

Exploring the Impact of Student Success Centers in Georgia: A Narrative Inquiry Approach

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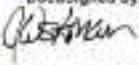
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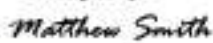
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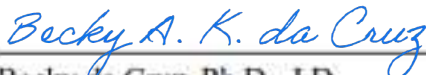
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the multifaceted nature of student success (defined as retention, progression, and graduation) in higher education through the lens of narrative inquiry and the framework of Vincent Tinto's Theory of Student Departure. The data collection consisted of a survey and semi-structured interviews. Purposeful criterion sampling was employed to select administrators, and the snowball method was utilized to select the student participants from public institutions in Georgia. The findings aligned with Tinto's Dimensions and Commitments, with the following student themes shaping success: (1) Comprehensive Student Support Ecosystem; (2) Comprehensive Academic Support and Aspirations; (3) Student Journey and Development in Higher Education; (4) Holistic Student Support, Wellbeing, and Engagement Spectrum. Additionally, there were three themes to emerge for administrators: (1) Holistic Approach to Student Success and Support Systems; (2) Strategic Academic Innovation; (3) Comprehensive Student Success and Wellbeing.

The implications for institutions to consider include investing in communications, student-driven programming, focusing on mental health, and supporting student identities. Implications for administrators include sharing their personal journey, creating a welcoming environment, and partnering with faculty to balance rigor with support. Implications for students include being proactive in seeking assistance, focusing on peer connections, identifying a professional path, focusing on mental well-being, and seeking support options. Future researchers may consider expanding this study to include the long-term impact of COVID learning loss and a longitudinal study on student success services for pre-enrolled students until their graduation.

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I am grateful to my daughters, Kirsten, and Margaux, for always being my “why.” Finally, I want to thank my wife, Aleisha, for her unwavering support. There were many times during this process that it would have been easy for me to quit, but you were always there with a listening ear and wise words to keep me moving forward.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all the first-generation students who are working hard to change the trajectory of not just their lives, but the lives of their entire family tree. You may not know it, but there are more folks than you could ever imagine praying for you and working hard to give you that opportunity.

More personally, it is dedicated to my grandmother, Viola Doris Heffernan, who first taught me to value the precious gift of education. To have her name in print here is a full-circle moment.

Chapter I

Introduction

A number of incredibly powerful forces are meeting on the higher education landscape to influence the business model of higher education. The lasting effects of the Great Recession, the lingering fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, public debate about the value of educational attainment, and the impact of political pressure to increase the number of college graduates are colliding on campuses across the state and impacting campuses within the University System of Georgia (USG) in profound ways. This study contains an exploration of student success, student success centers, and their potential role in influencing graduation rates and first-year student to second-year student retention.

In 2009, Mohamed El-Erian coined the phrase “the new normal” to represent a dramatic shift for organizations (Boesler, 2013). Higher education’s new normal includes the fiscal reality created by state budget cuts powered by the Great Recession (Fethke & Policano, 2012). Since the Great Recession of 2007, the allocation from the state legislature to fund higher education in Georgia was down 15% per student as of 2017 (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2017). This represented a decrease of approximately \$1,500 per student (Mitchell, Leachman, Masterson, & Waxman, 2018, p. 6). Conversely, the annual state allocation covering 75% of education and general funding in the 1990s was reduced to 47% in FY 2021 (Cook, 2022).

The Complete College Georgia (The Governor’s Office of Student Achievement, 2011) initiative was set as a new precedent and benchmark for public universities in Georgia. It was issued to increase the number of college-educated citizens to impact economic development.

The initiative aimed to graduate 60% of Georgia residents with a post-secondary certificate or degree by 2025, a positive difference of 250,000 citizens from the 2011 trajectory (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2011).

The Great Recession and the state's emphasis on completion created an environment in which public institutions are being asked to graduate more students, at a faster pace, with fewer resources from the legislature. For the public higher education enterprise to thrive, it must find ways to become more efficient and effective in graduating students. Institutions, in turn, increased the emphasis on student success by dedicating institutional resources toward concentrated retention, progression, and graduation programs. These programs focus on easing the hurdles of college graduation through myriad programs, communications, advocacy, and institutional policy.

This research explores five public universities in Georgia that have established student success centers (broadly defined as a central office on campus with the purpose of increasing student retention, progression, and graduation). I conducted interviews with both administrators at those centers, and students who have benefited from the work of student success centers. The institution's selection was based on their classification within the University System of Georgia, and graduation rates gathered from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) dataset to explore how certain universities are leveraging their limited resources to enhance educational outcomes. I used a qualitative narrative inquiry methodology to examine areas of congruence and incongruence between the experiences of the students and the student success administrators.

Statement of the Problem

In reviewing data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the total enrollment of American degree-granting postsecondary fell nearly 15 percent, approximately 2.7 million students, from fall 2010 to fall 2021 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). In Georgia, the well-reported demographic cliff shows the peak of Georgia high school graduate pipeline hitting in 2026, followed by a decline of 11% over the next 10 years (Cook, 2022). In my experience, for most institutions, the most important—and scrutinized - annual statistic is the headcount of enrolled students. The tuition dollars paid by those students are most likely the institution’s primary economic driver and revenue stream, hence the demographic cliff has cast a long shadow across the industry.

While the college graduation rate at public institutions grew 15% since 2010, higher education institutions in the United States are still left with only one in four students completing their college degree in four years (Hanson, 2021). The higher education industry must look for ways to uncover efficiencies in the enterprise to meet the growing demand for college graduates. Thus, the research findings provide additional leverage to lessons learned from student success centers at five public institutions and assist in the dissemination of knowledge to increase rates of student retention, progression, and graduation.

Purpose of the Study

With roughly one-third of students entering college leaving without completing a degree in six years (The Governor’s Office of Student Achievement, 2024), the practical implications for student success personnel could prove to be quite impactful. If narrative inquiry interviews show additional investments in certain areas are demonstrated to improve student success outcomes, their case for support could be bolstered. The findings of this study support additional investments in certain demonstrated areas of student success and serve as evidence to garner additional support.

Additionally, if the data show that support of one of the areas of the student success centers carries greater weight, institutions could use the findings within their own context to realign their assets to direct energy and time toward one of the priorities that shows the most promise for increasing student success.

Research Questions

The research questions were constructed to gain insight from students and student success personnel into the impact of student success centers on their campus.

RQ 1: What factors do students believe contributed toward their persistence at their university?

RQ 2: What do student success personnel perceive as the reasons for the increase in student retention and graduation at their institution?

The purpose of RQ 1 explores what programs of student success centers the interviewed students believe have had the greatest impact on their educational attainment. The data responses for RQ 2 provided feedback from student success personnel to ascertain which aspect of their work has the greatest impact, as well as assist in the discovery of the congruency or incongruency between RQ 1 and RQ 2.

Utilizing Creswell and Creswell's (2018) protocols, I surveyed personnel at student success centers and students at five public institutions in Georgia, and students preparing to graduate with their first undergraduate degree (see Appendix A). I designed questions to learn which services, if any, of an institution's student success center had the greatest impact on a student's persistence and graduation. Interviews (see Appendix B) with staff members charged with student success initiatives provided additional information. I utilized Tinto's longitudinal model of institutional departure to develop the questions (Tinto, 1993).

Significance of the Problem

The study's problem is to examine the impact of institutions' student success centers on students' success. A six-year graduation rate and first-year student-to-sophomore retention served as the measure for student success (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). The study could be beneficial to the governing administration of public universities. Individuals who provide oversight for student success centers are the primary audience. It has been widely discussed among higher education leaders across the southeast that the declining level of appropriations from state legislatures forced institutions to find efficiencies in the enterprise and help coach students toward earning their degree (Mitchell et al., 2018). That pinch has been coupled with the Complete College Georgia initiative to increase the percentage of Georgia residents with a post-secondary degree to 60% by 2025 (Complete College Georgia, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

In Tinto's foundational works, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (1993) and *Completing College: Rethinking Institutional Action* (2012). Tinto (1993) created a model of institutional departure that informed thoughts on student success for a generation. This model considers: pre-entry attributes, internal and external goals/commitments of the student, institutional experiences (both formal and informal), and academic and social integration over time to explain the ultimate departure decision of the student. As illustrated in Table 1, I designed the interview and survey questions using Tinto's (1993) research to inform the questions and research (see Appendix A).

Table 1

Research Question and Theory Matrix

Research Questions	Components of Tinto's (1975) Academic & Social Integration Theory	Tinto's Commitments
RQ 1: What factors do students believe contributed toward their persistence at their university?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Formal Academic– Academic performance• Informal Academic– faculty/staff interactions (academic system)• Formal Social– Extracurricular activities• Informal Social–peer group interactions (social systems)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Institutional• Educational• Community
RQ 2: What do student success personnel perceive as the reasons for the increase in student retention and graduation at their institution?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Formal Academic (if they serve as advisors)– Academic performance• Informal Academic– faculty/staff interactions (academic system)• Formal Social – (if they serve in the capacity as an organization advisor or encouragement to join the organization)– Extracurricular activities• Informal Social–peer group interactions (social systems)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Institutional• Educational• Community

Note: Research and Theory Matrix developed based upon Tinto's Dimensions and Tinto's Commitments (1975, 1993).

Limitations of this Study

There are several limitations of this study. First, the framework of this study is taken from Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure (1993). The activities of student success centers, such as academic advising, financial aid counseling, predictive analytics, and degree pathway mapping, are most closely aligned with Tinto's (1993) frame of social integration but are not a

direct parallel to Tinto's (1993) concept. Numerous variables can affect student success on an individual and institutional level including but not limited to internal and external motivations, the background of the participants, and use of selective sampling can all affect student success on an individual and institutional level.

In addition, it is too early to assess the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student success, overall levels of educational attainment, and myriad additional impacts on persistence and graduation rates. During the COVID-19 pandemic, most institutions reported a decrease in the number of graduates; however, Georgia State University reported an increase in graduation rates. It should be noted that some institutions have not recovered their pre-COVID graduation rates (Governor's Office of Achievement, 2024; Harris et al., 2024). This demonstrates the possible impact of Georgia State University's robust student success initiatives. Their focus on ensuring that students are given the tools necessary to be successful, including advising, financial coaching, and predictive analytics, has been cited as a powerful combination. Early interventions on both academic and financial markers allowed Georgia State to improve graduation rates, with higher student head count, while their percentage of Pell eligible students grew from 31% to 58% (Georgia State University, 2024).

The sample size for this project is relatively small. While care was taken to ensure a broad representation of student experiences, the qualitative research design and sample size of one student and administrator from each institution may not be transferable to all students at the respective institutions. Finally, all qualitative research is limited to the perspective of the participants included in the study and the data they provide. My hope is that this project provides the reader with the opportunity to look for transferability within their own context.

Assumptions

Any qualitative project begins with a set of expectations and assumptions. In interviewing those students who show the greatest use of services provided by their home institution's student success centers, we must assume that they will share processes and procedures honestly and openly. There is a longer discussion in Chapter Three about how this will be addressed during the study.

By interviewing students suggested and recruited by student success administrators, there is some level of academic integration intrinsic to the study. These administrators have an epistemic knowledge of the resources available to these students and an understanding of the potential impact of the utilization of these services. They have a deeper understanding of and ability to assess what would be impactful to assist these students in their educational journey.

Summary and Organization of the Study

This dissertation includes five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the study with purpose, problem statement, and research questions. Chapter 2, the literature review, is a summary of the literature that informed the context and provided background on the changes to the higher education fiscal landscape, those identified factors tied to student success, and research related to student success. Chapter 3 covers the chosen research methodology, and the collection and analysis of data related to interviews with students and administrators at student success centers at public universities in Georgia. Chapter 4 provides the results of the study, and Chapter 5 details a discussion of findings, implications on practices, and directions for possible further study, as well as the conclusion.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Introduction

The myriad factors that influence and impact student retention, progression, and graduation have been closely researched by scholars of higher education and student success for decades. This review of relevant literature begins with theoretical models created in the early 1970s and concludes with the relatively recent creation of campus offices known as student success centers. The review of relevant literature will also explore two additional themes: the changing face of educational finance since 2008, and factors that impact the rates of retention, progression, and graduation of undergraduate students.

The focus of this paper, broadly referred to as student success centers, attempts to harvest predictive analytics, utilize intrusive advising methods, assist with financial planning, and address the emotional and social needs of college students (Georgia State University, 2024). All of this is in an effort to increase graduation rates and reduce time to degree completion. One example of this in Georgia can be found at Georgia State University. Since launching their revised student success program, Georgia State University has increased their six-year graduation rate by 23 percentage points and reduced the average time to earn a degree by almost a full semester since 2003 (Georgia State University, 2024).

One of the earliest theoretical models for university dropout that factored in the sociological aspects of dropout was proposed in 1970 and refined in 1971 by William Spady (1970). Spady demonstrated that it was the interaction of the academic and social spheres that

coexist in a college student's life, and either or both can influence dropout rates. The crux of Spady's (1970) argument is that internal attributes, attitudes, and skills interact with institutional attributes and norms. Those norms can either bolster positive attributes to support student success or get in the way. A holistic review of a student's experience and how the two spheres interact will be discussed as part of this study.

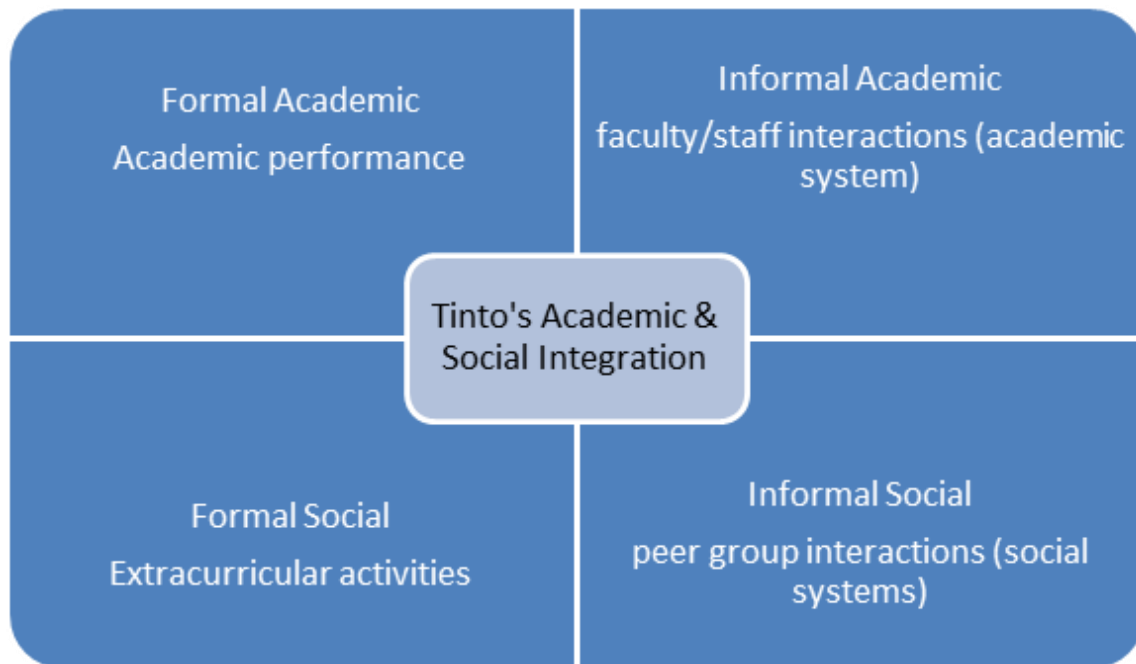
Researchers such as Vincent Tinto (1975) began making a scholarly attempt to classify the causes and cures for student attrition in higher education over fifty years ago. That research gave us a fundamental and holistic framework to consider the reasons those who begin their academic pursuit do not finish. In 1973, Tinto and Cullen published the results of a survey published by the U.S. Office of Education that ultimately became a foundational study in student retention and graduation in higher education. The researchers' "Conceptual Schema for Dropout" looked to distinguish between the four different types of dropouts: Voluntary, Non-voluntary, Transfer, and Permanent (Tinto & Cullen, 1973, p. 41) and promoted the concept of dropping out of college as longitudinal beginning with pre-enrollment attributes, goal commitment, and academic and social integration. Aljohani (2016a, 2016b) grew and updated their work on student retention in higher education, noting that the number of variables impacting student retention had grown.

Tinto's (1993) integration model will be used as the conceptual framework. Tinto's (1993) work in exploring the dynamics that lead to student persistence and graduation in higher education has been widely cited and is considered a foundational text. He demonstrated that student integration into an institution can occur in two dimensions: academic and social. Diving deeper, the key points made by Tinto (1993) are that for students to have the best chance of success and graduate from college, they must integrate into formal (e.g., standard grades on

assignments) and informal (intellectual development through interactions with faculty/staff) academic systems, as well as formal (campus-organized extracurricular activities) and informal (peer-group activities) social systems, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Tinto's (1993) Academic & Social Integration Conceptual Framework



Note: Conceptual framework was adapted from (Tinto, 1993, p. 114)

Following up on the work of Spady (1970) and Tinto (1975, 1993) were Pascarella (1980) and Terenzini in the early 1980s. Pascarella (1980), and Pascarella and Terenzini (1983) dove deeper into the interaction between students and faculty members, assuming that informal interactions between those two groups contribute to a student's decision to persist. Informal Contact was one of five main modules (along with Student Background Characteristics, Institutional Factors, Other College Experience, and Educational Outcomes) that Pascarella (1980) listed as variables for persistence. The impact of personal contact and relationships

between students and faculty and staff is a consistent theme of their research and may be shown to have an impact on student success in Georgia.

Bean and Metzner published a model in 1985 with three exogenous variables (Academic Factors, Social-psychological Factors, and Environmental Factors) which influence one endogenous variable (Socialization/Selection variables of college grades, institutional fit, and institutional commitment) (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Nicoletti (2019) and others used Bean (1980) and Bean and Metzner's (1985) model as a general starting point but considered it too general to function as a pragmatic way of analyzing the dropout phenomenon. Nicoletti (2019) attempted to strengthen Bean and Metzner's (1985) model by adding precise definitions to his model and questioned whether the extreme importance placed on social integration was still relevant, creating a computational system and dropout/persevere model. Nicoletti (2019) attempted to develop a model that would effectively predict a potential dropout in time to provide preventative interventions. Nicoletti (2019) also thought that the model developed by Tinto and Cullen in 1973 was very general and difficult to customize for modeling a real-world scenario at an institution and lacked specific guidelines on how to approach instituting the model to increase student success. Nicoletti made the case that the current business model of higher education is very different from the model of the time during Tinto's (1975) original research. Duranczyk, Goff, and Opitz (2006) explored how student's experience with tutoring assisted with increasing confidence with college-level math.

To deepen our understanding of how student success centers in Georgia are influencing retention, progression, and graduation rates a review of historical and current research on the impact of advising, financial aid programs, retention initiatives, and demographic trends through

the lens of the current economic realities and business model of public higher education is important.

Current Economic Models of Public Higher Education

Across the country, the financial model of public higher education has undergone a sea change since the 2008 economic crisis that has been only exacerbated by the immediate and lingering impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are still playing out, especially in the selection, admission, and access to community colleges and universities (Harris et al., 2024). By late spring 2020, FAFSA renewals had declined by 5%, suggesting that lower-income college students were not planning to re-enroll (Fain, 2020).

In Georgia, the annual appropriation from the state legislature has dropped from \$12,544 per student in fiscal year 2008 to \$10,599 per student in fiscal year 2023 (Kanso, 2022). In addition, tuition discounting has grown at all types of institutions, and state appropriations are about equal to net tuition revenues at public four-year colleges (Baum, Blagg, Cohn, Cook, & Colin, 2024). This has led educational administrators to look at both the price and cost of higher education and the critical importance of getting students through their academic programs as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Georgia is not alone in this change. In 2017, Webber (2017) further demonstrated that the decline of investment by states into their public higher education system was being passed along to students at a higher rate post-2000. For every \$1,000 per student reduction, the pass-through rate increased from 10.3% prior to the year 2000 to 31.8% post-2000 (Webber, 2017). In using Temple University as an illustration, from 2000 to 2016, Pennsylvania cut its per-student appropriation by \$6,000 in inflation-adjusted dollars (Webber, 2016). Overall, after adjusting for inflation, the average annual cost of tuition at a public four-year college has

increased 747.8% since 1963 (Hanson, 2021). With students enrolled in public colleges representing over two-thirds of all enrolled baccalaureate students, that is a huge impact for a majority of those seeking to pursue higher education (Irwin et al., 2023).

While some of that increase is due to an increase in administrative expenses, faculty salaries, and capital investments, Webber (2016) found that 75% of the increase was directly attributed to the decline in support from state legislatures. While the debate over the role of public higher education as a public need versus a private good has been fiercely debated, with those flames only stoked during the conversation around student loan forgiveness, there seems to be a consensus that the rates of public support for higher education seen before the Great Recession will not be seen again anytime soon.

As stated by Kantrowitz (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2023), “deep state cuts in funding for higher education over the last decade have contributed to rapid, significant tuition increases and pushed more of the costs of college to students” (p. 1). Baum, McPherson, Braga, and Minton (2018) demonstrated that changes in state appropriations had a significant impact on enrollment. Not surprisingly, they showed institutions that dealt with the decline by increasing tuition showed a decline in initial enrollment, but those that balanced the budget by cutting institutional resources and expenditures showed diminished student success. Bound, Braga, Khanna, and Turner (2019) examined the impact of declining state appropriations on educational outcomes and research productivity at public research institutions in the United States. The researchers found that the more highly ranked research universities were more able to adapt to declining state revenues by increasing philanthropic support while those outside the top tier were not able to do so. Moreover, expenditures at top public research universities (defined by

membership in the American Association of Universities - AAU) were largely immune from dips in state allocations while that was not the case at other institutions outside the AAU.

A natural hypothesis for the rise in the price of higher education is Baumol's cost disease theory (Baumol & Bowen, 1966) for the tuition increases—pointing to the lack of a dramatic increase in productivity in teaching at the higher education level. Wexler (2016) and EAB (2017) posited that the effects of cost disease have been exaggerated in this context. The effects of COVID-19 could play an interesting role in the cost disease discussion. It is possible that an increase in the participation of online and hybrid classes could help find efficiencies in some undergraduate courses. Those efficiencies through things such as larger class sizes, fewer sections of courses, and asynchronous course delivery and their impact on student success need further study.

In 2017, the Education Advisory Board (now known as EAB) pointed to the increased costs associated with responding to oversight, accreditation, and Title IX as an overlooked driver of the increased rates of tuition. In researching Vanderbilt University, they found that the institution was spending \$11,000 per student, per year, to cover costs associated with government regulations such as medical research (EAB, 2017). Logic suggests that while larger institutions with a more robust research program would see a larger impact on their expenditures, all institutions receiving federal support must abide by a certain baseline of oversight and reporting that has grown.

Ehrenberg and Webber (2010) pointed out that spending on instruction has been outpaced by spending on academic support, student services, and research. The researchers used various statistical models to analyze the effect of non-instructional expenses on graduation and freshman to sophomore retention rates. Ehrenberg and Webber (2010) found that expenditures on student

services have a positive impact on graduation and persistence rates—specifically on students at institutions with lower standardized test scores and those with higher rates of Pell-eligible students. Reviewing the growth in support services budgets, and the feedback from interviewed students on how these non-instructional expenses impacted them, with an eye towards their Pell-status could help inform best practices.

As Carlson (2018) and others have stated, it was necessary for higher education administrators have had to develop new financial strategies to respond to a new economic reality. While this includes a watchful eye on spending with his notable example of knowing how much is spent annually to educate a student in each major, he also points to increasing philanthropic revenue as a paradigm shift. One issue that may affect perfect partnering of philanthropic support and student need is the perception bias of the donor. Su and Wan (2018) found that perception bias decreases giving to charities designed to help low-ability individuals, but increased support was given to support high-ability individuals. Moreover, that perception bias increases as the donors' income increases. Su and Wan (2018) suggested that fundraisers should focus energy on correcting the perception bias in donors by highlighting those recipients who were born with low ability but worked hard to achieve.

In times of the budget reductions mentioned earlier, it becomes critical that the highest and best use of resources comes into sharper focus. Quantitative and qualitative measurements of which academic and academic support programs have the greatest impact on student success help to drive data-informed decision-making as well as make a case for additional support from legislative leaders and interested philanthropists (Georgia State University, 2024). Additional philanthropic support for success centers can help institutions respond quickly to student needs

outside of the more cumbersome budgeting process and restrictions of public funds stewarded by colleges and universities.

Advising

Looking at Tinto's revised model of student integration, student academic advisors understand that "students' goals and intentions are continuously reshaped through interactions with their institution's academic and social structures" (Schreiber, Luescher-Mamashela, & Moja, 2014, p. v). Thus, providing access without the requisite and necessary support structure can result in students not completing the degree requirements (Tinto, 1993).

Advisor-initiated outreach to students has been incredibly popular at institutions such as Georgia State University (GSU), which began piloting its GPS system in 2012. GSU used predictive analytics garnered from over 140,000 student records to identify 800 predictive variables that correlated with students dropping out (Gates, 2017). Advisors mined that data to focus outreach efforts for at-risk students, often before the students even realized the problem. Early alerts or interventions have been coupled with students selecting one general academic area as a "meta-major" versus having to select a definitive academic path as a first-time freshman. The meta-major has allowed the institution to assign a block schedule that ensures positive academic momentum and has eliminated wasted credit hours while a student decides on a specific major.

Retention and Progression Programs

Wohlgemuth, Whalen, and Sullivan (2007) tracked a cohort of students at a midwestern public research-intensive university to learn which areas of the college experience had the strongest influence on rates of retention and graduation. The reviewed demographic data included (age, gender, race, and whether the student was a resident of the state), environmental

factors (college athlete, honors program participant, first-generation) and financial aid status (gifts, loans, or work study). Their meta-analysis found that financial aid had a small, but significant, positive effect on graduation. Interestingly, grants made the most impact in a student's first year, but the effect was minimized in later years. In reviewing the role of student debt, Wohlgemuth et al. (2007) found that if taking on student debt allowed undergraduates to work less than 15 hours a week, it had a positive effect on progression and graduation rates. Overall, Wohlgemuth et al. (2007) showed that an increase of \$1,000 in financial increases the relative likelihood of being retained by 13% from first to second year, a 39% increase in second to third year retention, and an 89% increase in third to fourth year retention demonstrating the impact of financial aid and scholarships on student progression.

In 1993, Tinto followed up on his earlier work by publishing what is widely recognized as the definitive resource for student success for educational administrators. *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* laid out three principles of effective retention. The first principle, labeled as Institutional Commitment to Students, implores colleges to put student welfare ahead of other institutional goals (Tinto, 1993). The second principle, Educational Commitment, is demonstrated by the school putting policies, procedures, and action items in place to ensure that student learning is not left to chance (Tinto, 1993). The third principle stresses the importance of community by encouraging institutions to integrate all students into the social and academic communities of the school (Tinto, 1993).

Kruger, Martin, Mehaffy, O'Brien (2017), speaking on the work of NASPA: National Association of Student Personnel Administrators in Higher Education, wrote about the increased importance of health, safety, and well-being of students to increase retention, progression, and graduation. Going further, Kruger in speaking in his role as President of NASPA highlighted the

“rise in serious psychological issues among traditional-age college students” (Kruger et al., 2017, p. 12). He also referenced the importance of creating a campus culture that uses learning beyond the classroom to build core competencies that are necessary for success after college. Mentoring and coaching are important tools for first-generation students to be successful.

And we know that outside of basic financial aid, small amounts of financial assistance can play a huge role in student success. Emergency aid programs, food pantries, completion grants, and other forms of assistance have been shown to increase degree persistence for students. (Kruger et al., 2017, p. 13)

Kruger et al. (2017) advocated for a strong partnership with an institution’s information technology office to look for predictive analytics to identify students who need support, as well as find which behaviors have a positive impact on retention, progression, and graduation. After matriculation, the ability of a student to graduate is determined by their intrinsic motivation, choices, associations, behaviors, orientation, and the support experienced by the campus community (Kimball & Campbell, 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). What is clear is that no standard procedure applies in academic advising. Each situation is different and must be tailored to the individual students’ needs within the university’s setting (Kimball & Campbell, 2013).

Financial Aid Practices

While multiple studies have pointed to the dramatic impact that financial aid has on student success rates, the financial model is tenuous. Olbrecht, Romano, and Teigen (2016) showed that an increase in a family’s ability to contribute to educational costs improved a student’s chances of retention and that institutional financial assistance also improved the likelihood of freshman to sophomore retention. Wexler (2016) used data from the National

Bureau of Economic Research, demonstrated that student aid accounted for most of the dramatic increase in college tuition between 1987 and 2010.

In a 2014 paper reviewing the role of tuition discounting across the higher education sector, the Education Commission of the States discussed price discrimination as one of the unintended consequences of tuition discounting. The commission defined tuition discounting as “the practice of awarding targeted financial incentives to students, usually in the form of merit awards or need-based grants” (Education Commission of the States, 2014, p. 1). The goals of tuition discounting include attracting talented students, incentivizing those who are able but unwilling to pay full price, diversifying the student body, attracting higher numbers of non-resident students, and recruiting gifted academic students to raise an institution’s academic profile. However, the increased role of tuition discounting, especially after the Great Recession, has compressed the issue of the rising rates of tuition as more institutions must increase their sticker price to account for the growing rate of tuition discounting to leave a profit margin. As discussed earlier, that increased sticker price may diminish access for underserved and underrepresented students. Coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, about 60% of states restricted tuition rate increases for four-year institutions, either freezing rates or limiting increases to between 2-4% (State Higher Education Executive Officers Association [SHEEO], 2023).

An important part of financial aid and institutional budgeting in higher education would include endowment, but it is important to understand that endowments are very skewed across the sector and across the state of Georgia. As of 2024, only 21 institutions nationwide had endowments above \$10 billion, with only Emory University in Georgia (National Association of College and University Business Officers, 2025). Across the country only 143 institutions had

an endowment over \$1 billion (National Association of College and University Business Officers, 2025). In Georgia, the only public institutions to hit that benchmark are the Georgia Institute of Technology, who has an endowment of roughly \$3 billion, and the University of Georgia, with an endowment just over \$2 billion (National Association of College and University Business Officers, 2025). While these large endowments garner much attention from the media, they are not typical. Further, endowments are typically made up of several accounts with various donor-imposed restrictions as to their use. This further complicates the role of endowment to mitigate tuition increases and decline of state revenues overall.

Demographic Trends

In 2019, Fox used data from the National Center for Health Statistics and the National Center for Educational Statistics, to discuss the looming impact of the decline in birth rates that started in 2008 and its anticipated impact on higher education—commonly referred to as the demographic cliff (Bloomberg Opinion, 2019). Fewer college-age students will mean an increased importance on retention and progression to meet both the financial needs at institutions and workforce needs across the country. Fox (Bloomberg Opinion, 2019) predicted that two-year colleges will have to weather a 13% drop in demand from their 2012 levels by 2026, which is the hardest hit sector, but all institution types after the top 50 elite institutions will see a drop in overall student head count (Bloomberg Opinion, 2019). Overall, from 2012 to 2020 enrollments fell 11% nationally at American colleges and universities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). These demographic trends help to color the overall picture of the critical role of student progression and graduation rates will mean for workforce readiness.

Summary

The landscape created by the interplay among these critical factors has increased pressure to improve student success outcomes across the higher education industry (Demeter et al., 2022). This interplay has been a key catalyst for the creation and strengthening of student success centers across the world. In 2019, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) launched an initiative for member schools to enhance student success outcomes—with a particular focus on first-generation, lower-income, and students from underrepresented backgrounds. Their cohort developed a guidebook used widely by administrators of student success centers to guide the holistic advising process and focus on the strategic alignment of resources and student needs (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, n.d.).

Student success centers, if given adequate resources, have demonstrated innumerable times the capacity to create positive momentum for a student's academic achievement. A centralized and focused set of professionals tasked with increasing retention, progression, and graduation can make a true and immediate impact across the institution. Part of the secret sauce of those administrative units is their ability to cut across siloed areas of the university to take a holistic view of the student's journey. Their focus on eliminating barriers and leveraging the power of predictive analytics to guide decisions at critical points in a student's time at the institution can make a tremendous impact.

Chapter III

Methodology

Introduction

In this section, I describe the selected methodology in which to explore the problem. As previously stated, my central goal for this dissertation is to synthesize the role of student success centers and share their impact across the state. This chapter begins with the justification for my qualitative narrative inquiry research design. The section also includes details pertinent to the study participants, including steps undertaken to identify and recruit participants, as well as steps taken to protect their rights. The data collection and data analysis techniques used are identified and briefly explained. Lastly, this section contains the identified data collection and data analysis scheme.

Qualitative Research Design and Approach

Qualitative methodology was most practical for the research study for several reasons. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative research is “an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). In addition, qualitative researchers are allowed to collect data in a place comfortable for the participant, analyze data to illuminate common themes and patterns, and present their interpretation of the data in the final report (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Creswell and Creswell (2018) ascribed several characteristics to qualitative research: a natural setting, the researcher as the key instrument, multiple sources of data, inductive and deductive data analysis, participants’ meaning, emergent design, reflexivity, and holistic account. As qualitative research is emergent,

several key characteristics to note during the design phase is understanding a phenomenon within its context, the natural setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative researchers also serve as both data collection and analysis instruments. Typically, within qualitative research, there are a number of forms of qualitative data: interviews, observations, documents, and audiovisual materials (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The research design for this study was a qualitative narrative inquiry collected via both a survey (see Appendix A) and a semi-structured individual interview (see Appendix B). Previous studies utilizing the selected research design and related topics have successfully answered their questions (Harrison, 2014; Perkins, 2021; Villarreal, 2023). Narrative inquiry provided me as both researcher and instrument of data collection, an opportunity to serve as a “researcher-storyteller” (Barone, 2007, p. 468). Narrative inquiry “presumes the importance of the everyday, the ordinary...” and “extends our understanding of human phenomena” to deepen our understanding of the human condition (Kim, 2016, p. 23). By focusing attention on these often overlooked and untold stories, narrative inquiry dissertations can help build a repository and add to the base of knowledge. This project hopes to collate and illuminate the critical role that student success centers have at public institutions in Georgia through storytelling.

I weighed different designs of inquiry and research to determine which would be most useful and possible within the limitations and focus of the study. This careful consideration eventually led me to choose both a survey (see Appendix A) as well as conducting semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B). Students’ basic biographic information (age, gender, race), anticipated graduation date, and course of study were collected using a narrative survey (see Appendix A). The survey portion for the student success personnel collected basic biographic information (age, gender, race) in addition to information on their professional path

and time working in their current role and at their current institution (see Appendix A). With semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B) and survey (see Appendix A) responses, students and student success administrators were given an opportunity to discuss their perceptions of the role of student success centers based on their experiences within their university. Semi-structured interviews can be guided by a series of consistent questions, although the order may vary (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Likewise, the level of secondary/probing questions by the interviewer allows the researcher to adjust to the flow of the interview depending on the participants' responses. The questions were open-ended to avoid yes/no or overly rehearsed answers by the interviewee.

In addition, this path of inquiry was chosen based on personal and professional experiences. As a first-generation college student who worked my way through college with no familial support, I am passionate about the necessity of helping students graduate, on time, with as little debt as possible. Moreover, my entire professional career has focused on storytelling to encourage philanthropic gifts to support students on their academic journey. Kim (2016) describes narrative thinking as “a method of making a story out of experience” by allowing researchers to create a story by “organizing experience around our perception, thought, memory, and imagination” (p. 156). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) captured the central task of narrative inquiry as seeing “people are both living their stories in an ongoing experiential text and telling their stories in words as they reflect upon life and explain themselves to others” (p. 4). Choosing the narrative approach allowed me to tap into some of my storytelling background to help illuminate and frame the conversations with the participants of the study.

Robinson and Hawpe (1986) outlined three necessary components for rigorous narrative inquiry: researcher's prior knowledge and experience, narrative schema, and cognitive strategies.

My prior knowledge and experience helped establish the frame for the project and set the baseline for the schema. The schema in this project involved the questions in the semi-structured interview and helped answer the questions of the impact of the student success center on the student's experience and how the perceptions of the student coalesce or differ from the personnel. The cognitive strategies include articulating how the coding and data analysis helped clarify and explain the findings of the interviews. These three elements combined to ground the study and created a strong foundation for the project.

This focused narrative research study allowed me to derive a set of findings to identify consistent themes surrounding the ability of student success centers to increase student success at public universities in Georgia. Chintakrindi et al. (2022) provided a strong lens through which to form interview questions for this topic. In addition, a qualitative study by Harper (2011) provided an example of a semi-structured interview technique to explore the experiences of those students who were actively engaged in their campus community. This qualitative research methodology followed established protocols by systematically arranging and categorizing the text from semi-structured interviews. Interview transcripts, notes from observation of interviewees, and textual and non-textual materials allowed a sight line into common themes and a logical chain of evidence (Wong, 2008). The methodology used in this study pulled inspiration from the methods used by Chambers and Chiang (2012), who researched the experiences of undergraduate students using qualitative content analysis with open-ended responses from the National Survey for Student Engagement. Additional work completed by Chintakrindi et al. (2022) examined student success indicators to explore if student success indicators provided researchers with evidence-based insights into best practices to eliminate achievement gaps. These relevant studies provided inspiration for the research design. The researchers focused on

undergraduate student retention, progression, graduation, and the role of certain student success indicators. Tinto (1993, 2012) studied and described the aforementioned student issues or concerns that influence student achievement.

I used the semi-structured interview technique to foster authentic conversations and opportunities for reflection while also maintaining focus and direction in the conversation. This technique allowed for more information and interesting threads to be explored, as the narrative story was woven to explore the expected impact of student success centers across Georgia. I followed Creswell and Creswell's (2018) protocols for interviews. Observation protocols helped outline both descriptive and reflexive notes. Descriptive notes included things such as the physical setting of the interview and a transcript of the interview. Reflexive notes included the personal thoughts that came to mind as the narrative unfolded. I separated the notes by using a single page with a dividing line to mark the sections. The interview protocol supplemented the audio recording of the semi-structured interview with notes in case there was an equipment failure and supplemented the transcription. I collected basic information about the interviewee, provided an introduction of the project; and I opened with a question to set the tone, five to 10 content questions, probing questions, and closing instructions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Research Questions

RQ 1: What factors do students believe contributed toward their persistence at their university?

RQ 2: What do student success personnel perceive as the reasons for the increase in student retention and graduation at their institution?

Selection of Setting, Participants, and Data Collection

According to the University System of Georgia home page, the system (2024b) has approximately 26 higher education institutions, including the following designations:

- Four research universities
- Four comprehensive universities
- Nine state Universities
- Nine state colleges (USG, 2024b)

The USG assigns core characteristics for each of their designations. The Research University designation is categorized with the following characteristics: "...statewide scope of influence, a commitment to excellence and responsiveness in academic achievements that impart national or international status; a range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary academic programming at the baccalaureate, master's and doctoral levels..." (USG, 2024b, para. 2).

Please note several of the designations have similar core characteristics; however, the range of influence is more determinant of the level of designation. Thus, Research Universities' ability to impact on the national or international level differentiates it from other designations.

Similarly, Comprehensive Universities have the charge from the USG to focus on a "...scope of influence defined by the needs of a specific region of the state; a range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary academic programming at the baccalaureate and master's levels,..., including a limited number of professionally oriented doctoral level programs" (USG, 2024b, para. 2). Member institutions of the State University sector receive the mission of providing "a high-quality general education program supporting a variety of disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and professional academic programming at the baccalaureate level, with selected master's and educational specialist degrees, and selected associate degree programs

based on area need and/or interinstitutional collaborations” (USG, 2024b, para. 2). Lastly, State Colleges are responsible for delivering “a high-quality general education program that supports a variety of well-chosen associate programs and prepares students for baccalaureate programs, learning support programs designed to ensure access and opportunity for a diverse student body...” (USG, 2024b, para. 2). For the scope of this study, the researcher selected participants from six public universities in the USG. I selected a combination of Research, Comprehensive, and State Universities because of their similar funding models and diversity of size, student population, and USG designation (one Research, two Comprehensive, and two State Universities). I inquired (Letter of Cooperation) with institutional oversight for permission to select administrator and student participants (see Appendix C).

Population

Based upon the work of EAB—formerly known as the Education Advisory Board—student success and student support are rooted in and birthed by retention theorists such as Spady and Tinto (Venit, 2016). Tinto’s (1975) commitments exemplify the need for institutions to provide more tangible support to ensure and promote student integration. Over the last 50 years, professionals, educators, and theorists have put several initiatives in place to bridge the achievement gap, develop, and implement first-year experience programs, develop early alert systems, and diversify support to advance student success (Venit, 2016).

Student Success Administrators and Personnel

Student success programs and personnel associated with those programs have various names and organizational structures throughout the USG. At some institutions, these offices report up through the Office of the Provost/Chief Academic Officer. At other institutions, they report up through the Office of Student Life. The exact mix of responsibilities for the offices

also varied widely, with it sometimes being responsible for additional programs, such as career planning, in addition to the areas of focus in this study. For this study, I interviewed the senior student affairs professional or the institution’s officer who is charged with monitoring, supporting, and enhancing student success programs (see Appendix D).

Students

The USG had a Fall 2024 enrollment of 364,725 (159,918 males and 204,807 females) across the 26 institutions, which was an all-time high. This was an increase of 5.9% (20,333) from the fall 2023 enrollment (USG, 2023, 2024a). Each of the institutions in the system showed an increase in enrollment when compared to Fall 2023. Research University, Comprehensive University, and State University sectors saw their largest institutional increases, with the Research University sector showing the largest growth over Fall 2023 with 6.2% (USG, 2024a). The USG reported a continuation of the reversal in a two-year downward trend post-COVID-19. Thus, there have been increases for undergraduate and graduate students. The USG (2024a) released the Fall 2024 enrollment brief, which contains demographic information across the 26 institutions, as seen in Table 2.

Table 2

USG–Fall 2024 Demographic Data

	Enrollment	Increase since 2019	Graduate	Race/Ethnicity
Research Universities	160,516	18,290	Master’s	57,426 Hispanic 12%
Comprehensive Universities	100,050	5,834	Doctorate	12,854 Black/African American 25%
State Universities	65,539	3,207	Ed. Specialist	4,250 White/non-Hispanics 42%

State Colleges	38,620	1,410	First Professional	3,846	Asian	14%
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Note. The Demographic was adapted from *Semester Enrollment Report Brief Summer 2024* (USG, 2024a).

For the scope of this study, I sampled from the undergraduate population. The population was nearing the end of their academic journey and would be earning their first undergraduate degree across ethnicities. The sampling process is discussed more in the next section.

Sampling

Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, and Walker (2014) and Creswell and Guetterman (2019) defined purposeful sampling as the intentional selection of “individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon” (Creswell & Guetterman, p. 206). Ary et al. (2014) listed 15 different types of purposeful sampling. These were the comprehensive, the critical case, the maximum variation, the extreme sampling, the typical case, the negative or discrepant case, the homogeneous, the snowball, the intensity, the stratified, the random, the theoretical, the criterion, the opportunistic, and the convenience sampling. As with Ary et al. (2014) defined criterion sampling, Creswell and Guetterman (2019) defined critical sampling as a strategy for selecting individuals critical to the phenomenon, or more importantly, those who meet the researcher’s set criterion. I used the criterion sampling method to select student success personnel.

After selecting student successful personnel, I conducted snowball sampling to select students. Ary et al. (2014) defined snowball sampling as occurring when “the initially selected subjects suggest the names of others who would be appropriate for the sample” (p. 458). Thus, I

asked student success personnel to advise on student selection, as I did not have direct contact with students on each of the selected campuses.

Sample

The study involved participants from five public Georgia universities, including Research, Comprehensive, and State, due to their diverse funding models and student populations. The participation selection included inviting student service and academic administrators to participate in an interview. The criterion for administrator selection was that an administrator must oversee the operations of student success. Thus, I intended to recruit the highest-ranking administrator focused on student success at each institution. If the person in that role was not at the institution for at least two years, then a replacement was determined. Likewise, if no response was received from the highest-ranking administrator, then a replacement was determined. The replacement administrator was someone with substantial professional responsibility related to student success and was someone who had been in the role at the institution for at least three academic years. Contact information for student success professionals was publicly available, and this was used in efforts to contact and recruit study participants (see Appendix D).

A student from four of the five corresponding institutions was recruited with the assistance of the administrator interviewed by the student success staff or their designee. A second student from one institution was recruited to meet the sampling size required. Criteria for selected students were that they were entering their final year of study for their first bachelor's degree. I obtained contact information for student participants through the offices of the various universities that are participating. Once the student accepted the invitation, a time and location for the interview was arranged (see Appendix E). I aimed to learn more about the experience of

the student and how the university's student success center provided support to help them progress toward an undergraduate degree. None of the students who participated in the study identified as male. One male student was suggested through the snowball method but did not respond to the interview request after multiple attempts.

Data Collection

Creswell and Guetterman (2019) outlined four qualitative data collection methods: observations, interviews and questionnaires, documents, and audiovisual materials. Two of the outlined methods were best suited for this study: questionnaires (surveys—see Appendix A) and interviews (see Appendix B). Participants completed a survey and participated in a semi-structured personal interview. The survey helped frame the semi-structured interview by giving respondents the opportunity to begin formulating their thoughts around the topic as well as by obtaining baseline information about the student and student affairs professional. Answers from the survey informed choices to omit, reword, or change the order of a question to further probe the interviewee (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

I obtained a complete narrative on the impact of student success personnel and programming from both the perspective of the student and professional staff through a semi-structured interview. Using the narrative inquiry framework, these interviews provided “a way of understanding human experience through stories that, in turn, help us better understand the human phenomena and human existence” (Kim, 2016, p. 190). The narrative included both paraphrasing and direct quotes from the participants in support of the research questions, framing of the theory, as well as themes and patterns. My study aimed to explore student persistence and provide a systematic way of reviewing and documenting what students and administrators report about their institutional experiences. I provided insight into the relationship between those

documented experiences and the impact of student success centers on progress toward their first college degree. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

Data Analysis

I designed questions to learn more about their experiences through the lens of Tinto's (1993) model of institutional departure and followed Saldaña's (2016) process of pattern coding in two rounds related to research questions and theories. I used meta coding during the first round to identify broad themes related to RQs and then performed a second round of coding to refine the threads and find alignment with the theories (Saldaña, 2016). I used a deductive approach in coding and an inductive approach while developing themes and patterns (Saldaña, 2016). The first round of coding used open coding to help create a broad initial review (Saldaña, 2016). I used the findings from the first round to inform the creation of a more refined code table for a second round of coding. This second and more refined round of coding helped sharpen the focal points and explore the possibility of more consistent results (Saldaña, 2016). I used a separate code table for each group of interviewees with the students using one table and the student success personnel using a separate code table. The process for each group remained the same, however (See Appendix A).

By using semi-structured interview questions, I explored and learned more about the attitudes of students toward their experiences with the university's student success center, their skill development since enrollment, as well as their awareness and confidence toward their undergraduate education. Responses from the open-ended questions were coded and classified using Intellectus Qualitative, a software program for analyzing qualitative research studies. Word frequency counts were recorded to find common phrases, which were then used to help identify the various themes that emerged from the data (Atenstaedt, 2017). I coded responses

and used Intellectus Qualitative to help determine common themes across multiple interviews and to enhance trustworthiness (Intellectus Qualitative, 2024). Thematic analysis framed the responses to provide a structured analysis of the experiences of students who utilized the services provided by the centers (Caulfield, 2023). The analysis aimed to clarify the experiences of the students and student success administrators within the context of their institution. Caulfield (2023) prescribed thematic analysis, and I followed a six-step process to: become familiar with the findings through developing the transcript, develop shorthand labels or codes, and round out the initial steps by identifying broader themes. I reviewed and defined those themes for the reader and shared the results. Overall, I utilized a three-iteration coding system, wherein I coded (1) for research questions, (2) for components of Tinto's (1993) Academic and Social Integration theory, (3) for Tinto's (1993) commitments. Lastly, I utilized the data for the discovery of themes and patterns.

Researcher Role and Subjectivity

Since I served as the primary research instrument for this study given its research design, it is important to recognize and acknowledge any biases and personal subjectivities. As a first-generation student, I have clear memories of working through new student orientation and feeling as if those making presentations were speaking in a foreign language. I had never been exposed to the terms credit hour, block schedule, preregistration, drop/add, or advisor before that time. I was away from home for the first time and trying to navigate while feeling completely overwhelmed. Fortunately, I was assigned a faculty member, Mark, who took their job of mentoring seriously and spent hours with me, guiding me through the process. When Mark learned that I was planning to drop out after my first quarter because of finances, he worked to find me two jobs on campus that made it possible for me to finish the year. That kind of

academic and social support changed the entire trajectory of my family's life. As someone who has worked on a campus since 2001, I have seen the transformative power that student success personnel can have on students countless times. These professionals are regularly presented with the opportunity to help chart the course for educational persistence in what can be seen as small, but incredibly impactful, moments. In both academic and social interactions, these professionals can mean the difference between a student ending or pausing their educational journey or crossing the stage at graduation.

The experiences as both a student and as someone who has witnessed the interactions between students and student success administrators can create bias. I have worked at two institutions, where part of my professional responsibilities has been to administer financial aid programs, including the review of countless applications for scholarship support. All of this helps to create a lens that gives an awareness of what it is like to be an undergraduate college student through personal and professional experiences. It is important to note, however, that direct engagement with undergraduate students has been limited. To reduce bias, I took several steps to ensure the project's trustworthiness, such as peer-reviewed coding for interviews, data, and analysis.

As noted above, I maintained reflexive notes throughout the interview process and a reflexive journal throughout the dissertation development process. Creswell and Creswell (2018) advised qualitative researchers to be reflective on "how their role in the study and their personal background, culture, and experiences hold potential in shaping their interpretations, such as the themes they advance and the meaning they ascribe to the data" (p. 184). Thus, reflexive notes and journaling served as a method by which to maintain subjectivity. I am the first in my family

to attend college and have previously worked at eight colleges and universities. In addition, I have had children attend two other universities (including one university sampled in the study).

Trustworthiness

Ary et al. (2014) discussed the issues of trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility lies at the core of trustworthiness. Both Ary et al. (2014) and Maxwell (2013) have outlined various methods to ensure validity, including triangulation, peer debriefing, member check, extended fieldwork or prolonged engagement, reflexivity, and investigation of negative cases. Several researchers, including Creswell (1994), Merriam (1998), and Spall (1998), recommend using peer debriefing to improve the validity and credibility of qualitative research. Peer debriefing, through exposing a peer with an arms-length and disinterested position to initial findings and getting their feedback, strengthens the validity of findings in research (Maxwell, 2013). Peer debriefing involves the sharing and discussion of methodology and research findings with a set of peers to gain their perspective (Maxwell, 2013). Throughout the project, I utilized a peer writing group to question assumptions and examine alternative interpretations of data analysis, thereby enhancing validity by verifying the accuracy of phrase labels. Barber and Walczak (2009) “recommend orienting the peer debriefer to the data and research questions, reviewing 20–25% of the data... meetings between researcher and debriefer” (p. 16) to increase the validity of qualitative research.

Participants were given a verbatim transcript of the semi-structured interview after transcription to review their feedback. Additionally, they had the chance to examine the narrative story and code table, offering their insights into the analysis. This process functioned as a type of member verification (Ary et al., 2014). This feedback enhanced the trustworthiness of the project by giving those interviewed an opportunity to help shape their story while ensuring

a certain standard and consistency across the inquiry (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I utilized all feedback to enhance the results, narrate the participant's story, and enhance comprehension of the impact of student success centers.

Foste (2018) relied on Jones, Torres, and Arminio's (2014) description of transferability, as the focus was less on generalizability but more on the reader's ability to consider the findings within their local context, which is more specific for narrative research. Dependability is based on the consistency of the findings and the ability to reproduce similar results with similar employment of the methodology (Ary et al., 2014). Ary et al. (2014) advised qualitative researchers to utilize audit trails, replication models, coding agreements (iteration and iteration agreements), and corroboration or triangulation of the findings. Data from both administrators and students at the same institution provided a method to triangulate some of the findings. During data collection, I kept memos or notes as a form of auditing, as well as interview protocols for each of the participants. During the data analysis process, I intended to conduct several iterations of the analysis to ensure code agreement. Confirmability controlled for bias as was described in I's subjectivity (Ary et al., 2014; Maxwell, 2013). Therefore, I conducted activities such as memo writing, peer debriefing, auditing, member verification, triangulation, and audits to establish credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

Data Presentation

Following Polkinghorne's (1995) lead, the data collected from the surveys and semi-structured interviews told the story of the impact of student success centers across Georgia. I accomplished this feat by focusing on key events, actions taken by both the student and the staff, and other feedback received from pulling them into a narrative thread. I paid special attention to those areas (if identified) of strong congruence or incongruence—attempting to show the

significance of the lived experience of the participants. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) outlined five different methods for presenting the data: comparison table, hierarchical tree, present figures, map, and demographic table. I shared the codes created using software along with the number of time(s) a theme was discussed at the participant level as a table.

I used an additional table to visually share the key characteristics of the subjects interviewed in the study. I aggregated and reported gender, race, and age in a demographic table. As these stories were presented, I paid particular attention to all the factors that influenced the narrative including the “historical, political, environmental, personal, and all things that have influenced the story and anyone involved with the story” (Kim, 2016, p. 236).

The final collection of stories aimed to develop linkages between the stories to inform a broad, approachable, and easily digestible narrative to assist educational leaders in improving student outcomes across the USG. Kim (2016) stated “the science of narrative or narratology, where we substantiate our knowledge claims through narrative, making scholarly contributions to advancing our respective fields” (p. 237) when referring to the outcome of a narrative inquiry project. This definition helped frame the hope that the study helped others understand the impact of this life-changing work that student affairs professionals engage in on a daily basis. I shared the final paper with the participating institutions, and I prepared proposals for conference presentations concerning organizations interested in student success.

Study Limitations

The focus of this study created some limitations. First, I used Tinto’s (1975, 1993) Model of Institutional Departure as a theoretical framework, but it was not a perfect match. Furthermore, when employing narrative research, I relied on the responses of the students and administrators who willingly participated. Their responses were limited by their comfort level

and ability to respond to the questions. Furthermore, the USG designations' exclusion of student success centers at TCSG and Georgia Military College limited the study's applicability to similar-sized institutions with similar student demographics. Furthermore, the exclusion of state colleges from the USG designation limited the study, as their inclusion facilitated a more comprehensive cross-comparison of data across the USG designations. Both the administrators' and students' sampling methods served as a limit; specifically, the administrator's selection of students through snowball sampling may have introduced a form of embedded bias, as the selection process was not randomized. Additionally, both the administrator and the student criteria created a limit, as administrators who did not meet the criteria could have provided information on the impact of student success centers on student success if they had been included. Likewise, the exclusion of students within the freshmen to sophomore classifications served as a limit, as each classification potentially had specific student success needs that added to the narrative of the impact of the student success centers.

Study Delimitations

The focus of this study required this researcher to make some decisions based on logistical elements and desired scope. A point I considered included the focus on certain students who actively used the services provided by the student success center. Focusing on students who already took full advantage of the resources available to them also took away from learning from those students who were not engaging with the center, thereby demonstrating a certain missing element of Tinto's (1993) framework. In addition, there was a limitation of using only colleges and universities in a similar geographic area. The inclusion of three of the four types of institutions within the USG served as the scope of the study. The five institutions in the proposed study included the following USG designations: research university,

comprehensive university, and state university. Choosing only one student and one staff member from each institution limited the scope of the findings. Finally, limiting the study to those students seeking their first college degree limited the pool of possible research subjects.

Ethical Considerations

Policies and procedures outlined by Valdosta State University's Office of Sponsored Research and Research were followed throughout the study, including Institutional Review Board IRB approval prior to any recruitment of interviewees and data collection (see Appendix G). Additionally, I completed and adhered to the ethical considerations for human research as outlined within the CITI Training Program (See Appendix G). I explained to all participants the purpose of the research project, the duration of their involvement, the potential risks and benefits, and the voluntary nature of participation (Valdosta State University, 2023). Additionally, I disseminated information about the data coding, participant code/pseudonym process, and recorded retention to all participants. Participant codes and pseudonyms ensured the confidentiality of institutions and participants' data. I ensured informed voluntary consent as participants were allowed to withdraw at any time should they choose to do so. Additionally, I included a discussion about voluntary consent at each point of data collection. I utilized a password-protected system by which to store, access, and manage the data. Survey results and transcripts of the semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B) will be retained for five years after the completion of the dissertation and stored in a password-protected cloud-based OneDrive account.

I built upon earlier work by Meara and Schmidt (1991), as well as the Belmont Report's (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) standards for ethical conduct that inspired Bourdieu (2000), who gave a

framework for researchers to follow. This included “autonomy” (Bourdieu, p. 4) of the participant, meaning that consideration was given to what the participant is being asked to do, and “commitment to do no harm” (Bourdieu, p. 4), meaning a commitment not to do anything that may cause stress or discomfort. The third standard, “beneficence” (Bourdieu, p. 4), committed the researcher to attempt to use the research to help the participants and participating organizations. The final standard, “justice” (Bourdieu, p. 4), which committed the researcher to not use the research to benefit themselves if it is detrimental to the participants. Some ethical considerations specific to narrative inquiry as “good narrative practices” include an understanding that “narrativizing” (Richardson, 1990, as cited by Kim, 2016, p. 103) has a component of moral responsibility for the researcher. Additionally, the researcher’s responsibility is to ensure an ethical relationship with the participants, wherein the participants feel safe, connected, passionate, and honored in telling their stories (Richardson as cited by Kim, 2016, p. 103). Thus, I followed ethical standards of the American Education Research Association (AERA) to safeguard and ensure the participants’ perspectives and voices to honor their stories (AERA, 2009, as cited by Kim, 2016, p. 102).

Summary

This chapter detailed the approach I used to examine the possible impact of student success centers at public higher education institutions in the state of Georgia. Student success centers need to provide students with the necessary tools and important motivation, especially to complete their undergraduate degree. Narrative inquiry enabled me to collect and present the experiences of student affairs professionals and students, highlighting how the centers affected student achievement. To strengthen the body of knowledge on the topic, I summarized and highlighted the areas where there is alignment, and areas where there is not symmetry between

what administrators and students shared as the areas of high impact from their perspective(s). My hope is by doing so, greater efficiency in resource allocation can be identified to bolster the programs and areas with the highest positive impact. As stated above, I adhered to the ethical standards outlined by Valdosta State University (see Appendix G), CITI Training Program, and Kim's (2016) narrative inquiry-specific ethics throughout the data collection and analysis processes (CITI Training Program; Kim, 2016; Valdosta State University, n.d., see Appendix G).

Chapter IV

Findings and Results

Overview

This chapter will include participant profiles and findings related to Research Questions 1 and 2 (RQ1 and RQ2), Tinto's (1993) Academic and Social Integration, as well as Tinto's (2012) Commitments. Additionally, the chapter will provide a breakdown of the coding and thematization of both the inductive datasets (related to the research questions) and the deductive datasets (related to theories). The chapter will highlight the emergent themes that may not directly align with the research questions. Finally, the chapter will integrate both the inductive (RQ) and deductive (theory) datasets, resulting in paired themes that correspond with both the research questions and theoretical frameworks.

Coding & Thematization

The coding process included both AI coding and deductive coding, along with thematization with Intellectus Qualitative software (Intellectus Qualitative, 2024). In the AI coding approach, an inductive method was used to identify codes and findings related to both research questions for students and administrators. Deductive coding was used to identify codes related to components of the theoretical framework. It is important to note that the student data relates to RQ1, while the administrator data relates to RQ2, as seen in Table 3. The students' data comprised 187 coded segments with 18 codes related to Research Question 1 (RQ1), also revealing four overarching themes. Several themes were consolidated: Holistic Student Support, Student Support and Well-being, and Student Engagement Spectrum with nine incorporated

codes. For the administrators, there were a total of 238 coded segments, resulting in 29 codes related to Research Question 2 (RQ2) and three overarching themes. I consolidated several themes, such as Holistic Approach to Student Success and Holistic Student Support Systems, with 12 incorporated codes.

Table 3

Inductive AI-Assisted Coding and Thematization

Participant Type	Coded Segment	RQ 1	RQ2	Themes and Patterns
Students	187	18 Codes 9 Incorporated Codes	*n/a	4 themes for RQ 1
Administrators	238	*n/a	18 Codes 12 Incorporated Codes	3 themes for RQ 2

Note: The * n/a indicates that the data was not applicable for administrators in answering RQ1 nor was the student data applicable in answering RQ2.

The coding and thematization process involved deductive coding, resulting in the development of eight codes—four representing Tinto’s (1993) concepts of Social and Academic Integration and four representing Tinto’s commitments (2012). This approach aimed to identify themes related to both integration and commitments from the perspectives of students and administrators. The students’ data included 127 coded segments, revealing four themes: Commitment to Excellence in Education, Equitable Learning Environment, Holistic Academic and Social Engagement, and Holistic Student Engagement, as seen in Table 4. For the administrators, there were 184 coded segments, which led to the identification of four themes: Equitable Learning Environment, Holistic Academic Experience, Holistic Student-Centric Approach, and Social Engagement Spectrum, as seen in Table 4.

Table 4*Deductive Coding and Thematization*

Participant Type	Coded Segments	Tinto Social and Academic Integration	Tinto's Commitments	Themes and Patterns
Students	127	4	4	1 theme 2 emergent themes
Administrators	184	4	4	2 themes 1 emergent theme

The study benefited from both coding methods and thematization. AI enables efficient data discovery, while deductive methods are more intuitive and better capture the nuances of qualitative research, adding a human element to the process. Additionally, deductive coding facilitates a focused exploration of data related to specific theories and their components (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Both datasets were integrated into the findings, allowing for a cross-comparison of the data from administrators and students, which will further enhance the connections within the data.

Participants

The study consisted of five administrators from five institutions and five student participants from four institutions. As outlined in Chapter Three, the University System of Georgia comprises 26 higher education institutions, classified as research universities, comprehensive universities, state universities, and state colleges (University System of Georgia, 2024b). One student personnel administrator and two student participants were from a research institution, as seen in Table 5. The selection for comprehensive universities included two Academic and Student Affairs Administrators and two student participants. Lastly, the selection for state universities included two student personnel administrators and one student participant.

Table 5*Student and Administrator Participants' Demographics*

Student Participants						
Pseudonym	USG Designation	Age	Gender Identity	Race or Ethnic Background	Academic Major or Course of Study	
Leni	Research	21	Female	Other	Chemistry, Biology minor	
Whitney	Research	21	Female	Black	Kinesiology	
Ruth	State University	20	Female	Other	Psychology	
Daniela	Comprehensive	22	Female	Other	Public Relations	
Jess	Comprehensive	21	Female	White	Biology, Pre-Professional, Psych minor	
Administrator Participants						
Pseudonym	USG Designation	Age	Gender Identity	Race or Ethnic Background	Time in current position	Time in HE and time in student services
Amy	Research	60	Female	White	8 years	25 years; 8 years
Monica	State University	35	Female	Black	1.5 years	5 years; 5 years
Peter	Comprehensive	39	Male	White	1 year	14 years; 10 years
Jan	State University	47	Female	White	4 years	25 years; 25 years
Carol	Comprehensive	35	Female	White	2 years	14 years; 14 years

Participant Profiles

Student Leni self-identified as a female, age 21. She marked her race/ethnic origin as “other.” She is majoring in chemistry and minoring in biology at a Research Institution. She was a dual-enrollment student for her senior year of high school. She accelerated her coursework and began college at 17. Her current plan is to attend dental school after graduation.

Leni was one of the student participants who shared that their parents were in the military. As such, she “bounced around a lot” through her school years. An intriguing part of her story that has impacted her educational journey is that because of her father’s deployment, she learned nearly all of her middle and high school mathematics in another language at an off-post bilingual school. She is a STEM major, so this has been a substantive obstacle for her to overcome.

The family eventually settled at Fort Eisenhower in Georgia the summer before her senior year of high school. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted her first two years at the Research Institution, and she began in the hybrid program with classes and coursework completed online. She has lived at home throughout her college experience.

Leni has been involved in academic clubs during her time at the Research Institution. She currently holds a leadership position in the school’s chapter of the American Chemical Society, planning the social events and celebrations for the club. For her, it is a wonderful opportunity to match her academic and social skills.

Leni shared that she has been particularly inspired by one of her chemistry professors. During a challenging point of the semester, the professor shared that they had failed a similar course as an undergraduate but ultimately went on to earn a PhD in the field. That firsthand story and moment of authentic vulnerability were inspirational to Leni. Further, Leni developed a deep friendship and rapport with one of the teaching assistants in the chemistry department that has been valuable.

When discussing their interaction with the student success programs at the Research Institution, Leni spoke frankly about their experience. They have had a very positive experience with the tutoring services. They opined that there is more need than what is available. This is

particularly important for students who are not residential students. She would like to replicate her experience with virtual tutoring, which she had access to through the military. Additionally, they have identified a problem with students who require additional time and a distraction-free testing environment for exams and quizzes.

Leni was impressed with the reactive work done by the office in one of her chemistry classes. After half the class failed the first exam, the tutoring office came in and shared available resources. That classroom visit was a catalyst for Leni to begin her journey with the office, and it has been a giant boost to her academic success.

Part of our conversation about how the institution reflected Tinto's commitments focused on inclusiveness. Leni shared that they sometimes feel that the institution and her classmates show prejudice related to her age. She mentioned a few instances of micro-aggression related to her youth and perceived inexperience. In one example, fellow students in a club related to her major would consistently ignore or even mock her suggestions for club activities, "they think I'm too young...they are like 'you wouldn't understand' but that doesn't mean that I don't have experience." In another example, she shared that she was the member that was always asked to handle social media outreach since she was the youngest in the group.

Student Whitney self-identified as a Black female, age 20. She is majoring in biology and is on the pre-professional track with a minor in psychology at a Research Institution. She intends to pursue a career in physical therapy. This was the only interview that was audio-only, with Whitney not willing to be on video.

Whitney grew up in a small town outside of Athens, Georgia. She chose to attend this Research Institution because she intends to major in kinesiology. She is keen to work with kids but not in education or childcare, so she chose kinesiology. Her ultimate goal is to become a

pediatric physical therapist, but that goal is being weighed against the prospect of the additional debt of graduate school. Whitney has been involved on campus in a limited manner. She lives on campus and has “nice enough” roommates, and she described herself as a “loner.” She has been involved as a member of the Caribbean Dance Team at the school.

When asked to discuss her experience with the student success office, Whitney had nothing but positive things to say. She shared that the team has helped her connect with students who are like her and better understand what to expect from college. She provided a specific example of the office helping her succeed in a statistics class by assisting her with understanding the required software package. She was also complimentary of their ability to advertise all the events and services that the office makes available— “There are signs everywhere, and you get emails.” She appreciates the student success professionals’ proactive outreach and that they “keep up with you even if you have not been there in a while.” She appreciated their encouragement and the school’s commitment to holistic wellness.

A unique part of our conversation about student success focused on the food at the institution. She shared that it would be advantageous for the school to offer healthier options in the dining hall. She found that they needed more and better options to feel better and focus on school. Like many students, she uses her meal plan for every meal and has been disappointed by the lack of fresh and healthy options.

Student Ruth self-identified as a female, age 20. She referred to herself as “Hispanic” during our interview. She is majoring in psychology at a State University. She has been very involved in the campus life and student success programs. She works in the student success office, is a member of a national sorority and an academic club and is a leader in multicultural clubs on campus. Ruth grew up in a small town in middle Georgia. She was very involved in

high school clubs and activities, including the Future Farmers of America and Debate Club. She had a wide college search and applied to seven universities, ultimately deciding to attend State University because of its size and location.

She shared that she was a first-generation college student from an immigrant family. In her experience, sharing and discussing her mental health challenges and anxiety has been difficult with her family. As such, she chose her major to one day be able to assist other first-generation students from a Latine background in navigating the cultural norms and build awareness within her community.

She shared that there were moments during her time at State University when she gave serious consideration to transferring. She was disappointed with the lack of diversity on campus and had “lots going on in my personal life.” She shared frustration with the advisors at the career center not providing adequate guidance from her point of view. Attending a multicultural conference her sophomore year and getting an on-campus job ignited a new experience for her, and she has been an engaged student from that point forward. She also shared that the friends she has made through her sorority have been particularly inspirational.

Ruth shared very positive experiences with the one-on-one counseling that is available at State University. Further, they have been helped by the academic advising center and career coaching staff, although she has had “four or five” different academic advisors assigned to her during her time there. She has observed the turnover of employees in that role. In discussing Tinto’s commitment to student success, Ruth spoke about the excellent job that State University does in showing that student success is central to their mission. She highlighted the school’s ability to advertise the different resources that are made available and the relatively new

“serenity den” in the student center that is designed for students who are overstimulated and need a quiet and calming place to decompress.

Through our conversation, she also addressed a few points of concern. One note of frustration has been the difficulty in being able to get into the classes she needs at the time she needs them. She is balancing a part-time job and campus activities, making scheduling more complicated. While discussing Tinto’s commitment to inclusivity, Ruth expressed her ongoing concern for the homogeneity of the campus. She said, “Overall, it is a PWI, and as a person of color, it is harder to feel included.” She continued, “I have to work ten times harder. I am proud of who I am... I just need to have a space to be successful.”

Student Daniela self-identified as a female, age 22. She marked her race/ethnic origin as “other,” and she is a first-generation college student. She is majoring in public relations at a comprehensive university. She is a peer tutor and ambassador for the student success center.

Daniela grew up in Metro Atlanta and attended a public high school in DeKalb County. Her high school career was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and she did her junior and senior years through remote instruction. She shared that that experience helped prepare her for college as it “set me up to be independent.”

Daniela spoke about her path to choosing a major. Initially, she was a nursing major but quickly found that she was having difficulty in chemistry courses. A peer who was familiar with her writing skills suggested that she consider a change to public relations, and that has been a great fit for her. She is working on securing full-time employment in public relations in the sports sector.

Daniela has been incredibly active in the peer mentoring program at Comprehensive University. The program matches incoming, first-year students with a returning student who has

at least 15 credit hours to assist with the college transition. The mentors help the new students access campus resources, maintain scholarships, and persist through their first year of college. Daniela assists the mentoring program by helping with communications, event planning, and social media. She is very passionate about the program and said it was one of the best at the school.

In discussing Tinto's commitments, Daniela shared that the university has advisors embedded within the individual colleges, and that shows a commitment to success. She has shared that on a personal level she has had three different advisors during her college experience and hoped that there was a way to limit that turnover moving forward. While discussing Tinto's commitment to an inclusive environment, Daniela said that while the students at the school were predominantly white, "the school does not cater to them. Except maybe for Greek life." She also mentioned that she had seen athletes at the school have a different experience than other students.

Daniela shared that she would like to see additional funding for events and supplies for student success programs. Furthermore, a designated place on campus to house all of the student success programs that were welcoming and had fun activities for engagement would make an impact on student success.

Student Jess self-identified as a White female, age 21. She is majoring in biology at a comprehensive university. She works as a supplemental instructor and peer tutor in the student success office. Jess is a former varsity soccer player at the institution.

Jess grew up in rural Virginia with a graduating high school class of 175. She played soccer for most of her spare time in high school. Because of the size of her high school, she spent additional time playing with travel club teams that were independent of her

school. Athletics was the big motivator of her college search. She met the coach of Comprehensive University through club soccer, and that relationship led to her commitment to the institution after applying to only that institution in her senior year of high school.

Jess has been active on campus. She lived on campus in her freshman year and became involved with the Student Alumni Association. She works part-time with the Center for Academic Success, with most of her time being dedicated to tutoring. While she no longer plays for the soccer team due to injury and a change in coaching, she remains a very active fan of all of the university's athletic teams.

During our discussion, she was able to quickly share examples of both professors and students who inspired her along her academic journey. Her personal use of supplemental instruction and tutoring has made her an advocate for the program and eventually led to her position as a supplemental instructor in both science and history courses through professor recommendations.

When discussing Tinto's commitments, Jess talked about the importance of communications related to the services available to students. She said that she appreciated "the continued emails. It is a reminder that they are there and that they care about your success." As a supplemental instructor, she is impressed with the ongoing training and development required to keep the job.

In addition, she made a point to make sure that we discussed the employees of the Student Success Center at the Comprehensive University. She said they are friendly and do an impressive job checking in with students to ensure they stay in school and graduate. She lifted up the special events that the office will host around final exam time. She finds those events

very encouraging on a personal level. She also mentioned that the space the center is located in is open and welcoming.

Administrator Amy self-identified as a White female age 60. Amy had served eight years in her current position and 25 years overall at the time of the interview. She started her career in student success programs after an earlier role as a faculty member. At the time of the interview, she was approaching the end of her tenure at the research university and preparing for retirement. Her retirement celebration had taken place earlier that week, and she mentioned that the timing was influencing her responses.

Amy grew up in England and moved to the United States when she was 18. She noted that both of her parents had left school at 15, but they always encouraged her passion for learning. Amy began college as a non-traditional student, enrolling after having her two children—starting classes around age 30, when her youngest child entered kindergarten. She shared that she divorced while pursuing her bachelor’s degree.

Amy recounted a significant moment when she decided to attend graduate school for an advanced degree and possibly a career in academia. She had traveled to San Francisco to attend a professional conference through her role in the Honors Program at her undergraduate institution. During the trip, she rented a bicycle and was crossing the Golden Gate Bridge when she was overcome by the realization of being a first-generation student from another country with the chance to travel and join a scholarly community. This experience opened her eyes to new opportunities, prompting her to apply to graduate school. She was accepted and pursued a PhD in sociology, focusing her dissertation on the professionalization of teachers who entered the profession through alternative credentialing.

She described her impactful relationship with a faculty member in the Sociology Department as a reason for her choice of academic discipline. She praised this faculty member's pedagogical approach, which emphasized an engaged classroom where critical thinking was valued more than rote memorization. Additionally, she reflected on her personal growth journey as an undergraduate in her math courses, beginning her college experience with remedial algebra.

Before transitioning to her administrative role, Amy worked as a faculty member at several institutions. In discussing the differences between the two roles, she remarked, "It is like being in the *Wizard of Oz*. When I was in the faculty, these things just happened... Then I got an administrative job, and it felt like a curtain was opened." She was struck when she attended a conference on student success and repeatedly heard attendees refer to faculty at their institutions as barriers to student success rather than partners in the process.

Amy spoke passionately about the necessity of a designated physical space for student success initiatives. At her institution, the designated space has become a central hub. Students have a space to study without the need for silence, expressing that they feel welcome and benefit from free refreshments. She also emphasized the necessity for a central university hub that supports faculty in their teaching and learning endeavors. At her institution, that focus has shifted to online instruction and technology. She is concerned about this new emphasis on instructional design over classroom activities and faculty development.

Amy described retention, progression, and graduation programs as a complex web. She said that improving student outcomes is not a one-size-fits-all solution; it involves many factors beyond students' control. One example we discussed was the effect of grade inflation in high schools, which has led many students to begin college believing they are academically prepared

because of the messages they received in high school. They often face a harsh reality when they receive their first college grades, necessitating that student success professionals assist them in rebuilding their confidence. In her experience, students who excel in high school and never sought help are the most challenging to encourage using institutional services such as supplemental instruction, tutoring, and writing centers. Many wait too long in the semester to take advantage of these resources and find it difficult to recover their grades.

Administrator Monica self-identified as a Black female age 35. Monica had served 18 months in her current position at a State University and has worked in student success programs for a total of five years. This was her first management position in higher education after an earlier career as a government contractor.

Monica described herself as a “military brat” who grew up near multiple military bases, primarily in the southeastern United States. She graduated from high school in middle Georgia, pursued an economics degree at a USG institution, and graduated at the age of 19, all while working throughout her college experience. She was actively involved as a student, particularly with the Future Business Leaders of America and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) student organizations.

After college, she began working with several federal agencies and as a federal contractor. She has extensive experience with community relations and administering grants such as the federal TRIO programs that are designed to increase access to higher education for economically disadvantaged students. She remarked that she was glad she was “not a higher ed lifer” because that outside experience has been helpful in her conversations with students as they navigate their own personal and professional trajectories. Additionally, the institution relies

heavily on its advisory boards to ensure that the curriculum aligns with the needs of the local workforce.

She was initially elevated to her position on an interim basis before being appointed permanently in 2023. While serving in a leadership role, she still works directly with students and finds great fulfillment in that engagement. She believes that the first-year experience program is having a tremendous impact on campus. However, the large cohort of first-year students presents a significant challenge for the course registration process.

She is particularly aware of the need for social integration of minority students on campus. She serves as a mentor for the African American Male Initiative and noted that they require more social opportunities. The necessity of social opportunities for all traditionally minority and underserved groups was briefly discussed. While not an official duty, she also maintains close contact with the institution's cultural and women's centers.

In closing, she made two final points. The first was her general concern that the student success initiatives at the school were becoming too focused on quantitative measures instead of considering the success of individual students. Secondly, she shared that her office was conducting extensive outreach across campus to emphasize that retention, progression, and graduation are the responsibilities of the entire institution and not just their office alone. They are hosting seminars on the topic that are open to the entire campus community.

Administrator Peter self-identified as a White man age 39. Peter has served in his role as executive director at a Comprehensive University for one year, having moved into the senior-level position after the retirement of his previous supervisor. With 14 years of experience in higher education, he began his career as an English faculty member at a different institution before transitioning into student success programs four years later.

During his undergraduate years, Peter was a commuter student who worked full-time while completing his English degree. He noted that several faculty members inspired him during college, though he did not mention any relationships with fellow students that were influential during that time. After finishing his English degree, Peter immediately entered graduate school, serving as a teaching assistant (TA) while pursuing a master's degree in English and a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. The TA position eventually evolved into an adjunct instructor position.

His experience in the Writing Lab prompted his transition into student success administration. Although he finds his work in administration inspiring, he remarked that it entails "a lot more meetings, reports, and data analysis. I honestly did not know what that side of the world involved." When asked about aspects he disliked about the transition, he mentioned feeling overwhelmed by the bureaucracy and the need for maintaining a paper trail.

He appreciates the partnerships that enhance students' educational experiences both in and out of class. He collaborates closely with the associate dean in each college responsible for student outcomes. Additionally, their focus on executive functioning and peer mentoring for first-year students is proving to have a positive impact.

One unique program discussed was his office's work with the Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally (HOPE) Scholarship recipients. Georgia's HOPE Scholarship is available to Georgia residents who have shown academic achievement in high school through graduating with a 3.0 HOPE grade point average and four full rigor credits from an approved course list (University System of Georgia, Student Affairs, n.d.). Myriad factors impact the amount a student receives per semester, including the institution the attend and hours attempted, with awards ranging from \$1,635 to \$5,256 for 15 credit hours per semester (Georgia Student Finance

Commission, n.d.). To maintain HOPE, enrolled college students must maintain a 3.0 GPA in college at regular checkpoints. His institution runs a program for HOPE Scholar outreach, which helps coach and guide HOPE recipients on maintaining or regaining their scholarships through proactive outreach. They have demonstrated that the ability to maintain HOPE has been linked to improved graduation rates. Similarly, they offer some need-based scholarships, but to retain them, recipients must take advantage of the infrastructure that the office has put in place.

Administrator Jan self-identified as a White female age 47. She has worked in higher education for 25 years—all of that in student success programs. She began working in the field as an undergraduate student at the same State University where she presently works. She has been in her current position for four years.

Jan also grew up as an “Army brat” and moved around a dozen times as a child. Jan spoke a lot about her undergraduate experience, which was an impactful time in her life that has shaped her current professional path. She had a very difficult time transitioning to college. She ended up nearly failing out after her freshman year, stating that she “was not successful whatsoever.” She had a difficult situation with her roommate and was unable to successfully integrate into the social elements (formal or informal) at the campus and shared that there was “no faculty or staff support for my situation.” After a short break, she transferred to a nearby institution to complete her bachelor’s degree. She contrasts her experience at her first institution with the institution from where she graduated very clearly. She praised the academic advising at her second school and valued the faculty support in several disciplines. She remarked that the “culture in the classroom supported your efforts around learning.”

After graduating, she began working as an Administrative Assistant in the admissions office at the State University where she has worked for 15 years. After a few moves,

promotions, and restructures she now serves as the Assistant Vice President for Student Success. She has responsibility for a wide range of student success initiatives with a particular emphasis on retention. She spoke deeply about how her own academic experience has helped prepare her for this role. As an undergraduate, she learned how to clearly communicate through a class in entrepreneurship. During her master's program, she took several courses in student development theory that have helped shape her reference points. Finally, her doctoral program helped her strengthen her research skills and develop cases for support using empirical evidence.

Jan was one of the administrators who discussed the Student Success Center's mission and resources. They regularly use text messages, newsletters, campus outreach, and social media to share action items with students. They have invested in hiring a full-time position dedicated to communicating their messages.

She considers their work to be successful when a student is balanced in key areas: academic achievement, sense of purpose, sense of belonging, engagement, and well-being (physical and mental). Part of Jan's focus has been working with academic leadership to help build empathy among the faculty. She remarked that many have had a challenging time since the COVID-19 pandemic, meeting students where they are academically. She believes that partnering with faculty is critical to student success as they are generally the first to know if a student is struggling or facing adversity and have a clear view into how a student is doing with those key areas identified. She is also an advocate for making more student success programs mandatory for certain classes saying, "students do not always know what is best for them."

Administrator Carol self-identified as a White female age 35. She has been with her Comprehensive university for 14 years—all in student success programs. She has been in her current position for two years. Carol had an unconventional path through her undergraduate

education. She did not enjoy her high school experience and began taking classes at the local community college to satisfy her high school graduation requirements. She started at a private liberal arts college but did not have a positive experience. She left college for two semesters while she considered her next academic steps and ultimately transferred to a public comprehensive institution to finish her undergraduate degree.

Carol had a professional background in digital marketing and communications before beginning her career trajectory in student success administration. That background has proven useful as she spends time making sure students are aware of the services provided by the office. The background allows her to create collateral material and develop strategies that drive engagement. The student success program at the Comprehensive University is having a positive impact on the institution's ability to retain and progress students. Carol shared that they have an 85-89% retention rate for students who use their services. That compares to an overall graduation rate of around 50%.

Carol had a deep affection for the work of Vincent Tinto that was developed through her own academic work and research, and we had a robust discussion about how his commitments are being demonstrated on their campus. Faculty members at the university have widely adopted an early alert system to proactively engage students who are not performing well in a course. Further, their supplemental instruction program is one of the few in the region that the International Center for Supplemental Instruction has accredited. They have demonstrated a pass rate of 83–98% for students who take advantage of the supplemental instruction program.

One of the things Carol shared openly about was her commitment to maintaining a work-life balance. She shared that the work can be very consuming as she tries to guide students on their journey. She tries to stay vigilant about making sure that her work does not follow her

home to maintain that balance. She tries to use her time commuting between campuses and her drive home to decompress and recenter herself. She also uses her artistic gifts as a creative outlet both personally and professionally.

Research Question 1

What factors do students believe contributed toward their persistence at their university?

For Research Question 1, the focus is on students' beliefs regarding factors that enable them to persist at the university. Four themes and 40 codes emerged from the interview questions related to RQ 1. The following themes were consolidated: Holistic Student Support, Student Support and Well-being, and Student Engagement Spectrum along with their respective incorporated codes.

Comprehensive Student Support Ecosystem. Comprehensive Student Support Ecosystem was the first theme to emerge from the dataset as seen in Table 6, along with the following codes (Student Support Services, Support Resources and Services, Military Family Background, Student Success Program Engagement, Staff Support and Recognition Institutional Support Access) for Research Question 1. The theme of "Comprehensive Student Support Ecosystem" directly addressed Research Question 1 by highlighting the various support systems available to students at the university. Students' beliefs about factors contributing to their persistence can be tied to the presence and effectiveness of comprehensive support services.

Table 6

Comprehensive Student Support Ecosystem -RQ1

Codes	Theme Descriptions
1. Student Support Services	The theme of "Comprehensive Student Support Ecosystem" directly addresses the research question by highlighting the various support systems available to students at the university. Students' beliefs about factors contributing to their persistence can be tied to the presence and effectiveness of comprehensive support services. This theme emphasizes the importance of resources, personalized guidance, and inclusive programming in fostering student success and persistence. Students may attribute their ability to persist at the university to the presence of such a supportive ecosystem that addresses their academic, professional, and personal needs.
2. Support Resources and Services	
3. Military Family Background	
4. Student Success Program Engagement	
5. Staff Support and Recognition	
6. Institutional Support Access	

This theme emphasized the importance of resources, personalized guidance, and inclusive programming in fostering student success and persistence. Students may attribute their ability to persist at the university to the presence of such a supportive ecosystem that addresses their academic, professional, and personal needs. Four of five participants identified Comprehensive Student Support Ecosystems and its elements.

Daniela provided an example of Student Success Program Engagement here:

I think so much of it is because, like, freshmen do think that they have, like, everything under control. Like, I feel like you come into like the place, like thinking that you know everything and again I do think that they facilitated a lot for them.

Daniela also spoke about the importance of institutions having support for addiction and a focus on holistic well-being for their students:

I don't think I have problems with addiction, but like, I can see how that would be really helpful for anyone who does because having that support and that structure obviously is like really good and I do think that that should be something that you know is offered in like all campuses...But you know, that's obviously such a big issue, and I think sometimes that's obviously what hinders people from graduating or being successful because they can't find a way to get out. And so I think that's a really good thing that they have. They obviously also have like the whole like I think they call it well-being...But where they do like the therapy and stuff like that. And I heard that they do group sessions, and they help with anything of that sort.

Jess reinforced the importance of these programs being made available to students as part of their overall tuition package, "I just think it's so important, so incredible, that these are free options for students at the university at my university it is. It's free to students. All you have to do is walk in." Jess spoke of the warm relationship that they had with the folks in the office:

From my personal experience, I would just love to like dote on the people who run our Center for Success because they're just so kind and so welcoming, and they work so hard to make sure that we feel welcome.

Theme Summation. As the student participants shared their accounts, they were open and direct about the importance of institutions to have a complete and comprehensive ecosystem in place to support their educational journey. This includes programs, infrastructure, and a culture committed to providing support for their academic and social experience at the university. This summation contains a holistic view of participants' responses within the Comprehensive Student Support Ecosystem theme.

Leni discussed her experiences as a military child, mentioning her father's service in the Army and her consideration of joining the Air Force after graduation. She shared that her experience of regularly moving and being exposed to new environments helped prepare her for college. Likewise, she reflected on her time in California, noting the Hispanic community and bilingual school nearby were both a strength and a weakness, as learning math in another language was a detriment. Whitney shared insights about the support from advisors and the importance of engagement for first-year students, particularly regarding class registration and the challenges they face with block scheduling. She emphasized the need for more interaction and engagement opportunities for freshmen. Similarly, Daniela highlighted the availability of resources and support systems at their university, including free printing and various student success programs.

Additionally, Whitney appreciated the accessibility of these services and the importance of having multiple places to seek help. She also mentioned the existence of support for addiction and mental health, advocating for such resources on all campuses. Jess expressed gratitude for the supportive environment at their university, noting the flexibility of their schedule and the willingness of their boss to help with personal concerns. She commended the staff at the Center for Success for their kindness and dedication to student well-being, emphasizing the importance of feeling valued as both a student and an employee. Overall, the student participants expressed appreciation for the services and support provided by their student support staff.

Comprehensive Academic Support and Aspirations. Comprehensive Academic Support and Aspirations was the third theme to emerge from the dataset, as seen in Table 7 with the following codes: Academic Support Systems, Academic Purpose, Academic Support Role, Academic Access, Academic Identity, and Academic Support Services.

Table 7*Comprehensive Academic Support and Aspirations – RQ1*

Codes	Theme Descriptions
1. Academic Support Systems	The theme of Comprehensive Academic Support and Aspirations directly addresses the research question by highlighting the importance of various factors that contribute to students' persistence at university. This theme emphasizes the significance of academic support systems, such as peer education and accessibility to courses, in helping students stay motivated and engaged in their studies. Additionally, the focus on educational and career goals, especially in healthcare fields, underscores how having clear aspirations can impact students' determination to persist and succeed in their university education.
2. Academic Purpose	
3. Academic Support Role	
4. Academic Access	
5. Academic Identity	
6. Academic Support Services	

Student Participant Leni provided an example of her use of Academic Support Systems:

I got really close with my chem lab TA and she has helped me through my chemistry courses and then her friends who recently just graduated in fall 2024 were always there, like helping me. Like they'll see me in the corner, and if I'm struggling, they will come and help me...If I remember, I think it was my first semester chemistry. Our class was like, I think half, or more than half had failed our first exam, and...one of the higher ups...had come in and they're like, "We have a tutoring center." And that's when our tutoring center was only on one campus. I never had a tutoring center where there was really just a writing center. So for any other class the military gives me a tutoring online service. So that's what I was using at the time until like they came into my class here and was like, oh, we have tutoring. So I was like perfect. The tutoring has benefited me so much.

Theme Summation. Conversations on this topic touched on very personal topics and experiences. Students spoke about how they see the academic elements of the institution

interplay with their backgrounds and aspirations for life after college. Familial background and relationships with peers were a popular discussion.

Whitney shared that she chose kinesiology because she wanted to work with kids and were considering a career in pediatric physical therapy but was concerned about the need for graduate school, and the debt associated with that choice, afterward. Leni mentioned the support she received from a chemistry lab TA and fellow students, highlighting the importance of connecting with peers who understand the courses. She also found the success center helpful for understanding class material, particularly in statistics. Jess discussed her experience as a student-athlete and tutor, expressing satisfaction in helping others succeed academically. She mentioned the availability of peer tutors and supplemental instructors who assist students struggling with classes. She highlighted the impact of the personal introduction and marketing of the tutoring center in individual classes after the first test of the semester. Jess also reflected on her father's unconventional journey to earning a degree, which inspired her to persevere in her own academic pursuits.

Student Journey and Development in Higher Education. Student Journey and Development in Higher Education was the fourth theme to emerge from the dataset along with the codes illustrated in Table 8. The theme of "Student Journey and Development in Higher Education" was central to answering Research Question 1 about factors contributing to student persistence at a university. Students spoke about their experiences in how they must be purposeful in navigating and curating their educational experiences. Most of the students commented on their ability to adapt to new environments and grow both personally and academically during their time on campus. Tinto (2012) and others speak about how higher education institutional programs, peers, faculty, and staff can influence a student's decision to

persist in their studies, and multiple examples are outlined here that provide concrete examples of those elements. Understanding the impact of transitions, academic growth, and campus involvement on students can provide valuable insights into the factors that contribute to their persistence in university settings. Each of the student participants spoke about topics related to Student Journey and Development in Higher Education.

Table 8

Student Journey and Development in Higher Education - RQ1

Codes	Theme Descriptions
1. Retention and Student Success	The theme of "Student Journey and Development in Higher Education" is central to answering the research question about factors contributing to student persistence at a university. By examining how students navigate their educational experiences, adapt to new environments, and grow both personally and academically, we can identify key elements that influence their decision to persist in their studies. Understanding the impact of transitions, academic growth, and campus involvement on students can provide valuable insights into the factors that contribute to their persistence in university settings.
2. Personal Growth	
3. Academic Journey and Major Change	
4. Program Development	
5. Academic Journey and Transition	
6. Continuous Professional Development	
7. Career Development in Higher Education	
8. Rural To College Transition	
9. Athletic Identity Transition	
10. Chemistry Career Path	
11. Career Development	
12. Employment Challenges	

Ruth spoke about how an on-campus job changed the trajectory of her studies and professional path, "...I ended up like starting to work at the University Career Center, and that just kind of led me on a completely different path." She continued:

I think it really did start when I got an on-campus part-time job because I was able to help like students...then I eventually moved up to being a career peer advisor to, you know, having those one-on-one appointments with students and just overall like being I think that really altered like the way I just thought about things because I realized that I had so much to share, and like I honestly felt like I was able to be a resource to my peers.

Leni spoke about the impact of academic growth through an interaction with a faculty member. She was planning on a career in the dental field but was questioning her ability to do the work after struggling in a course her first semester. The faculty member provided support that allowed her to continue on the path of study, “she told me that she had failed like a class in chemistry. And because I thought I was at the point of failing, she was like, don’t worry. Like, look where I am now.”

Jess had a similar experience in coursework and has changed her initial vocational plans. She is currently studying biology on a preprofessional track with a minor in psychology. She was initially aiming for medical school but has shifted her focus after finding the coursework stressful and not a natural fit for her talents. Now, Jess aspires to become a clinical psychologist and is exploring graduate school options. Leni initially applied to Virginia Tech for aerospace engineering but decided to begin her college journey closer to home. She has become interested in studying chemistry after taking a class. She enjoys hands-on lab work and is currently on a pre-dental track, influenced by her family’s background in dentistry.

Whitney shared that she had been deeply impacted by how the college had exposed her to broader diversity. She had come to college from a homogenous community and, “meeting like the different people and like more culture of, like, people that have different backgrounds” was exciting, and that experience helped to address “any preconceived notions that I have.” That exposure also carried over into her academic course of study and led to her changing her initially planned major.

Theme Summation. The students interviewed are navigating their academic paths, discovering new interests, considering possible vocations after graduation, and adapting to

college life. Many are involved in extracurricular activities and part-time jobs (on and off-campus), which influence their career aspirations and personal growth.

Ruth started working at the University Career Center, which shifted her career interests. That on-campus job, where she has been able to help other students, made her realize the importance of being a resource for peers, and she is exploring working in higher education as a result. Leni was emboldened and encouraged by a faculty member after early struggles, and has continued on her course after giving serious consideration to leaving college. Jess and Leni both have changed their initial academic and vocational course to areas that they feel are a better fit after input and conversations with faculty and student success professionals. Both Whitney and Daniela have turned early struggles in math and science into a career trajectory in the public relations and writing fields. They are both very excited about their new vocational plans and the coursework that has been associated with them. They have found a passion for writing and communication and believe they have natural aptitude in those areas.

Holistic Student Support, Wellness, and Engagement Spectrum. Holistic Student Support, Wellness, and Engagement Spectrum was the fourth theme to emerge from the dataset as seen in Table 9.

Table 9

Holistic Student Support, Wellbeing, and Engagement Spectrum - RQ1

Codes	Theme Descriptions
1. One-On-One Support	The theme of a Holistic Student Support, Wellbeing, and Engagement Spectrum directly addresses the research question by highlighting the various factors that students perceive as contributing to their persistence at university including but not limited to support and engagement. It shows that personalized academic guidance, emotional and mentoring support, effective tutoring services, campus activities participation, and holistic wellness are crucial elements that help students navigate challenges and
2. Follow-up Timeline	
3. Emotional Support and Mentoring	
4. Tutoring Center Excellence	
5. Peer Learning Support	
6. Tutor Availability Issues	
7. Online Tutoring Needs	

8. Mental Health Support (incorporated)	persevere in their academic journey. The theme emphasizes the importance of having comprehensive and tailored support systems in place, underscoring how these resources can significantly impact student retention and success. The element of mental health and wellness requires institutional initiatives that help foster students' mental, emotional, and academic success and help identify key factors that influence students' persistence. The mental health and wellness element, also allows student personnel to encourage students to be aware of personal connections, athletic support, and holistic wellness programs that impact their well-being. Additionally, the Student Engagement Spectrum is another element of the theme that helps to illuminate the process by which students move along a continuum of engagement at an institution from isolation to active participation in the life of the university. By examining the specific factors and experiences that move students toward persistence and graduation, researchers can gain insights into what triggers move students forward in the academic journey
9. Student Wellness Programs (incorporated)	
10. Athletic Identity (incorporated)	
11. Support Networks (Incorporated)	
12. Peer Support Networks (Incorporated)	
13. Social Integration (Incorporated)	
14. Campus Engagement (Incorporated)	
15. Community Building Activities (Incorporated)	
16. Mental Health Support (incorporated)	

This was an incorporated theme with a blend of three elements: student support, student wellness, and student engagement spectrum. The theme has several incorporated codes that are related to Research Question 1. The theme of Holistic Student Support, Wellbeing, and Engagement Spectrum directly addressed RQ 1 by highlighting the various factors that students perceive as contributing to their persistence at their university, including but not limited to support and engagement. It showed that personalized academic guidance, emotional and mentoring support, effective tutoring services, participation in campus activities, and holistic wellness are crucial elements that helped them navigate challenges and persevere in their academic journey.

The theme emphasized the balance of having structures and infrastructure in place, with the importance of individualized, tailored support systems. The interplay of structure and personalization significantly impacts student retention and progression. The element of mental health and wellness was a common topic of discussion. How an institution can foster students'

mental, emotional, and academic success and help identify key factors that influence students' persistence early during their time on campus can have a tremendous impact. The mental health and wellness element also allows student success personnel to encourage students to build meaningful personal connections among peers and with faculty members. Additionally, the Student Engagement Spectrum is another element of the theme that helped to illuminate the process by which students move along a continuum of engagement at an institution from isolation to active participation in the life of the university. While each student is on their individual journey, active participation in the life of the campus has been demonstrated to positively influence rates of persistence and graduation.

In reviewing the conversations, the student support elements were discussed in various ways by the student participants. They spoke about their experience with faculty, staff, and peers that inspired and motivated them on a personal and academic level. Daniela spoke about the support she receives from the administrators she works closely with orientation and new student programming:

I had meetings with her only because it was obligated because this WING Leader thing, but I really enjoyed going to talk to her because I do think that like a big thing of people doing good in their academics, is kind of releasing like any emotion that they have or any concern. And so she just sits there and she, like, listens to you. ...kind of like a therapist, but like, without being, like, examined. So I think that she was just someone that was like very caring. And so I thought that that was nice because I never really felt like again, like I was doing bad during the semester, but it was just nice to be able to go to her and like, release like anything that I had going on.

Ruth spoke about the team in the university's Career Center being a boost to their college experience, "I think just being able to communicate really well with the advisors in the Career Center has really like just made my experience at State University 10 times better because I know like I have them in my corner." Ruth saw the value in, "one-on-one, counseling has always been like the most impactful, whether it is through like academic advising or getting some help at the Career Center or just like with the like other resources that we have on campus."

Jess spoke of the impact that she had seen Supplemental Instruction (SI) play at their institution. She worked as an SI tutor, and in speaking of their experience, noted:

So it really transformed more to a problem session, but because I'm not grading you and because I don't care if you get it wrong or what you get wrong, I found that they were so much more able to, like make a mistake. And I think that that was beneficial because, you know, this lecture class had 90-some kids in it, which is huge at my university, and you don't want to get it wrong in front of all those 90 people. So you come to SI and there's ten of us.

Jess also shared about the special bond she had created with a tutor in the Chemistry department:

You know, there were times where we would sit in the library and like, cry over organic chemistry, but we just kept going and she is part of the reason that I kept going. Because I didn't want to do it without her, and I didn't want her to have to deal without me because she built me up and she then made me a better person because I had to hold her up too. We were sort of two peas in a pod that way when it came to that.

Student wellness is the second element, and it sheds light on the various support systems and initiatives provided by the university that contribute to student persistence. Understanding how

mental health initiatives, personal connections, athletic support, and holistic wellness programs impact students' well-being can provide insights into why students choose to stay at their university. Additionally, examining the role of institutional efforts and personal networks in fostering students' mental, emotional, and academic success can help identify key factors that influence students' persistence.

Jess based her college search almost solely on her athletic pursuits. This was a big part of how she would identify herself as a high school student that transferred into her early college days:

I spent like a spring break of my junior year of high school, like driving around to colleges. So we went to a bunch of different colleges. If I could meet with the soccer coach, I would. We would also take a tour, and it just so happened that I was able to meet with the soccer coach that I played for at Comprehensive University, and I was able to take like an admissions tour, and I just fell in love with the place.

Student participants demonstrated that an institution's commitment to establishing a framework for holistic student support is critical. Being able to tailor personalized programs through a suite of offerings allows students to take advantage of which support programs they need, in a way and at a pace that is comfortable to them. The interviews with most student recipients highlighted the growing importance of mental well-being in the student experience. Many students now come to college with an understanding and vocabulary around mental health and well-being. This was demonstrated through our conversations about self-identity, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and peer support.

Ruth spoke about her own journey with mental illness, "I did struggle a lot with different mental illnesses like anxiety and depression at a very young age, and my being a first-generation

student as well. And coming from an immigrant family, like my parents didn't really understand that." She went on to discuss the importance of creating an open environment to discuss sensitive topics and educate students, "just being willing to be open and talk about it is so special. Like I think today there is a presentation at the hub and they're giving out like free Narcan and like drug testing kits."

Student Engagement Spectrum was the third element and highlights the various levels of student involvement and how it impacts their persistence at the university. By examining how students move along the spectrum from isolation to active participation in campus life, student affairs practitioners can gain insights into the specific factors and experiences that contribute towards their persistence. Understanding where students fall on this spectrum can provide a nuanced understanding of the importance of engagement in fostering a sense of belonging and commitment to the university, ultimately influencing their decision to persist in their academic journey. Two out of five student participants reported on the Student Engagement Spectrum or its components. Each demonstrated a pole on the continuum.

Jess is engaged on campus, volunteering for the Student Alumni Association in the Advancement Office, among other things, "I work very closely with the Alumni Board of Directors at Comprehensive University, and I sort of like help be the connection between the student body and the alumni board." She enjoyed the work and was clearly good in the role and was recognized by the Advancement Office and her peers, "I sort of took it over. I don't really know how that happened to this day, but I got put in charge, and here I sit as the chair." Jess became very engaged with the campus from her arrival because of her status as a soccer player for the university. While her playing days ended, she continues to support the program, "I walk

around campus a lot. I go to a bunch of soccer games to support my roommates because they're all soccer players. I usually go to most sporting events."

Whitney had more of a solitary experience on campus. When asked about her relationship with fellow students and if she had been inspired by any of her classmates, she replied that, "I haven't really bonded with any of them. I'm kind of too shy... I made like a few, like, acquaintances and things that I wouldn't say necessarily inspired by, but I don't know." When asked about her other social outlets on campus and relationships with roommates, "I have, you know, nice enough roommates. I'm kind of a loner, so I haven't really talked to them that much. But it's been nice." During a conversation about life in the residence halls, "I don't know if I see like, I mean, I guess a lot of the people you know, they have friends. So they sit with them, and I guess that builds community. They have every now and then, not a party, but you can go down, and sometimes they have like a movie and snacks, where they have like games."

These two student participants demonstrated that each student is on their own journey through college. One was deeply invested in the social aspects of the school, demonstrated school spirit, and would be seen as an extrovert with deep love for her college. The other was a self-described introvert who sees her institution as a utility, with little interest in engaging in the social aspects of the institution. However, both are progressing towards their degree on pace.

Theme Summation. A majority of the students discussed mental health concerns during their interview. The discussion around their personal experience with anxiety and depression, and their interest in assisting other students who have walked a similar path, was mentioned by more than one student. Their institution's ability and commitment to provide programmatic and physical resources (such as the serenity den) demonstrated that the needs of the students are being actively addressed and responding to Tinto's (2012) commitments. Student success

administrators being able to have generative conversations, or guide students to professionals who are equipped to have those conversations, provides reassurance to students as they tackle the difficult conversations around mental health can be transformative to undergraduate students. For all but one of the students who were interviewed, active engagement in campus activities helped them develop a sense of community and belonging. Those connections helped encourage their academic journey.

In conclusion, the experiences shared by the students interviewed, Ruth, Leni, Daniela, and Jess highlight the importance of an institution committing to providing full support through a thorough set of policies and procedures. In addition, providing a spectrum of resources that help to meet students where they are on an individual basis is important, as is a plan for mental health and wellness initiatives to enhance their academic journeys. The students all discussed their personal experience with the value of one-on-one counseling, tutoring services, and academic advising, which made a positive impact on their experience and progress toward graduation. The presence of supportive faculty and peers creates a sense of community that has encouraged most of the students who were interviewed. These elements collectively create a supportive atmosphere that promotes both academic success and personal well-being among students.

Research Question 2

What do student success personnel perceive as the reasons for the increase in student retention and graduation at their institution?

For Research Question 2, the focus was on student success personnel's perception regarding factors of student retention and persistence until graduation at their institutions. Three themes and 18 original codes emerged from the interview questions related to RQ 2. The

following themes were consolidated: Holistic Approach to Student Success and Holistic Student Support Systems, and respective incorporated codes.

Holistic Approach to Student Success and Support Systems. Holistic Approach to Student Success and Support Systems was the first to emerge from the dataset, along with the following codes (Practical Industry Experience Value, Admissions vs. Student Success, Student Success Model, Student Success Metrics Focus, Program Success Metrics) for Research Question 2. Additionally, as the Holistic Approach to Student Success and Support Systems was a consolidated theme, it also has the incorporated codes as seen in Table 10.

Table 10*Holistic Approach to Student Success and Support Systems – RQ2*

Codes	Theme Descriptions
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Practical Industry Experience Value 2. Admissions Vs. Student Success 3. Student Success Model 4. Student Success Metrics Focus 5. Program Success Metrics 6. Support (Incorporated) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandatory Support Services (incorporated) • Student Support Structure (incorporated) • Student Support Services (incorporated) • Student Help-Seeking Barriers (incorporated) • Technology Accessibility Support (incorporated) • First-Generation Support (incorporated) • Student Career Support (incorporated) • Comprehensive Student Support Services (incorporated) • Hope Scholarship Support (incorporated) • Student Success Administration (incorporated) • Flexible Service Delivery(incorporated) • Support For Underserved Students (incorporated) 	<p>The theme of a holistic approach to student success and support helps answer the research question by providing insight into the various components, strategies, and initiatives that student success personnel believe contribute to the increase in student retention and graduation rates at their institution. By considering elements such as integration of industry experience, strategic admissions processes, comprehensive success models, support services, and assessment of program effectiveness, this theme offers a comprehensive understanding of the reasons behind the observed improvements in support and student outcomes. It highlights the importance of addressing various aspects of student needs beyond academics, such as career planning and technology assistance, to create a conducive environment for student success. By focusing on a comprehensive support system that considers the diversity of students and reduces barriers to seeking help, student success personnel can identify the multifaceted reasons behind the positive outcomes observed in retention and graduation rates.</p>

The theme of a holistic approach to student success and support systems helped answer RQ 2 by providing insight into the various components, strategies, and initiatives that student success personnel believe contribute to the increase in student retention and graduation rates at their institution. By considering elements such as integration of industry experience, strategic admissions processes, comprehensive success models, support services, and assessment of

program effectiveness, this theme offers a comprehensive understanding of the reasons behind the observed improvements in support and student outcomes. It highlighted the importance of addressing various aspects of student needs beyond academics, such as career planning and technology assistance, to create a conducive environment for student success. By focusing on a comprehensive support system that considers the diversity of students and reduces barriers to seeking help, student success personnel can identify the multifaceted reasons behind the positive outcomes observed in retention and graduation rates.

Jan drew a comparison between working on the recruitment side of the institution versus their role in student success:

[Student] success is where I definitely belong, and it's more along the lines of seeing a student identify what their purpose is and what their strengths are, and aligning that purpose with the ability to learn and come out of this with something that they desire to do in their lifetime.

Monica spoke about her ability to translate life outside of the academy to those students who are dealing with the intense pressure of higher education success: "when I talk to students about success and what that looks like, I'm able to give them a perspective outside of having the 4.0." Her outside experience also helps her guide students to consider their paths and respond to the needs of local industries, "just being able to bring in so much knowledge from so many different industries and then share that with students," as she helps with academic advising.

Jan went into great detail about her institution's comprehensive student success program. The framework at the institution is guided by four pillars: sense of belonging, academic achievement, engagement, and sense of purpose. In the sense of purpose pillar, students are given the resources and space to help them on a path of "discovering their strengths along with

their passions, and it leads them to a purpose which...helps them be prepared to make meaningful contributions to society.”

Holistic Student Support Systems was an element of the consolidated theme and provided insight into the strategies and initiatives implemented by student success personnel that have contributed to the increase in student retention and graduation rates at their institution. It highlighted the importance of addressing various aspects of student needs beyond academics, such as career planning and technology assistance, to create a conducive environment for student success. By focusing on a comprehensive support system that considers the diversity of students and reduces barriers to seeking help, student success personnel can identify the multifaceted reasons behind the positive outcomes observed in retention and graduation rates. Carol explained the student-centric approach to services:

One of the things that we've done around our center, we have completely changed our operation hours to work to fit students. So rather than doing our services available until 5:00, we've moved 9:00 to 7:00. We offer things on the weekends...We offer more virtual options for students that are at a satellite campus.

Peter described their efforts to boost students' hope and persistence:

We have a whole series of workshops here in student success programs that run the whole semesters. Like, you know, maintaining HOPE, parts one through six, on how to just maintain it through the course of the whole semester and do your best. And so, it's like different components of, you know, teaching them the requirements for keeping HOPE, but also the skills you need in order to succeed in your classroom to keep the HOPE scholarship.

Peter also expressed the benefits of mentorship for students:

But I do think mentorship is huge. Peer mentorship as well as faculty, staff mentorship to students. We do see that some of our professors, especially in math and English, do require their students to go to the tutoring lab at least one time a semester, and there is some signs that point to success for that.

Theme Summation. During most of the interviews with student success administrators, I spent a healthy amount of time discussing the myriad factors of student success. Making the success of students as the central mission of the center helps to ground and prioritize the work and guide how resources are allocated. Creating a comprehensive support system that does not stop solely at academic achievement but helps to foster a sense of purpose and belonging inspires students to continue on their degree pathway.

The combination of services offered by the center staff interviewed varied widely. In addition, the reporting structure was not consistent among the institutions studied. It is also worth noting that all of the administrators' institutions had gone through a reorganization within the past 10 years that had moved the work of the center under a different vertical at the institution—bouncing between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs—with one institution going to a decentralized model. Each of the centers had a handful of components in common. Some level of academic coaching, degree planning, mentoring, and tutoring were available throughout. Some institutions supplemented that work with programming to address the unique needs of different student demographics, particularly first-generation and underrepresented students.

The integration of career planning along with the overall emotional and intellectual growth and discovery was considered an important synergy to develop. While each institution represented in the interviews has a distinct student body with unique needs, four of the five institutions interviewed emphasized career planning and readiness as a large part of their center's

focus. They find that helping students begin with the end in mind helps to keep them motivated on their academic journey. Beyond the career planning aspect, institutions also aim to help students discover their individual strengths and passions. They hope to build characteristics during their time as students that lead them to lead lives of success and significance, where they make meaningful contributions to society.

Strategic Academic Innovation. Strategic Academic Innovation was the second theme from the dataset as seen in Table 1. The theme includes the following codes Data-Driven Decision Making and Program Planning and Development in support of Research Question 2. The theme of Strategic Academic Innovation helped answer Research Question 2 by showcasing how student success personnel at the institution are actively working towards increasing student retention and graduation rates through data-driven decision-making and program development.

Table 11

Strategic Academic Innovation - RQ2

Codes	Theme Descriptions
1. Data-Driven Decision Making	The theme of Strategic Academic Innovation can help answer the research question by showcasing how student success personnel at the institution are actively working towards increasing student retention and graduation rates through data-driven decision-making and program development. This theme demonstrates that the personnel are proactive in identifying areas for improvement, implementing innovative solutions, and continuously evaluating the effectiveness of their initiatives to support student success and institutional outcomes.
2. Program Planning and Development	

This theme demonstrated that the personnel are proactive in identifying areas for improvement, implementing innovative solutions, and continuously evaluating the effectiveness of their initiatives to support student success and institutional outcomes. Two out of five student success personnel participants reported on the Strategic Academic Innovation theme.

Monica spoke of the importance of using data to inform decision-making but making sure that data does not drive the decision-making process, “I love data, I love data from informing, not data, just to say oh, we dropped a percentage and that be the only focus.” She also made the point that data is contextual. At her institution, she shared that students generally come from a higher-than-average socioeconomic background. Therefore, some things that have driven retention gains at other institutions, “other schools can fix food insecurity, and their numbers drop a percent. That is not our struggle. So, we really have to dig into the nitty-gritty...”

Peter shared the energy he receives from the annual planning process and the gains they have been able to see:

That’s the part I love the most, and seeing our plans develop and seeing what we are able to do, we’re planning an event or planning a program, or we’re building on a mentoring program for first-year students or what have you and seeing it come to fruition piece by piece.

Theme Summation

Student success professionals are often asked to balance qualitative and quantitative metrics as part of their jobs. It has been demonstrated through illustrations in this paper that individual relationships can often drive retention at an institution. Many shared this is balanced with the summary quantitative reports that tend to be closely studied by the leadership at the institution. Academic leaders are charged with finding the right balance between caring for an

individual student and making data-driven decisions that benefit the larger student body. In my experience, that choice can often be a difficult one. In addition, university and college presidents in Georgia have multiple audiences that are interested in the success of an institution. Balancing the pressures from elected officials, the Chancellor's office, the Board of Regents, faculty, staff, alumni, and citizens. The quantitative measures can help address those pressures in a way that is easier to digest by multiple audiences.

The theme of strategic academic innovation highlighted the work of Peter and Monica. Peter was enthusiastic about the work done at Research Institution around mentoring programming and wished they had the resources to provide every first-year student with a mentor. He has developed a collaborative atmosphere with his team, and they have a structured approach to executing new ideas and concepts. Monica spoke about their commitment to making data-informed decisions for the Comprehensive University. Her institution has a unique mission compared to other schools within the University System of Georgia, and this presents unique challenges as they work to meet their quantitative goals. The vast majority of students come to the institution without the same economic or academic challenges than what is seen at other schools. As such, the institution tries to address retention and progress concerns on an individual basis. She emphasized that their strategies sometimes must target a smaller swath of students than at other institutions. This again highlights the balance that student success administrators must weigh between what is good for the overall institution and what benefits a discrete segment of their student population.

Comprehensive Student Success and Wellbeing. Comprehensive Student Success and Wellbeing was the third theme to emerge for Research Question 2 along with the codes as illustrated in Table 12.

Table 12*Comprehensive Student Success and Wellbeing*

Codes	Theme Descriptions
1. Holistic Student Wellness	The theme of Comprehensive Student Success and Wellbeing directly helps answer the research question by showcasing how student success personnel perceive that a holistic approach incorporating wellness, engagement, and academic success initiatives has led to increased student retention and graduation rates at their institution. This theme highlights the importance of providing students with personalized support, effective communication, and resources that cater to their diverse needs, ultimately fostering a thriving student community and promoting equitable access to opportunities. By focusing on enhancing student wellbeing alongside academic success, student success personnel can address the various factors contributing to improved retention and graduation outcomes at their institution.
2. Student Centered Mission	
3. Cross-Campus Communication	
4. Campus-Wide Integration	
5. Data-Driven Student Success	
6. Academic Achievement Culture	
7. Personalized Student Engagement	
8. K12 Educational Preparation	
9. Proactive Student Communications	
10. Inclusive Student Success	

The theme of Comprehensive Student Success and Wellbeing directly helped Research Question 2 by showcasing how student success personnel perceive that a holistic approach incorporating wellness, engagement, and academic success initiatives has led to increased student retention and graduation rates at their institution. This theme highlighted the importance of providing students with personalized support, effective communication, and resources that cater to their diverse needs, ultimately fostering a thriving student community and promoting equitable access to opportunities. By focusing on enhancing student wellbeing alongside academic success, student success personnel can address the various factors contributing to improved retention and graduation outcomes at their institution. All five of the student success personnel participants reported on Comprehensive Student Success and Wellbeing.

Jan described how intentional student communication was utilized to help students succeed:

...we're doing a whole project now where we're doing an audit of student communications. Communications that they get, and we're going to try to put them all into an easier way, an easier to read format... really are focused around like pushing students to do actions that we know lead to success, whether that's registering for your next semester of college, reaching out to check in on students who are struggling, if a student withdrew from a class, encouraging them to retake it next semester. Tips and tricks on how to be successful in your first six weeks.

Peter described a student encounter that helped foster student connection and engagement:

Finally, striking up a conversation with a student, getting them on the phone or what have you. And he realized and learned that this student was like a soccer aficionado. And [personnel] is an athletic guy, loves doing all kinds of athletics... So he went out to the soccer fields and found this student, and then ended up having a coaching session on the soccer field, and spent two hours playing soccer with this student and making a great connection. And now they have a weekly (academic) coaching meeting because that student came to really like, just enjoyed that they had a great conversation...

Monica discussed how to build a rapport with students and encourage students to contact them for assistance:

So making connections with faculty, even 30 minutes in your classroom, to introduce a concept. Because when I meet a student in their classroom, it's a bit more relaxed and then they feel comfortable coming in because, oh, I met with Miss [administrator]. She came to my class. Miss [administrator] can I schedule an appointment with you?

Jan, Peter, and Monica provided examples of how to make connections with students through engagement. Jan's example highlighted the importance of communication within the advisement

process; similarly, Monica discussed how communication ensures that she had a welcoming environment wherein she could assist her students. The common thread of the administrators' examples is the intentionality needed to develop a rapport and a relationship that aids students both in and outside of the classroom.

Theme Summation. The theme of Comprehensive Student Success and Wellbeing covers a wide range of topics. It emphasizes the critical role that student engagement, communication, and support systems play in assisting students on their higher education journey. Consistent and clear communication was one of the elements of the conversation on this topic that deeply resonated with administrators. In addition, building authentic and meaningful relationships with individual students was a common refrain. Administrators all had stories of students whom they had assisted and shared that those instances buoyed their professional lives.

Peter expressed a passion for working with students in this field after beginning his career in the classroom. This new area gives him the chance to have a greater influence across the institution in helping all students focus on their growth and development through tutoring and coaching. He was one of many interviewed who emphasized the need for lines of communication to be clear among academic departments and those administrators charged with student success to make sure both sides of the institution are sharing successful strategies.

Monica also emphasized that student success is a collective responsibility across the campus, advocating for a series of programs aimed at fostering this culture. She highlighted the importance of faculty involvement as the "first line of defense" in identifying students who may need additional support with regular emails about at-risk students, or the use of a structured early alert system between faculty and the center was critical. In another example of how to leverage all communication tools available, Jan discussed the potential benefits of utilizing text messaging

to encourage student actions, such as class registration, and the importance of proactive outreach to students who may be struggling. She mentioned ongoing projects to streamline student communications for better clarity and effectiveness. Carol noted the high faculty engagement in the early alert process, showcasing a commitment to student success through regular feedback on student performance. She brought forward the idea of conducting regular surveys with students that allowed her institution to consistently and constantly tailor programs to meet the needs of the student body.

The theme also touched on the need for holistic support beyond academics. The concept of an institution paying adequate attention to the emotional and social needs of students was consistent in both the administrator and student interviews. Further, this theme brought to light the work that many of the institutions are doing to meet the needs of first-generation and low-income students. Overall, the emphasis was on creating a supportive, interconnected environment that prioritizes student well-being and success.

Administrator and Student Thematic Cross-Comparison

The themes identified from student and administrator perspectives reveal a comprehensive approach to student support and success in higher education, highlighting both similarities and distinctions. The cross comparison includes similar students and administrators' themes, such as Students: Holistic Student Support, Wellbeing, and Engagement Spectrum (RQ1) and Comprehensive Student Success and Wellbeing (RQ2), as seen in Table 13. Those themes present holistic approaches in student services to address students' academic success as well as health and well-being.

Table 13*Administrator and Student Thematic Cross-Comparison*

Student (RQ1)	Administrators (RQ2)	Relations Between Students and Administrators Themes
Holistic Student Support, Wellbeing, and Engagement Spectrum 1. One-On-One Support 2. Follow-up Timeline 3. Emotional Support and Mentoring 4. Tutoring Center Excellence 5. Peer Learning Support 6. Tutor Availability Issues 7. Online Tutoring Needs 8. Mental Health Support (incorporated) 9. Student Wellness Programs (incorporated) 10. Athletic Identity (incorporated) 11. Support Networks (Incorporated) 12. Peer Support Networks (Incorporated) 13. Social Integration (Incorporated) 14. Campus Engagement (Incorporated) 15. Community Building Activities (Incorporated)	Comprehensive Student Success and Wellbeing 1. Holistic Student Wellness 2. Student-Centered Mission 3. Cross-Campus Communication 4. Campus-Wide Integration 5. Data-Driven Student Success 6. Academic Achievement Culture 7. Personalized Student Engagement 8. K12 Educational Preparation 9. Proactive Student Communications 10. Inclusive Student Success	Both the student theme Holistic Student Support, Well-being, and Engagement Spectrum (RQ1) and the administrator’s Comprehensive Student Success and Wellbeing (RQ2) themes present a holistic approach to providing students with support that enhances their engagement, academic success, and mental health and wellness.

The second cross-comparison includes consistent themes such as: Student Journey and Development in Higher Education (RQ1), which was matched with an institution’s Holistic Approach to Student Success and Support Systems (RQ2), as seen in Table 14.

Table 14

Administrator and Student Thematic Cross-Comparison – Support Systems

Student (RQ1)	Administrators (RQ2)	Relations Between Students and Administrators Themes
<p>Student Journey and Development in Higher Education</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Retention and Student Success 2. Personal Growth 3. Academic Journey and Major Change 4. Program Development 5. Academic Journey and Transition 6. Continuous Professional Development 7. Career Development in Higher Education 8. Rural To College Transition 9. Athletic Identity Transition 10. Chemistry Career Path 11. Career Development 12. Employment Challenges 	<p>Holistic Approach to Student Success and Support Systems</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Practical Industry Experience Value 2. Admissions Vs. Student Success 3. Student Success Model 4. Student Success Metrics Focus 5. Program Success Metrics 6. Support (Incorporated) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandatory Support Services (incorporated) • Student Support Structure (incorporated) • Student Support Services (incorporated) • Student Help-Seeking Barriers (incorporated) • Technology Accessibility Support (incorporated) • First-Generation Support (incorporated) • Student Career Support (incorporated) • Comprehensive Student Support Services (incorporated) • Hope Scholarship Support (incorporated) • Student Success Administration (incorporated) • Flexible Service Delivery(incorporated) • Support For Underserved Students (incorporated) 	<p>From Student Themes for RQ1: “directly address” support systems available–from Admin Support (Incorporated): Mandatory supports, and support system structures and services. Those elements help to alleviate barriers and provide the infrastructure to assist students to integrate into the institution. Mandatory elements help to remove the stigma of using services for the first time. Conversations point to the initial barrier of entry using services (as discussed in the Administrator’s theme Holistic Approach to Student Success and Support Systems–RQ 2) initially that quickly disappear once students participate.</p>

This comparison helped to highlight the importance and transformational impact of getting students to use the services of the center for the first time.

Holistic Support and Wellbeing. Both students and administrators emphasize the importance of holistic support systems that enhance student engagement, academic success, and

mental health and overall student wellness. The commitment to being student-centered on an individual basis was a clear area of agreement between students and administrators. In addition, there was agreement on the impact of students identifying the peer networks and social interactions that would positively impact their commitment to continuing at the institution. Students focus on specific support mechanisms like one-on-one mentoring, tutoring, and peer networks, while administrators highlight a broader framework that includes campus-wide integration and data-driven strategies for student success.

Student Journey and Development. Students' express concerns about retention, personal growth, and career development, indicating a need for tailored support throughout their academic journey. Many of the student participants discussed the impacts of on-campus jobs on their academic and professional development. On-campus employment allowed some participants an opportunity to explore career development, which in turn impacted their choice of major. Informal faculty mentorship also aided students' exploration by providing tangible support and encouragement based on the students' strengths and aspirations.

Administrators respond with a focus on structured support systems, emphasizing the importance of metrics and mandatory services that facilitate student integration and success. Administrators provided examples of student support from the recruitment processes, academic advising, student engagement, and other retention measures. Some of the administrators were instrumental in helping students understand the metrics of success within their academic work, while other administrators help students maintain financial support, such as the HOPE scholarship. In advising students, other administrators provided mentorship and encouraged students to also seek peer mentorship as a strategy for success.

The final cross-comparison focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. For students (RQ1), this included the impact of the pandemic on their academic and social development because all of the students interviewed had their high school experience interrupted, as seen in Table 15. Most administrators (RQ2) reported that student social engagement and academic preparedness had suffered as a result of the pandemic. Each institution was actively working to address the disruption the pandemic has caused.

Table 15

Administrator and Student Thematic Cross-Comparison - COVID

Student (RQ1)	Administrators (RQ2)	Relations Between Students and Administrators Themes
COVID Influence on Student Education 1. COVID Impact - Effects of pandemic on educational experience 2. COVID Impact on Personal Growth - Effects of COVID on student development and personality	COVID's Educational Disruption 1. COVID Impact - Effects of the pandemic on student engagement and support services 2. COVID Learning Impact - The ongoing effects of COVID on student learning and academic preparation	Students: Exploring the multifaceted impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education, encompassing both academic experiences and personal growth trajectories of students. Administrators: Exploration of the multifaceted impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on student engagement, support services, and its lasting effects on learning and academic preparation.

COVID-19 Impact. Both groups acknowledge the profound effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on education. Students reflect on its impact on their personal growth and educational experiences, while administrators address how it has influenced student engagement and the effectiveness of support services. Students reflected on how their academic experience in high school and college was impacted by the switch from hybrid/online learning and face-to-face instruction in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While there was appreciation for experience

navigating online/hybrid learning before beginning their college journey, the disruption has also impacted the social engagement that many experienced.

Some administrators commented that the COVID-19 pandemic forced a pivot for their institution to adopt additional ways of content delivery that were not adopted before the pandemic. Many students commented on the pain of living through this disruption as faculty learned new technology on the fly. However, most feel that they were still able to learn the content as intended. This shared recognition underscores the need for adaptive strategies in response to ongoing challenges.

In summary, while students provide insights into specific needs and experiences, administrators offer a broader perspective on institutional strategies and support systems. This is another example of the difficult balancing act that institutions must demonstrate between establishing a structure for student success at the institutional level and being able to respond to a student's individual needs. Overall, this indicates the need for a collaborative effort between the student and their institution to enhance student success and well-being.

Tinto's Academic and Social Integration, Tinto's Commitments, and Research Question 1

As discussed in Chapter Two, Vincent Tinto (1993, 2012) has outlined a framework that helps institutions consider multiple dynamics of the student experience. Tinto suggests that students are more likely to be retained and progress toward a degree if they become connected to the social and academic life of their institution. When institutions are actively committed to developing systems to address both the social and academic elements of the student experience, they demonstrate a commitment to student success, as illustrated in Table 16.

Table 16*Student Data Related to Theories/Components of Theories for RQ1*

Themes	Themes Description	Tinto's Dimension & Commitment
Holistic Academic and Social Engagement	The theme of Holistic Academic and Social Engagement helps answer the research question by highlighting the multi-faceted nature of students' experiences that contribute to their persistence at university. It recognizes that students' engagement goes beyond just academic performance and includes social interactions, extracurricular activities, and informal learning experiences. By understanding the holistic engagement of students, researchers can identify the various factors that motivate and support students in persisting through their university journey, providing a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences.	1. Informal Academic 2. Formal Academic 3. Formal Social 4. Informal Social

Holistic Academic and Social Engagement. Holistic Academic and Social Engagement was the first theme to emerge from the students' dataset, along with the following Tinto's Academic and Social Integration codes (Informal Academic, Formal Academic, Formal Social, and Informal Social) for Research Question 1. The theme of Holistic Academic and Social Engagement helped answer Research Question 1 by highlighting the multi-faceted nature of students' experiences that contribute to their persistence at university. It recognized that students' engagement goes beyond solely academic performance and includes social interactions, extracurricular activities, and informal learning experiences. By understanding the holistic engagement of students, student success personnel can identify the various factors that motivate and support students in persisting through their university journey, providing a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences. All five student participants reported on Holistic Academic and Social Engagement.

Formal Academic. Jess reflects on her experiences as she tries to decide her major.

Thus, taking courses allowed her to determine what field of study she was suited for:

I currently study biology on a preprofessional track and I've added a minor in psychology. I was really focused on going to Med school and decided like, this was the end-all be-all. This is what I wanted to do. And then I took biochemistry, physics, and organic chemistry all in the same semester, and decided that Med school is not for me... I'm someone who's already, like, very anxious to begin with, and that just was not helpful. So I added a psych minor and I'm hopefully going to be a clinical psychologist, but it was very mind opening like trying to figure that out at 20... instead of at 25 when I was, you know, halfway through medical school and like 'crap!'

Informal Academic. Whitney had the support of faculty members who inspired her to grow and develop her interpersonal skills. She discovered that she would enjoy working with a diverse group of people. In discussing a faculty member who has inspired her, "he's a sociologist. I had him for sociology 1101 and he was really cool." Going further, she said that she enjoyed "the way he talked about like his job experience and working with different people and like the police and stuff." In discussing that experience helping her to think about a new career path, "I really like when he told stories about his job and I was thinking maybe that could be something for me."

Formal Social. Ruth was involved in student organizations and extra-curricular activities. She has become an involved student through formally organized social and cocurricular activities at her school after being more introverted and reserved her first and second year of college. She shared that, "I was a little bit more reserved." For her, a big turning point was joining a national sorority and becoming active with the Greek Life community on campus,

“getting involved with Delta Gamma or with other student groups on campus...once I did start doing that, I just had like, that’s what my actual spark for higher education and just being involved overall like really started to come out.” That part of campus has been a bit of a skeleton key for her and has given her the platform for additional leadership and public speaking opportunities. That continued to snowball, and she has taken on additional leadership roles in the institution’s multicultural conference. She shared:

When I actually started getting involved and see that, you know, people recognize me and want me to be able to do these things for them. I think that’s what really has just excited me the most about being at Comprehensive University, and just for what’s to come.

Informal Social. Jess shared examples of how the more informal and casual social elements of campus life has been impactful to her. She has been particularly inspired by a classmate who regularly commutes to campus, and is demonstrating dogged determination to become a veterinarian. Jess said that she is “one of my very best friends who I met freshman year.” In telling more about why this student inspires her and how this informal social connection helps to keep her motivated:

...she is truly just so inspiring because she just keeps working. You know, there were times where we would sit in the library and like, cry over organic chemistry, but we just kept going and she is part of the reason that I kept going. Because I didn’t want to do it without her, and I didn’t want her to have to deal without me.

Jess went on to discuss how that relationship made them “two peas in a pod” and that this friend made her a better person. An important part of their dynamic is a shared sense of humor, “being able to laugh with someone about, you know, the grade that you didn’t love is better than having to cry about it alone.” Going further, “what we found is that if you can laugh about it then, then

you're not crying alone. And that was better." This friendship has helped to bolster Jess's resiliency as well,

I would get a test back, and I would be down for days at a time. But we started to realize together that that wasn't helping anybody. It wasn't helping us. It wasn't helping her. It wasn't helping me, so we started to, you know, be like, 'OK, we're just gonna get up and do it again.' And that was very helpful for both of us.

Theme Summation. The findings from the interviews aligned with the conceptual framework of the study.

Formal Academic. Every student interviewed reflected on their academic journey and the various twists and turns it has taken as they near the end of the undergraduate experience. Most students spoke about their challenges with STEM courses, with those courses causing a few students to change their major and/or career aspirations. Others spoke about how formal coursework unlocked their true interest and passion in their fields. Most participants shared an example of an interaction with faculty members during formal instructional time that had an impact on them. Some of those examples shared would be to help the student explore another pathway, while some interactions strengthened their path they were already on.

Informal Academic. Most students had an example of an interaction with a faculty member outside of structured instruction time that has had a tremendous impact. For at least one student, such an interaction gave them the confidence to continue in the course in which they were struggling and on their academic and professional path. Three of the students interviewed spoke of a Supplemental Instructor (SI) or Teaching Assistant's (TA) impact on them. The hybrid role of peer and academic role model of SIs and TAs was something that was not discussed at length in the literature reviewed and is worth further study. Two students spoke

passionately about the role those positions had in their academic journey, and an additional student spoke about her first-hand experience as a Supplemental Instructor. For Jess, being asked to serve as SI by a faculty member whom she respected gave her incredible confidence in her own academic journey.

Formal Social. The interviews provided examples of the important role that structured social elements can have on a student's experience. The students interviewed were all involved in at least one campus-sponsored club or activity. Further, most students interviewed had taken on a leadership position in at least one campus-sponsored club or activity. Intermural athletics, new student orientation teams, sororities, and academic honor societies were all mentioned. Further, on-campus employment was shown to have a positive impact that was mentioned multiple times. The impact of employment went beyond the financial element, with one student mentioning how it tightened the tether between her and the institution and encouraged her to persist on her academic journey.

Informal Social. Students shared personal anecdotes about friendships formed during college, including supportive relationships that helped them cope with academic stress. They mentioned bonding over shared struggles in classes and the importance of having someone to laugh with during tough times. The social aspect of college life, including involvement in sororities and student groups, is also noted as a significant part of their experience.

Tinto's Academic and Social Integration, Tinto's Commitments, and Research Question 2

Student Success Administrators spoke about their personal experiences in assisting academic institutions in creating a holistic academic experience for students. This holistic experience included the scope and sequence of courses, content delivery, and faculty mentorship that is primarily created within the academic unit. Outside of formal instruction, the academic

experience is also influenced by the physical environment in which the students are learning and the mentorship received from those academic support services. An institution's commitment to creating a student-centric approach was highlighted as a key theme. This institutional mindset of keeping student achievement at the center of the work of the university must be woven throughout all elements of the school. This included strategies and tactics such as adjusting operational hours, creating more flexible and online options for tutoring and counseling, and early alert programs.

Holistic Academic Experience. Holistic Academic Experience was the first theme to emerge from the administrator's dataset, along with the following Tinto's Integration components (Academic and Social) and Tinto's Commitments (Formal Academic, Informal Academic, and Educational Quality) for Research Question 2. The theme of "Holistic Academic Experience" directly helps answer Research Question 2 by showing that student success personnel perceive the increase in student retention and graduation to be attributed to an integrated approach to education. By focusing on providing quality content delivery, inspiring environments, and meaningful mentorship, institutions are creating a comprehensive educational journey for their students. This holistic approach engages students both academically and personally, leading to improved outcomes in retention and graduation rates according to the perceptions of student success personnel. All of the student personnel participants reported on Holistic Academic Experience.

Formal Academic. Peter described his transition from undergraduate studies to graduate studies. He stated that during this time, he served as a teaching assistant and a tutor. His work experience also included teaching. His tenure was delineated by two timeframes within the first

two years he tutored and the subsequent two years he taught. Through this experience, Peter developed a love for teaching:

And so then, that teaching experience in grad school propelled me to continue teaching because I loved it. And so I went on to be, you know, adjunct and then instructor level teaching, English composition, literature, creative writing, etcetera.

Informal Academic. Monica described her relationship with a faculty member, who served as an informal mentor. This relationship developed through a formal social club at her undergraduate institution was formative in her interest in supporting undergraduate students professionally:

So Doctor [faculty member's name] was definitely the faculty member that I felt the closest with, and it was unique because he was not my technical faculty member. He was my student organizer who was also a faculty member at the institution. So we were able to develop this kind of unique relationship because he wasn't grading my papers. And so, he served really just more as an informal mentor.

Educational Quality. Carol discussed quality metrics that showcased the student support services' commitment to quality education. Carol described the collaboration with faculty members and the support team in both curriculum design and training for the support staff. Student Support asks faculty to strengthen students' accessibility to services by informing students within their syllabi. Supplemental Instruction leaders are provided opportunities to address the class at the start of the semester, before midterms and finals. As Carol described that they regularly see a 15-point swing in students who engage with SIs versus those students who do not take advantage of that resource.

Theme Summation. The student experiences provided insight into informal and formal academic elements of academic support. Carol described the academic challenges she faced throughout her academic journey. She discussed failing a semester and then later changing her major. Similarly, Administrator Amy described how the lack of academic support hindered her transition from a larger institution to a smaller institution. Both accounts showcase the impact of support on academic achievement that has framed how these professionals guide the next generation of students. Conversely, Peter described a positive experience wherein faculty aided him through effective communication and engagement. Similarly, Jan discussed the impact of faculty mentorship on her college trajectory. She also described the impact of peer mentorship and campus groups on her college success. Much like Jan, Monica also personally saw the value in peer groups that provided support beyond academics.

For both informal and formal academics, there is a demonstration of how supports helped participants navigate both personal and academic challenges. Overall, this support demonstrated the institution's educational quality in addressing students' levels of preparedness or under preparedness, as services will have to address students who feel overwhelmed by the academic rigor compared to their previous experiences. Services such as advising, supplemental instruction, and workshops help enhance student retention and success. Faculty members serve in the forefront of formal academic as it is related to students' academic performance. Students and Administrators put forth suggestions such as block scheduling to simplify course registration, the importance of faculty accountability in promoting student success, and the need for continuous assessment of educational programs to ensure timely completion. The theme also illuminated the need to address broader institutional strategies for improving student engagement and retention, such as the integration of wellness initiatives and the emphasis on research

opportunities for undergraduates. Overall, the input underscores the complexities of the academic experience, the critical role of support systems, and the ongoing need for institutions to adapt to the evolving needs of their student populations.

Holistic Student-Centric Approach. Holistic Student-Centric Approach is the second theme to emerge from the dataset along with the following Tinto’s Commitment codes: (Student Support and Student Success) for Research Question 2. The theme of a Holistic Student-Centric Approach is essential in answering Research Question 2 about the factors perceived by student success personnel for the increase in student retention and graduation rates, as seen in Table 17.

Table 17

Administrator Data Related to Theories/Components of Theories for RQ2

Themes	Themes Description	Tinto’s Dimension & Commitment
Holistic Academic Experience	The theme of "Holistic Academic Experience" directly helps answer the research question by showing that student success personnel perceive the increase in student retention and graduation to be attributed to an integrated approach to education. By focusing on providing quality content delivery, inspiring environments, and meaningful mentorship, institutions are creating a comprehensive educational journey for their students. This holistic approach engages students both academically and personally, leading to improved outcomes in retention and graduation rates according to the perceptions of student success personnel.	1. Informal Academic 2. Educational Quality 3. Formal Academic
Holistic Student-Centric Approach	The theme of a Holistic Student-Centric Approach is essential in answering the research question about the factors perceived by student success personnel for the increase in student retention and graduation rates. This theme emphasizes the importance of providing comprehensive support to students, ensuring that their academic and social needs are met through	1. Student Success 2. Student Support

various resources and services. By prioritizing the holistic success of students and aligning institutional efforts to support them at every step, student success personnel can contribute to the improvement of student outcomes such as retention and graduation rates.

This theme emphasizes the importance of providing comprehensive support to students, ensuring that their academic and social needs are met through various resources and services. By prioritizing the holistic success of students and aligning institutional efforts to support them at every step, student success personnel can contribute to the improvement of student outcomes such as retention and graduation rates. All five student personnel participants reported on the Holistic Student Centric Approach.

Holistic Student-Centric Approach Theme: Carol discusses the institutions early alert system wherein the faculty can inform support services of students who are performing below expectations. Carol stated that the early alert system showcases “a huge faculty commitment to student success.” The institution has “a 96% response rate from faculty for 40,000 reports for them to let us know so that is a massive commitment.” She stated that faculty may need some extra assistance as this is a large undertaking.

Student Support. Carol provides an example of how her educational and previous career background has prepared her to work with at-risk students. She dislikes the term, but understands that those students may need additional assistance:

So I would say it prepared me to work with students that some may say are at risk. I hate that term, but the students that may have an indicator that they need more assistance. From being able from, you know, being a student that took a break after failing out, for instance.

Carol is able to relate with those students because she had to take a break during her studies. Now, her job in Academic Support Services allows her to interact with students with high GPAs and students with lower GPAs. She shared, “I can relate to those students that need to take that break or need to justify that break.” In her experience, she has seen students who have appreciated her sharing her own personal academic journey that mirrors theirs. In talking about her personal journey, “I think that my GPA when I was in college was like a 1.2...I know that that was a long time ago, and things change, but...being able to relate to those students, oh, it’s OK.” Thus, her ability to relate and empathize may allow Carol to make connections with students who may be experiencing feelings of layered disconnection.

Jan gave multiple illustrations of how her institution focused their efforts on student retention. In her office’s visioning and planning, they have worked to find synergy between career services, student orientation, first-year experience programs, and the testing center. Those programs are supplemented with special areas of focus and supplementary programs for those students who have transferred into the institution, adult learners, veterans, and students who have reenrolled after a time out of higher education. One of the programs that Jan spoke passionately about was the work they are doing for students who had to pause their studies due to academic reasons, sharing that they are doing immense work to help those “who are academically suspended and they’re coming back...returning from a failure and helping them pursue their dreams to become a college graduate.”

Theme Summation. The theme highlights the impact of support services on student success, noting that some services are tailored to address the needs of diverse student populations, including but not limited to first-generation students, adult learners, and underrepresented populations, such as African American males and middle-income students.

The important elements are the differentiation of the students' success needs, which include professional development for tutors, the importance of mentorship, and the need for a sense of purpose and belonging among students. Administrators have described programs like first-year experience courses and academic coaching that aim to increase retention for first-year students. Those retention programs have been described as effective strategies. The culture or climate of support encourages students to seek help and utilize available resources.

In discussing student support, administrators provided rich descriptions of services offered at their institutions, including tutoring centers, career services, and specialized programs for various student demographics. Some services were established in collaboration with faculty, especially the alert systems that helped identify at-risk students. Faculty members and various campus services also provided flexible service hours to accommodate nontraditional students. As support was holistic, it also addressed students' mental and physical well-being to foster academic success. Overall, the theme underscores the collaborative effort required from faculty, staff, and administration to enhance student success and support across the institution.

Student's Emergent Theme: Tinto's Components of Integration (Academic and Social) and Tinto's Commitments

There were two emergent themes from the student dataset: Equitable Learning Environment and Commitment to Excellence in Education. The themes are deemed emergent as they did not emerge in alignment with either RQ 1 or RQ 2. However, the themes do highlight the Inclusiveness and Educational Quality elements of Tinto's Dimensions and Commitments, as seen in Table 18.

Table 18*Emergent Theme from Student Data Related to Theories/Components of Theories*

Themes	Themes Description	Tinto's Dimension & Commitment
Equitable Learning Environment	A framework within educational institutions that ensures all individuals have equal access to learning opportunities and resources, irrespective of their race, ethnicity, age, gender, or other identities. It emphasizes inclusive curriculum development and fosters a campus culture that supports diversity and inclusivity.	1. Inclusiveness
Commitment to Excellence in Education	This theme encapsulates the dedication of educational institutions to uphold and enhance quality standards in both teaching and learning environments. It encompasses the development and evaluation of curriculum content, refinement of teaching methods, and the creation of enriching and supportive learning spaces for students to engage in discovery and knowledge acquisition.	1. Educational Quality

Equitable Learning Environment. Equitable Learning Environment is the first emergent theme from the student dataset, along with Inclusiveness as Tinto's Commitment code. An equitable learning environment can become a framework within educational institutions that ensures all individuals have equal access to learning opportunities and resources, irrespective of their race, ethnicity, age, gender, or other identities. It emphasizes inclusive curriculum development and fosters a campus culture that supports diversity and inclusiveness. Five of the student participants reported on an Equitable Learning Environment.

Daniela provided some insights on how inclusive her learning environments but also areas wherein diversity and inclusive behaviors have been challenging:

I mean, I do think [Daniela's institution of study] is pretty inclusive. I think there have been like incidents where it, like, hasn't been, but I don't necessarily think that that's because of [institution's name]. I think it's like the people themselves.

Daniela also discussed how students are exposed to or learn about cultural awareness through coursework such as Sociology. However, she did state that most of her coursework was not focused on cultural awareness or the need to be culturally sensitive to other learners:

And I feel like I don't necessarily think that we have too many classes that are catered towards learning more about like diversity and stuff like that, because obviously most classes are just focused on general education-like requirements, and I don't really think most people are gonna go out of their way to learn about things that they don't really have to unless you know it's in their major.

Thus, as it is not a requirement, students attending the institution may or may not learn ways in which to be inclusive. Ultimately, Daniela seems to put the ownership of learning on the student as she states:

I think certain things you just can't change someone's mind on. Unless they want to, like, have that education and learn more about it, because I think like the biggest issue is just kind of ignorance and not really knowing.

Daniela expressed that college is inherently a place where you get exposure and can gain awareness and learn, but some insensitivities come from willful ignorance:

And so I mean, obviously you go to college to become more aware. And so I do think that some people do, but I think some people are just very like they don't care enough. And so they just continue to be ignorant.

Thus, Daniela continues to make a distinction between institution-sponsored events that promote inclusivity and students' individual choices. She discusses how attending a primarily white institution (PWI) does not inherently mean that a student cannot celebrate their culture through student organizations or institutionally sponsored programming.

Theme Summation. The student participants were from diverse backgrounds, which further highlighted issues of diversity and inclusion within their educational experiences and environments. Daniela reflected on her time as a middle schooler; as a result of her bilingual experience, she felt as a college student that minority representation was important. She mentioned that she had several interactions with unwelcoming individuals; however, the community overall was open and friendly. Additionally, Ruth described her experience at a PWI, wherein she felt excluded and thought that the school would benefit from some student-led organizations, such as the Latina Student Association or the Black Student Alliance. She believes that such organizations would provide support for marginalized students to share their experiences.

Participants like Whitney expressed excitement about meeting people from diverse backgrounds; she felt that diversity within the education experience was an essential element of inclusivity. She shared her experience with how a professor used an accommodating teaching method to address students' language needs. Similar to Ruth, Jess expressed the importance of a welcoming classroom environment and noted the need to prioritize inclusivity within the classroom. Overall, the student participants highlighted some challenges, opportunities, and possible benefits from learning in supportive environments that are diversified and inclusive.

Commitment to Excellence in Education. Excellence in Education is the second emergent theme from the student dataset with Educational Quality as Tinto's Commitment code. Excellence in Education encapsulates the dedication of educational institutions to uphold and enhance quality standards in both teaching and learning environments. It encompasses the development and evaluation of curriculum content, refinement of teaching methods, and the

creation of enriching and supportive learning spaces for students to engage in discovery and knowledge acquisition.

Ruth celebrates and acknowledges how her institution promotes educational excellence while also acknowledging that there are areas of growth. She provides examples wherein her faculty members have made “room” for her to be expressive by creating safe spaces for challenging dialogue:

I think it definitely has been good. While at [participant’s institution], I think there are areas that can be improved on. I know like specifically like with my major, and ... like philosophy and sociology and women and gender studies classes, there is always room...it’s always a comfortable room to discuss different things like the professors I’ve had have always made the room like a safe space for us to be able to discuss and agree to disagree.

Like Ruth, Daniela also discussed the benefits of her coursework and how instruction is structured while also encouraging the integration of new technologies:

...we took an AI class, a Topics in PR, and then the topic was AI. And I really enjoyed that class because I think that it was innovative. But it was innovative in the sense of like, we hear so much about students using AI to do their assignments. But it’s like, why not incorporate it into the curriculum when it is becoming such a big thing? And especially in those sectors where like I don’t really necessarily think that AI should be seen well, like obviously there are bad aspects of it. But you know, in certain things like it really does help to just facilitate the process of things you know, and especially if you know how to like, prompt it and everything. And so I thought that it was really cool to learn more about it because I didn’t know too much about AI aside from like, oh, you ask

it a question and it tells you something. But we learned how to like, prompt. Our like questions and then like how to like maximize the responses that we would get...I like that they're staying on top of...expanding growth.

Daniela expressed that as the institution and faculty show intentionality towards course development, they are also showing their commitment to educational excellence. Thus, the institution and faculty members will also have to continue to expand their skillsets and knowledge as to present relevant instruction to their students.

Theme Summation. The student participants overall held positive views of their educational experiences, emphasizing the importance of personal engagement and the quality of instruction. Daniela thought some classmates might criticize their school's education quality. However, Daniela held the belief that students' effort and perspective would determine the quality of their education. In comparison with other institutions with more resources, she believed that her graduating with a 3.7 GPA showcased the quality of education at her institution.

Jess described her journey to finding a major and courses that she was passionate about. She started with history, then chemistry and biology, which allowed her to realize that she did not want to pursue a medical degree. Jess, by way of her support systems, changed her major and career pursuits. She expressed enormous appreciation for faculty members' support as well as her work with the supplemental instruction program.

Likewise, Ruth reflected on her personal growth through academic engagement and supportive faculty. She believed that the faculty and departments within her institution had created safe spaces across various disciplines. Other participants, like Leni, expressed concern about the lack of a dedicated tutoring space but did express gratitude for the newly installed

tutoring services. Leni made several recommendations, including recruiting more tutors and adding additional resources to enhance student support. In contrast, Daniele discussed the innovative course utilizing AI and the impact that it had on societal trends. She thought that there needed to be a balance between traditional teaching methods and contemporary topics and resources. Overall, student participants described the value of their educational experiences and the support they received from faculty and other institutional resources, such as tutoring. Their descriptions highlight the impact of support and resources on their personal academic journeys while also highlighting areas that need improvement.

Administrator’s Emergent Theme: Tinto’s Components of Integration (Academic and Social) and Tinto’s Commitments

There was one emergent theme from the administrators’ dataset: Equitable Learning Environment. The theme is deemed emergent as it did not emerge in alignment with either RQ 1 or RQ 2. However, the theme does highlight the inclusive element of Tinto’s Dimensions and Commitments, as illustrated in Table 19.

Table 19

Emergent Theme for Administrator Data Related to Theories/Components of Theories

Themes	Themes Description	Tinto’s Dimension & Commitment
Equitable Learning Environment	A holistic approach within educational institutions aimed at fostering an inclusive and supportive ecosystem. This environment ensures that individuals from diverse backgrounds, including different races, ethnicities, ages, genders, and other identities, have equal access to educational opportunities. It encompasses both curricular content and the wider campus climate, aspiring to create spaces where	1. Inclusiveness

every member feels valued and empowered to succeed.

Equitable Learning Environment. Equitable Learning Environment is an emergent theme from the administrator's dataset, with Inclusiveness as the Tinto's Commitment code. A holistic approach within educational institutions aimed at fostering an inclusive and supportive ecosystem. This environment ensures that individuals from diverse backgrounds, including different races, ethnicities, ages, genders, and other identities, have equal access to educational opportunities. It encompasses both curricular content and the wider campus climate, aspiring to create spaces where every member feels valued and empowered to succeed. All five participants reported on Equitable Learning Environment.

Monica described how she provided advisement for an institution-sponsored organization as well as oversaw centers that provided support for women and culturally diverse students. She shared:

to that I mean here recently I was given the African American Male Initiative program to oversee...But as an institution, you know, we have a Cultural Center and a women's center. That had really robust LGBTQ+ programming. Really robust programming for our students of color.

Likewise, Jan also discussed the importance of student engagement and the fulfillment that she obtained from her outreach efforts. An element of student engagement that Jan stressed was how it provided students with a sense of belonging. One of the signature programs at her institution was driving engagement specifically to address the needs of first-generation students. Hers was one of the larger institutions in this study, and they found that it was especially important to help first-generation students navigate the complexities of the comprehensive university. They

accomplish this through a regular suite of workshops to “help first-gen students orient to college.”

Inclusiveness. Amy provided insight on how to create inclusive environments within the classroom and also examined data to extrapolate where bias and perception intersect with the realities of a diverse classroom:

I could see they...made sure everybody in the room was included in the discussions.

Were more of the women being successful than the men, or were my white students more successful than my nonwhite students? De-aggregating the data or aggregating the data in different ways over time to see if what I was teaching was, you know, was biased in some way or supporting students who went to better high schools than others.

Theme Summation. The theme highlights the importance of support for students needing additional assistance. Students facing academic challenges may not feel they can achieve and thus need additional support and encouragement. An administrator shared their academic struggles and how they used their personal experiences to empathize with students. Additionally, the administrators provided guidance to students who may need to take an academic break or address concerns related to their academic performance, such as low GPAs. Overall, the administrator discussed the importance of student advocacy and the need to create an inclusive environment for diverse learners.

Diversity within institutions includes first-generation students, students of color, and adult learners. Thus, institutions have to be committed to providing inclusive services and accommodation for underrepresented student populations. Institutionally driven accommodation and services will ensure that all students have access to needed support. Programs similar to

Reach Georgia and Achieve Atlanta are mentioned as targeted initiatives for low-income and rural students, offering structured academic support and scholarships.

The commitment to creating inclusive environments also addresses accessibility issues for students with disabilities. The administrator described caring staff who recognized students’ unique challenges and individuality. Overall, the focus is on fostering an environment that supports all students, regardless of their academic background or circumstances.

Cross-Comparison of Students’ Inductive (RQ2) and Deductive (Theory) Themes

The cross-comparison of students’ inductive (RQ2) and deductive (theory) themes showcases very distinct but interconnected dimensions of the students’ higher education experiences, as seen in Table 20.

Table 20

Comparison of Students’ Inductive (RQ1) and Deductive (Theory) Themes

Students’ Inductive Themes	Students’ Deductive Themes	Tinto’s Dimension & Commitment
Holistic Campus Inclusivity 1. Campus Inclusivity 2. Campus Diversity & Inclusion 3. Inclusive Learning Environment 4. Campus Living Experience	Equitable Learning Environments	1. Inclusiveness
Student Journey and Development in Higher Education 1. Retention and Student Success 2. Personal Growth 3. Academic Journey & Major Change 4. Program Development 5. Academic Journey and Transition 6. Continuous Professional Development 7. Career Development in Higher Education 8. Rural to College Transition 9. Athletic Identity Transition 10. Chemistry Career Path 11. Career Development 12. Employment Challenges	Commitment to Excellence in Education	1. Educational Quality

Comprehensive Academic Support and Career Aspirations	Holistic Student Engagement	1. Informal Academic 2. Formal Academic 3. Formal Social 4. Informal Social
1. Academic Support Systems 2. Academic Purpose 3. Academic Support Role 4. Academic Access 5. Academic Identity 6. Academic Support Services		
Holistic Campus Experience	Holistic Academic and Social Engagement	1. Student Support 2. Student Success
1. Student Engagement Challenges 2. Educational Space and Resources 3. Educational Accommodations 4. Student Engagement 5. Educational Innovation 6. Campus Involvement Evolution		

As the inductive themes, such as Holistic Campus Inclusivity, pair with the deductive theme of Equitable Learning Environments, both highlight elements of Tinto's (2012) Commitment of Inclusiveness. Tinto's (2012) Commitment to Educational Quality is demonstrated in the deductive theme of the Student Journey and Development in Higher Education and the inductive theme of Commitment to Excellence in Education; these themes encompass various elements such as retention, personal growth, and career development. While the inductive theme serves as a reflection of the students' experience, the deductive theme emphasizes administrators' commitment to excellence within education and, thus, how to provide services that benefit the student body as a whole while also addressing students' individual needs.

The tension between the needed individual experiences of students, as highlighted in most of the Comprehensive Academic Support and Career Aspirations inductive themes, enhances the understanding of students' academic identity, career aspirations, support systems, and similar concepts, which are associated with the deductive theme of Holistic Student Engagement. Lastly, the students' inductive theme of Holistic Campus Experience aligns with the students' deductive theme of Holistic Academic and Social Engagement; both themes

provide insight into how Student Support services address challenges that undermine Student Success. Overall, comparing students' inductive and deductive themes shows how they view their experiences, while deductive themes help illustrate the framework used to assess Tinto's (1993, 2012) Dimensions and Commitments.

Cross-comparison of Administrators' Inductive (RQ2) and Deductive (Theory) Themes

The cross-comparison of administrators' inductive and deductive datasets provides various approaches to improve educational practices for student success. The inductive themes demonstrate the evolution of educational practices and an adaptation of educational systems that impact students' access and learning attitudes. The deductive themes focused on providing students with a holistic academic experience by improving informal and formal educational quality. The elements of creating a collaborative environment, including support networks, faculty mentorship, and peer support, along with the integration of both academic and social components, are exemplified through the social engagement spectrum. Within the inductive reasoning, the administrators demonstrated the need for comprehensive support services, including but not limited to mandatory services, technology accessibility, and career support.

The deductive themes serve as a complement to supporting a student-centric perspective of students' needs. Overall, the inductive themes outlined both the approaches and services for students' holistic wellness, while the deductive themes emphasized the need for equitable learning environments that foster inclusiveness. Thus, it is not enough to create services that benefit students' system-wide without acknowledging issues related to accessibility, as an institution may fail to actualize Tinto's (1993, 2012) dimension and commitments to equality, student success, student support, and the creation of environments that promote educational quality, as seen in Table 21.

Table 21*Comparison of Administrators' Inductive (RQ1) and Deductive (Theory) Datasets*

Administrators' Inductive Themes	Administrators' Deductive Themes	Tinto's Dimension & Commitment
Transformation in Educational Practices 1. Educational System Differences 2. Online Learning Adoption 3. Changed Learning Attitudes	Holistic Academic Experience	1. Informal Academic 2. Educational Quality 3. Formal Academic
Collaborative Academic Growth Support 1. Support Network Impact 2. Faculty Mentorship 3. Peer Mentorship Vision 4. Peer support	Social Engagement Spectrum	1. Informal Social 2. Formal Social
Holistic Student Support Systems 1. Mandatory Support Services 2. Student Support Structure 3. Student Support Services 4. Student Help-Seeking Barriers 5. Technology Accessibility Support 6. First-Generation Support 7. Student Career Support 8. Comprehensive Student Support Services 9. Hope Scholarship Support 10. Student Success Administration 11. Flexible Service Delivery 12. Support For Underserved Students	Holistic Student-Centric Approach	1. Student Success 2. Student Support
Comprehensive Student Success Well-being 1. Holistic Student Wellness 2. Student-Centered Mission 3. Cross-Campus Communication 4. Campus-Wide Integration 5. Data-Driven Student Success 6. Academic Achievement Culture 7. Personalized Student Engagement 8. K12 Educational Preparation 9. Proactive Student Communications 10. Inclusive Student Success	Equitable Learning Environment	1. Inclusiveness

Summary

Students–RQ1. Feedback regarding Research Question 1 helped to outline four main themes that are assisting students in their progression toward their first undergraduate degree. The first theme, Comprehensive Student Support Ecosystem, helped to illuminate the critical role that various support systems working together played in assisting students. These systems included both academic and co-curricular elements (i.e. tutoring, personalized guidance, and health/wellness programs). The second theme, Comprehensive Academic Support and Aspirations, highlighted the important interplay between academic support systems (i.e., supplemental instruction) and individualized educational and professional goals in keeping students motivated to stay on track to graduation. The third theme, Student Journey and Development in Higher Education, reflected students' ability to adapt and grow through their college experience, which was typically influenced and shaped by faculty and peer interactions. The final theme, Holistic Student Support, Wellness, and Engagement Spectrum, underscored the significance of mental health initiatives, especially those that work to address anxiety, and being an active participant in the life of the campus community to increase student success. Overall, these themes illustrate the critical role of institutional support and personal connections in a student's success.

Administrators–RQ2. For RQ2, student success professionals identified three key themes which they reported as making the most impact at their individual institutions. The first theme, Holistic Approach to Student Success and Support Systems, demonstrated the important role of having a comprehensive system, which has the flexibility to address a diverse range of students and student needs, has on the ability of an institution to respond to its students. The second theme, Strategic Academic Innovation, highlighted the role of a data-driven decision-

making program in enhancing student outcomes. Further, the interplay that staff must balance between quantitative metrics and qualitative relationships and conversations was a common point of conversation with administrators. Finally, the Comprehensive Student Success and Wellbeing theme emphasized how personalized support, effective communications, and engagement strategies help an institution organize its resources to best cater to the emotional and social needs of its students, ultimately creating a thriving academic environment for all students.

The cross-comparison of inductive and deductive datasets can be utilized as a strategy to improve educational practices for student success. The inductive themes illustrate a multifaceted approach to student success that prioritizes holistic support and proactive engagement. The inductive themes also highlight how educational systems are impacting students' experiences, access, and learning attitudes. Deductive themes support the need for a holistic academic experience that has embedded student support networks, faculty mentorship, and peer support. Overall, the deductive themes emphasize the need for institutions to create equitable learning environments that understand accessibility as a method of promoting student success and educational quality (Tinto, 2012).

Chapter V

Discussion, Implications, Limitations, and Recommendations

This chapter will contain a highlight of key findings and a discussion of the findings as related to the literature. Additionally, this chapter will lay out implications for institutions and student success centers, student success administrators, and students with suggestions for how to increase retention rates and support students' well-being at public universities in Georgia. Lastly, the chapter contains a review of the limitations of the study as well as recommendations for future research.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to use narrative inquiry to compare and contrast the work of student success programs at public universities in Georgia. The project aimed to assist student success professionals by creating stories of how the work of their office was impacting retention, progression, and graduation rates at their institution. The hope was that by adding context to the work of the student success center, more administrators engaged in this important work would have additional information to prioritize their limited resources and strengthen the case for more resources to support the areas of their program that are having the greatest impact.

Research Questions

The two Research Questions (RQs) were designed to allow me to compare and contrast the feedback from students and student success administrators. The research questions were constructed to gain insight from students and student success personnel into the impact of student

success centers on their campus. RQ1 is focused on the student experience, while RQ2 is focused on the feedback of student success administrators.

RQ1 (Students): What factors do students believe contributed toward their persistence at their university?

RQ2 (Administrators): What do student success personnel perceive as the reasons for the increase in student retention and graduation at their institution?

The purpose of RQ1 was to explore what programs of student success centers the interviewed students believe have had the greatest impact on their educational attainment. The data responses for RQ2 provide feedback from student success personnel to ascertain which aspect of their work has the greatest impact, as well as assist in the discovery of the congruency or incongruency between RQ1 and RQ2.

Methodology, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

I chose narrative inquiry as the method because it provided me with the opportunity to weave a narrative that can be easily shared. In using the qualitative narrative inquiry research design, I collected data via both a survey and semi-structured individual interviews. Previous studies utilizing the selected research design and related topics effectively added to the body of retention literature (Harrison, 2014; Perkins, 2021; Villarreal, 2023). Narrative inquiry provided me, as both researcher and instrument of data collection, an opportunity to serve as a “researcher-storyteller” (Barone, 2007, p. 468). Narrative inquiry “presumes the importance of the everyday, the ordinary...” and “extends our understanding of human phenomena” to deepen our understanding of the human condition (Kim, 2016, p. 23).

Data Collection

Both inductive and deductive coding were used in coding and thematization. In the AI-assisted coding approach, an inductive method was used to identify codes and findings related to both research questions for students and administrators (Intellectus Qualitative, 2024). Following that process, deductive coding was used to identify the codes related to components of the theoretical framework (e.g. Tinto's Academic and Social Integration, "1993," and Institutional Commitments, "2012"). The use of AI provided me with the opportunity to efficiently find patterns in the data through intuitive means. Deductive coding and methods gave me the chance to look for nuance and deeper meaning not discoverable through inductive coding alone. Both datasets were integrated into the findings, allowing for a cross-comparison of the data from administrators and students. During the inductive part of the study, students' data consisted of 187 coded segments with 18 codes related to Research Question 1 (RQ1), also revealing four main themes. For the administrators, there were 238 coded segments, leading to 29 codes related to Research Question 2 (RQ2) and three main themes.

During the deductive part of the project, eight codes were used—four representing Tinto's (1993) concepts of Social and Academic Integration and four representing Tinto's (2012) Institutional Commitments. This approach aimed to identify themes related to both integration and commitments from the perspectives of students and administrators. The students' data included 127 coded segments, with the following four emergent themes: Commitment to Excellence in Education, Equitable Learning Environment, Holistic Academic and Social Engagement, and Holistic Student Engagement (see Table 5). For the administrators, there were 184 coded segments, with the following four emergent themes: Equitable Learning Environment,

Holistic Academic Experience, Holistic Student-Centric Approach, and Social Engagement Spectrum.

Key Findings

A number of key findings for students and student success administrators came to the front. Both students and student success administrators named the lingering impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the overall educational ecology as a major point of disruption. Students discussed the need for institutions to support their journey with a holistic approach, which supported them academically and socially in a way that factored in their mental wellbeing as important. Students also spoke about the positive impact that having faculty and student success professionals support their educational journey, with an eye toward their post-graduation plans had a huge impact. Administrators helping students think deeply about the connection between their major and vocational ambitions was mentioned by nearly every student interviewed as having a positive impact on their academic journey.

In addition to the COVID-19 disruption, student success administrators had two additional major findings. Building a student success program that supports student success and wellbeing in a comprehensive manner, that responds to the needs of students on an individual level through personalized communication strategies and identity-based programs and workshops. Finally, I will discuss the concept of executing a Holistic Approach to Student Success Services will be discussed. This holistic approach discussed by administrators focused on the need for student success administrators to direct equal energy and resources behind both academic and social elements of the student experience.

RQ1: Students. The student data yielded a number of key findings: Holistic Student Support, Wellbeing, and Engagement Spectrum, Student Journey and Development in Higher Education, and COVID-19 Influence on Student Education.

Holistic Student Support, Wellness, and Engagement Spectrum. All student participants reported on some element of support, wellness, and/or engagement. The study's findings highlighted the need and desire for personalized academic guidance, emotional and mentoring support, effective tutoring services, and participation in campus activities. The participants provide insight into the benefits of a holistic approach to wellness, as it aided them as they overcame challenges throughout their academic journey. The spectrum was a demonstration of the students' levels of engagement; some participants reported little to no engagement socially, while other participants reported being very engaged in student employment and student organizations. Additionally, the spectrum element highlighted students' connections to their faculty, as some participants noted that their faculty members were pivotal in their persistence and also encouraged a level of exploration and confidence. Participants like Ruth stated that it was very important to have an open and inclusive environment, as it allows for discussion of sensitive topics that could aid students in their fight against substance abuse.

Student Journey and Development in Higher Education. All five student participants reported on some elements of their journey and development within higher education. The study's findings provided rich descriptions of how students navigate academically, professionally, and personally. Participants discussed their transitions from home to college, as well as their development of academic and athletic identities. Some participants reported on factors that help them persist at their institutions, while others reported on factors that sustain their academic growth. Change of majors also provided opportunities for participants to explore

their career trajectories. On-campus employment served as a factor of retention and also enabled some participants to transition as they garnered support from faculty and supervisors.

COVID-19 Influence on Student Education. Two of the five student participants reported on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their student experiences. Ruth described how, during COVID-19, she felt disconnected, as if she did not have the full high school senior experience. Ruth also talked about the learning losses she experienced due to her reduced academic engagement during the pandemic. Daniela also reported on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and stated that she had a difficult time socializing and interacting with others. She stated that her experience during the pandemic contributed to her shyness, “So I was so shy and quiet again, back in my bubble, like my freshman year of college.”

RQ2: Administrators. The administrator data yielded a number of key findings: Comprehensive Student Success and Wellbeing, Holistic Approach to Student Success and Support Systems, and COVID-19’s Educational Disruption.

Comprehensive Student Success and Wellbeing. All of the administrator participants reported on how their services support students’ success and well-being. The study’s findings highlight the commitment and passion that administrators have for students and their success. A number of administrators reported their intentionality toward engaging students and supporting their success through services such as text messaging and early alert systems. Both text messaging and early alerts allow faculty to both identify and assist students who may be struggling personally, academically, mentally, etc. Several support services that support students’ wellness include workshops and outreach programs that particularly focus on first-generation students. Although some administrators stated that they have services in place, others

expressed the need to make improvements with communication across departments in their efforts to better support students.

Holistic Approach to Student Success Systems. All of the administrator participants reported on the strategies and systems approach in supporting students. Several participants noted that their services were an integrated model consisting of social, health, and academic elements. The integrated model allows departments to create focused programs to support their diverse student populations (e.g. first-generation, adult learners, athletes, rural, etc.) in an effort to increase retention. Some of the examples shared included mentorship, mandatory advising, and peer support, all of which help students develop a sense of belonging. The study's findings emphasize the need for students to actively seek support, as students who actively seek support are more likely to perform better academically. As a result, institutions, departments, and success centers are encouraged to ensure accessibility of resources to support students' well-being and success.

COVID-19's Educational Disruption. Two of the administrator participants reported on the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic on student engagement and academic performance. The study's findings highlight the impact of the pandemic on the delivery of instruction from face-to-face to an online medium. Both Amy and Jan reported on the decrease in student engagement as students were reluctant to turn cameras on during class. Amy discussed how the disengagement was poignant, as she had experienced students seeking out face-to-face support services. Thus, the findings support the need to adapt teaching methods to meet students' needs, particularly in subjects such as English and math. Jan stated that faculty were reluctant to change their teaching methods in an effort to intentionally engage their students in a new way.

Discussion and Interpretation of Findings

The discussion and interpretation of findings demonstrates how literature aligns with the study's key findings. Spady (1971) and Tinto's (1974, 1993) research on retention aligns with the study's findings as related to the holistic support of students as well as factors of student engagement. Theorists such as Kimball and Campbell (2013) and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) build upon the research by examining retention factors and threats, as student engagement or involvement can serve as predictors of graduation. The study did yield new findings, as the impacts of COVID-19 have yet to be realized.

RQ1: Students.

Holistic Student Support, Wellbeing, and Engagement Spectrum. Each student comes to college with a unique set of variables impacting their ability to progress and graduate. These variables are impacted by both pre-enrollment attributes and their experience at the institution. Moreover, the lived experience of these students means that they have different needs vis-a-vis the role the institution should play in their development. That spectrum of engagement can be a continuum that ranges from aggressive to passive.

Student success and student support are rooted in and birthed by retention theorists such as Spady (1971) and Tinto (1975, 1993). Tinto's (2012) commitments exemplify the need for institutions to provide more tangible support to ensure and promote student integration. Thus, professionals, educators, and theorists have put a number of initiatives in place to: bridge the achievement gap, develop and implement first-year experience programs, develop early alert systems, and diversify support to advance student success (Tinto, 1975, 1993). This theme can be summarized by reviewing Tinto's (1993) *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*. Namely, that colleges should put the welfare of students ahead of any other

institutional goal. That can be a bit of a moving target as Schreiber et al. (2014) stated that academic advisors report that students are continuously reshaping their academic goals and intentions. Being able to quickly respond to those shifting priorities is an important element for a successful program.

These findings are congruent with Spady (1971) and Tinto (1993) and Tinto's foundational works on the topic (1975). The student participants offer insight into the benefits of a holistic approach to wellness, as it aided them in overcoming challenges throughout their academic journey. As an example of supporting a healthy lifestyle, Student Leni mentioned the importance of having healthy dining options as a way to support the student experience.

In looking more at social wellness, the spectrum demonstrated the students' levels of engagement; some participants reported little to no engagement socially, while other participants reported being very engaged in student employment and student organizations. Additionally, the spectrum element highlighted students' connections to their faculty, as some participants noted that their faculty members were pivotal in their persistence and also encouraged a level of exploration and confidence. Participants like Ruth stated that it was very important to have an open and inclusive environment, as it allows for discussion of sensitive topics that could aid students in their fight against substance abuse.

Student - Student Journey and Development in Higher Education. Kimball and Campbell (2013), Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), and Tinto (1993), explained that a student's likelihood of graduating is determined by their intrinsic motivation, choices, associations, behaviors, orientation, and the support experienced by the campus. Student Jess described how influential her faculty was on her decision to change her major, as the faculty member helped her realize the freedom she had to explore the majors and careers that best suited her. Gates (2017)

spoke about the impact of advisor-initiated outreach to students which has made a tremendous impact at institutions such as Georgia State University. Advisors are a key part of an “institution’s academic and social structures” (Schreiber et al., 2014, p. v) that help students shape their academic and vocational ambitions. Administrator Amy spoke about how investing in additional advisors would be her top priority if additional funding was made available to help keep students on track to graduation.

Student - COVID-19 Influence on Student Education. This leads to the most-referenced impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by students. The study highlights that interviewed students universally reported negative effects of COVID-19 on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) preparedness, social relations, and mental health. Nearly every student interviewed shared some level of feeling unprepared for STEM courses in college due to disruptions in their high school education caused by the pandemic. The loss of hands-on and experiential learning caused by the lack of lab time for science and engineering courses was a common discussion. This feeling of unpreparedness was part of why Jess changed her major.

The mental impact on the students interviewed was clearly stated by four of the participants. They shared stories of anxiety and depression as result of the pandemic. One student seemed to still be processing the impact of the period of isolation, and shared that she has not fully integrated into the life of the institution and had considered transferring and/or withdrawing from school. This speaks to the need for institutions to continue to think about student success holistically, considering academic and social dimensions of the educational journey.

RQ2: Administrators.

Comprehensive Student Success and Wellbeing. As mentioned, the literature aligns with the Administrator's Theme, Comprehensive Student Success and Wellbeing as noted by Webber and Ehrenberg (2010), who found that in recent years spending on academic support and student services has outpaced the growth in instructional spending. The researchers noted that academic and student support services can have a positive effect on persistence and graduation rates (Webber & Ehrenberg, 2010). Similarly, the findings of the study highlight the need for a holistic approach that includes wellness, engagement, and academic initiatives, all of which support student retention and graduation rates. Webber and Ehrenberg (2010) reported that the impact of those services has an outsized impact on those students with lower standardized test scores and higher rates of eligibility for the Pell grant. Several participants noted that communication was foundational in their support of students, as it allowed them to foster engagement with students and share the opportunities provided by the centers. Centers that invested in creating a robust communications strategy that included emails, social media, special events, and text messages had a greater reach within their institutions.

Another pivotal area of support is financial aid. Wohlgemuth et al. (2007) stated that financial aid has a positive impact on graduation as it allows students to work less and focus on their academics. Similarly, participants made note of how support can be particularly beneficial to first-generation and low-income students, as some support allows for advocacy for students to prioritize their well-being as well as their academic achievement. Kruger et al. (2017), speaking as the president of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, emphasized the growing importance of student health and well-being due to rising psychological issues among college students. Understanding the impact of the psychological issues of colleges can allow

student support personnel to be more equipped and strategic in providing services that meet students' needs.

Holistic Approach to Student Success and Support Systems. Additionally, Holistic Approach to Student Success and Support Systems emerged as a key theme in addressing Research Question 2, highlighting various components that contribute to student retention and graduation rates. This theme encompasses several incorporated codes, including mandatory support services, student support structures, and technology accessibility, among others. It emphasizes the importance of addressing diverse student needs beyond academics, such as career planning and technology assistance, to foster a conducive environment for success.

Spady (1970, 1971) spoke about the interaction between a students' internal attributes on how they responded and adapted to institutional norms. These internal, pre-enrollment attributes cause students to respond differently to student success programs, thereby creating the need for both broad stroke and individually tailored programs. Interviews with student success personnel revealed insights into their strategies. Jan emphasized the significance of aligning students' strengths with their purpose, while Monica shared her ability to provide perspectives from outside academia to help students navigate pressures. These examples were in line with the suggestions made by both Pascarella (1980) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1983), who noted the significance of informal interactions between students and members of the faculty and staff at an institution, which students in this study referenced, particularly regarding supplemental instructors (SIs) and peer tutors.

Jan's institution follows a framework based on belonging, achievement, engagement, and purpose, guiding students to discover their strengths. Jan was one of the student success professionals who referenced the work of Vincent Tinto during our conversation. She was

clearly inspired professionally by Tinto's (1993) work that emphasized the importance of integrating both the academic and social elements of the college experience to drive student success.

Carol described operational changes to better fit student schedules, while Peter highlighted workshops aimed at maintaining student motivation and the importance of mentorship. Overall, the interviews underscored the necessity of a comprehensive support system that prioritizes student success, integrating academic and career planning to inspire students toward meaningful contributions to society. The institutions studied showed variability in services and organizational structures, yet all recognized the synergy between career readiness and personal growth as vital for student motivation and success.

COVID-19's Educational Disruption. While there is no debate that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant educational disruption, affecting student success for a generation, there were some positive impacts. Most of the student success professionals interviewed shared that their institutions made substantial investments in educational technology to add flexibility to their course delivery and student outreach efforts. These forced investments in educational technology may have the secondary impact of helping to counter Baumol's (Baumol & Bowen, 1966) cost disease theory by increasing economy of scale, thereby increasing the overall financial health of an institution. It should be noted that Wexler (2016) and EAB (2017) all think that the impact will be minimal with the real driver of tuition increase being more closely aligned with rising costs of administration and research.

With that said, administrators and faculty are addressing substantial learning losses as students progress through the system. Jan shared that working with faculty to help them realize the loss, build empathy for students, and meet them where they are has been a focal point for her

office. A 2023 study by the Harvard Graduate School of Education found that while students recovered 20-30% of learning loss in the first year, no further recovery occurred afterward. Additionally, it reported that U.S. public school students in grades 3-8 lost about half a year of math learning (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2023).

Implications for Research

The deductive (theory) data analysis within Chapter Four yielded a number of themes that aligned with RQ1 (Students) and RQ2 (Administrators). The themes highlight both the similarities and contrasting perspectives between students and administrators regarding academic and social integration in higher education as framed within Tinto's (1975, 1993) theories on student success, Tinto's (1975, 1993) Dimension and Commitments. In framing the study, Tinto's dimensions included: Formal Academic, Informal Academic, Formal Social, and Informal Social:

- Formal Academic - Academic performance
- Informal Academic - faculty/staff interactions (academic system)
- Formal Social - Extracurricular activities
- Informal Social - peer group interactions (social systems)

Additionally, Tinto's (1975, 1993) Commitments include: Student Success, Student Support, Educational Quality, and Inclusiveness:

1. Commitment to student success: Colleges need to prioritize the academic and social success of students as a central goal. Create an environment where students are the center and their needs and challenges are actively addressed.

2. Commitment to student support: Support systems for academic and social systems are readily available. This includes advising, mentoring, tutoring, and other forms of assistance that drive retention and progression.
3. Commitment to Educational Quality: The institution must maintain a commitment to effective and high educational standards in teaching and learning through regular review of scope and sequence, curriculum design, instructional strategies, and robust learning environments.
4. Commitment to Inclusiveness: Institution has demonstrated commitment to success regardless of the background, race/ethnic origin, age, etc. of students.

RQ1: (Students). The deductive (theory) themes: *Holistic and Social Engagement*, along with emergent themes of *Equitable Learning Environment*, and *Commitment to Excellence in Education*. Holistic and Social Engagement aligned with: Formal Academic, Informal Academic, Formal Social, and Informal Social. The theme highlighted the layered nature of students' experiences, which contributed to their persistence within their institutions. Student engagement extends beyond the classroom (academic performance) and is demonstrated through informal mentorship, extracurricular activities, and social interactions.

Researchers' ability to understand factors that serve as motivators to students may extend retention research as the education environment and mode of instruction delivery evolve. The evolution will include more students engaged with coursework through online learning, which may warrant more research on retention. The two emergent themes: *Equitable Learning Environment* and *Commitment to Excellence in Education* align with the following Tinto's (1975, 1993) commitments: Educational Quality and Inclusiveness. Both themes underscore the need for institutions to be aware of and ensure inclusiveness and educational quality through

standards (teaching and environment), learning opportunities, and resources. Thus, through inclusion and educational quality, institutions ensure that all students have access to quality education that enriches and supports their discovery of knowledge and reaffirms their identities.

RQ2: (Administrators). The deductive (theory) themes: *Holistic Academic Experience*, *Holistic Student-Centric Approach*, along with an emergent theme of *Equitable Learning Environment*. *Holistic Academic Experience* and *Holistic Student Centric-Approach* themes align with the following Tinto's (1975, 1993) Dimensions and Commitments: Formal Academic, Informal Academic, Educational Quality, Student Success, and Student Support. In contrast to the student themes, the administrators' themes highlight the need for structured support systems. Both themes illustrate the positive effect that mentorship, resources, and services have on students' success. Initiatives like early alert systems help ensure that resources and services are available to the campus in an efficient manner and also tailored to the needs of students. Thus, integrating both the academic and social components is needed in order to fully support students. Researchers could benefit from understanding how structural dynamics affect students' retention and persistence.

Implications for Practice

The study's findings yielded a number of implications for institutions, leaders of student success centers, student success personnel, and students seeking or utilizing services. There are wide-ranging deductions for each audience with overlap and distinctions. These implications should be considered broadly by institutional leaders, student success professionals, and students as they consider resource allocation and planning for their institutions or academic journey.

Institutions and Student Success Centers. The first implication for institutional leaders to consider is how they communicate with students. This includes the mode of communication,

the content of communications, and the frequency with which they reach out. Schools should look to audit their communications to ensure that messages are clear and give students a clear call to action. They need to invest in strategies that help to engage students who became disconnected during remote learning. Also, highlight communications that help to normalize seeking help in both academic and mental wellbeing contexts. Additionally, institutions should celebrate and highlight students who are involved in the campus community both formally and informally to model and inspire other students to participate in the campus.

The second concept for institutions to review is their academic support programming. A clear path for potential progress would be for institutions to review ways to expand the early alert system and maintain faculty participation in reporting progress and early struggles. Moreover, institutions should explore using diagnostic tools and engagement opportunities, such as surveys, to create targeted workshops to address real-time needs. If feasible, institutions should invest resources in expanding tutoring options. This expansion should include more online tutoring, more supplemental instruction, tutoring beyond the introductory levels, expanded hours, and additional training for science, technology, engineering, and math (i.e., STEM) courses.

The third implication for institutions to consider is to review the school's response and commitment, as well as resources devoted to student success and well-being. Institutions are encouraged to use both qualitative and quantitative measures to inform leadership about the impact of their work. Tracking the impact through data that is easily digested and shared across their campus is important. In addition, having narratives around individual student stories and testimonies helps add color to the discussion about the impact of their work. Institutions should look to balance metrics with meaning as they share their story. Student success centers should adopt holistic success models (e.g., Four Pillars at State University) for programming and

resource allocation. Research also demonstrates that assisting students in initiating career planning early positively impacts retention. Students benefited from having an end in mind as they progressed through their academic coursework; however, the ability to normalize academic pivoting and provide tailored counseling and wellness services for high-stress academic tracks also positively impacts student success efforts.

The fourth link for institutions to consider addresses the need for universities to create environments that are responsive to all students. This includes hosting student organizations and cultural events that foster a sense of belonging among students from diverse backgrounds, including different ethnicities, races, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic backgrounds. By providing the framework for students to create organizations that help bring like-minded students together, institutions show an interest in creating space for them to bring their whole selves to their academic community. In addition, these organizations create another pathway for students to show leadership and experience success through program execution.

These four implications help institutions contemplate the structures, policies, and procedures that can influence student success at the institutional level. Each of these connection points are worthy of investment and regular review. Strategic benchmarks and performance indicators can be a leading marker for additional student success.

Student Success Administrators. The first implication for student success professionals to consider is leveraging personal experiences. Many of the professionals interviewed shared their belief that their personal narrative has helped shape their professional life. As mentioned in Tinto (2012), and demonstrated through conversations with students, having a post-graduation vocational plan impacts student retention and graduation. In three of the interviews, students found a new vocation to explore through the relationships formed in work-study jobs in the

student success department or using the services provided by the department. One of the students, Ruth, was actively applying for jobs in the area of student success after being helped by the school's program. Administrators should consider sharing their journeys. This would mean being open and transparent about their undergraduate experience with students who are experiencing a rough patch during their time. For many of those interviewed, that dialogue helped keep students positive and allowed the administrators to reinforce their professional calling by reminding them of the impact of their work. Four of the administrators interviewed had faced a key moment (e.g., academic probation, transferring, residence life issues) during their undergraduate years that had impacted them. Likewise, one professional, Monica, would quickly share her average academic record when meeting with students who were facing academic difficulty in college.

This also means that professionals should pay attention to how they respond to the myriad paths that students follow before arriving at their campus. Professionals need to recognize, respond to, and validate students who come from school systems in rural areas, immigrant families, and high school experiences not on the college-prep track. This seemed to be particularly important to Georgia students coming from outside the metro-Atlanta area. It was also clear that Tinto's (2012) suggestions about the importance of mentoring students through transitions remain true. Key moments, such as the first two weeks of classes, first exams, and preregistration are critical fulcrums in a student's academic journey. Student success professionals can encourage students to progress in their studies by showing empathy while assisting them in navigating academic or vocational uncertainty. In this study, it was especially impactful for tutoring and supplemental instruction (SI) programs to engage with students who were receiving the results from their first exam of their freshman year to discuss the available

programs. Early intervention helped lower the barrier of entry and normalize students using the services available to them.

The second overtone for student success professionals to consider is to ensure they are creating inclusive and supportive learning environments. This included both the physical space as well as the culture that exists within it. Students discussed the importance of having a welcoming and centrally located office on campus. For some, the success center became the preferred study location. This preference happened organically due to the physical environment, and occasional coffee and refreshments, that created a space that was more conducive to group study than the library.

The culture of these spaces should validate making mistakes as part of the learning process. Supplemental instructors (SI) and tutors should work diligently to create an environment where students feel safe to make errors and learn from them. In addition, administrators should dedicate energy to making sure that all areas of the student support program are systematically partnering together. Wraparound support reinforces foundational skills, and STEM support helps create a center that meets students where they are and gives them the tools they need to succeed.

The third connection for student success professionals is quite possibly the most complicated to execute, as it crosses over with the academic offerings in course scope and rigor. Student success professionals need to partner with faculty to balance rigor and responsiveness. This does not necessarily mean faculty should lower standards, but they should partner to explore alternative methods for assessments to meet students where they are, especially in light of the learning loss suffered through the COVID-19 pandemic. Faculty could contemplate providing scaffolding for students who experienced disruptions in their academic foundation

during their late high school or early college years. Faculty could also collaborate with SI leaders to learn about alternative learning methods that have proven successful for students in their classes. Student success professionals and faculty can also partner on promoting minors and electives that help students discover new passions and vocational interests.

Implications for Students. The implications for students are categorized into the following areas: *Proactive Engagement and Help-Seeking, Peer Connection and Community Building, Personal Growth and Purpose, Emotional and Mental Well-being, and Accessible and Comfortable Support Options*. Students seeking support are encouraged to respond to text messages, surveys, and alerts that are designed to support academic success. As noted, some alerts may be an intervention through Early Warning Systems to ensure that the students do not fall into chronic absenteeism or course failure. Students who are engaged in tutoring, counseling, or peer support are encouraged to come early and often, as multiple visits are closely associated with persistence. It is important to use tutoring, counseling, and/or peer support - even if they are not struggling - to build a level of comfort and familiarity, as this will help students retain and reinforce key concepts and practices. If a course failure or a crisis occurs, students could be given the option of engaging in academic recovery through tutoring, workshops, or supplemental instruction. Support services, as previously mentioned, can aid students in addressing learning gaps. This has been shown to be particularly relevant in STEM courses in this project. Communication with key faculty or personnel can help students collaborate to create applicable solutions for their academic and personal needs.

The first implications related to *In building Peer Connection and Community*, it is important for students to build connections with their peers, as this fosters a sense of belonging and shared resilience. Peer connections allow students to share resources, skills, and knowledge;

such resources could include recommendations for support services (e.g., tutors). Peer-led learning, in a formal context such as supplemental instruction and in an informal context such as organic study groups, provides an opportunity for students to deepen their understanding and mitigate some academic performance anxiety. Additionally, Supplemental Instruction allows peers to connect based on their shared academic goals.

The second implications related to *Personal Growth and Purpose* showcases how students are encouraged to define their purpose, explore leadership opportunities, and honor their place in the world. Through reflection, students can assess their strengths and passions, which aid in academic and career goal development and alignment. For two of the students interviewed, working in the student success program has inspired them to consider this as a potential vocation after graduation. Engaging in campus organizations can provide students an opportunity to gain formal or informal leadership. While developing a sense of purpose, it is important to assess and establish a pace that fosters authentic connections, which can contribute to success.

The third implication related to *Emotional and Mental Well-being* is essential; as such, it is important for students to prioritize well-being and seek emotional support when needed. Prioritizing well-being allows students to balance academic demands along with those of personal wellness and well-being; optimal balance aids students in long-term success. Students are encouraged to seek out mentors, advisors, or residential life staff when they are experiencing academic or other stressors. Faculty and staff can help students mitigate stress through processing and releasing emotions, either directly or by making connections with mental health professionals. Helping students through these issues can improve their focus and overall well-being.

The fourth implication related to *Accessible and Comfortable Support Options* showcases how students are encouraged to assess the most comfortable and accessible options of support. Some students may feel more comfortable utilizing digital or online options for connection. Others will be more comfortable with peer or professional counseling delivered in person. Additionally, participation in workshops and events such as tailored programming can help address students' needs and equip them for challenges.

Limitations

There were several limitations of this study, including the selection of the institutions and sampling methods for both administrators and student participants. The institution selection does not fully represent all of the institutional types within the USG system; however, I believe that the findings may still be transferable as they relate to the students' experiences and the administrators' methods of support. Additionally, the proposed sample size for both the administrator and student participants was $N = 5$. However, I successfully recruited five administrators from five different institutions and five student participants from four institutions. Thus, the total sample of represented institutions was somewhat imbalanced; however, the datasets for both administrators and students were complete.

The sample size and selection of students with a specific classification may not provide a full depiction of the retention or persistence impact of student support services for those students with lower and higher classifications. The utilization of a specific theoretical framework was beneficial in analyzing the dataset, but may serve as a limitation in that this framework may not be conducive to institutions that do not align with the proposed values of Tinto's (1993, 2012) Dimension and Commitment. Like most self-reported data, credibility may be impacted by reactivity (Maxwell, 2013); however, I sought to develop the dependability of the findings by

using triangulation and interrater data analysis, thus the employment of the three-iteration coding process (Ary et al., 2014).

Recommendations for Future Research

This study utilized a narrative inquiry design to collect and analyze data. Future researchers can expand upon the original selection of institution types and sampling of administrators and students to examine similar and emergent findings that are transferable to a larger context within higher education. Further study could diversify the number of institutions or expand the number of student participants at a single institution to explore how findings either align or differ. Additionally, the use of methodologies such as narrative inquiry can allow future researchers the ability to capture participants' stories within their contexts, which allows for the exploration of stories across contexts to ensure the comparable representation of student support services within higher education.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will be a rich area of study for the foreseeable future. It will take until the spring of 2044 for the students who were in kindergarten during the 2019-20 academic year to hit the traditional six-year graduation mark. The students interviewed for this project had their educational experience impacted by the pandemic at points ranging from 11th grade through their first year of college. The impact of the lost instructional time was discussed, as was the impact on the social experience and comfort level of peer relationships with fellow students. In particular, the pandemic seems to have impacted a student's ability to learn STEM-related content, as courses with a lab component were harder to translate to online delivery. Course content, such as anatomy labs or physics experiments, generally lost the ability to have hands-on experiential learning. Administrators spoke about the learning gaps and the impact on mental health and how their offices are working to address the pandemic's impact

holistically. Future researchers can explore the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on both learning loss and mental health.

An opportunity for deeper study that was uncovered during this conversation was around the impact of student employment. The majority of the students interviewed worked on campus at some point during their experience. Aside from the financial gains, they also felt that there were additional intrinsic benefits to those positions, which helped them learn more about how to navigate their institution. Working for the institution also created a deeper connection with the school that has strengthened their ability to persist. For administrators, having student employees has deepened their impact in various areas. A cadre of peer tutors can assist students in ways that could be less intimidating, as they are close in age and stature. Also, having students in the office can assist administrators in generating ideas about communicating with students and can help spread the word about services offered on a grassroots level. Further study of the possible broad impact of student employment on student retention, progression, and graduation could be beneficial.

A longitudinal study that follows students from pre-enrollment through graduation to ascertain the impact of the use of student success services versus those who do not engage in services would be an area worthy of further investment. While most sophisticated universities have institutional research offices that regularly review and report the quantitative elements to share with governing boards and accrediting agencies, the added dimension that narrative inquiry could bring to those measures could be intriguing. The storytelling elements of narrative inquiry, or other qualitative designs, can help institutions align current resources and assist in the solicitation of additional resources to strengthen their program. Quantitative measures that look

to track the impact of those students who use the services against those who do not, layered with the rate and frequency of use, would help to illuminate the impact of the programming.

Future researchers may also expand and explore topics related to the burnout of student success professionals, which may impact or impede their ability to effectively support students (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1997). The current study findings demonstrated the importance of comprehensive support that holistically addresses students' needs, including their mental, emotional, and physical wellness. Several findings identified how support helped reduce stress and offered structural scaffolding that assisted students in achieving success. As noted in the COVID-19 discussion, both students and professionals alike were impacted; thus, the wellness of the support staff may serve as valuable information as to how Tinto's commitments are sustaining both students and staff (Tinto, 1993, 2012; Zhang, Gossett, Simpson, & Davis, 2017). How are institutions providing support to student personnel who aid in student success and equitable learning environments? Are student success personnel, who safeguard the institutional values and goals, also recipients of the care and support from the institutions in which they serve? As research has shown that stress and burnout can lead to depersonalization within the role and impact job satisfaction and effectiveness, it is important to know how institutions support those who provide support (Maslach et al., 1997; Szromek & Wolniak, 2020; Tarcan, Hikmet, Schooley, Top, & Tarcan, 2017).

Conclusion

Some key findings that were consistent points in the cross-comparison are: communication, gateway usage, turnover, and hospitality. Communication was a consistent topic with the students and administrators. While few student success offices had a dedicated full-time staff person to manage communications for the office, many were utilizing student

workers to help manage social media and other communication channels to positive results. Secondly, the hurdle of getting students to use the services of the office the first time is high but seems to disappear quickly. Heavy usage and repeat customers were regularly discussed, so finding ways to get students through the door the first time will undoubtedly increase rates of student success.

The turnover, particularly among advisors, was astounding. One student in her senior year was on her third academic advisor. A review of the career pathway, and retention program, for academic advisors should be considered at each institution to help maintain continuity in those important jobs. Individuals in these positions become trusted partners in a student's academic journey.

Hospitality, ambience, and location of student success offices were clearly important to the students. Many who were interviewed considered the office their personal "third place" and shared how important it was for them when those places had coffee and snacks. They felt more comfortable asking for help and appreciated the school's commitment to their experience. While few things are universally true across all campuses, free food is a strong motivator for engagement across the board.

A creative tension exists between installing broad guardrails, policies, and procedures in place to guide the work of student success at the institutional level, against creating space for tailored and individualized responses. Consistent recalibration along that continuum is a heavy lift for student success practitioners, but is worthy of concentrated time and effort, especially for institutions that engage in higher percentages of first-generation and low-income students who need extra assistance navigating the complex ecology of a university.

In addition, helping students start with a prospective vocational outcome in mind has become increasingly important. The path of using the college experience to explore various professional outcomes can still be useful, and students are certainly able to change majors and career aspirations, but social factors and the rising cost of higher education seem to have ratcheted up the anxiety around post-graduation plans for those students interviewed. Having a clear end in mind helped these students stay motivated to graduate on time, even if three of those interviewed changed their major during their time in college.

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Appendix A:

Survey

Student Survey

I acknowledge that I have read and understand the information provided in the statement above.

Please enter the survey code provided. By entering this code, you are providing your consent to participate in the research study as explained in your email. You may exit this survey at anytime and withdraw your participation from the research study without consequence.

1. What is your current age?
2. How would you describe your gender identity?
3. What is your race or ethnic background?
4. What is your current academic major and/or course of study?
5. Would you like to continue with the interview phase of the study?

Administrator Survey

I acknowledge that I have read and understand the information provided in the statement above.

Please enter the survey code provided. By entering this code, you are providing your consent to participate in the research study as explained in your email. You may exit this survey at anytime and withdraw your participation from the research study without consequence.

1. What is your current age?
2. How would you describe your gender identity?
3. What is your race or ethnic background?
4. How long have you been employed in your current position?
5. How long have you been working in higher education overall - and how long of that has been in student services?
6. Would you like to continue with the interview phase of this study?

Appendix B:
Interview Protocol(s) & Coding Document

Interview Protocol

General Information

Date:

Time:

Location: Virtual Session

Interviewer: Doerr

Participant: Participant #__ (Pseudonym)

Student or Administrator: Student or Admin

Approach: Semi-structured

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this narrative inquiry is to explore the impact of student success centers. I seek to compare and contrast the impact of centers on the student experience by interviewing student success personnel and a student.

Recording & Transcription: Permission granted by Participant #__ **Circle: Yes or No**

General Information:

Purpose of Interview: To explore the impact of student success centers

Interviewer to Participant: Explain the process for conducting the interview and the set time allotted. Note that interview questions will be utilized as a guide to help move the interviewing process but this is a semi-structured process.

Research Questions:

RQ 1. What factors do students believe contributed toward their persistence at their university?

RQ 2. What do student success personnel perceive as the reasons for the increase in student retention and graduation at their institution?

Theories: Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure/ Tinto's Academic & Social Integration

Components with descriptions:

- Formal Academic - Academic performance
- Informal Academic - faculty/staff interactions (academic system)
- Formal Social - Extracurricular activities
- Informal Social - peer group interactions (social systems)

Tinto's Commitments and descriptions:

1. Commitment to student success: Colleges need to prioritize the academic and social success of students as a central goal. Create an environment where students are the center and their needs and challenges are actively addressed.
2. Commitment to student support: Support systems for academic and social systems are readily available. This includes advising, mentoring, tutoring, and other forms of assistance that drive retention and progression.
3. Commitment to Educational Quality: The institution must maintain a commitment to effective and high educational standards in teaching and learning through regular review of scope and sequence, curriculum design, instructional strategies, and robust learning environments.
4. Commitment to Inclusiveness: Institution has demonstrated commitment to success regardless of the background, race/ethnic origin, age, etc. of students.

Interview	Questions	Data related to which RQs	Dimension references (academic or social; formal or informal)	Tinto Commitments (Student Success, Student Support, Educational Quality, Inclusiveness)	Themes and Patterns
Admin Interview	1. Tell me about yourself. Where did you grow up? What was your college experience?	Background Admin_Back_College_IQ1	Academic formal; Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal Admin_Dim_AF_IQ1 Admin_Dim_AIF_IQ1 Admin_Dim_SF_IQ1 Admin_Dim_SIF_IQ1		
Admin Interview	2. During your time as a student, were there any faculty or staff members that you felt particularly inspired by?	Admin_facultyInspired_IQ2	Academic formal; Academic informal Admin_Dim_AF_IQ2 Admin_Dim_AIF_IQ2		
Admin Interview	3. During your time as a student, were there any fellow	Admin_StudentInspired_IQ3	Social formal; Social informal		

	students that you felt particularly inspired by?		Admin_Dim_SF_IQ3 Admin Dim SIF IQ3		
Admin Interview	4.What is your career and educational background?	Background Admin_Back_CareerEd_IQ4	Academic formal; Academic informal Admin_Dim_AF_IQ4 Admin_Dim_AIF_IQ4		
Admin Interview	5.If you worked in a different capacity in HE what are some differences between that role and working in student success?	RQ2 Admin_RQ2_DiffJobroles_IQ5	Academic formal; Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal Admin_Dim_AF_IQ5 Admin_Dim_AIF_IQ5 Admin_Dim_SF_IQ5 Admin_Dim_SIF_IQ5		
Admin Interview	6.What are some things that your academic and professional background did to prepare you for this role?	Background Admin_Back_Preparation_IQ6	Academic formal; Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal Admin_Dim_AF_IQ6 Admin_Dim_AIF_IQ6 Admin_Dim_SF_IQ6 Admin_Dim_SIF_IQ6		
Admin Interview	7.Many jobs have parts that we enjoy and parts we would rather not be a part of what we do. Is that the case for you?	RQ2 Admin_RQ2_JoyBurden_IQ7	Academic formal; Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal Admin_Dim_AF_IQ7 Admin_Dim_AIF_IQ7 Admin_Dim_SF_IQ7 Admin Dim SIF IQ7		
Admin Interview	8.What do you currently do in your role that you wish you had had access to as a student?	RQ2 Admin_RQ2_StudAccess_IQ8	Academic formal; Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal Admin Dim AF IQ8		

			Admin_Dim_AIF_IQ8 Admin_Dim_SF_IQ8 Admin_Dim_SIF_IQ8		
Admin Interview	9.How did you become interested in working with students in this way?	Background Admin_Back_WorkInterest_IQ9	Academic formal; Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal Admin_Dim_AF_IQ9 Admin_Dim_AIF_IQ9 Admin_Dim_SF_IQ9 Admin_Dim_SIF_IQ9		
Admin Interview	10.Tell me your perspective on which areas of the student success program are having the greatest impact here?	RQ2 Admin_RQ2_GreatestImpact_IQ10	Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal Admin_Dim_AIF_IQ10 Admin_Dim_SF_IQ10 Admin_Dim_SIF_IQ10		
Admin Interview	11.Likewise, could you give me your perspective on which areas are not living up to expectations?	RQ2 Admin_RQ2_LeastImpact_IQ11	Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal Admin_Dim_AIF_IQ11 Admin_Dim_SF_IQ11 Admin_Dim_SIF_IQ11		
Admin Interview	12.Magic wand experiment: If you could wave a magic wand and make one thing related to student success happen here– what would it be?	RQ2 Admin_RQ2_Magicwand_IQ12	Academic formal; Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal Admin_Dim_AF_IQ12 Admin_Dim_AIF_IQ12 Admin_Dim_SF_IQ12 Admin_Dim_SIF_IQ12		
Admin Interview	13.Do you have any stories or examples of helping students integrate into the social dimensions of the institution?	RQ2 Admin_RQ2_SocialDimension_IQ13	Social formal; Social informal Admin_Dim_SF_IQ13 Admin_Dim_SIF_IQ13		
Admin Interview	14.Do you have any stories or examples of helping students integrate into the academic dimension of the institution?	RQ2 Admin_RQ2_AcademicDimension_IQ14	Academic formal; Academic informal Admin_Dim_AF_IQ14 Admin_Dim_AIF_IQ14		

Admin Interview	15.What has not come up about the student success program here that you want to make sure we talk about?	RQ2 Admin_RQ2_IQ15	Academic formal; Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal Admin_Dim_AF_IQ15 Admin_Dim_AIF_IQ15 Admin_Dim_SF_IQ15 Admin_Dim_SIF_IQ15		
Admin Interview	16.Based on Tinto () there are some commitments to student success and it is defined as Colleges need to prioritize the academic and social success of students as a central goal. Additionally, institutions are charged with creating an environment where students are the center and their needs and challenges are actively addressed. What components of your job responsibilities highlight your institution’s commitment to student success?	RQ2 Admin_RQ2_TCStudentSuccess_IQ16	Academic formal; Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal Admin_Dim_AF_IQ16 Admin_Dim_AIF_IQ16 Admin_Dim_SF_IQ16 Admin_Dim_SIF_IQ16	Student Success Admin_TC_Stud Suc_IQ16	
Admin Interview	17.Based on Tinto () there is some commitment to student support when institutions are charged with developing support systems for academic and social systems such that they are readily available to students. This includes advising, mentoring, tutoring, and other forms of assistance that drive retention and progression. What components of your job responsibilities highlight a commitment to student support?	RQ2 Admin_RQ2_TCStudentSupport_IQ17	Academic formal; Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal Admin_Dim_AF_IQ17 Admin_Dim_AIF_IQ17 Admin_Dim_SF_IQ17 Admin_Dim_SIF_IQ17	Student Support Admin_TC_Stud Sup_IQ17	

Admin Interview	18. Based on Tinto () there are some commitments to educational quality. Institutions are charged with maintaining a commitment to effective and high educational standards in teaching and learning through regular review of scope and sequence, curriculum design, instructional strategies, and robust learning environments. What components of your job responsibilities highlight the commitment to educational quality?	RQ2 Admin_RQ2_TCEducationalQuality_IQ18	Academic formal; Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal Admin_Dim_AF_IQ18 Admin_Dim_AIF_IQ18 Admin_Dim_SF_IQ18 Admin_Dim_SIF_IQ18	Educational Quality Admin_TC_EdQual_IQ18	
Admin Interview	19. Based on Tinto () there are some commitments to creating inclusive environments (inclusiveness). Institutions have demonstrated commitment to success regardless of the background, race/ethnic origin, age, etc. of students. What components of your job responsibilities highlight the commitment to inclusiveness?	RQ2 Admin_RQ2_TCI Inclusiveness_IQ19	Academic formal; Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal Admin_Dim_AF_IQ19 Admin_Dim_AIF_IQ19 Admin_Dim_SF_IQ19 Admin_Dim_SIF_IQ19	Inclusiveness Admin_TC_Inclus_IQ19	
Student Interview					
Student Interview	1. Tell me about yourself.	Background Stud_Back_Yourself_IQ1	St_Dim_AF_IQ1 St_Dim_AIF_IQ1 St_Dim_SF_IQ1 St_Dim_SIF_IQ1		
Student Interview	2. What was your high school experience and what was your college search like? 3.	Background Stud_Back_HSCollege_IQ2	St_Dim_AF_IQ2 St_Dim_AIF_IQ2 St_Dim_SF_IQ2 St_Dim_SIF_IQ2		
Student Interview	4. How did you choose your major?	Background Stud_Back_Major_IQ3	Academic formal; Academic informal		

			St_Dim_AF_IQ3 St_Dim_AIF_IQ3 St_Dim_SF_IQ3 St_Dim_SIF_IQ3		
Student Interview	5. What are your plans for after college?	Background Stud_Back_Plans_IQ4	St_Dim_AF_IQ4 St_Dim_AIF_IQ4 St_Dim_SF_IQ4 St_Dim_SIF_IQ4		
Student Interview	6. Have you been involved in any clubs/activities sponsored by the institution?	RQ1 Stud_RQ1_Extracurricular_IQ5	Social formal St_Dim_AF_IQ5 St_Dim_AIF_IQ5 St_Dim_SF_IQ5 St_Dim_SIF_IQ5		
Student Interview	7. Have you lived on campus at any point during your time here?	RQ1 Stud_RQ1_residential_IQ6	Social formal St_Dim_AF_IQ6 St_Dim_AIF_IQ6 St_Dim_SF_IQ6 St_Dim_SIF_IQ6		
Student Interview	8. Was there ever a moment where you considered dropping out? If so, who did you speak with?	RQ1 Stud_RQ1_dropout_IQ7	Academic formal; Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal St_Dim_AF_IQ7 St_Dim_AIF_IQ7 St_Dim_SF_IQ7 St_Dim_SIF_IQ7		
Student Interview	9. What about your experience here makes you the most excited?	RQ1 Stud_RQ1_Excitement_IQ8	Academic formal; Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal St_Dim_AF_IQ8 St_Dim_AIF_IQ8 St_Dim_SF_IQ8		

			St_Dim_SIF_IQ8		
Student Interview	10. Are there any faculty or staff members that you felt particularly inspired by?	RQ1 Stud_RQ1_FacultyInspired_IQ9	Academic formal; Academic informal St_Dim_AF_IQ9 St_Dim_AIF_IQ9 St_Dim_SF_IQ9 St_Dim_SIF_IQ9		
Student Interview	11. Are there any fellow students that you felt particularly inspired by?	RQ1 Stud_RQ1_StudentInspired_IQ10	Social informal St_Dim_AF_IQ10 St_Dim_AIF_IQ10 St_Dim_SF_IQ10 St_Dim_SIF_IQ10		
Student Interview	12. Can you tell me your perspective on which areas of the student success program are having the greatest impact here—and which areas have been the most impactful for you?	RQ1 Stud_RQ1_GreatestImpact_IQ11	Academic formal; Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal St_Dim_AF_IQ11 St_Dim_AIF_IQ11 St_Dim_SF_IQ11 St_Dim_SIF_IQ11		
Student Interview	13. Likewise, could you give me your perspective on which areas are not living up to expectations?	RQ1 Stud_RQ1_LeastImpact_IQ12	Academic formal; Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal St_Dim_AF_IQ12 St_Dim_AIF_IQ12 St_Dim_SF_IQ12 St_Dim_SIF_IQ12		
Student Interview	14. Do you have any stories or examples of how the office helped you integrate into the academic dimension of the institution?	RQ1 Stud_RQ1_AcademicIntegration_IQ13	Academic formal; Academic informal St_Dim_AF_IQ13 St_Dim_AIF_IQ13		

			St_Dim_SF_IQ13 St_Dim_SIF_IQ13		
Student Interview	15. Do you have any stories or examples of how the office helped you integrate into the non-academic or social dimension of the institution?	RQ1 Stud_RQ1_SocialIntegration_IQ14	Social formal; Social informal St_Dim_AF_IQ14 St_Dim_AIF_IQ14 St_Dim_SF_IQ14 St_Dim_SIF_IQ14		
Student Interview	16. Magic wand experiment: If you could wave a magic wand and make one thing related to student success happen here—what would it be?	RQ1 Stud_RQ1_Magicwand_IQ15	Academic formal; Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal St_Dim_AF_IQ15 St_Dim_AIF_IQ15 St_Dim_SF_IQ15 St_Dim_SIF_IQ15		
Student Interview	17. Based on Tinto () there is some commitment to student support when institutions are charged with developing support systems for academic and social systems such that they are readily available to students like you. This includes advising, mentoring, tutoring, and other forms of assistance that support your ability to stay in school and make progress towards your degree. What components of your experience with the center has demonstrated to you their commitment your success? Do you have an example?	RQ1 Stud_RQ1_TCStudentSupport_IQ16	Academic formal; Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal St_Dim_AF_IQ16 St_Dim_AIF_IQ16 St_Dim_SF_IQ16 St_Dim_SIF_IQ16	Stud_TC_StudentSupport_RQ1_IQ16	

Student Interview	18. Based on Tinto () there is some commitment to educational quality when institutions are charged with developing maintaining a commitment to educational standards in teaching and learning through curriculum and the learning environment. This includes what is taught in the classroom, reviewing instructional strategies, and giving students a nice place to learn and discover. What components of your experience with the center has demonstrated to you their commitment your success? Do you have an example?	RQ1 Stud_RQ1_TCEducationalQuality_IQ17	Academic formal; Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal St_Dim_AF_IQ17 St_Dim_AIF_IQ17 St_Dim_SF_IQ17 St_Dim_SIF_IQ17	Stud_TC_EdQual_RQ1_IQ16	
Student Interview	19. Based on Tinto () there is some commitment to student success when institutions are charged with keeping the success of students as the central goal of the institution. This would mean alignment within the school that creates an environment where students are the center and their needs and challenges were actively addressed. What components of your experience with the center has demonstrated to you their commitment your	RQ1 Stud_RQ1_TCStudentSuccess_IQ18	Academic formal; Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal St_Dim_AF_IQ18 St_Dim_AIF_IQ18 St_Dim_SF_IQ18 St_Dim_SIF_IQ18	Stud_TC_StudentSuccess_RQ1_IQ18	

	success? Do you have an example?				
Student Interview	20. Based on Tinto () there is some commitment to inclusiveness when institutions are charged with developing maintaining a commitment to a space where everyone has the opportunity to learn regardless of their race/ethnic identity, age, gender, etc. This includes what is taught in the classroom, and the broader university community. What components of your experience with the center has demonstrated to you their commitment your success? Do you have an example?	RQ1 Stud_RQ1_TCInclusiveness_IQ19	Academic formal; Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal St_Dim_AF_IQ19 St_Dim_AIF_IQ19 St_Dim_SF_IQ19 St_Dim_SIF_IQ19	Stud_TC_Inclus_RQ1_IQ19	
Student Interview	21. What has not come up about the student success program here that you want to make sure we talk about?	RQ1 Stud_RQ1_Other_IQ20	Academic formal; Academic informal; Social formal; Social informal St_Dim_AF_IQ20 St_Dim_AIF_IQ20 St_Dim_SF_IQ20 St Dim SIF IQ20		

Appendix C:
Letter of Cooperation

“Correspondence must be on the facility’s letterhead”

Ms. Tina Wright, Compliance officer
Office of Sponsored Programs & Research Administration (OSPRA)
Valdosta State University
1500 N. Patterson Street, Valdosta, GA 31698

Subject: Letter of Cooperation/Authorization (LOC)

Dear Ms. Wright,

After reviewing the description of the research presented by William “Bill” Doerr, I have granted authorization for William “Bill” Doerr to conduct research at our institution.

I understand the purpose of the study is to [brief description of authorized individual’s understanding]. [Researcher’s Name] will work with [Name of site employee who has agreed to be the liaison during data collection].

[Researcher’s Name] is aware that participation in the research study is strictly voluntary. Participants may withdraw consent at any time during the study with no penalty. Furthermore, there is no penalty for anyone who chooses not to participate. There is no more than minimal risk anticipated for participants. The study is for research purposes only. There will be no [benefit/personal gain] for participants participating in this research study. All information is [select either anonymous or confidential] and will only be used for research purposes.

If you have concerns about the permission granted by this letter, please contact me at [authorized individual’s email address].

Sincerely,

Authorized Facility Representative Signature Date

Appendix D:
Administrator's Invitation Email

Greetings:

I am currently a doctoral student at Valdosta State University. I am researching the impact of student success centers and professionals across the University System of Georgia. Specifically, I am looking to compare and contrast which areas of student success programs impact a student's experience at your institution.

Study participants will be made up of one student success professional and one student from each institution studied. Participants will be asked to take a short demographic survey, and will be asked to participate in one 60-90 minute-long semi-structured interview. If you agree to participate in this study, we will meet virtually on an agreed date and time.

[For the student affairs professional: I would ask your assistance in identifying a suitable student at XYZ College/University. The only requirement is that they have utilized the services of your office and are entering the final year of study in earning their first undergraduate degree.]

Interviews will happen virtually over Microsoft Teams. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed, and recordings and transcripts will be protected and destroyed once a transcription of the interview is created in accordance with the Board of Regents record schedule. Participants will have the opportunity to edit or clarify the transcripts of their interviews. Participation in this study is voluntary. Participants will be assigned an alias and will not be identifiable to protect the participant's identity. Your identifiable information will be replaced with a pseudonym in publications or presentations. No one, including the researcher, will associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, to stop responding, or to skip questions you do not want to answer. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your participation in the interview serves as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 years of age or older.

If you are willing to participate in this study or have questions, please contact me at xxx@valdosta.edu or XXX-XXX-XXXX. You can also contact my dissertation chair at xxx@valdosta.edu if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you for your consideration,

Appendix E:
Students Invitation Email

Greetings! Dr. [Administrator's] has recommended you to participate in some research I am doing with [Institution Name]. I hope you will agree to work with me on this project and I apologize for the delay as I worked through IRB clearance at VSU and [Institution Name]. I am researching the impact of student success centers and professionals across the University System of Georgia. Specifically, I am looking to compare and contrast which areas of student success programs impact a student's experience at your institution.

Study participants will be made up of one student success professional and one student from each institution studied. Participants will be asked to take a short demographic survey and will be asked to participate in one 60-90-minute-long semi-structured interview. If you agree to participate in this study, we will meet virtually on an agreed date and time. Please reply to this email with your availability over the next couple of weeks for the interview.

Interviews will happen virtually over Microsoft Teams. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed. The recording will be deleted immediately after the transcript is created. The transcript will be secured for three years and then destroyed. Participants will have the opportunity to edit or clarify the transcripts of their interviews. Participation in this study is voluntary. Participants will be assigned an alias and will not be identifiable to protect the participant's identity. Your identifiable information will be replaced with a pseudonym in publications or presentations. No one, including the researcher, will associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, to stop responding, or to skip questions you do not want to answer. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your participation in the interview serves as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 years of age or older.

The brief survey is available [here](#).

You will be asked for your survey code - it is Studxxx

If you are willing to participate in this study or have questions, please contact me at XXX@valdosta.edu.

Thank you for your consideration,
Bill Doerr

Appendix F:
IRB Approval



**Institutional Review Board (IRB)
for the Protection of Human Research Participants**

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04525-2024

Responsible Researcher(s): Mr. William Doerr

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Jamie Workman

Dissertation Research Member: Dr. Matthew Smith

Project Title: *Exploring the Impact of Student Success Centers in Georgia: A Narrative Inquiry Approach.*

Institutional Review Board Determination:

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations, **category 2**. If the nature of the research changes such that exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research study.

Comments:

- *Research activities may begin at the following approved research locations: Augusta University, Georgia College and State University, University of West Georgia (11.05.2024), the University of North Georgia (11.11.2024), and Kennesaw State University (11.14.2024).*
- *According to exempt protocol guidelines, interview sessions may be recorded to create an accurate transcript. However, it's important to note that the guidelines strictly **prohibit** the collection, storage, and sharing of these recordings. Therefore, it is imperative that once the transcript is created, the recorded interview session must be promptly deleted from all recording and storage devices used.*
- *To comply with consent guidelines, audio and video recordings must capture the researcher reading the consent statement aloud, ensure participant understanding and willingness to participate. The transcript must document the researcher's reading of the consent statement and the participants' consent.*
- *Pseudonym and alias lists must be maintained in separate files from corresponding data.*
- *Upon completion of the research study all data (e.g. data, pseudonym, alias, & email lists, transcripts, etc.) must be securely maintained (e.g. locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a **minimum of 3 years**. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.*

- Proposed modifications are to be submitted to the IRB Administrator at tmwright@valdosta.edu for review and approval before being implementation is permitted.*

Elizabeth W. Olphie

11.05.2024

Elizabeth W. Olphie, IRB Administrator

Date

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.

Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-259-5045.

Appendix G:
CITI Training Program



Completion Date 13-Sep-2022
Expiration Date 12-Sep-2025
Record ID 49754916

This is to certify that:

William Doerr

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

Human Research

(Curriculum Group)

IRB Basic

(Course Learner Group)

2 - Refresher course

(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Valdosta State University

CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

101 NE 3rd Avenue, Suite 320

Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301 US

www.citiprogram.org

Generated on 19-Jun-2024. Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?wa5f04c15-e606-4192-be0b-266d17e11070-49754916