative research. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), "a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (p. 75). Phenomenology is a research strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants (Creswell, 2013). This phenomenological research in having participants tell their personal stories while in college not only helped verify existing findings within the literature, but also helped to understand their individual lived experiences. This chapter will discuss the purpose of the study, research question(s), qualitative research design, phenomenological methodology, setting of the study, sampling, recruitment survey, participants, procedures & timeline, data collection, interviews, role of the researcher, data analysis, ethical considerations, and informed consent.

Purpose of the Study

This study delved into the personal and educational journeys of seven participants who shared experiences while they were in college. The seven participants were all students between fall 2018 and fall 2021, who took some of the same courses, and were pursuing a computer program degree. Ultimately, this research attempted to find the success factors of college graduates and better understand what factors led to non-completion status for some students. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the subjective experiences of college students who have achieved academic success and who did not achieve academic success. By

delving into the rich and nuanced perspectives of these students, this study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences and underlying processes that enable college students to succeed academically. This qualitative study hoped to gain insight into the lived experiences of successful college students and college students who were not successful in completing college. Other insights including their perceptions of the challenges they faced, the strategies they used to overcome these challenges, and the resources that they found helpful in achieving their academic and personal goals, were also included. The hope was to gain a better understanding of the challenges college students face and if there were considerations or ideas that institutions could do differently to help students succeed. Despite the inherently varied and multifaceted nature of the American community college mission, it is clear that in this economic environment, improving the academic achievement of students attending community college must remain a top priority (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Colleges and universities should be active participants in, rather than the objects of, increasing academic momentum and should be allowed autonomy to achieve these ends while being held accountable for making sure goals are met (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Ultimately, the findings of this study may inform the development of effective interventions and support programs for students who face challenges in achieving academic success in college.

Research Question(s)

The primary question that this study attempted to answer was:

RQ1. What are college non-completers and college graduates' perspectives on factors that led to their success or failure in completing their two-year college degree?

The sub-questions were:

RQ1a. Of the factors identified, which ones are internal factors and which ones are external factors?

RQ1b. What resources are identified that can help students who are struggling to graduate?

Research Methodology

Different forms of phenomenological research reflect the diverse theoretical and methodological approaches developed within the broader phenomenological tradition. Examples of these forms include descriptive phenomenology, interpretive phenomenology, existential phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology, and transcendental phenomenology. This study used hermeneutic phenomenology as the form of methodology for the research. "Phenomenology of practice is a mode of inquiry that aims to understand how people experience and make sense of their everyday world. It is concerned with the lived experience of the world, the meaning structures that underpin it, and how these structures are constituted through our practical engagements with the world" (van Manen, 2014, p.9). Phenomenology can be defined as an approach to research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it (Neubauer et al., 2019). Hermeneutic phenomenological research is a form of qualitative research that focuses on understanding the meaning of individual experiences within their environment. Hermeneutic phenomenological research emphasizes the interpretive nature of human experience and seeks to uncover the meanings and interpretations individuals give to their experiences within their social and cultural contexts (van Manen, 2014). Since hermeneutic phenomenological research is focused on understanding the meaning of how individuals experience their environment, the researcher

asked open-ended interview questions that helped guide participants in sharing their each unique stories during their years in college.

Research Design

Qualitative research aligns with the constructivist paradigm, in which the ontological perspective is that reality is not objective but rather is created, transformed, and understood by individuals and groups as they interact with the world around them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell & Poth (2013) stated:

Qualitative research is best suited to exploring the complexity and richness of phenomena within their social context. Qualitative research is uniquely positioned to capture the nuances and intricacies of human experiences and social phenomena, which cannot be fully understood through quantitative methods alone. Qualitative inquiry attends to the lived experiences of individuals and groups and seeks to provide a detailed account of these experiences as they are situated within social, cultural, and political contexts. (p.23)

By attending to the context and perspectives of individuals and groups, qualitative research can provide a rich and nuanced understanding of complex social phenomena. Creswell (2013) emphasizes the importance of qualitative research in understanding complex human experiences. "Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for understanding complex human experiences, especially in their natural settings, over time, and in interaction with other people and factors in the environment" (Creswell & Poth, 2013, p. 21). This quote emphasizes the value of qualitative research methods in exploring the subjective experiences of individuals in a rich and detailed manner. A qualitative approach seems to be the most appropriate to uncover the possible factors of student success and provide a rich, holistic description of participants' experiences. In addition, a qualitative approach enables the researcher to "understand how

events, actions, and meaning are shaped by the unique circumstances in which these occur"
(Maxwell, 2013, p. 30). By focusing on the lived experiences of people in their natural
environments, qualitative research can provide insights into the complex and multifaceted nature
of human behavior, emotions, and perceptions. The researcher sought to explore the stories of
the seven individuals who shared information and provided insights into their complex journeys
of attempting to earn a computer college degree.

Population and Sample Selection

Purposeful sampling, specifically criterion sampling, was used in this study. One type of
purposeful sampling, criterion sampling, is particularly relevant in phenomenological research to
ensure that all participants have experienced the phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).
Participants included individuals who started in the computer program within the last five years,
specifically between the fall of 2018 and the fall of 2021. Purposeful sampling is most often used
in qualitative research because it allows the selection of participants with rich experience of the
phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The sample size for this study was
kept small. The researcher believed that a sample size of seven would be a good fit to create
strong dialogue created by asking specific questions regarding the journeys of each of the
participants. "Sample size in qualitative research is determined by the information power of the
study, which includes the study's research aim, quality of dialogue between the researcher and
participants, information richness of the data, and the analytical strategy. As such, there is no
fixed sample size in qualitative research, and researchers need to provide a justification for their
sample size based on the information power of the study" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.155).

Instrumentation

Specific methods and techniques used in phenomenological research can vary depending on the research question and the population being studied. Common forms of data gathering used in phenomenological research include in-depth interviews, focus groups, participant observation, written or audio diaries, and artifacts. Interviews are a valuable tool for phenomenological research because they allow researchers to explore the subjective experiences of individuals in-depth and with nuance. Interviews allow participants to provide first-hand accounts of their lived experiences of the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A semi-structured interview protocol is recommended, allowing students to construct interview questions relevant to the research question so that the key aspects of the research study are sure to be covered while allowing for participants to discuss other information that may end up being relevant to the study (Peoples, 2020). Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested conducting one-on-one interviews in the same room, or virtually via web-based or email-platforms. Additionally, during the interview, Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few in number and intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants.

Guided interview questions

The researcher designed the interview questions around pieces of Tinto's (1993) model. The researcher hoped that by asking questions like results found with Tinto's model, enough information would come out of the interviews to either agree or disagree with previous research from Tinto. During the interview, at times, the researcher would ask additional, follow-up questions, not reflected below. The follow-up questions were utilized when needed or when the researcher felt that additional information would become of the primary question asked.

Given this research topic and the information that Creswell and Poth provided, the researcher felt strongly that interviews were the best data collection method, rather than utilizing

focus groups. Interviews were conducted on campus. The researcher asked questions in hopes of

the participants sharing their experiences while they were taking college courses. The aim was to

hear the voices of each participant and understand each participant's perceptions while moving

along in the coursework and hoping to earn their two-year computer degree. Table 1 includes a

listing of the interview questions used and a mapping to each of the research questions.

Table 1

Interview Table

	Research Q1	Research Q2	Research Q3
Interview Q1How and why did you arrive at college?			
Interview Q2*What your experiences were like on campus?	X		
Interview Q3*What organizations/sports were you a part of?	X		
Interview Q4*Did you seek support?	X		X
Interview Q5*What were your institutional experiences like?	X	X	X
Interview Q6*Personal issues?	X	X	
Interview Q7*What the department or college could do differently?			X
Interview Q8*What did you struggle with?	X	X	
Interview Q9*What helped or motivated you?	X	X	
Interview Q10*Anything additionally to share?	X	X	X

Interview questions shortened for brevity. See full interview protocol in Appendix C

Validity and Reliability

Member checking with the participants was used to address the validity of the transcripts

of the participants. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), member checking can be used by the

participants to verify the accuracy of the transcripts not the accuracy of the interpretations. After

the seven interviews were completed, the researcher emailed each of the participants a copy of

their transcript to verify that the transcripts were accurate.

Data Collection and Management

To gather data for the study, interviews were used with seven college students who were taking courses between fall 2018 and fall 2021. The researcher used Zoom from his laptop to record audio and video of the interview. In addition, the researcher utilized the transcribing feature within Zoom to help with the coding process afterward. After the researcher interviewed the seven participants, the researcher took the semi-structured data and structured it into codes, themes, and patterns for analysis.

Data Analysis Procedures

With hermeneutic phenomenology, the term data analysis is not always used. By definition, analysis means to "break into parts," and the premise of hermeneutic phenomenology is the use of the hermeneutic circle. The idea of the hermeneutic circle is that the parts inform the whole, and the whole informs the parts (Peoples, 2020). In some phenomenological research, data analysis is used interchangeably with other terms. Explication is one such term, which means an "investigation of the constituents of a phenomenon while keeping the context of the whole" (Hycner, 1999, p.161). For the purposes of this study, the researcher used the traditional term of data analysis when describing the work completed with the data. The researcher followed best practices from Peoples (2020) regarding the data analysis process for each interview transcript:

1. Read the entire transcript multiple times and remove unnecessary language.

2. Use the data to generate preliminary meaning units.

3. Generate final meaning units for each research question.

4, Determine the meaning behind the participant's description of their experience as to reveal themes.

5. Synthesize situated narratives into general narratives.

6. Generate general description. After completion of the first five steps, the sixth step was to generate a general description. The goal of general description was to move away from the participants' descriptions of their experiences, and aim to unite the major phenomenological themes into a cohesive general description (Peoples, 2020). The researcher categorized the responses into themes while preserving each of the participant's stories. These stories were shared, and the identified themes were reported in Chapter four.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout this study, ethical standards were maintained. Before conducting the interviews, approval was obtained from the IRB, and every consideration was made to ensure the anonymity of the participants. All participants were provided an overview of the anticipated study and provided an informed consent form (see Appendix B). Participants were informed that the interview was voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any time, for any reason. All data and recordings were kept confidential to ensure participant anonymity. Both the Zoom recordings and electronic copies of surveys and write-ups were stored securely on the researcher's Office 365 drive account, which was password protected. Additionally, the electronic copies that were edited and stored on the researcher's laptop which was password protected with credentials of the domain account. Each participant reviewed their narratives to ensure an accurate representation of their stories. The researcher received IRB approval to conduct the study, received IRB approval of the site location, and conducted the interviews in an ethical manner. A copy of the IRB approval letter is attached (See Appendix E).

Limitations and Delimitations

The design of this study was somewhat limited. As with other qualitative studies, the study relied on trusting memory and perception of experiences of the participants that possibly occurred years ago. Participants noted that it was hard to remember everything or every detail about their experiences from when they were in college. Delimitations in the study included the researcher choosing the focus and scope of the research and the research questions used. The researcher focused only on participants who were enrolled in a computer program between fall 2018 and fall 2021. Additionally, the participants were only recruited from one mid-size Midwestern college.

Setting of the Study

The location of this study was at a two-year college in a mid-size Midwestern town. The researcher was willing to accommodate any individual's request to meet anywhere else, if needed. However, all seven interviews were held from an office on campus. The office was approximately 10 feet by 14 feet wide. The office consisted of a filing cabinet, a book rack, an office desk, and two chairs. Each participant had the choice to complete the interview in the office or over Zoom. Additionally, if any of the individuals had a preference to meet in-person at a different location, that option was also available to them. All interviews were conducted from an office on campus, and Zoom was used to record audio and video.

Recruitment Survey

Participants for this study were recruited over a period of a month. An automated email was sent out to individuals who met the criteria of the study. The email attempted to seek individuals who would be willing to participate in the interview. The email included an attached informed consent form and asked individuals to return the form if they were interested in partaking in the interview and the study.

Participants

Seven individuals were recruited for this research. The participants of the study

identified as being in college between the fall of 2018 and the fall of 2021. The following table

(Table 2) provides the reader with some basic information about the ages of the participants. In

chapter four, further descriptions of the participant demographics are provided. Pseudonyms

were assigned to protect the identity of the participants and will be used throughout the study.

Table 2

Participant Ages

Name*	Age Range
Participant A	18-24
Participant B	25-34
Participant C	18-24
Participant D	25-34
Participant E	18-24
Participant F	35-44
Participant G	45-54

*pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of participants.

Procedures & Timeline

The researcher achieved IRB approval in March 2023 to conduct the interviews. The

proposal defense was successfully completed in June 2023.

In September 2023, the researcher worked with the Director of Institutional Effectiveness

at the research site to reach out to potential participants and gauge interest in the interviews.

With the help of the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and working with Hobsons, a request

was made by the researcher to have an email sent out to potential participants. The request was

granted, and an email went out to two different distribution groups (Group A and Group B) in

October. The first group (Group A) consisted of prospective participants who were enrolled in a

computer program during fall 2018 and fall 2021, who had graduated. The second group (Group

B) consisted of prospective participants who were enrolled in a computer program during fall 2018 and fall 2021 and had not yet completed their program (non-completers).

During the second week in October, an email was sent to Group A on behalf of the researcher. That email was sent to 128 individuals via email, in hopes that three individuals would respond favorably and would be willing to partake in the interview. Out of the 128 individuals, ten of them responded indicating that they would be interested in the interview. An email was also sent to Group B on behalf of the researcher. That email was sent to 253 individuals via email, in hopes that three individuals would respond favorably and would be willing to partake in the interview. Out of the 253 non-completers, nine of them responded indicating that they would be interested in the interview. Because the researcher was only looking for the first three respondents from each group, the first three individuals from each group to respond were the first three contacted to set up an interview. The researcher approached the selection of participants as a first-come-first-served system. Information about the study was provided to all prospective participants (see Appendix A). Those individuals who agreed to participate were asked to complete the informed consent form (see Appendix B). The researcher emailed each participant and scheduled an interview date and time that worked well for both the participant and the researcher.

Of the seven individuals who were interviewed, three were non-completers, and four were graduates. The researcher initially was aiming for six interviews, in hopes of interviewing exactly three non-completers, and exactly three participants who had completed a computer program. However, during the fifth interview, the researcher thought the participant was a non-completer, but learned during the interview that the participant had already graduated from the program. Because the researcher wanted a minimum of three non-completers, the researcher

went back into the pool of email respondents and sought one additional participant from the non-completer group (Group B). Interviews were held during October 2023 and November 2023.

The definition for non-completer was any individual who started attending college courses but did not complete their degree. The length of time the non-completer spent attending college was irrelevant. In other words, if an individual dropped out after the first week of courses or during the last semester of the program, he/she would still fall into the category. The definition for a graduate was any individual that started a computer program, completed the program, and officially graduated by earning the degree.

Demographic information on each of the seven participants was collected during each interview, as part of the process. Data results from demographic information is included in Appendix D. Each participant was assigned pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

The researcher understood that this sample does not necessarily represent views of individuals across the country or even across Minnesota, as the sample is only coming from seven students from a mid-size Midwestern college.

Role of the Researcher

At the time of the study, the researcher had worked in higher education for over 20 years and had worked with many students in helping them achieve their degree. The researcher enjoyed the daily challenge of motivating students and helping them succeed in various labs. The researcher also enjoyed staying in touch with graduates to hear about how well their career flourishes in the field after graduation. The researcher wanted to look at the barriers that have impacted these students from completing their degree. Additionally, the researcher was interested in discovering themes of persistence to better serve incoming students. The researcher will be able to share this information with his employer and other colleges. The desire to help

future and current college students, and over 20 years of higher education experience provided

perspective and knowledge for the researcher to guide the research questions and design of this

study.

The researcher picked this topic because he strongly believed in the value of education.

He has witnessed first-hand many graduates who have not only found a rewarding career in the

IT field, but who have also gained a personal level of self-confidence by completing their

program. Education opens the door for many individuals to not only increase wages throughout

one's lifetime, but also helps in personal development. (Mandela, 1994) noted:

> "Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the
>
> daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mine worker can become the
>
> head of the mine; that a child of farm workers can become the president of a great nation.
>
> It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person
>
> from another" (p.166)

The researcher's personal educational experiences have been positive and very rewarding. The

researcher believes he would not be where he is today in life if not for his educational

background, and he has spent more than 20 years teaching at the two-year college and

undergraduate level. Specifically, he has devoted the past 21 years to teaching full-time at the

two-year college level. His favorite saying is "Do what you love, so you love what you do." He

shares this expression with everybody he interacts with- in particular, with his students.

Because education and earning various degrees throughout the years have helped the

researcher achieve his pathway to a rewarding job, he thoroughly enjoys the challenge of helping

college students achieve the same future success for themselves. Specifically, the researcher

enjoys teaching, but also getting to know the students, and helping them succeed post-graduation.

Informed Consent

Protection of human subjects participating in research was assured. Participants were made aware that this study was conducted as part of the researcher's doctoral degree program. Once a participant agreed to be part of the interview, they were emailed the informed consent, asked to sign and return to the researcher. Informed consent means that the participants will be fully informed of the purpose and procedures of the study for which consent is sought. Confidentiality was protected through the use of pseudonyms (i.e., Participant A) without the utilization of any identifying information. The choice to participate or withdraw at any time was outlined both verbally and in writing.

Summary

In summary, the researcher was interested in understanding the lived experiences of college students. The research design being used was phenomenology, specifically hermeneutic phenomenology. The researcher hoped to inquire and ask questions about the students' experiences while they were in college and hoped to understand the experiences of these students. The researcher aimed to identify college student success factors and compare the results to the existing literature on the topic. The goal was then to share information learned from this study with both incoming and current college students. An additional goal was to share this with colleges, in hopes that they can use the information to better serve students who may be struggling or in need of services that the college could make available to them. Chapter Four will share the findings of the data collected through phenomenology.

CHAPTER 4. PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

Introduction

Since many students explore college and take multiple courses but are not completing the college degree that they sought, this study attempted to identify factors amongst students who graduated and did not graduate from a two-year computer degree program. The purpose of this study was to identify factors amongst students who graduated and students who did not graduate from a two-year computer degree program. This qualitative study had a research method that was exploratory in nature. This study had an ontological component of relativism and the data derived from the collective stories of those who had experienced it. The following chapter provides a description of the sample, data analysis procedures, and the results are discussed in this chapter.

Description of the Sample

This study focused on the lived experiences of individuals pursuing a degree from a two-year computer degree program. Two sets of participants were sought after to be part of this study. All the participants of the study started their computer program between the fall of 2018 and fall of 2021. The participants who graduated were part of two groups. The first group (Group A) consisted of prospective participants who were enrolled in a computer program during fall 2018 and fall 2021, who had graduated. The second group (Group B) consisted of prospective participants who were enrolled in a computer program during fall 2018 and fall 2021 and had not completed their program (non-completers). Table 3 gives additional information about the gender and ethnicity of the participants.

Table 3

Participant Gender and Ethnicity

Name*	Gender	Ethnicity
Participant A	Male	White
Participant B	Male	White
Participant C	Male	White
Participant D	Female	White
Participant E	Male	White
Participant F	Male	Asian
Participant G	Male	White

*pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of participants.

Data Analysis Procedures

The primary research question was: What are college non-completers and college graduates' perspectives on factors that led to their success or failure in completing their two-year college degree? The sub-questions were:

RQ1a: Of the factors identified, which ones are internal factors and which ones are external factors?

RQ1b: What resources are identified that can help students who are struggling to graduate?

The researcher conducted all interviews on campus. Three of the participants opted for an in-person interview and four of the participants decided to do the interview remotely via Zoom. Regardless of which route the participant chose, all seven interviews were recorded with Zoom. Participants had the option to choose the date, time, and location where they felt the most comfortable for conversation. One hour was set up for each interview and the actual duration

ranged from 35 minutes to 55 minutes. With Zoom, audio and video recordings were created for each interview.

After the seven interviews were completed, the researcher used the software program NVivo to create preliminary meaning units (codes) that the researcher included from chapter two. These deductive codes helped create the beginning of the initial codes for the coding process of this study. The researcher then followed the six steps outlined in chapter three.

Step 1- Read the entire transcript and take out unnecessary language.

This was the first step in the data analysis process. The purpose of this step was to understand each of the participant's story by reading the transcript. The transcript was automatically created using the transcribing feature within Zoom. The transcription feature did an overall good job with picking up the words used by both the participant and the researcher. However, the researcher did go into each transcript to complete edits and remove unnecessary language (you know, um, etc).

Member checking with the participants was used to address the validity of the transcripts of the participants. After the seven interviews were completed, the researcher emailed each of the participants a copy of their transcript to verify that the transcripts were accurate.

Step 2- Generate Preliminary Meaning Units.

This step allowed the researcher to look at the data and attempt to create preliminary meaning units. Meaning units consist of phrases, words, or paragraphs that bring meaning to a feature or trait of the phenomenon being investigated.

The researcher inputted nine deductive codes that were derived from previous research. The researcher then created and added preliminary meaning units based off transcripts from the participants. In total, there were a combination of 25 codes and preliminary meaning units

created. The researcher created a list of the 22 preliminary meaning units. Some of the

preliminary meaning units included: physical environment, interactions with peers, approachable

instructors, and clubs and activities. Figure 2 is a listing of the final meaning units that were

created. The far-right column encompasses the 22 preliminary meaning units.

Step 3- Generate Final Meaning Units for each interview/survey question.

The researcher looked at the preliminary meaning units that were created, and from that

information, created final meaning units. The Final Meaning Units (or themes) were derived

from the stories shared by the participants. The researcher attempted to understand each of the

participants' journey while taking classes and attempting to complete their college degree. Figure

2 shows the seven Final Meaning Units in the center column.

Figure 2

Final Meaning Units

Research Sub-Question	Final Meaning Unit (Theme)	Preliminary Meaning Unit
Internal vs External factors	Sense of belonging	Physical environment
		Interactions with peers
		Approachable instructors
		Clubs and activities
	Sense of purpose	Not liking current job
		Working in the field
		Gaining a valuable skill
	Self-discipline and self-drive	Time management
		Internal motivation
	Issues/obstacles	Personal issues
		Family issues
		Work issues
	Focus on graduation	Overcoming obstacles (grit)
		Exernal motivation
	Outside support	Family
		Work flexiblility
		College resources
Resources to help students who are struggling	Importance of faculty	Interactions with faculty
		Small group work
		Course content
		Aproachability of faculty
		Hands-on approach

Step 4- Synthesize Final Meaning Units into Situated Narratives under each interview/survey question.

This step included having the researcher look back on each of the participant's answers and organizing each response to specific interview questions. Direct quotes from the interviews were used to fit into each interview question and the meanings of each narrative became highlighted.

Step 5- Synthesize Situated Narratives into General Narratives, integrating all major themes of participants.

The researcher used the situated narratives of the participants and created general narratives while attempting to create a general description of all the participant's narratives. The researcher wanted to emphasize or highlight the meanings of the participants' experiences from the situated narratives.

Step 6- Generate General Description.

The researcher used situated narratives to create general narratives. The goal was to highlight all the participants' meanings of their experiences by organizing the data from the situated narratives.

Results

Research Question One: What are college non-completers and college graduates' perspectives on factors that led to their success or failure in completing their two-year college degree?

Theme 1. Sense of belonging.

Each of the seven participants were asked if they felt like they belonged while they were in college. All seven participants said yes, they felt that they belonged, and each gave a few hints

or reasons as to why they felt like they belonged. Participant A (non-completer) said having classes with large numbers of students helped. He felt like he was not the target of attention. He had many positive interactions and felt that everyone was helpful. He said, "I don't think I really had any negative interactions or anything bad to say. I thought everybody was pretty friendly, pretty helpful." Participant B (non-completer) also mentioned that it was helpful to have many different ages of people in school. He stated, "I definitely wouldn't say that I didn't feel like I felt like I belonged. I mean, I think it's a different sense of belonging there, because of all the different kind of sub-categories of people there. I mean, you'll have young people. You'll have middle-aged people. You'll have old people. You'll have young kids, like it's kind of a mixed bag. So that's a weird kind of core group of people to like mesh with. And you know, have a good, I guess, flow, or whatever you want to call it."

Starting a program and being in the first year can be a bit intimidating and that may lead to feeling like you do not belong. Also, because the computer programs consist of mostly males, some females may feel outnumbered within the program. Participant D (completer) said she felt like she belonged, but there were times it was a bit intimidating. She stated, "I think a lot of it was intimidating coming into a bunch of classes where it was all guys at first, and then I got to know everybody, and it was everybody was very, very nice, but it's kind of intimidating when you need to go and like, ask a teacher a question, and it's a room full of guys. And then they all just walk in, and they're just kind of staring."

All seven participants gave reasons as to why they felt that they belonged. Reasons included approachable instructors, the positive peer interactions that they experienced, and a welcoming physical environment with equipment.

Subtheme 2. Approachable instructors.

When Participant B was asked about sense of belonging, he said, "It was really nice to get back into kind of that school experience. I think, in general, the student-feel of the school was great. I mean, I had zero issues with it. The staffing and the teachers were fantastic. I definitely made friends while I was there for sure". In terms of welcoming and warm, students and teachers were considered by a few of the participants as being both, and that helped with their sense of belonging. Participant B stated," Everybody was super welcoming, including the instructors. My instructors were all very nice. The program had great instructors. It's so much the teachers and the classmates. Our classmates all work together as groups and everything. We all participated in group activities in our networking classes, and we all get to know each other and work with each other really well." Some participants associated the warmness and the extra lab time given by instructors as helping with their sense of belonging. Participant E noted, "You know, I didn't feel like I didn't belong or anything else. Just like, you know, teachers were accepting. They're like, Oh, yeah, you know if you need time to come into the labs and such they'll open their doors."

Welcoming and approachable instructors were mentioned by many of the participants as important factors. The course material and equipment used in the computer programs can be intimidating to use and figure out. Participants noted that they appreciated the extra effort of instructors to open and unlock doors if participants needed extra time on labs.

Subtheme 3. Clubs and activities.

Since returning from the pandemic, the college has added many extra-curricular clubs and activities for the students to be involved with while on campus. The goal of the activities and clubs is to get students together to foster relationships and help with their sense of belonging while being a student. Some students take advantage of those clubs, and others would like to, but can't or aren't able to. Out of the seven participants, only one participant mentioned being

involved with clubs and activities while in school. Most participants had busy schedules and did not feel that they had time to be part of anything outside of school and work. Participant G (non-completer) stated, "I mean, I'm not involved in any of the outside stuff, you know. And I kind of wish I was younger and wasn't working full-time, and probably I would take part in some of that stuff."

Although only one participant mentioned being part of an official club or activity on campus, all seven participants shared information about activities that they are part of outside of school clubs and activities. All participants talked about some form of hobby or activity that they do outside of school. However, only one participant mentioned being part of an official school club and activity.

Theme 2. Sense of purpose.

When asked, all the participants had a great story and reason for enrolling in a computer program and each had a solid reason as to why they chose to attend this college. Because each participant had a good reason for starting and enrolling, all participants did well in their program at the start. The participants that continued to do well in the program and succeed were the individuals who had a strong reasoning for being in the program, and they understood the value of the material being learned. Some of the reasons that were reflected in the interviews included the following - not liking their current job, currently working in the field and, how important it is to gain some skill in life. Participants that understood why they were taking classes and learning the material were more successful with the coursework and had a more enjoyable time while in college.

Two of the three non-completers seemed to lack a sense of purpose as to why they were enrolled in their computer program. Participant A mentioned that he wasn't sure what he wanted

to do after high school, and although he knew he should go to college, he picked a two-year

school (as opposed to a four-year school) because of the cost. He did not know exactly what he

wanted to do. Participant B also didn't know what he wanted to do when he started college, and

he picked the college because of physical proximity to where he lived. The third non-completer,

Participant G, did have a great sense of purpose, as he is still working on completing his degree,

and he is eager to be working in the IT field soon.

Subtheme 1. Not liking current job.

A few of the participants shared that they were not happy in their current job or current

position at work. Some of the reasons they were not happy at their current job included that they

weren't making much money, they were bored, they weren't being challenged, or they reached

the maximum pay at that job. Participant G explained how he had been at his current job for

many years but wasn't getting anywhere with it. He was getting burned out with his entry-level

office job. He stated, "This is stupid. I'm wasting my potential." He went on to say "It's not

enjoyable work, at least to me. There wasn't a whole lot of room to move up unless you wanted

to manage a lot of people". Participant F had been doing many different jobs throughout the

years. He had been in his current job for 10 years, and he wasn't happy there. He hated it. He

said that when he got to work, he wished he had an IT job, because he would be a lot happier.

Both participants mentioned that they wished they had started taking classes earlier, because

neither enjoyed their jobs.

Subtheme 2. Working in the field.

A few participants noted that their current IT job made them realize the value of what

they were learning. In some cases, the participant had an entry-level IT job, such as customer

service position, or Tier 1 support position, and they were hoping to move up into a higher IT

position. The best way to move up in the field is to learn more material about computer languages, the network, or troubleshooting to support IT issues. The more knowledge of the material, the quicker individuals move up within IT. Participant F had been working for a year in the field and he really appreciated what he was learning with both the content and the hands-on approach. He noted, "I have so much experience with these different devices compared to others who have possibly four years of a degree, and they have never even touched a piece of equipment or worked on an actual piece of equipment." When asked what motivated him while in college, he said it was getting his IT job while he was in school. He had a sense of purpose for learning the material because he was already working in the field, and he recognized the value of this education that he was receiving.

Subtheme 3. Gaining a valuable skill.

Many of the participants referenced the material being learned as a very important reasoning as to why they were at this college and why they were not at a traditional four-year university. Some participants mentioned during the interview that they had tried the four-year university route prior to attending this college. Many stated that the traditional way of learning by sitting in classrooms and being part of the lecture format was not for them. It hadn't worked for them in the past. They wanted and needed something "hands-on", and they wanted the valuable skill of installing, configuring, and troubleshooting devices on a computer network. Participant D bartended while taking classes. She was motivated by words from her dad. She said, "It was my dad who pushed me a lot. Do your school and get done with it. You need something, whether it be a two-year or four-year. You need to have some type of achievement beyond high school, whether it be a trade as an electrician or a welder, or something like that. You need to have some type of skill."

Theme 3. Self-discipline and being self-driven.

Self-discipline revolves around activating a habit and resisting distractions. Being self-driven has more to do with the motivation behind one's actions. The combination of these two pieces seems to have a profound impact on the ability to succeed in college. During the interviews, many participants went into detail about how busy their lives were while in college. They referenced their schedules as many of them took a full credit load and worked part-time or full time. Four of the seven participants ranked time management as one of their top two success factors while they were taking classes. In addition to that, one of the participants was raising a one-year-old child. Schedules were busy and time management and internal motivation were referenced numerous times. Self-discipline and being self-driven were prevalent, especially among the four completers. Most participants referenced that having support from family and friends was very helpful in being self-driven to complete the program.

Subtheme 1. Time management.

Time management was a big part of each participant's interview. The researcher did not ask how or where the participants learned time management, but it was apparent, and it was a factor. When the researcher asked what a typical day was like, five of the participants gave an answer that included a regimented breakdown of what typical days were like during the week and the weekends. They stressed how important it was to have such a schedule and follow it.

Two of the participants noted that they worked because they "wanted to" and felt that it was beneficial to occupy their time while taking classes. One of the participants noted that having a part-time job actually helped with time management. If he didn't have a part-time job, he felt he would get lazy. Participant C noted, "I was working a lot anywhere from 25 to 30 hours a week, which took up a lot of my time. And then my mainly other hobbies were like

playing with video games, tinkering with computers and building computers. I would actually say it's beneficial to be working, and to almost have less time. I tend to get lazier the more free time I have." Another participant noted that he didn't have to work, but he worked because he enjoyed the work. Participant E stated, "I was working because I enjoyed the work, not because I needed to. I did not need to work at that time. Yeah, I enjoyed doing the work that I had. In addition to the learning that I did here, I kept my free time occupied, and I still had enough time at the end of the day to decompress and enjoy myself."

Subtheme 2. Internal motivation.

Most of the participants picked their computer degree because they were gamers, or felt that they were good with computers, or really wanted to know and understand how the Internet worked. This internal motivation of wanting to understand how something worked played a big role in motivation. Participants shared that the topic that they were studying meant a lot to them and that naturally made them want to know and learn more. It was a natural fit. Participant A said, "I've always been sort of computer inclined. I was always a PC gamer, so I kind of had a leaning towards that. And I was like, oh, well, you know, why don't I look into doing something with computers, and the networking side of it kind of caught my eye. It was stuff I didn't really know anything about. I wanted to learn something that I felt like I sort of had a strength in." Participant G said, "I came to an open house. I liked the vibe I got. I liked the programs that were offered and being able to start part-time and at night was huge. I would like to have something valuable to an employer that gets me a little bit more money, and is fun to do, if I can play with computers all day." Participant D stated, "I liked learning how the Internet worked itself". Participant F shared how he had been playing around with computers for over 30 years, and he was motivated once he finally started taking classes and learning about computers and networks.

Theme 4. Lack of issues/obstacles.

During the interview, the researcher asked each participant about any issues/obstacles that they experienced while in college that prevented them from doing well. The researcher was expecting a list of obstacles ranging from personal issues, family issues, to work issues that may have gotten in the way while in school. The researcher was shocked and surprised to hear that six of the seven stated that they did not have any issues or obstacles that got in the way of pursuing their computer degree. The researcher believes that participants occasionally had small issues that came up from time-to-time, but nothing too serious or worth mentioning during the interview.

Issues and obstacles are a common theme among college dropouts throughout the nation. The researcher understands that results from this study may not encompass what other studies reflect. There were three non-completers in this study, and only one of them shared personal obstacles that he experienced. Six of the seven participants did not feel that they experienced any issues or obstacles while in college.

Theme 5. Focus on graduation.

Most of the participants had a focus on graduation. They prioritized school and went into detail about how they succeeded. They went into detail about what they felt was needed to succeed. Participants shared many stories about their busy lives and crazy schedules. But they each had graduation as a priority and that focus was helpful. One of the participants shared how he was getting burned out toward the end of the degree, and he mentioned how important it was to stay dedicated and keep motivated. Regarding Participant C's response to struggling, he stated, "I would say, just staying almost dedicated and keeping that motivation throughout the entirety of the degree, especially at the end. Definitely, as you get closer, you just kind of want to

be done. And, you just want to finish. That was something I struggled with, especially in the last semester I was already basically checking out. I was already working full-time. I had my job and everything like that, so I felt that I was done. But I didn't have my degree yet. So just staying focused and staying motivated until the end of the degree, until you have the piece of paper." Each of the four completers mentioned how important it was to keep moving forward, even when things were not always going as planned. Focusing on graduation was a big part of the journey.

Subtheme 1. Grit.

Participants shared how they needed courage to figure out ways to work with an instructor that they weren't fond of, or how they really had to look for answers to a lab or assignment. Participants shared how they completed their labs and sought answers with the help of friends or by using the Internet. Participant C stated, "I was probably mainly just on my own researching and kind of figuring things out on my own. Really, anybody can do it with the right motivation and dedication."

Subtheme 2. External Motivation.

Many of the participants were able to stay focused on the coursework and graduation because of various external motivations. Participant A commented that he was hoping for a better paycheck, and he wanted to be doing something that he liked. Participant B mentioned that some of his teachers were strong motivators, and his student advisor was phenomenal. He found his student advisor's presence to be motivating for him. Participant B stated, "FIRSTNAME was phenomenal. She was my student advisor. You could definitely tell she cares a lot." Participant C said his external motivation was buying a house. He looked forward to earning his degree and buying a house. Participant D stated how her dad was motivational, as he pushed her a lot. Participant F stated his girlfriend was pushing him, and he felt that was motivational. Participant

G already had a good paying job. But he was motivated by someday having a job that he enjoys. With referencing his current job, he stated, "The Money's great, but I would love to enjoy what I do".

Theme 6. Outside Support.

The ability for the participants to have access to outside support was a common theme. The students had schedules that changed from semester to semester. In other words, for some semesters, they might have four-day classes and two-night classes. The following semester they might have two-day classes and three-night classes. To add to the complexity of the schedule, each semester had different days of the week that classes were offered. Having a supportive family and flexible work schedule allowed participants to easily adapt to the dynamic course schedules that each experienced. In addition, school resources were available to participants who needed various help with services such as mental health, counselors, and emergency funds.

Subtheme 1. Family.

Participants shared stories of how important it was to have family available during their time in college. Many times, throughout the interview, the family was noted for being a strong advocate and supporter of the participant. Participant F ran into daycare issues at times, but he was determined to find a way to get to class. It helped that his family was very supportive and helped motivate him by watching his one-year-old in the evening if needed. He stated, "I think for me, I wasn't the typical student, just because, while attending, I had a, like a baby, like a one-year-old. I have family members that live close too, so they were able to babysit at certain times during the day, like evenings. So, it helped with the night courses." Outside support from family members was very helpful.

Subtheme 2. Work flexibility.

A few participants noted that if their employer wasn't flexible with their work schedules, that would have been stressful. The participants mentioned that each semester their course schedule would change, and that their employer would work around their school schedule. Participant C mentioned that his employer would ask him what his school schedule was going to be, and that he got to pick his work schedule. Participant D noted, "The last year I got a job, and my job was very flexible with being able to go into work, work from home and then being able to come to class during the times, and just clock out for that period. If I had to clock in and do something while I was at school, they were more than willing to accommodate any type of schedule that I that they needed to have me employed." Participant G noted that when he had a course schedule for the following semester that was different from the previous semester, he approached his manager. His manager was very supportive of the new/updated schedule and found a way to keep him employed. In one case, he ended up working on weekends instead of working during the week (which was new to him). He mentioned that he was very appreciative of his manager, and how accommodating his manager was.

Subtheme 3. College resources.

The college has many resources that are available to students who are struggling. Resources include student advisors, counselors, mental health counselors, and access to emergency funds. Of the seven participants, only one participant talked about how important his student advisor was. Although utilizing school resources was not mentioned in detail by participants in this interview, the researcher felt it was important to include them in the paper because school resources are an important resource for students.

All seven participants were asked if they ever sought support while in college. The follow-up question was then asked where they got support from while at this college. The

researcher read five areas that are common when looking for support. The areas included within the department, school-wide, instructors, peers or other students, and family members. A few participants mentioned that they would just ask instructors for clarification on homework and assignments. But that was it. The only participant who sought support was Participant B. He found it very beneficial to talk with the college-wide student advisor for the computer department when he was struggling.

Theme 7. Importance of faculty.

Participants noted that faculty have a profound role in shaping the experiences of students. During the interview, all participants talked about their experiences with faculty while they were taking courses.

Subtheme 1. Interactions with faculty.

All the participants noted interactions with faculty at some point during the interview. They stressed how those positive interactions made their coursework seem worthwhile and a few of the participants noted that the positive interactions were motivational to the student. Two of the participants noted both positive interactions and negative interactions with faculty. Participant A stated, "There was one instructor in particular that at the beginning, I didn't care for". Participant B stated, "I had a couple of really kind (instructors) that stood out to me as great teachers. There was one that I had some issues with. I definitely struggled with her." Participant C recalled how during COVID he was taking a class via Zoom and when he got up and went to the restroom, he was kicked out of the Zoom session. It turns out the instructor thought that the student was not involved, so she booted him out of the Zoom session. When the student tried to re-join the Zoom call, he was not allowed, and that really angered the student. He went on to say

how frustrated he was and that he was looking forward to not taking another class with that instructor.

All participants in this study had many positive interactions with faculty. In addition, two of the seven participants shared the negative experiences they had encountered with instructors. Those two participants fondly remember the instructor, and the negative situation experienced with that instructor.

Subtheme 2. Course delivery.

Course delivery was a common theme among the participants. Many participants mentioned that the reason they were at a technical college was for the "hands-on" experience. They also noted that when faculty do their best to make the content interesting and exciting, it makes a big difference in their learning. Participant E stated, "Most of my classes in my first and second semester were online, and that made it rather difficult for me to get said hands-on experience. That hands-on experience made it a lot easier for me to learn concepts and strategies and things like that. Participant G talked about some of the classes that he took. In referencing a few of his previous classes that he had already taken, he stated, "I wish I could take those classes with a more hands-on instructor." Instructors have a choice in how they want to deliver their classes. Prior to COVID, classes were delivered in a "100% in-person" format or a web-enhanced format. Since COVID, many of the computer classes are delivered in many different delivery methods including: "100% in-person", web-enhanced, online asynchronous, online synchronous, and HyFlex.

Reflection

Two of the most crucial pieces the researcher learned about the participants were:

- How important a sense of purpose is (and)

- How important faculty are to creating the student experience.

Students who possess a sense of purpose seem to have the ability to finish their degree. The researcher was a bit surprised that not all participants kept a strong sense of purpose while enrolled. Some of the participants enrolled in their respectable computer program without really knowing what they would be learning and what a computer career was like. The good news is that although some of the participants did not know the specifics about the major, they knew they should work on getting a degree, specifically a technical degree, and that is why they were enrolled. The thought of a four-year degree did not interest them because of the financial resources needed, or the commitment of completing a four-year degree, but they sensed the value of a two-year degree. They felt that a two-year degree would provide an opportunity for them, so that is why they were enrolled. The unfortunate thing is, that once some students experienced life changes (job loss, personal issues, etc.), students who did not start with a strong sense of purpose, eventually did not complete their intended program.

As mentioned earlier, faculty members play a very important part in creating a positive experience for students. Obviously, faculty do not have much control over the personal obstacles or issues that some students experience. However, faculty do play a role in helping to create a positive environment for the students in the classroom. Additionally, if faculty appear approachable to students, students might be more likely to reach out, when they are experiencing any problems with course material, assignments, or issues related outside the classroom.

Summary

The preceding chapter provided an introduction, description of the sample, then covered data analysis procedures, and lastly provided the results of the study. Seven participants (four

completers and three non-completers) shared their story along with their perceptions on what they felt were success factors amongst college students. They shared personal stories about how they navigated through their daily lives while taking courses and attempting to complete a computer degree. The researcher was reminded about how important a sense of belonging is to college students and how important faculty-student interactions are to student success.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Discussion of Findings

The need for this study arose directly from the research problem of the number of students who drop out or do not finish a college degree. The purpose of this study was to identify reasons or factors that lead to students not completing their college degree. The literature review encompassed many of the common reasons or factors as to why students do not complete their degree. The sample size and location included seven participants from a mid-size Midwestern college. Interviews with each of the seven participants were conducted for the data collection method. This study used hermeneutic phenomenology as the form of methodology for the research. This study aimed to collect rich data about each of the seven participants and learn about their lived experiences while enrolled in college courses.

The theoretical orientation for this research study followed key points from Vincent Tinto's college student departure model (1993). This study was designed to add to the existing literature on the topic. The significance of this study is that information from this study can be shared with both incoming and current college students. It would be beneficial for incoming and current college students to know what the success factors were of previous students, especially with understanding how important a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose are to completing a degree. Additionally, the information could be shared with colleges, in hopes that they can use the information to better serve students who may be struggling or in need of services that the college could make available to them.

The primary research question was: What are college non-completers and college graduates' perspectives on factors that led to their success or failure in completing their two-year college degree? The sub-questions were:

RQ1a: Of the factors identified, which ones are internal factors and which ones are external factors?

RQ1b: What resources are identified that can help students who are struggling to graduate?

The following sections list and discuss each of the seven themes presented in chapter four. The themes outlined in chapter four are compared to the existing literature.

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging can be explained and defined using a few models. Tinto's Model (1993) suggested that students will remain in college if they become integrated within the institution in two dimensions: academic and social. Academic integration occurs when students become attached to the intellectual life of the college and develop an interest in learning. Social integration occurs when students create relationships and connections outside the classroom. This study asked each of the participants about their institutional experiences while on campus. Experiences with instructors constitutes one part of sense of belonging and falls under social integration. Each of the seven participants shared that they had positive experiences with their instructors. Another aspect of sense of belonging refers to peer group interactions. Many of the participants shared stories of group work, and working with each other, and how those experiences were positive. One of the participants mentioned that computer students tend to be on the shy side, and a bit more kept to themselves. Participant C stated, "As for peers and

everything like that, it was a little bit awkward, I would say. But, overall, everybody's willing to work with each other and help each other out more or less. So, it was like, very good to have people to lean on in case your friends fall through, or anything like that. At the end of the day, I did know that I could ask some other classmates for help." None of the participants shared any bad or negative experiences when given group work. Two of the participants stated that they wished that instructors would create more group work, so that classmates would get to know each other better. The existing literature on sense of belonging states how important it is for students to feel that they belong while in college. Gillen-O'Neel (2019) stated that a sense of belonging, and engagement, were linked at the person level: students who typically had a higher sense of belonging than their peers tended to also have higher emotional and behavioral engagement in college. This sense of belonging is very important for any college student. Additionally, some of the literature explains how sense of belonging is even more important for First Generation College Students (FGCS). Four of the seven participants in this study identified as FGCS. Gillen-O'Neel (2019) also suggested that sense of belonging is an important resource for maintaining student engagement among all students, but especially among FGCS.

Seeking out and using campus resources is an important component to a sense of belonging. In other words, those who do not feel like they belong, are less likely to seek out campus resources. In both experimental (Yeager et al., 2016) and correlational (Strayhorn, 2012) studies, researchers have found that students who feel they belong are able to seek out and use campus resources to a greater extent, furthering their success. This study consisted of seven participants who all experienced a sense of belonging. However, only one of the participants sought help from a student advisor (a campus resource), when needed. The other six participants

stated that they never sought any of the other campus resources, but they also inferred that they did not need any of the campus resources.

Since returning to the classroom from COVID, the college has added many new student groups on campus, in an effort to foster a sense of community and sense of belonging among the students. At the college, fiscal year 2023 saw a 338% increase over fiscal year 2022 in student life-sponsored events. These events included outside school activities. Ahn and Davis (2019) stated that universities need to develop initiatives which encourage students' engagement with geographical, natural, and cultural surroundings such as participating in local community events and volunteering. Only one of the participants in this study engaged in a school organization. Although six of the participants in this study were not part of school organizations, many of the participants shared information about hobbies and activities that they were a part of outside the college. Activities outside of college included- video gaming, bell ringing, and down-hill skiing,

Won et al. (2017) claimed that students who felt more accepted and supported by a peer group tended to report greater use of study groups or other peer-based strategies for learning. Peer groups can have many benefits, especially if they are formed early in the college experience. During the interviews, the researcher learned about another way that some students are staying connected with each other while taking college classes. That method is by using a service called Discord. Discord is a popular communication platform that some students use outside of the classroom to communicate. Using this platform, students create a channel and post questions and answers with other students about course content. Students can share their screens with each other and collaborate on course material. Although it is not a formal Learning Management System (LMS), it has many capabilities and features like screen sharing, and it allows peer groups to collaborate.

Findings from this study line up with the current literature about how important a sense of belonging is. The existing literature stresses how important college activities and organizations are to creating a sense of belonging. With this study, the participants all felt like they had a sense of belonging, although only one participant was involved with college activities and organizations.

Sense of Purpose

Five of the seven participants portrayed a strong sense of purpose during the interview. The five participants had a strong understanding as to why they were enrolled in college, and they were motivated to be there. Zimmerman (2000) claimed when students are motivated to learn about a topic they are apt to engage in activities they believe will help them learn, such as attend carefully to the instruction, mentally organize and rehearse the material to be learned, take notes to facilitate subsequent studying, check their level of understanding, and ask for help when they do not understand the material. The five participants who had a strong sense of purpose were motivated individuals who engaged in activities that they believed would help them learn and they were not afraid to ask for help when they did not understand the material. When participants have a strong reasoning or sense of purpose as to why they are in college and taking classes, they are motivated to complete the coursework. Participant E mentioned "There's a high chance of me getting a job after this, having that kind of reassurance was good." When students know why they are taking classes and have a sense of purpose, the commitment level is higher. This aligns closely with many studies on sense of belonging. Students with stronger sense of purpose, and especially with higher scores in altruistic purpose reported stronger degree commitment (Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018). When the five participants were asked

why they were enrolled in the program, their answers included- hopefully getting a better job, learning some type of skill, working with computers, and having an enjoyable job working with computers. Participant G stated, "I mean, the money's great (referring to his current non-IT job), but I would love to enjoy what I do." Results from this study align closely with existing literature, specifically the results from Zimmerman (2000) and Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart (2018).

Self-Discipline & Being Self-Driven

The researcher believes self-discipline revolves around activating a habit and resisting distractions. Being self-driven has a lot to do with the motivation behind one's actions. The combination of these two pieces has a profound impact on the ability to succeed in college.

Much of the existing literature explores how important it is for students to manage their time wisely. If students are able to manage their time wisely, it correlates to being self-driven When students were living at home in high school, most students experienced a structured schedule. With the start of college, students do not have as structured of a schedule as they once had. This life change tests each student's ability to manage their time in the most productive manner. During the interviews, all seven participants shared what a typical day was like while in college. Six of the seven participants needed to work (part-time or full-time) while taking classes, so their schedules were full with many items. This emphasized how important the skill of time management is. The one participant who did not need to work, but chose to work, did it because it kept his free time occupied. Filling that time slot for work was important to him. The existing literature emphasizes how important time management is to meet assignment deadlines, attend class, and study. All these need to be factored into a student's schedule in order to remain

in good academic standing and achieve educational goals. Cho & Heron (2015) shared how setting goals, planning ahead, and monitoring one's learning are tactics used by students to regulate their learning and stay on track with assignments. Each of the seven participants seemed to understand how important time management was and each of them seemed to have no problem with implementing time management.

Internal motivation is a big piece of college success. Motivation has been conceptualized in varied ways, including inner forces, enduring traits, behavioral response to stimuli, and sets of beliefs and affects (Schunk et al., 2008). Per the existing literature, there are many factors that affect internal motivation. One of the factors revolves around faculty-student interaction. Komarraju et al. (2010) found that students feeling alienated and distant from faculty members is associated with experiencing a lack of motivation. The researcher strongly feels that faculty-student interactions are an important component of internal motivation.

The researcher strongly believes that self-discipline and being self-driven can only be attained once time management skills and internal motivation are achieved. While there are many ways to learn time management skills, this study did not focus on obtaining those skills. Future research in this area could include whether time management skills and internal motivation are two fundamental necessary traits needed to have, before one can achieve self-discipline and being self-driven. Regarding internal motivation, there are many factors at play, but the faculty play a part in creating internal motivation for the students in their day-to-day interactions with students.

Lack of Issues/Obstacles

The existing literature outlines how various issues/obstacles, such as financial stress or external commitments can get in the way of someone from completing a degree. Hogan et al.,

(2013) concluded that students with higher stress are more likely to discontinue college. Tinto (1993) stated that external commitments can alter a student's intentions (plans) and goal and institutional commitments throughout the college career. In this study, six of the seven participants stated that they did not have any issues or obstacles that got in the way of completing their degree. However, here is a list of some of the common issues and obstacles that come up within the literature regarding college success: depression, homesickness, being a FCGS, work issues, financial stress, family issues, social issues, and academic preparedness.

Two of the factors mentioned in chapter two included homesickness and being a FGCS. Homesickness was not mentioned by any of the participants. To add to that, when participants were asked what would be (in their opinion) the least important factor in college success, three of the participants chose homesickness. Those three participants did not believe that homesickness should be considered a success factor. During the interview, the researcher learned that most of the participants live and work less than 20 minutes from campus. To add to that, some of the participants picked the college because of the proximity to home. The researcher believes in the current literature of homesickness, and how that can be a factor. However, given this study and the participants not being far from school, homesickness did not appear to be an issue.

As mentioned earlier, four of the participants noted that they were FGCS. According to the literature, FGCS can experience more issues than non-first generation college students (NFGCS). According to Dennis et al., (2015), first-generation college students may be less equipped for college due to poor academic preparation in high school. The literature also references how FGCS are at a disadvantage with college preparation from their parents. Zalaquett (1999) mentioned that parents of first-generation college students lack first-hand knowledge of the college experience, and that these students have a major hurdle to overcome in

navigating the educational system. Although the literature suggests that FGCS are more prone to obstacles to overcome, one of the participants mentioned that being a FGCS could be a benefit. He thought that students might have more motivation to complete their degree if they were coming from a family who had not earned a four-year college degree.

Based on the study's results, the researcher agrees with the literature on FGCS from Dennis et al., (2015) and Zalaquett (1999). Having positive social interaction with peers helps create a sense of belonging. Some FGCS might not experience as many positive social interactions as NFGCS. First-generation students typically lack these social ties that transmit important knowledge about how to be successful in higher education institutions and, as a result, have "inadequate college-related cultural capital" (Ward et al., 2012, p. 106). Students coming from FGCS families may be less equipped for college, or lack sense of belonging, or lack sense of purpose. Additionally, FGCS students could lack support from family members. Results from this study indicate that support from family and friends is imperative to college student success.

Focus on Graduation

The researcher strongly believes that college students need to possess grit and have external motivation to maintain a focus on graduation. The road to graduation can be longer than expected. College life is not just about coursework, labs, and homework. There are many life changes, such as getting acclimated to a new schedule, meeting new people, using time management skills to adjust to new work schedules, and the potential to deal with unexpected issues and obstacles. The important piece for the student is to keep the focus on graduation.

Duckworth et al. (2007) described grit as the ability to approach challenges and face failure while also maintaining stamina to resist defeat. Participants shared many stories about their lived experiences as they focused on completing their degree. When asked if he had ever

sought support during college, Participant C said "no". He shared "Honestly, I was probably mainly just on my own researching and kind of figuring things out on my own. Really, anybody can do it with the right motivation and dedication." Responses from participants in this study align with what the literature says about the importance of grit. People with greater levels of grit are more determined when trying to overcome obstacles (Arslan et al., 2013). There is no doubt that students will encounter bumps or unexpected problems as they progress through college. But what is most important is that they do not feel defeated when experiencing those bumps or unexpected problems.

The literature on motivation lines up with many of the responses from participants in this study. Four of the seven completers all gave examples of having external motivation while in college. Participant C talked about how important it was for him to stay strong and keep going at times because his external motivation was buying a house. Participant D said she was externally motivated by her dad, who told her that she needs to have some type of skill beyond high school. Participant E said his motivation was having a high chance of getting a job after college. Participant F said that his external motivation was his girlfriend. Nobody was really pushing him, but his girlfriend.

The researcher feels that motivation is a key component to college success. It helps students to stay focused on their graduation. Furthermore, it is important to break down motivation into both internal motivation and external motivation. Internal motivation is a big component, and ideally, every college student entering college would have that going into a program of study. However, colleges have little control over the internal motivation of students. But colleges can play a part in external motivation for students. External motivation is a

combination of many things, including social groups, good instructors, and making the classroom experience fun so that students have a genuine interest in the course content.

The researcher strongly agrees with the literature from Wright (2012). Wright emphasizes six areas why students are not motivated to perform. The researcher believes in the importance of all six areas that Wright emphasizes. Specifically, results from this study directly align with each of these three areas of research by Wright (2012). These three areas include-

- Classroom instruction and learning activities do not engage them.

- Failure to see an adequate pay-off to doing the assigned work, such as praise, access to rewards, or other short-term "pay-off" to encourage them to apply greater effort.

- Lack of positive relationship with the teacher.

Outside Support

As mentioned previously, only one of the participants sought support from the college. He mentioned how important it was for him to be able to connect with his student advisor when he needed help. That support from his student advisor helped him significantly. All past and current literature mentions how important it is for students to have support from the college when needed. Common support areas at a college include student services, disability services, financial aid services, student advisors, and counselors. The researcher was surprised that only one participant out of the seven sought support from any college resources.

But support can come from many places, not just an official department or area at a college. The literature mentions how important it is for college students to have support from other places such as family members and friends. In particular, FGCS may need support from the college as it may be difficult for those students to get support from family and friends. House et al., (2019) mentioned that FGCS experience the same challenges as non-first-generation students

(NFGCS), but they also face their own unique stressors, such as a lack of academic preparation, absence of support from family and friends, and difficult cultural transitions.

Another area of support experienced by most of the participants was work flexibility. Each semester the participant's class schedule could vary. In other words, one semester, the student might have more day classes than evening classes. In another semester, a student might take more night classes than day classes. Given that six of the seven participants needed to work (at least part-time), support from a work schedule, or a manager, is very important.

Outside of education, many successful people have individuals that they can talk to and get support from when needed. Being a college student and having someone to talk to is no different. Individuals for college students to talk to include family, friends, or even co-workers. Sometimes, just making conversation with someone who has experienced the same problem or scenario is very helpful to an individual. Connections or conversations with trusted individuals can go a long way towards helping someone who is going through a tough time. Counselors, therapists, and life coaches also fall into this category.

The researcher strongly believes in the literature regarding outside support. Trockel et al. (2000) reported that college life can be stressful and alter the life experience of a student; it is, therefore, vital to be in the company of family and friends while being in college. Results from this study strongly support that statement.

Importance of Faculty

Faculty have quite an impact on the classroom environment and how the students engage with each other and with the course material. During the interviews, each of the seven participants shared that they experienced positive interactions with faculty and staff. Tinto's model (1993) argues that experiences within the institution, primarily those arising out of

interactions between the individual and other members of the colleges, student, staff, and faculty, are centrally related to further continuance in the institution. Trolian et al. (2016) conducted a study, and the findings show that several forms of student-faculty interaction, such as quality of faculty contact, frequency of faculty contact, research with faculty, personal discussion with faculty, and out-of-class interactions with faculty, have a positive influence on academic motivation.

The researcher strongly believes in the existing literature about the importance of faculty. Faculty have a lot of autonomy in the classroom. Faculty can decide how they want to present the material, and it is their decision with how interactive they would like to be with the class. As we know, some faculty go out of their way to do the best they can to help with student learning, while others are simply there to fulfill their work obligation or requirement. Komarraju et al., (2010) reported that students who perceive their faculty members as being approachable, respectful, and available for frequent interactions outside the classroom are more likely to report being confident of their academic skills and being motivated, both intrinsically and extrinsically. During a semester class, students can sense the vibe of the instructor. In other words, many students can tell if their instructor is enjoying their time in the classroom. It is not an official rule that instructors must enjoy their job to come to work each day; but when instructors enjoy being present, it can make the students want to be there. Even if, at times, the content is not always the most enjoyable or interesting.

Implications

Tinto's Model (1993) discusses factors that come into play for an incoming college student. Although academic preparedness is part of the model, that is not the only component of the model. The bigger piece to understanding college success deals with how students interact

with the institution. There is an external environment that is part of the institution, and each student experiences the environment differently. Tinto (1993) reminds us that students are involved with the institution at the academic and social level.

The findings in this study connect back to many things that Tinto (1993) discussed in his model. Tinto wrote about how important social interaction is within the college, and how that leads to a sense of belonging. College students interact more than just with their instructors. The social context of peer groups and feeling like they belong on campus plays an important part in their college success.

Findings from this study relate to many of the prior research discussed in chapter two. Chapter two focused on nine factors that the researcher felt were some of the most important components to college success. As it turns out, some of those factors were very strong, and helped form some of the themes of this research. As discussed in chapter four sense of belonging (pp 51-54), motivation (p 57), time management (p 57), and grit (p 60) were the most common factors shared among the participants. Other factors, as discussed in chapter four, such as homesickness (p 74) and FGCS (p 74) were not factors that were talked much about by the participants in the study. Results from this study drive the need to explore and research areas including student motivation, faculty-student interactions, student issues/obstacles, and the "hands-on" approach traditionally used in technical education. Additionally, results from this study advance the researcher's knowledge of Tinto's model (1993).

Like all studies, this study has some limitations. As mentioned previously, the study relied on participants giving accurate perceptions and accurate stories that go back as far as five years ago. The researcher also knew some of the participants. He hopes that the participants that he had known, felt comfortable giving accurate information. He reminded each of the

participants that he was looking for honest answers and that he did not want participants telling him anything solely because it was something that sounded good or that he thought was favorable to hear.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study aimed to understand success factors of college students using a research design of constructivism. Qualitative research aligns with the constructivist paradigm, in which the ontological perspective is that reality is not objective but rather is created, transformed, and understood by individuals and groups as they interact with the world around them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Based on findings from this study, the researcher has a list of recommendations that he believes are important for future research. Those recommendations include the following:

- Motivation is a big part of college success. Future research should focus on the motivation of college students enrolled in programs. If the motivation is present, are the students more internally motivated or externally motivated to complete their degree? Future research should focus on what truly motivates students in the program.

- Faculty-student interactions appear to be very important. Positive faculty-student interactions tend to create a sense of motivation for students. Future research should focus on those interactions.

- Previous and current literature focuses on various issues/obstacles that college students experience. This study did not find many of the issues/obstacles that some students experience. Future research should focus on learning about issues/obstacles that students are experiencing. Are there newer themes or obstacles that are being overlooked? Are students seeking help or support when needed? Additionally, it would be nice to know how students are working on overcoming those obstacles.

- There are many programs taught in higher education specifically through the "hands on" approach that technical education colleges market and advertise to prospective students. Many of the students at these technical colleges are enrolled in a program at that college specifically because they want the "hands on" experience that is being advertised (and historically being taught in that format). Some programs in technical education colleges have moved away from "100% in the classroom" learning and moved to various online formats. Furthermore, some programs have incorporated more simulation software into the program to replace some of the "hands on" experience. Future research should focus on students coming out of programs which have moved away from traditional "hands on" learning to measure the satisfaction of those students.

Participant Responses

Additionally, the researcher believes that the opinions of what the participants in this study believe are important and should be reported as well. Answers from the participants fall under the two themes. The following is a list of responses from the participants regarding the question - What could the computer department or the college do differently to help students?

Equipment and Content

- Upgrade some of the computer equipment (Participant B).

- Go a bit more in depth with the IT Security classes (Participant C).

Instructor Focused

- More group work from the start, as a way for students to interact with each other more. I feel like I didn't have a ton of other inaction with the other people in my class (Participant A).

- A lot more group activities. Group activities get us troubleshooting in a work dynamic. Working together in groups is really beneficial because you learn how to talk to people professionally and being able to express your opinions in a group setting is really nice (Participant D).

- Reach out to struggling students, via email. There are a lot of IT folks, and we don't talk much, so email is best. As students, we are scared to ask because of the power struggle, especially with some of the younger students (Participant F).

- A more hands-on approach with classes (Participant G).

Implications for Future Practice

The researcher hoped that colleges could utilize this study's information to help future students succeed. Additionally, the researcher intended that information from this study could benefit new students, instructors, and existing departments on campus, such as student services.

Based on findings in this study, the researcher provides the following recommendations for future practice. They include the following:

- How can instructors become more personable and approachable to students? Is this a topic even worth exploring? Many public colleges and universities (including in Minnesota) have a faculty union presence. Faculty unions do not have a requirement that their faculty be personable and approachable. And even if that could get added as a requirement for new faculty, how could we even attempt to change the ways of some (current) faculty members?

- Can administrators provide training or in-service days to focus on training faculty on the benefits of group work and ice-breaker activities for students, especially in the first few

weeks of college? Would this be something that faculty would have an interest in learning more about?

Conclusion

This qualitative, phenomenological study sought to examine which factors influence college students in completing their two-year computer degree and graduating from college. Participants were only recruited from a mid-size Midwestern college. All interviews were conducted from an office on campus. Some interviews were conducted in-person while others were conducted via Zoom. Upon IRB approval, an automated email was sent out to individuals to gauge interest with individuals willing to participate in the study. The email included an informed consent attachment, and seven participants were interviewed for the study. Using thematic analysis, the researcher identified themes from the data and reported the results in chapter four. Key points from Tinto's Model (1993) were used as the theoretical framework for the study. Specifically, questions about campus experiences, student organizations, and support while in college were asked during the interviews with each of the participants. The results of this study highlighted similarities and differences in how participants experienced college.

The primary question that this study attempted to answer was RQ1: What are college non-completers and college graduates' perspectives on factors that led to their success or failure in completing their two-year college degree? This question was the focus of the study. The seven themes derived from this study include: sense of belonging, sense of purpose, self-discipline and being self-driven, issues/obstacles, focus on graduation, outside support, and the importance of faculty.

One of the two sub-questions in this study was RQ1a: Of the factors identified, which ones are internal factors and which ones are external factors? The researcher believes that

internal factors have a lot to do with a college student's traits, abilities, and feelings. Out of the seven themes derived from this study, the researcher categorizes two of the themes primarily consisting of internal factors. Those two themes include sense of purpose, and self-discipline/ being self-driven. The researcher believes that the external factors have a lot to do with the physical environment of the student and the college. The physical environment of the student includes both where the student lives and works. The four themes consisting mostly of external factors include sense of belonging, focus on graduation, outside support, and importance of faculty. There are two themes that fall under the category of both internal and external. Those two themes include issues/obstacles and focus on graduation. Please see Figure 3.

Figure 3

Internal vs. External Factors

RQ1a: Research Sub-Question	Final Meaning Unit (Theme)	Preliminary Meaning Unit
External	Sense of belonging	Physical environment
		Interactions with peers
		Approachable instructors
		Clubs and activities
Internal	Sense of purpose	Not liking current job
		Working in the field
		Gaining a valuable skill
Internal	Self-discipline and self-drive	Time management
		Internal motivation
Internal or External	Issues/obstacles	Personal issues
		Family issues
		Work issues
Internal or External	Focus on graduation	Overcoming obstacles (grit)
		Exernal motivation
External	Outside support	Family
		Work flexiblility
		College resources
External	Importance of faculty	Interactions with faculty
		Small group work
		Course content
		Aproachability of faculty
		Hands-on approach

The purpose of RQ1a was to differentiate between internal and external factors. The researcher believes that colleges and universities have control of some of the external factors that students experience while on campus.

The other sub-question in this study was RQ1b: What resources are identified that can help students who are struggling to graduate? Out of the seven participants, six participants never sought outside support while in college. Regarding what resources can help students who are struggling, the theme revolved around the importance of faculty. Participants noted that faculty has a lot to do with creating the student experience. Figure 3 lists the five preliminary units that fall under the category of the importance of faculty.

This study could be used to further our understanding of the problem of college success factors by looking at all the factors that go into completing a degree. There is much more to completing a computer degree than just the content being learned by the student. Yes, the content can be difficult and challenging for students at times. However, in addition to having the ability to understand and comprehend the course material, each student needs to have many other components and pieces in place to be successful in completing a college degree.

Statement of Professional Growth

Being part of the research in the study reminded the researcher how important faculty-student interactions are for students. Students are starting a program and some of them are intimidated by the course material, intimidated by the instructors, and adjusting to college life. There are no set rules for instructors to get to know students or provide ice-breaker activities for the students, in hopes that they get to know each other a bit more. However, the researcher has made it a priority to get to know the students at the beginning of the semester by using ice-breaker activities. In addition, the researcher has assigned small-group activities early in the semester in hopes that students will get to know each other a bit more. Results from this study hint that more student interaction with each other would help bond or form relationships with the students. Since the researcher has many second-year students, he feels that some of them already

know each other, but he still makes it a point for students to work together. One of the classes that he teaches has students from three different computer majors. Many of those students do not know each other, so the researcher intentionally tries to assign more group work at the beginning of that course, in hopes that the students will get to know each other better and feel more comfortable working with each other. Also, at the beginning of each semester, the researcher emphasizes to his students the importance of office hours. He reminds students verbally and in his syllabus of when office hours are available for students to attend. For computer students who are more introverted or quiet, office hours provide a comfortable environment where students may feel more comfortable asking questions about the course structure or course content. Office hours provide a one-on-one environment for faculty members and students.

Another area that the researcher has chosen to work on based on the results of the research is reaching out to students once he realizes his students are not attending class or turning in assignments. Results from the study indicate that students appreciate faculty who are being proactive and reaching out to them. The researcher was reminded during the interview process that some of the students feel a power struggle and are scared to ask faculty for help. Reaching out to students who may be struggling is not a requirement as an instructor; but it is a simple and straight-forward gesture that could be very helpful to a student.

The researcher has also made a conscious effort to remember the importance of hands-on instruction in the classroom. In IT, there are many pieces of hardware that students can work with. Considering many of the students are picking the college because of the hands-on approach, it is important to honor that. Since COVID, some classes have moved away from a traditional in-person format to an online format. Online formats have the option to use simulation programs to simulate network environments. Based off information from this study, the

researcher realizes the importance of hands-on instruction. Therefore, the researcher continues to use real equipment for in-person classes and Virtual Machines (VMs) for both synchronous and asynchronous online classes.

The researcher learned a lot about college students and their perceptions on success factors during this research project, which is exactly what he wanted to get out of this project. Writing was not a strong part of the researcher's background. He learned a lot, and he acknowledges that the proceeding chapters are not perfect. This was his first attempt at formal research, and he now appreciates the time and effort that researchers put into their day-to-day work. He was grateful to the participants and the willingness of the participants to share information about their lived experiences while in college. This research project has made the researcher feel like a better instructor, as he feels like he has a greater understanding of what students are looking for, and a better understanding of their educational experiences while enrolled in college courses.

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Appendix A

PARTICIPATION RECRUITMENT LETTER

My name is Nathan Blommel, and I am a doctoral candidate at Minnesota State University, Moorhead. I am conducting my dissertation research on college student success factors. I am interviewing previous students from the computer programs at the college, and I am writing to invite you to participate in this study. You have been selected for this study because you fall into the category as someone who has completed a computer program degree while at the college.

Participation in this study will consist of an in-person interview lasting approximately one hour and will include semi-structured and open-ended questions relating to your experiences as a student while at the college. The interview will be recorded with your permission. All data resulting from the interview will be anonymized, and your identity will remain confidential. Your participation in this study is voluntary. Participants will receive $25 payment for their willingness to participate.

If you are willing to participate, I would be grateful if you could sign and return the attached Informed Consent Form to me at nathan.blommel@go.minnstate.edu. You are also welcome to email me with any questions you may have about this study. I appreciate your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Nathan J. Blommel

Appendix B

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

Minnesota State University Moorhead

Department of Leadership and Learning, EdD program

Principal Investigator: Dr. Kristen Carlson, 218-477-2096, kristen.carlson@mnstate.edu

Co-investigator: Nathan Blommel, **xxx-xxx-xxxx**, nathan.blommel@go.minnstate.edu

You are invited to participate in a study on college student success factors. I hope to learn about your experiences while you were a student at the college. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you were a student at the college in the area of computer programs.

If you decide to participate, I will ask you semi-structured and open-ended questions regarding your experiences as a student while at the college. I don't see any risks associated or inconveniences associated with you being part of the interview other than the 60 minutes of interview time. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will not be disclosed.

Participants will receive $25 payment for their willingness to participate. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relationships with Nathan Blommel or the college.

Please feel free to ask questions regarding this study. You may contact me later if you have any additional questions at **xxx-xxx-xxxx** and Nathan.Blommel@go.minnstate.edu. You may contact the investigators later if you have any additional questions. Any questions about

your rights may be directed to Dr. Robert Nava, Chair of the MSUM Institutional Review Board, at 218-477-2134 or irb@mnstate.edu.

You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. You may withdraw at any time after signing this form should you choose to discontinue participation in this study.

Signature of Participant _____ Date

Signature of Investigator_____ Date

Appendix C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Informed consent statement (to be read to participants at start of interview)

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study on college student success factors. The video recording of this interview will be deleted as soon as it has been transcribed, and I assure you that under no circumstances whatsoever will you be identified by name in the research study. Even though you have given your consent, you may terminate the interview at any time or choose not to answer certain questions.

List of questions

(There are ten main questions which will be asked, with several prompts suggested for each one in order to obtain further details as necessary.)

    1. How and why did you arrive at college?

      a. Reason for attending college

      b. Why this college?

      c. Friends/family attend?

    2. What was your experience like while on campus? What helped form that experience?

      a. Friendly/Personable instructors?

      b. Peers

      c. Physical environment

    3. What organizations/sports were you a part of while in college?

a. Sports

b. On-campus or off-campus

c. School related

4. Did you ever seek support? If so, where did you get support from while at this college?

a. Within the department

b. School-wide

c. Instructors

d. Peers

e. Family members

5. What were your institutional experiences like while on campus?

a. academic performance

b. faculty/staff interactions

c. extracurricular activities

d. peer group interactions

6. What issues were you dealing with that prevented you from doing well?

a. Personal

b. Family

c. Work

7. What could the computer department or the college do differently to help students?

8. What part(s) of life or college did you struggle the most with?

9. What helped or motivated you while you were in college?

10. Do you have anything else that you would like to share with me about your college experiences?

Statement of thanks

Thank you for participating in this interview. Your responses and identity will remain confidential.

Appendix D

Demographic Information

What is your gender? 7 ⓘ

Gender - What is your gender?	Percentage	Count
Male	86%	6
Female	14%	1
Other	0%	0
Sum	100%	7

What is your age? 7 ⓘ

Age - What is your age?	Percentage	Count
Under 18	0%	0
18 - 24	43%	3
25 - 34	29%	2
35 - 44	14%	1
45 - 54	14%	1
55 - 64	0%	0
65 - 74	0%	0

Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin? 7 ⓘ

Ethnicity1 - Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?	Percentage	Count
Yes	0%	0
No	100%	7
Sum	100%	7

How would you describe yourself? Please select all that apply. 7 ⓘ

Ethnicity2 - How would you describe yourself? Please select all that apply.	Percentage	Count
White	86%	6
Black or African American	0%	0
American Indian or Alaska Native	0%	0
Asian	14%	1
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0%	0
Other	0%	0
Sum	100%	7

Are you a first generation college student? (Being a first generation college student means that neither of your parents completed a 4-year college or university degree). 7 ⓘ

Q10 - Are you a first generation college student? (Being a first generation college student means that neither of your parents completed a 4-year college or university degree).	Percentage	Count
Yes	57%	4
No	43%	3
Sum	100%	7

Appendix E

Institutional **R**eview **B**oard

DATE: April 17, 2023

TO: Kristen Carlson, EdD, Principal Investigator
Nathan Blommel, Co-investigator

FROM: Dr. Robert Nava, Chair
Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB

ACTION: APPROVED

PROJECT TITLE: [2038584-1] Most Likely to Succeed: Which Factors Influence College Students in Completing their Two-Year Computer Degree and Graduating from College
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project
APPROVAL DATE: April 17, 2023
EXPIRATION DATE:
REVIEW TYPE: Exempt Review

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Exempt Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to the Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to the Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB.

This project has been determined to be a project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of .

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact the [Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB](). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been issued in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Minnesota State University Moorhead's records.