Stopout Students: What are Their Experiences Returning to Community College?


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This dissertation, "Stopout Students: What are Their Experiences Returning to Community College?" by Samuel A. Mayhew, is approved by:

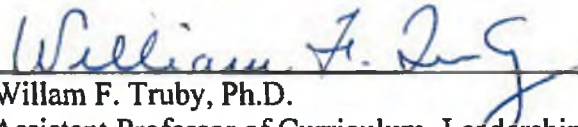**Dissertation**
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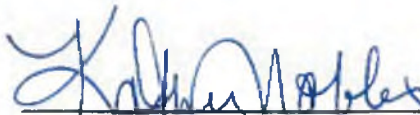
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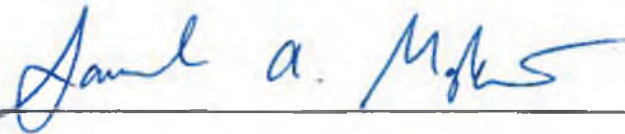Professor of Political Science

## ABSTRACT

Because funding models for higher education are changing to place more value on student retention and student degree completion than they have in the past, college and university administrators need to examine their policies and strategies for recruiting "stopout" students to return to college and complete their degrees. Stopout students are students who previously enrolled in college, stopped attending college for a period of time, and then returned to higher education. Using Spady's conceptual model, Tinto's theory of student departure, Astin's theory of student involvement, and Bean and Metzner's student attrition model for nontraditional students as a framework, this qualitative research study used basic interpretive methods, through an interpretive worldview, to conduct and analyze interviews to better understand the experiences of stopout college students and identify strategies that support efforts by colleges to increase student graduation rates. All participants for this study were recruited from one community college in southwest Georgia. Analysis of the data revealed four conceptual themes: factors influencing college selection, role conflict and time management, institutional strengths and challenges, and influence of family and peer relationships. These findings suggest that stopout students are likely to graduate from college when they feel supported by the institution through positive relationships beginning at recruitment through graduation. The data from the informants show the day-to-day challenges experienced by stopout students as they attempt to graduate from college. Study findings were based on data collected from stopout students, college administration, and institutional policy and documents.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Completing this dissertation has been the most significant academic challenge I have ever accomplished, requiring substantial amount of commitment and sacrifice. I would like to acknowledge those who contributed to the completion of this dissertation.

I am grateful to the participants in this study for sharing their time, stories, and college experiences with me.

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I am eternally thankful for my dissertation chair, Dr. Rudo Tsemunhu, for her mentorship and guidance throughout this research project and for making her schedule flexible to accommodate regular feedback. Dr. Tsemunhu's overall support will always be remembered and appreciated. She is absolutely amazing!

To my committee members, Dr. Green, Dr. Truby and Dr. Nobles, I thank you for your direction, your discernment, your feedback, and your support.

## DEDICATION

To my mother, Marilyn Mayhew (deceased), who taught me from a young age to seek knowledge, and understanding.

To my children, Caden, and Emmajyn, who loved me and encouraged me to *finish*.

Finally, and most importantly, to my wife Amanda, who supported and encouraged me throughout this process. I could not have completed this journey without your patience and unwavering love.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Researcher Background

*Personal Interest*

My interest in studying stopout students is personal and professional. I am interested in learning about the experiences of stopout students because I have observed family members and friends stopout of college and complete their baccalaureate degrees; and I have observed others dropout and not complete their education. My personal path to higher education was traditional: I earned my baccalaureate degree at age 22 and graduate degree at age 24. I started college at age 18 and never took a semester off from college. In contrast, my wife completed 3 years of college, and then she left college for 3 years (stopout) before returning to complete her degree, while married with two children. As a participant in my wife's education journey, I saw the struggles and victories she encountered as she went back to school to complete her degree.

*Professional Interest*

Professionally, as a student affairs administrator, my goal is to facilitate student learning and graduation. I want all students who start college to complete their program of study. For the past 11 years, I have worked within student affairs at three separate institutions of higher education. I currently serve as a student affairs administrator at a community college in southwest Georgia, where I am responsible for institutional retention strategies, academic advising, new student orientation, and the First Year

Experience program. At a previous institution, I served on the institution's planning and assessment team. The team was responsible for reviewing each department's programs, goals, and plans for assessment to comply with SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools) accreditation. In this study, I sought to understand the experiences of stopout students returning to college and identify strategies that support efforts by colleges to increase student graduation rates.

## Overview

More research is necessary to understand the experiences of stopout students. Students previously enrolled in college, who stopped attending college for a period of time and then returned to higher education are often referred to as "stopout" students (Tinto, 1993). Nationally, 22% of Americans started college and stopped attending college without completing their degree (Matthews & Lumina Foundation for Education, 2010). Data from the same report showed 1.1 million residents of Georgia, 21% of the state's population, stopped attending college before they completed their degree. College leaders are encouraged to recruit stopout students to return to college and complete their degrees (Matthews & Lumina Foundation for Education, 2010). Additional research could help institutions develop intentional strategies to attract previously enrolled students who have not completed their education (stopout students) to come back to college, have a positive experience, and complete their programs of study. Research may also assist college leaders to welcome and support stopout students as they return to college. This research is necessary because higher education funding is changing from enrollment funding to completion funding (Complete College America, 2014), which means colleges will need to raise their number of graduates (Dougherty, Natow, Hare,

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Vega, & Columbia University C.C., 2010). Colleges need to recruit stopout students to return to college and provide a positive learning environment for these students (Matthews & Lumina Foundation for Education, 2010). Understanding the experiences of stopout students may provide strategies for colleges to recruit and graduate more students.

## Statement of the Problem

Limited research is available to better understand the experiences of stopout students and identify strategies that support efforts by colleges to increase student graduation rates. College leaders need to recruit stopout students to return to college and provide a positive learning environment for these students to complete their degree. In Georgia there are 1.1 million residents who stopped out of college (Matthews & Lumina Foundation for Education, 2010). Understanding the experiences of stopout students may identify strategies that support efforts by colleges to increase student graduation rates.

Colleges must prepare a positive experience for students returning to college. The face of higher education is changing: more adult students than before, funding models are being adjusted, and student completion is becoming more important than in previous years (Complete College America, 2014). In order to provide students with positive experiences, effort must be made to first understand the experiences of students returning to college.

The number of students who graduate from college has become a more significant issue within higher education as more scrutiny is being placed on college completion rates today, than in previous years (Dougherty et al., 2010). Historically, funding for public higher education through the state's appropriations budget has been directly

related to the institution's student enrollment. This funding structure is changing as some states, including Georgia, will begin funding institutions of higher education based on student retention and completion (Complete College America, 2014). As states move from an enrollment model to a student completion model for funding, this will require college leaders to examine institutional practices assisting students returning to college who have completed some college credit previously.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study was to better understand the experiences of stopout college students and identify strategies that support efforts by colleges to increase student graduation rates. Additionally, my findings from this study empowered stopout students by giving them a voice to express their day-to-day experiences returning to community college. Stories from students identified strategies colleges can implement in order to assist stopout students successfully complete college.

## Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the college experiences of stopout students returning to college?

RQ2: What strategies did the identified stopout students employ while attending college?

RQ3: What strategies did the identified college employ to increase stopout student graduation rates?

## Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it may increase stopout students' completion rates and funding for public higher education through the state's appropriations budget.

Specifically, this study is designed to understand the experiences of stopout students and identify strategies that support efforts by colleges to increase student graduation rates. The results of this study provide college leaders with relevant literature to help them transform college campuses to meet the needs of stopout students. Through analysis of the experiences of stopout students, institutional barriers (such as policies, scheduling conflicts, accessibility to academic programs and services) were identified by students. College leaders are encouraged to take heed of this study's student voices seriously and respond to the needs of stopout students. Additionally, this research has provided successful strategies for future stopout students to follow as they return to college. By hearing voices of stopout students, college leaders may identify strategies to implement to assist stopout students successfully complete college. College administrators may also use data from this study to create a more student friendly environment for students returning to college to complete their degrees. A positive college environment may attract more students to return to college and help more students complete their degrees. Hopefully, this research may lead to colleges raising their graduation rates of stopout students.

## Conceptual Framework

With Bean and Metzner's (1985) student attrition model for nontraditional students, Spady's (1971) conceptual model, Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure, and Astin's (1985) theory of student involvement as a framework, the purpose of this study was to better understand the experiences of stopout college students and identify strategies that support efforts by colleges to increase student graduation rates.

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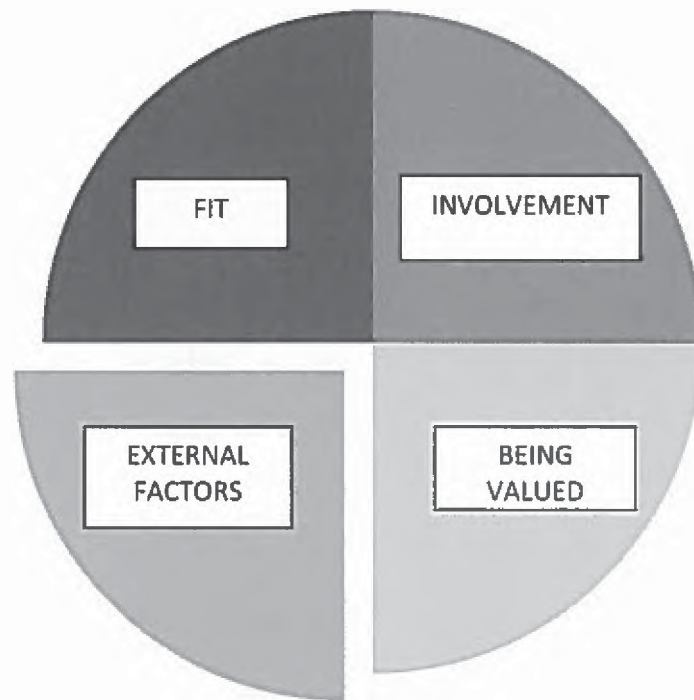
*Figure 1*. Framework of Concepts Impacting College Completion for Stopout Students

Figure 1 is my construction of the concepts that influenced college completion for stopout students. When stopout students feel valued (Tinto, 1993), connect academically to college (Astin, 1985), believe they fit in college (Spady, 1971), and are not pulled away from college by external factors (Bean & Metzner, 1985), it may increase the likelihood that they complete their education and graduate from college. External factors pull students away from college as opposed to pushing them toward college and graduation. When one of the pushing factors (fit, connection/involvement, and being valued) is missing, then completing college will be more difficult for the student, but it can be done. However, it is believed that external factors are the strongest determinant of stopout students' ability to complete their degrees (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

## Summary of Methodology

This qualitative study used a basic interpretive approach to analyze interviews with stopout students. The population was stopout students at one community college in

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southwest Georgia who were returning to college after being out of college at least four

consecutive semesters and were at least 25 years old. A basic interpretive approach

(Merriam, 2002) was used to answer the research questions for this study in order to

understand the experiences of stopout students returning to college and allowed students

to make meaning of their experiences (Merriam, 2002).

With the assistance of the Registrar, students who met the profile of the study's

population were identified and invited to participate in the study through email. The

email explained the purpose of the study, and the students were asked to contact the

researcher if the students were interested in participating in the study. When a student

interested in participating in the study contacted the researcher, an individual meeting

was scheduled with the student so the researcher could explain the study in detail, hear

the student voice information about themselves and their experiences, answer any

questions related to the study, and collect the student information form from the student.

After conducting individual meetings, students were selected for this study. Following

Seidman's (2013) three step interview approach, five students were interviewed three

times to gather information about them as people, as students, as well as their experiences

coming back to school. Additionally, one college administrator was interviewed two

times to learn how the college and state system views and reaches stopout students. Rich

data was captured from the participants by asking them to describe their experiences

through open-ended, general questions.

Each interview was conducted on campus and recorded with a digital recorder for

voice transmission. All interviews were transcribed into Microsoft Word on a password

protected computer. The interviews were scheduled for 90-minute sessions, using an

interview guide with embedded open-ended questions to help keep focus on the purpose of the interview (Seidman, 2013). In addition to interviewing students, researcher memos were written throughout the research process to reflect how I may have influenced the research, how the research influenced me, and how I analyzed and interpreted the data. The memos included my perceptions of the students' comfort levels during the individual meetings and my observations of the students during the individual meetings.

Additionally, my thoughts on each student's experience and the level of rapport I had with students during individual meetings were included in research memos. Key words or phrases mentioned during the meetings were also captured. Reflections on the individual meetings and capturing my thoughts and perceptions through research memos assisted me in selecting students to participate in this study. The same process of audibly recording memos was followed after each student interview and throughout this research project. All of the audibly recorded memos were transcribed into Microsoft Word files and the memos were saved on a computer. This process of data collection allowed for the collection of meaningful data from stopout students returning to college.

<center>Limitations</center>

The scope of the study was limited to current students who had previously stopped out of college, attending one community college in the southeast U.S. with a main campus and academic site in southwest Georgia. Data for this study was collected from multiple students from the same institution. The data collected and analyzed were from students' interviews, documents, artifacts, and researcher memos. Analysis of the collected data was only one interpretation of the data (Vagle, 2014); and is not generalizable to all students. Additional limitations included my subjectivity on the

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research (Maxwell, 2013). Students may have told me what they believed I wanted to hear during the research interviews.

In order to address these limitations, my thoughts on the research were captured through research memos. Research memos included how the research impacted me and how I may have impacted the research were recorded. Because of my personal and professional interests in this topic it was important for me to memo frequently during the research process. Additionally, the importance of the students to respond to infterview prompts honesty was communicated to them throughout the research. No students chose to withdraw from participating from this research. Rapport, effective communication, and trust were established with the students from the beginning, so as not give them a reason to withdraw from the research.

## Definition of Terms

*Adult Learner.* College students who are either a parent, employed, attend college part-time, a high school dropout, or delayed college at least 1 year (Hensley & Kisner, 2001).

*Community College.* A 2-year institution of higher education to meet the educational needs of the community related to program offerings, course content, and schedule (Baker, 1994).

*Completion Rate.* The percentage of students who complete a certificate, associate's degree, or transfer to a bachelors program (Wyner, 2012).

*Dropout Student.* A student who leaves college before graduating (Glynn, Sauer, & Miller, 2003).

*Graduation Rate.* Percentage of students who graduate within 150% of standard

completion time (ie: 3 years to earn a 2-year associates degree).

*Nontraditional Student.* A college student who is either older than 24, commutes to campus, is a part-time student, or any combination of these three factors (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

*Recruitment.* An active process of communication and marketing by college personnel to encourage potential students to enroll at an institution.

*Stopout Student.* A student previously enrolled in college who stopped attending college prior to completing their degree and returned to college (Tinto, 1993).

## Summary

In this chapter, I have provided my personal and professional interests that inspired me to carry out this study. I examined Bean and Metzner's (1985) student attrition model for nontraditional students, Spady's (1971) conceptual model, Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure, and Astin's (1985) theory of student involvement used to frame this study. The chapter also enumerated the research questions that guided this research and the methodology used in data collection.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Colleges need to raise their number of graduates (Dougherty et al., 2010) as higher education funding is changing from enrollment funding to completion funding (Complete College America, 2014). College administrators are recommended to recruit stopout students to return to college and complete their degrees (Matthews & Lumina Foundation for Education, 2010). Understanding the experiences of stopout students through this research helped identify strategies that support efforts by colleges to increase student graduation rates.

Community colleges are experiencing a shift in their operations as state legislatures adjust funding by putting more emphasis on student completion rates (Campbell, 2010). Community college leaders are encouraged to help students complete their degrees (Kerrigan & Slater, 2010), eliminate barriers to education (Cross, 1981), and recruit stopout students to come back to college and graduate (Matthews & Lumina Foundation for Education, 2010). The average student age at a community college is 29 (American Association of Community Colleges, 2011). More than half of students attending community college are older than 24 (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2012), 45% of community college students stop attending college prior to completing their degree, and only 36% of community college students complete their program within 3 years (Hoachlander, Sikora, & Horn, 2003). Using Bean and Metzner's (1985) student attrition model for nontraditional students, Spady's (1971) conceptual model, Tinto's

(1993) theory of student departure, and Astin's (1985) theory of student involvement as a framework, the purpose of this study was to better understand the experiences of stopout college students and identify strategies that support efforts by colleges to increase student graduation rates.

From my understanding of existing literature, it is believed when stopout students feel valued (Tinto, 1993), connect academically to college (Astin, 1985), believe they fit in college (Spady, 1971), and are not pulled away from college by external factors (Bean & Metzner, 1985), they will complete their education and graduate from college. Each of these models will be explained in more detail in the following sections.

Leading Models Affecting Student Enrollment

*Spady's Conceptual Model*

In 1971, William Spady made the first attempt to synthesize literature on student attrition into theory (Habley & McClanahan, 2004). Through his review of existing studies, Spady proposed a relationship between student attributes and the institutional environment (Spady, 1970), and later emphasized this relationship in his model (Spady, 1971). Spady's model (1971) emphasized positive interactions between the student's characteristics (values, attitudes, interests) and the institution's environment (faculty, administration, students, policy) as a way to retain students. Spady found that students leave college when they do not have consistent interactions with people who have similar values, or they think they do not fit into the current social system (Spady, 1970). Spady also found when students grow academically and socially they are more likely to continue their education when their attributes and the institution's environment are congruent. He identified a student's academic potential, normative congruence, grade

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performance, intellectual development, and the support from friends as five variables

contributing to a student's social integration. He stated a student's decision to leave

college is based on how these five variables interact with the student's satisfaction and

the perceived institutional commitment (Spady, 1971). Spady considered academic

performance to be the dominant factor in student attrition. The student's commitment to

the institution is less of a factor for student attrition because most students chose to attend

their local community college for financial and logistical reasons. Cohen and Brawer

(2003) reported many students chose community colleges because the institution offered

low class sizes, low tuition expenses, and convenient location. Instead, academic

performance in college and the support a student receives from family are key variables

in the student's success in college (Cheng, Ickes, & Verhofstadt, 2012). In this study,

more emphasis was placed on support from family and friends and less emphasis on

students' commitment to the institution.

### *Tinto's Theory of Student Departure*

Vincent Tinto borrowed from Spady's (1971) conceptual model to formulate a

theory on student departure (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Tinto's theory depicted the student

transitioning through three different phases: separating from home, transitioning into

independent living, and adapting to college life. Tinto's model is a two part model with

the first part occurring before the student's classes begin and the second part after classes

have started (Tinto, 1975). Tinto's model depicted student departure as a longitudinal

process of how students internalize meaning in their interactions with the college; these

interactions may be formal or informal interactions (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Before a student starts college, three factors contribute to persistence: the

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student's background characteristics, the student's institutional commitment, and the student's goal commitment (Tinto, 1975). A student's background characteristics include the student's academic performance in high school, race, sex, and financial background. Institutional commitment describes the student's personal commitment and connection to the chosen institution; and goal commitment involves the student's commitment to complete the degree program and graduate from college (Tinto, 1975).

The second part of Tinto's (1975) model involves the student after enrollment in college. Tinto theorized the student's commitment is either strengthened or weakened through the student's interactions within the institution's environment. The variables affecting a student's integration into the academic and social communities of the college are the student's goal commitment and institutional commitment (Tinto, 1975). Academic integration is the congruency between the institution's processes and the student, and social integration describes how the student interacts within the culture and subculture of the institution (Tinto, 1975).

A student's perception of the college experience was influenced by the student's ability to integrate socially and academically into college life (Tinto, 1975). The student's commitment is stronger as a result of positive interactions; conversely, negative interactions can weaken the student's commitment and lead the student to withdraw from college (Tinto, 1993). Students are more likely to stay at an institution when they are valued. Frequent contact with faculty and staff is also a predictor of student persistence (Tinto, 1993).

In later work, Tinto (1993) found that nontraditional students were impacted by external factors beyond the institution. External factors, including people, have an effect

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on student retention if they support or hinder the student's academic or social integration (Tinto, 1993). Tinto hypothesized that students with weak goal commitment and weak institutional commitment may be more vulnerable to external individuals and events. The amount of time students spend away from campus may affect their integration and persistence to finish their degree (Bean & Vesper, 1992).

By testing Tinto's model at a community college in New York, Halpin (1990) found academic integration to have a bigger impact than social integration on student retention. One limitation to Halpin's research is the exclusion of part-time students in the study. Mutter's (1992) research at a community college found a student's level of academic integration positively contributed to retention. Academic integration includes talking with faculty and staff, discussing concerns and options with academic advisors, and assisting faculty with projects. Mutter also found that students who persisted through college received more positive support from significant others than students who did not persist. Napoli and Wortman's (1998) study at a community college in New York state found a student's goal commitment, institutional commitment, academic integration and social integration all affect student persistence validating Tinto's theory. The research also found a negative influence on student retention is a student's external demands (Napoli & Wortman, 1998). Students' background characteristics and goal commitment (or commitment to graduate from college) greatly impact their ability to graduate from community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Less emphasis is placed on the student's commitment to the institution because of the aforementioned reasons (class size, convenience, and affordability). Most community colleges, including the site for the

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current study, are non-residential, so students spend most of their time off campus when not attending classes (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

*Astin's Theory of Student Involvement*

In addition to Spady, Alexander Astin espoused a similar student retention theory based on data he collected from multiple colleges. According to Astin's theory (1977, 1985), the critical factor for student retention is student involvement. When students are involved in campus life, they are more likely to continue their education (Astin, 1977, 1985). Astin classified involvement as the physical and psychological energy devoted to college. However, exposure to education and involvement is not enough; Astin (1985) believed students learn through involvement. Involved students spend energy interacting with people on campus and studying for classes. Non-involvement often results in them leaving college (Astin, 1977, 1985). Astin (1985) was influential in establishing a "stopout" category for undergraduate students who take time off from school before returning to college to complete their degree. Astin concluded that the more effort students put into college experience, the more likely they to complete their degree.

Astin's theory that students who spend more time committed to college involvement are more likely to persist through college, has been supported through later research. Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) validated Astin's model by finding a strong relationship between student persistence and student-faculty interaction. Student-faculty contact affected the student's academic and social integration (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) additional research supported Astin's theory of the relationship between student involvement and student retention: "... the impact of college is largely determined by the individual's quality of effort and level of

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involvement in both academic and nonacademic activities" (p. 610). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) found that student retention increased when students were involved and when the academic and social systems were integrated.

Chickering and Gamson (1991) identified student-faculty contact to positively impacted academic performance. Terenzini and Pascarella (1994) found student-faculty contact outside of the classroom to be very important for student persistence. Kuh (2001) concluded that positive interactions with faculty encouraged students to spend more energy on educational accomplishments; and Sauchuk (2003) identified positive faculty-student communication outside of class as an important factor influencing retention. Zepke and Leach (2005) reported faculty serving as mentors to students positively influences students' success. Arredondo (1995) reported, "students who are satisfied with the opportunity to talk to professors...outside of class or who are satisfied with the amount of available [faculty] contact...will be more likely to aspire to higher degrees" (p. 11).

Astin (1985) proposed student involvement as the key to student retention and that student involvement is both social and academic. Astin's theory emphasizing student involvement and time committed to college activities, has been supported through subsequent studies. Researchers testing Astin's theory of involvement have validated the connection between student involvement and retention (Pascarella &Terenzini, 1991), the positive influence faculty play in student retention (Pascarella &Terenzini, 1980; Sauchuk, 2003; Terenazini & Pascarella, 1994), and how contact with faculty influences student academic performance (Arredondo, 1995; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kuh, 2001; Zepke & Leach, 2005).

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*Bean and Metzner's Student Attrition Model for Nontraditional Students*

Bean (1980) offered a model that suggested students leave college for similar reasons as employees leaving their employers. Bean and Metzner conductedted previous studies on student attrition and developed their model to provide a framework to understand prior studies and to guide future research. Their model can be used for institutions to identify factors which impact student attrition. They defined a nontraditional student as a student who has at least one of the following factors: older than 24, commutes to classes, part-time student. Through their model, Bean and Metzner concluded that nontraditional students are more concerned with the college's academic programs compared to the social environment on campus. Bean's original model was modified to account for nontraditional students from commuter colleges (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Previous models (Bean, 1980) put heavy emphasis on social variables, which were found to be less important to most nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Bean and Metzner determined a new theory was necessary because a "defining characteristic of the nontraditional student was the lack of social integration into the institution" (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 489). They found that nontraditional students were influenced more by external factors than by their social connections on campus. Therefore, Bean and Metzner's (1985) model focused more on what influenced the student off campus than on campus influences. A student's decision to drop out of college is based on four variables: the student's background and defining variables (including age, educational goals, gender), the student's academic variables (study hours, study skills, course availability), their current environmental variables (include finances,

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work hours, family responsibilities), and the student's intent to leave (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Further, Bean and Metzner claimed a students' intent to leave college was affected by all the variables listed above, in addition to their psychological outcomes and their academic outcomes.

Two years after Bean and Metzner's (1987) initial introduction to their theory, they added, when compared to traditional college students, nontraditional students were more concerned with the institution's academic programs and were less influenced by the institution's social environment (Metzner & Bean, 1987). Social integration variables were considered for the model but were rejected based on research suggesting social integration was not a major factor in student attrition for adult students (Bean & Metzner, 1985). They found the student's intent to leave was one of the strongest predictors of student dropout for nontraditional students. Nontraditional students were more likely to leave college because of poor academic performance or their lack of commitment to the institution than they were to leave for social reasons (Bean & Metzner, 1985). This model for student attrition recognizes that a student's external environment influences the decision to stay in college more than a social connection to campus (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

As Bean and Metzner (1985) cited, high performing academic students can be forced to stop college if they are unable to arrange childcare. Bean and Metzner's model assumed older students will have more external factors (family and work responsibilities) to manage while attending college. Nontraditional students are more concerned with their academic program than they are with their social lives; they want to know how long the program will take to complete and when classes will be scheduled. A student's intent to

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leave, intent to graduate, and academic goal commitment are major considerations for community college students.

Before returning to school, students must decide if they can even come back to school due to their external factors. While external factors can pull a student away from college, Kinser and Deitchman (2008) found external factors also motivated students to return to school and graduate. Once students decide to return to college, they must understand their academic program, and how it will fit in with their other responsibilities in their lives. Bean and Metzner concluded a student's environmental support is stronger than a student's academic support. When students have external support to finish college they are more likely to complete (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Additional key factors found in Bean and Metzner's model that are believed to impact stopout students, are the students' commitment to graduate when they start school, and the students' academic performance once enrolled in college. External factors may impact students throughout each step of the process as external factors can pull students away from college, impact their commitment to graduate, and affect their academic performance.

Demographics of College Students

Nearly 30% of all students enrolled in college take at least one term off from classes during their initial 5 years of college (O'Toole, Stratton, & Wetzel, 2003). Attewell (2007) reported that traditional students in college count for less than 25% of students enrolled in undergraduate education. At community colleges, 53% of students are over age 24 (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2012), and the average student age at a community college is 29 (American Association of Community Colleges, 2011). At community colleges, 45% of students stop attending college prior to completing their

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degree, and only 36% of students complete their program within 3 years (Hoachlander, Sikora, & Horn, 2003). With nontraditional students representing the majority of undergraduate students at community colleges, higher education administrators should know what experiences students are facing in order to assist them in completing their education. College administrators should prepare to provide access, services, and programs for nontraditional students to ensure the success of students and the institution. This research is designed to contribute contemporary literature to the existing literature on stopout students by uncovering the experiences of stopout students and identifying strategies that support efforts by colleges to increase student graduation rates.

## Nontraditional Students

McGivney (2004) defined a nontraditional student as any student who is over the age of 24, or as any student enrolled part-time. O'Donnell (2006) reported there were 6.9 million college students 24 years or older in 2006 nationwide; 53% of students in community college were 24 years or older (Knapp et al., 2012). In his research of nontraditional students, Quigley (1998) found the first 3 weeks of college to be when most nontraditional students decided if they were going to stay in college. Based on this research when stopout students enroll in college, college personnel do not have much time to make a positive impression. Hearing how colleges can best support stopout students is crucial to provide the services/assistance for students to return to college and complete their degree.

Historically, nontraditional students bring life experience and personal experience with them and add value to the classroom and campus (Knowles, 1980); and they want to see practical application of the coursework to their career and education (Schlossberg,

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Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). Compared to traditional students, nontraditional students have higher internal motivation (Donohue & Wong, 1997) and higher self-determination (Schlossberg et al., 1989). Because nontraditional students do not always follow typical semester enrollment patterns, first-to-second year retention rates are not the most accurate, and they do not tell us why students choose to stopout or dropout (Tinto, 1993). Therefore, more investigation is necessary to learn why students leave, why they return, and how colleges can assist them to be academically successful when they return to college. This study focuses on the experiences of stopout students returning to college.

Student Persistence

Berger and Lyon (2005) defined student persistence as the student's ability to complete a degree program. They also acknowledged that students may enroll in more than one institution in order to persist. Leading models of theory related to college persistence include Tinto's (1975) student integration model, Bean's (1980) student attrition model, and the college choice nexus model (St. John, Cabrera, Nora, & Asker, 2000). The student integration model links the student's likelihood of persisting through degree completion with the student's congruence with the institution. If the student and the institution are not congruent, then the student is less likely to persist through college completion. Bean (1980) highlighted the importance of behavioral intentions as predictors of persistence in his student attrition model. The college choice nexus model disregards any connection between a student's persistence in college to the student's college choice; instead, persistence is shaped through a three-stage process. The stages include the student's socioeconomic status in addition to the student's academic ability prior to enrolling in college. Before enrolling in college, the student determines the

benefits and costs of enrollment; once enrolled in college, the collegiate experience and the student's academic performance shape the student's decision to stay and graduate from the institution (St John et al., 2000).

There is existing research related to college attendance, and according to the National Center for Education Statistics, NCES (2005), roughly 40% of undergraduate students attend at least two institutions prior to earning a bachelor's degree; and 30% of students attend more than two institutions before graduating. Students at 2-year colleges are more likely to drop out of college than students at a 4-year college (Wetzel, O'Toole, & Peterson, 1999). This higher dropout rate may be attributed to faculty and student involvement; it is generally lower at 2-year colleges and fewer students live on campus compared to 4-year colleges. Part-time students may have difficulty feeling they belong in college and connected to the institution (Wetzel et al., 1999). More students at 2-year colleges are part-time students, and more faculty members are part-time employees (Astin, 1999). Part-time students are more likely to stopout of college than full-time students (O'Toole et al., 2003). College leaders should create avenues to hear from students to understand their struggles and concerns in order to identify strategies for students to stay in college.

In order to increase student persistence, Thomas (1990) believed college leaders should be intentional with their academic advising. In relation to this study, college administrators should be intentional in assisting students integrate academically and socially into the campus culture. Research has indicated a connection between students having positive relationships with their faculty and higher student persistence (Heverly, 1999; Li & Killian, 1999). Li and Killian conducted qualitative research, interviewing

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students who did not return the following semester at one college. Through their research they recommended college administrators establish a center on campus to coordinate various interventions to assist students to stay in college to complete their degree.

## Student Retention

Retention of current students has been very important for institutions, and will remain a priority (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 2000). An institution's success will be measured by their ability to retain students (Berger & Lyon, 2005). It costs the institution less money to retain a student than it does to recruit a replacement student (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985). According to Berger and Lyon (2005), retention is the ability of one institution to graduate students who started college at the institution; and Hagedom (2005) defined a graduate as someone who completes their program of study. "As higher education and earning a college degree have become more important in society, retention has become more important in higher education" (Berger & Lyon, 2005, pp. 26-27).

Almost half of college students stop attending college before they complete their degree program (Tinto, 1993). McCormick (1997) found 43% of students start at a community college and transfer to another institution. An institution's graduation rate is the percentage of first time college students who have graduated after 150% of the standard completion time (6 years or a bachelor's degree and 3 years for an associate's degree) (Hagedom, 2005). Most institutions measure the first year to second year retention rate because the largest percentages of students leave college before their second year (Tinto, 1993). Institutions also choose to calculate first-to-second year

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retention rates in order to know which students to contact for intervention who are higher risk of leaving college (Mortenson, 2005).

Students whose parents did not go to college are less likely to be retained than children of college graduates (Boyd, 2004). First generation college students are unable to draw from their parents' personal experience in college; and the parents are reluctant and may be unable to provide their child with strategies to navigate the process involving admissions, financial aid, and other necessary processes for college matriculation (Volle & Federico, 1997). When students depart from higher education, colleges lose money (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Metzner & Bean, 1987). Because of the economic loss related to student departure and student stopout, institutions should explore ways to bring students back to complete their degrees. Tinto (1993) believed institutions must make their retention efforts a high priority in order to survive in the future.

### Student Goals

Adult learners enter college because they have goals; these goals may be personal, professional, or both. According to Hensley and Kinser (2001), stopout students may come back to college due to changes that affected their lifestyle or because they reevaluated their life's goals. Hensley and Kinser conducted an exploratory qualitative study of adult learners to learn (1) why students perceived they had been unsuccessful in past attempts at college and (2) why student chose to reenroll in college at a certain point in time. They collected writing assignments from 63 students who all sat out at least one semester before returning to college. Beginning with line-by-line coding and researcher memos, the researchers constructed themes from the students' words. The researchers found family factors caused students to leave college and also caused students to return to

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college; and the students believed their prior experiences would allow them be successful in college this time. Life demands are substantial on students; Hensley and Kinser (2001) found that 27% of undergraduate students are parents, and 13% of undergraduate students are single parents. Light (1996) found that key factors for student reenrollment included local unemployment rates and local wage demands. After conducting semi-structured interviews of students, Jacot, Frenay, and Cazan (2010) reported nontraditional students were more likely to be married, have family obligations, and have professional responsibilities when compared to traditional students.

## Barriers to Education

Cross (1981) proposed three categories of barriers to adult education: situational barriers, institutional barriers, and dispositional barriers. Situational barriers involve the student's life circumstances, institutional barriers relate to the academic requirements and program of study, and dispositional barriers include the students' preferences and self-perceptions (Kinser & Deitchman, 2008).

Situational barriers result from the student's life situation. These barriers may include costs associated with going to school, time necessary to be successful, transportation, job, and home responsibilities (Cross, 1981). Institutional barriers are controlled by the institution, and discourage adults from attending college. These barriers are generally policies and procedures that make it difficult for adults to be successful in college. Institutional barriers may include required time to complete their program, inconvenient course scheduling, lack of information and communication, and difficult enrollment procedures (Cross, 1981). Dispositional barriers are associated with the student's belief and confidence in their abilities as a student. Dispositional barriers

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include the student's thinking they are too old to go back to school, not having the energy to be successful, and not enjoying studying or attending class (Cross, 1981).

The barriers ranked in order of importance to adult learning are situational barriers, institutional barriers, and dispositional barriers (Cross, 1981). In addition, financial issues, academic issues, family related issues, and institutional administrators were identified as barriers to adult persistence (Bradshaw, Hager, Knott, & Seay, 2006).

All of these barriers may be applicable to stopout students when they return to college. Students may be unsure of their dispositional barriers as they question how they will be able to complete college when they return. Students' life situations may be a challenge to their academic success, but students have also explained their external factors, such as children, career advancement, better career environment, become a motivating factor for their persistence through degree completion (Hensley & Kinser, 2001). This study is designed to identify strategies that support efforts by colleges to increase student graduation rates.

<center>Global and Financial Impact of Education</center>

In order for America to compete in the global economy, we need more college graduates. Our country will need a highly educated and skilled workforce, who is able to adapt to a rapidly changing and technologically demanding workplace (Lotkowski et al., 2004). America's workforce will need education beyond high school in order to remain globally competitive (Lotkowski et al., 2004). In order to meet the global demands, colleges need to graduate more students, in a timely manner, ready to enter the workforce; and graduating stopout students is a way for colleges to meet these demands for the future.

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In relation to other countries, the U.S. ranks 11th in the world for number of college graduates (Field, 2010). President Obama has set a goal to increase the number of college graduates within the U.S. by five million over 10 years (Field, 2010); and to retake the lead of annual college graduates by 2020 (Jaschik, 2007). A $9-billion project to improve graduation rates at community colleges was approved by the U.S. Congress in 2010 (Field, 2010). This initiative will fund programs to allow students to graduate at a lower cost and on time.

Institutions lose money when students leave before they complete their degree; this is especially significant for non-research institutions (Schuh, 2005). Community colleges are dependent on tuition dollars for regular operations. A decrease in generated tuition is a direct loss to the institution when students leave; the institution also loses the money the student would have spent in the bookstore, at special events, and concessions (Schuh, 2005). Additionally the time faculty and staff spent with the student could have been spent with other students, and the institution lost a future alumnus to support the institution with their time and money (Schuh, 2005). Student attrition directly impacts the institutional budget (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004), through the loss of future tuition and fees (Schuh, 2005). Lotkowski et al. (2004) reported that institutions will jeopardize their reputation if they are unable to retain enough students.

Earning a college education benefits the individual and society as a whole. DesJardins, Ahlburg, and McCall (2002) reported benefits of an educated society include lower crime rates, higher quality of life, and more generated tax revenues. In addition to social benefits, the economic benefit of completing a college degree directly benefits the student (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). According to the U.S. Department of Labor

(2014), college graduates earn a 53% higher salary than workers without a college education. "College graduates earn twice as much as high-school graduates and six times as much as high school drop-outs" (DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002, p. 555). In general, college graduates earn a higher salary, and are employed by companies who offer better health and retirement benefits. Additionally, college graduates are less likely to be on welfare, incarcerated, or unemployed (DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 1999). Students who leave college will have a more difficult time earning a living than students who graduate from college.

While the financial benefits are tangible, students who leave college may never return (dropout), and may develop an adverse outlook toward scholarly exercises (Lotkowski et al., 2004). In today's rapidly changing workforce, a high school diploma may be insufficient to maintain a career. Camevale and Desrochers (2003) reported that some college education is required for 6 out of 10 jobs. Individuals without a college education may experience barriers within employment throughout their life (Lotkowshi et al., 2003). According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2015), the unemployment rate for workers with a bachelor's degree was 3.5% in 2014; while the national unemployment rate was 5% for the year. Students leaving college before graduation is a problem with tremendous financial impact (Bean & Metzner, 1985). When colleges graduate more students it benefits the college, society, and the students' future.

## History of Community Colleges

Breneman and Nelson (1981) described the community college as "one of the greatest education success stories" (p. 1). Community colleges were created to provide greater access to higher education and training (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). The first

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community college, Joliet Junior College, was founded in 1901 near Chicago, Illinois, and continues to serve its community today. Following the end of World War II, the President's Commission on Higher Education for American Democracy was created and supported access to higher education (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). The number of community colleges tripled between 1940 and 1970 (Vaughan, 2000), with 457 additional community colleges opening in the 1960s (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012). Today there are more 1,100 community colleges meeting the needs of its residents (AACC, 2012).

Community colleges serve the needs of the local community, provide comprehensive educational programs, prioritize teaching and learning over research, and provide open access to education to the community (Vaughan, 2000). Open access allows all residents the access to college education regardless of their finances, work schedule, family situation, or preparation level (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). The comprehensive mission of community colleges includes transfer programs to 4-year degrees, technical degrees, duel enrollment programs with high schools, developmental education programs, and lifelong learning opportunities for the community. The community college offers programs needed to educate and train the residents in the region (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Vaughan, 2000). "Each community college is a distinct educational institution, loosely linked to other community colleges by the shared goals of access and service. Open admissions and the tradition of charging low tuition are among the practices they have in common" (AACC, 2012, p. 1).

## Community Colleges

Community colleges have a long-standing mission to provide access to education

and opportunity to all people within their service area (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Herideen, 1998; Walter, 2001). Even with less funding and more students, community colleges have remained true to their open access mission (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). The needs and goals of students should be the primary mission of the community college (Bragg, 2001). Community colleges uniquely serve their service area in multiple ways including preparing students to transfer for a higher degree, training students in a vocation, providing continuing and developmental education, and leading others in community service (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Having access to community colleges allows nontraditional students a second opportunity to gain their education and training (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

Student services should effectively meet the needs and goals of the students (Kasworm, Polson, & Fishback, 2002). The purpose for an institutional service is to assist students in completing their programs of study (Townsend & Twombly, 2001). Services identified to assist students persisting through college are college orientation programs, career and personal counseling, tutoring services, and student connections (Kasworm et al., 2002). When providing services, colleges should intentionally create environments of learning in order for students to feel connected to the institution (Lau, 2003).

The landscape of community colleges is changing. In previous years, community colleges were evaluated on their ability to serve their local area by providing an educated workforce through several programs of study (Mellow & Katopes, 2009). Student enrollment was expected to fluctuate as students went in and out of college based on the employment demands (Ayers, 2010). Funding for community colleges is changing as

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several states are shifting their funding formula to have more emphasis on student

completion rates and less emphasis on student enrollment and enrollment growth

(Campbell, 2010). Policy makers at the national and state levels believe higher education

funding should be performance based, and student completion is how performance will

be measured for institutional funding. This performance based funding is in line with

President Obama's desire for America to be the number one producer of college

graduates by 2020 (Jaschik, 2007). Believing college leaders need to meet the needs and

expectations of stopout students returning to their institution, more research on the

experience of stopout students returning to college is needed.

A study in California (Evelyn, 2004) found 60% of freshman students entering the

California community college system with high school diplomas and plans to transfer to

4-year institutions, either left college or lowered their academic goals after their first

semester. Murphy (2009) reported only 25% of full-time community college students in

New York earned a degree within 3 years. On a national level, it is common for students

at community colleges to have non-continuous enrollment as they work toward their

degree (Stratton, O'Toole, & Wetzel, 2008) as they are in and out of college by the

semester for different individual reasons (Ronco, 1994). Previous quantitative studies

(Burley, Butner, & Cejda, 2001; Herzog, 2005; Johnson, 2006; Schatzel, Callahan, Scott,

& Davis, 2011) found that students stopped attending and returned to college, but we do

not know the stopout students' experiences as they returned to college.

Herzog's (2005) research found nearly 11% of students who started at one college in

the fall semester chose to transfer away from the institution within one year and 13% of

the students dropped out of college within their first year in college. Although Herzog

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did not find any differences in the dropout rates by gender, she did find that women were more likely to transfer to another institution compared to men; however, gender had no significance on student retention. Students with lower dropout rates came from families with middle to upper income levels, and students receiving loans were more likely to transfer after their first semester. In comparison to the current study, a contrasting limitation of Herzog's study is she did not include part-time students in her study. Knowing part-time students make up the majority of students at community college (Cohen & Brawer, 2003); part-time students were included in the current study.

Johnson (2006) analyzed the attendance patterns of stopout students at one public university over 12 semesters. Johnson found students were more likely to stop attending college after their second semester; students were more likely to return to college the following semester; however, the likelihood of the student returning lessened over time. Her research found women were less likely to leave college, but women were also less likely to return to college if they stopped attending. Additional findings included first generation students were less likely to return to college once they left, and students from low income families and minority students were more likely to stop attending college. Johnson said more understanding of the behavior of stopout students would allow college leaders to intervene and assist students in order to minimize the time the student is out of college and to also increase the number of students returning to college. Through this study the experiences of stopout students will be better understood in order to increase the number of stopout students completing their education.

Future of Community Colleges

The president of the American Association of Community Colleges believed community colleges should focus on helping students complete their degrees, training their students for success, and documenting student success (Kerrigan & Slater, 2010). Knowing college students swirl in and out of college attendance (de Los Santos & Wright, 1990; Johnson & Muse, 2012; McCormick, 2003; Sturtz, 2006), and take semesters off from college as they work to complete their degree, college admission leaders should actively recruit stopout students to come back to college and graduate (Matthews & Lumina Foundation for Education, 2010). Earning a college degree is important for the financial and career future of the student (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014), and it is important for the global success of the country (Lotkowski et al., 2004). College leaders should do all they can to assist stopout students to complete their degree.

Community colleges have improved their efforts marketing programs and keeping tuition costs low, while increasing student enrollment (Wilson, 2010). Even with better marketing and increased student enrollment, community colleges continue to rely on federal and state funding for their operations (Field, 2010). With the national economic downturn, there has been a shift of financial support away from education (Field, 2010). This financial shift, coupled with President Obama's commitment to produce more college graduates by 2020, has put community colleges in a pivotal position (Field, 2010). With these two separate objectives in mind (decrease in funding and goal to increase graduates), the future focus of community college leaders will be on student graduation rates. President Obama challenged community colleges to increase their graduates by 50%, for a total of five million students over 10 years (Boggs, 2010).

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Boggs believed President Obama's 2020 goal cannot be met without the assistance of community colleges.

In the past, community college funding has been based on total enrollment numbers and local community needs. With the increased focus on graduation and completion rates, funding for community colleges will shift toward completion rates and measurable outcomes (Tollefson, 2009). Because of the adjustment to college funding, some institutions with growing enrollment numbers have had their budgets reduced by their state officials due to the institution's student completion data (Facione, 2009). Colleges and universities are held accountable for their low graduation rates (Cook & Pullaro, 2010), and colleges should focus on student retention, completion, and graduation rates for future funding (Campbell, 2010). Three forces caused community colleges to retool their retention practices: state budgets for higher education, initiatives to increase degree completion, and sustainability of degree programs (Ashburn, 2007). Barefoot (2004) claimed that tying state allocation funding to institutional graduation rates would be a tremendous blow to community colleges because community colleges enroll a high number of at-risk students and a high number of transfer students. Māori (2007) recommended colleges give attention to reenrollment strategies for students who have withdrawn from college and help these students be academically successful as they return to college. This study was designed to understand the experiences of stopout students and identify strategies that support efforts by colleges to increase student graduation rates.

In summary, funding formulas for community colleges are changing to reward colleges for higher completion rates (Complete College America, 2014), and college

leaders are recommended to recruit the 1.1 million stopout students in Georgia to come back to college and graduate (Matthews & Lumina Foundation for Education, 2010). Nationally, more than half of students attending community college are older than 24 (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2012), 45% of community college students stop attending college prior to completing their degree, and only 36% of community college students complete their program within 3 years (Hoachlander, Sikora, & Horn, 2003). In order to be successful in college, students need to believe they fit in the environment (Spady, 1971), believe they are valued (Tinto, 1993), and feel connected to the institution (Astin, 1985).

More research is necessary to understand the experience of stopout students and to identify strategies that support efforts by colleges to increase student graduation rates. Nontraditional students are influenced by external factors (Bean & Metzner, 1985) and family factors impact students' decision to stay in school (Hensley & Kisner, 2001). Retention is more important than ever (Berger & Lyon, 2005) as college funding models change to performance funding (Campbell, 2010) and community colleges are in a pivotal position to graduate more students (Field, 2010). Prior qualitative research (Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Jacot, Frenay, & Cazan, 2010) did not conduct in-person interviews, or was not conducted at a community college. This research aims to better understand the experiences of stopout students, by giving stopout students a voice, and to identify strategies that support efforts by colleges to increase student graduation rates.

Chapter III

RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

Colleges need to raise their number of graduates (Dougherty et al., 2010) as

higher education funding is changing from enrollment funding to completion funding

(Complete College America, 2013), and college administrators are recommended to

recruit stopout students to return to college and complete their degree (Matthews &

Lumina Foundation for Education, 2010). There are 1.1 million Georgia residents who

stopped attending college before they completed their degree (Matthews & Lumina

Foundation for Education, 2010). Understanding the experiences of stopout college

students and identifying strategies that support efforts by colleges to increase student

graduation rates may provide strategies for colleges to graduate more students. Chapter 3

will discuss the research design, details for the research site, participant selection

procedures, data collection and analysis, validity issues, and research ethical

considerations.

### Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the college experiences of stopout students returning to college?

RQ2: What strategies did the identified stopout students employ while attending

college?

RQ3: What strategies did the identified college employ to increase stopout student

graduation rates?

The results of this research may be used to understand the experiences of stopout students enrolled at a community college and to understand strategies they implemented to enable them to be successful academically and socially when coming back to college. Student respondents of this study have identified strategies that supported efforts by colleges to increase student graduation rates.

## Research Design

To understand the experiences of stopout college students returning to college, I obtained an in-depth analysis of their experiences that could only be achieved effectively through qualitative study. Qualitative research attempts to understand how people perceive their experiences by focusing on the participants' meaning about their experiences and not the researcher's belief of the experiences (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2013). Creswell (2009) suggested that qualitative researchers use a theoretical lens when conducting research because people will have different perspectives of the situation and experience. This qualitative research was exploratory through an interpretive worldview (Creswell, 2009), following basic interpretive methods (Merriam, 2002) to understand the experiences of stopout students. The interpretive approach argues that research should explore "socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds" (Neuman, 1997, p. 68). As the researcher, my experiences, beliefs, and values are incorporated into the research design and analysis of data as I seek to "understand the context of the participants" (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). The research process was inductive as the research focused on the meaning of the students'

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experiences as stopout students. Through the interpretive worldview lens, this research sought to understand the complexity of the students' experiences and not narrow the focus to select categories (Creswell, 2009). An interpretive worldview allowed me as an outsider, using an emic perspective, to understand the experiences of stopout students returning to college from the students' perspectives.

Qualitative research studies a phenomenon in its natural settings. The basic interpretive qualitative research method was utilized to understand how stopout students make meaning of their experience (Merriam, 2002) returning to college. As the researcher, the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis was myself (Merriam, 2002). The process in performing this research was inductive; that is, data was gathered to build themes about the common practices used by stopout students returning to college. Data are generally collected through interviews, observation, and document analysis (Merriam, 2002). Rich data was captured from the participants through student interviews. During the interviews students were asked to describe their experiences through open-ended, general questions. This allowed for their individual experiences and how they interpret their experiences returning to college, to be recorded. Merriam (2002) says to inductively analyze your data to identify patterns or common themes which appear within the data and to present the finding descriptively. Using a basic interpretive approach allowed for understanding of the experiences of stopout students and presenting the results in the students' words (Patton, 2002). Additionally, I utilized an expert (dissertation chair) in qualitative research who advised me throughout the research process.

## Research Site

The participants in this study were currently enrolled at the same community college in southwest Georgia; however, the participants previously attended different colleges prior to their stopout. The college selected for this study, offers 64 academic programs of study. The institution offers continuing education courses, vocational training, technical training, liberal arts training, and offers a baccalaureate degree in management. In addition to its main campus, the institution has an academic site about 50 miles from the main campus and offers classes online. It is the only institution in the state of Georgia that admits students for technical studies and baccalaureate studies. Because the institution is the only one in the state of Georgia offering technical and baccalaureate programs and enrolling students for GED diplomas through bachelor's degrees, this site served as a great location to study the stopout student experience. Additionally, as an employee within the Student Affairs division, I had easy access to student participants for this study; I am also aware of the possible dangers of conflict of interest. Strategies used to control this problem are addressed under the validity issues section later in this chapter.

In the fall 2015 semester, total enrollment was 2,300 students. The student enrollment by gender was 69% female and 31% male. Students self-reported their ethnicity, and were not required to report their ethnicity. Of the students who chose to self-report, the student ethnicity was 50.3% Black, 46.5% White, 0.6% Hispanic, 0.4% Asian; 2.2% of students did not report their ethnicity (S. Stewart, personal communication, November 23, 2015). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), there are 27,842 residents in the county of the college's main campus and 11,004

residents in the county of the college's academic site. In the neighboring six counties of the main campus and academic site there are a total of 114,772 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

## Participant Selection

For the purpose of this research, those students who have been out of college for at least four semesters before they returned to college and are at least 25 years of age were selected. Students who are at least 25 years of age participated in this study because they were more likely to have external factors (family, children, employment, financial independency) pulling them away from college compared to students younger than 25 years old. Students who have been out of college at least four semesters were chosen in order to eliminate students who opted to sit out of college briefly before returning to college. Students who have been out of college at least four semesters may be more likely to make tough decisions in order to return to college.

This study was conducted at one community college in southwest Georgia. The institution's Registrar helped to identify potential participants who met the criteria for this research. In accordance with the guidelines of Valdosta State University (VSU) regarding the protection of human participants, a request for a review was submitted to the VSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval to interview four to eight participants for this study. After receiving IRB approval (see Appendix E) participant recruitment and data collection commenced. A total of 118 students were identified as returning to higher education after being out of college for a minimum of four semesters and are at least 25 years of age. Seidman (2013) recommended choosing participants who are currently living the experience, so I only studied stopout students who are

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currently enrolled in college.

Emails were sent to all 118 identified students within the population, explaining the purpose of this study and inviting them to participate in the study. Interested students were asked to email or call if they would like to participate in the study. Each student interested in participating in this study was phoned and explained the purpose and procedures of the study. If the student remained interested in the study, I scheduled an in person contact visit meeting (Seidman, 2013) with the student to explain the purpose of the study, explain the research procedures, to answer any questions, to collect their contact information form, to understand the students' experiences returning to college, and to establish a relationship of mutual respect with the students (Seidman, 2013). The contact visit meetings took place on the college campus, and were scheduled for 60 minutes for the convenience of the students.

At the contact visit meeting, participants completed a contact information form with their name, home address, telephone number(s), email address(es), and the best times to reach them by phone (Seidman, 2013). In addition to collecting contact information at the contact visit meetings, students were asked to write out answers to a few questions in order to hear more about their prior experiences with education and their experiences returning to college. These answers assisted in understanding the external factors (family demands, job demands, civic/social involvement) students are balancing while returning to school and their reason for returning to college (some training, graduation, career change). The students' answers to these questions were used to select participants for the study that could provide rich data to analyze.

Purposeful sampling from the students who attended a contact visit meeting

allowed students to be selected who met the research criteria and provided rich data to analyze (Creswell, 2009). Listening to the students' stories in the contact visit meetings and reading their answers on the contact information form, allowed me to glean a variety of information from the students. While every student has a story to tell, students were identified who were trusted to provide the most meaningful data about their return to college and their success in college. Researchers need to establish relationships with participants (Maxwell, 2013). It was necessary for me to have a positive rapport with the students within the sample group (Giorgi, 2009); therefore, rapport and ability to establish positive relationships with the students was criteria used to choose participants. The relationship should be friendly but not a friendship (Seidman, 2013), so it was planned to avoid including students within my study who were familiar to me. Students were selected for this study based on the belief that they could and would participate for the duration of the research.

Understanding students had demands outside of school and may have been nervous about attending the interview session; the purpose of this study was included in the initial email communication with potential participants. The purpose of the study was explained again during the initial phone conversation, during the contact visit meeting, and included when communicating with students selected to participant in this study (Appendix A).

In addition to conducting interviews with students, I also interviewed one college administrator and reviewed institutional documents. Purposeful sampling was used to select the administrator to interview. Criteria for selection included someone who has

been employed at the institution for at least 10 consecutive years and has knowledge on the different strategies the college has employed to assist students returning to college.

## Data Collection

Merriam, (2002) argues the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis in qualitative research. The ultimate goal of qualitative research is deeper understanding of a selected study, the "human element" allows researchers the ability to "process information immediately, clarify and summarize material, check with respondents for accuracy of interpretation and explore unusual or unanticipated responses" (Merriam, 2002, p. 5). Thus, the researcher must guard against personal biases that can affect the interpretation and conclusions of gathered data (Peshkin, 1991).

An interview guide was developed for the three step interview approach reflecting on literature in the literature review. The first interview focused on the participants' life history, the second interview centered on the experience being studied and the participants' currently lived experiences, and the third interview allowed the participants to reflect on their experiences and to make meaning or connections between their life and the lived experiences being studied. Prior to conducting the current study, a pilot study was conducted the summer of 2015 to test and refine the interview guide. By testing the interview guide through the pilot study, the interview guide was edited to rework and reorder questions to eliminate confusion, allow a better conversation, and to collect meaningful data.

Using an interview guide and following Seidman's (2013) three step interview approach, five students were interviewed three times to hear about them as people, as

students, as well as their experiences coming back to school. Seidman recommended

arranging three interviews for 90 minutes with each participant. Each interview was

conducted on campus. Following Seidman's (2013) three step interview approach, I

sought to understand the students' educational journey, challenges they faced throughout

their journey, challenges they faced returning to college, strategies they used to be

successful academically, and suggestions for how colleges can assist their reentry into

college. Conducting multiple interviews with each student allowed for deeper

understanding into the students' experiences and produced meaningful data (Giorgi,

2009).

At the beginning of each interview, it was communicated with the students that

our conversation was being recorded, so their story can be better understood. The

recording reduced the need to take a lot of notes during the interview sessions. The

interviews were intended to be a friendly conversation (Seidman, 2013), not a formal

interview, and kept the students' experience as the subject (Bevan, 2014). The goal

during the interviews was for the students to reconstruct their experiences returning to

college as stopout students (Seidman, 2013).

Interviewing the students allowed their experience to be put into context

(Seidman, 2013), and context is critical for qualitative research (Merriam, 2002). Each

participant was interviewed three times with three to seven days between each interview.

Using an interview guide, I started with a few open-ended questions to make sure the

students were comfortable with the interview. The interview room was arranged with

comfortable, relaxing seating. During the interviews, descriptive questions and structural

questions were asked and answered in order to collect data to add depth and quality to the

experience (Bevan, 2014). Examples of questions asked the students included: describe what motivated you to return to college, what impacted your decision to leave college the first time, and describe the value of an education.

It was necessary to listen to and allow the students to describe their experiences (Vagle, 2014). Effective interviewing required being alert and engaged in the conversation, and to ask follow up questions for students to describe their meaning of certain words and phrases whenever clarification was necessary (Seidman, 2013). In order to understand the students' point of view, it was important to listen to the students during the interview, encourage the students to describe their experiences, and allow the students to talk without interruption (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Conducting an open-ended interview as a relaxed conversation allowed the collection of qualitative data and hearing the stories of the students. Following the three-step interview process allowed me to keep the students' words in context. The intent was to receive data from the students' point of view and not from my point of view (Merriam, 2002).

Participants were asked to describe and reflect on their experiences (Vagle, 2014) coming back to college and asked for specific details of their experiences returning to college (Giorgi, 2009). This study will assist in understanding the students' perceptions and experiences returning to college as a stopout student. During the interviews, minimal notes were taken when needed to write down an idea or follow up question, so as to not interrupt the student talking. It was necessary to listen to not only what the students were saying, but also for the meaning of what they said (Seidman, 2013). Follow up questions were asked to allow the students to explain their experiences at a deeper level. In order to hear and understand as much as possible, focus had to remain on the student being

interviewed (Seidman, 2013) when little shifts to other thoughts and topics occurred. At times, it was necessary to move the conversation forward by redirecting the students back to their experiences (Giorgi, 2009) of returning to college when they began to take the conversation away from their experiences and the purpose of this study.

In addition to interviewing students and one college administrator, memos were written throughout the research process to reflect how I may have been influencing the research, how the research was influencing me, and how I was constructing the data. A digital voice recorder was used to speak my ideas and thoughts related to this research as they occurred. Within 12 hours of each contact visit meeting, my thoughts and perceptions of the contact visit meeting were documented through an audibly recorded research memo. Included in the memo were my perceptions of the students' comfort level during the meeting and my observations of the students during the meeting. Key words or phrases mentioned during the contact visit meetings were captured. Reflecting on the contact visit meeting and capturing my thoughts and perceptions through research memos assisted in understanding the students participating in this study. The same process of audibly recording memos after each student interview and throughout this research project was also followed. All of my audibly recorded memos and recorded interviews were transcribed into Microsoft Word and saved on a password protected computer. After the memo was typed on a computer, the memo was saved under a title based on the topics (framework, coding, tasks, reflection, etc.) covered in the memo (Saldaña, 2013). This process of data collection allowed for collection of meaningful data from stopout students returning to college.

Methods of Data Analysis

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The analysis of the data was ongoing throughout the research, and the goal was to understand the experiences of stopout college students and identify strategies that support efforts by colleges to increase student graduation rates. In order to meet my goals, one must be actively engaged in the data collection and analysis (Maxwell, 2013). Each interview and all research memos were analyzed. Research memos were constructed to track my thoughts and biases throughout data analysis. Each memo was voice transmitted and then typed into Microsoft Word on a password protected computer. For this study, 80 pages of typed research memos were accumulated.

Maxwell (2013) advised qualitative researchers to begin analyzing data immediately after the interview. Following each student interview, the interview was transcribed into Microsoft Word onto a computer by listening to the recorded interview. After transcribing the interview, the recorded interview was listened to with a copy of my interview transcription to check the accuracy of the transcription and edit any inaccuracies as necessary. Once it was believed the transcription was accurate, a copy of the transcript was emailed to each participant for them to review and provide editorial feedback to ensure accuracy. After receiving confirmation of an accurate transcript from the participant, the transcript was used to proceed to the next step of coding the interview.

Initial coding of the transcribed interview began by utilizing line-by-line coding of the interview (Charmaz, 2006). Codes were created by naming data through the students' words and experiences; and this researcher's interpretation of their meaning (Charmaz, 2006). The line-by-line coding of the interview was saved on my computer. After the line-by-line coding of the interview was completed, an audible memo of my thoughts and perceptions were recorded. Throughout the process, research memos were

recorded and transcribed into Microsoft Word onto a computer. Capturing my thoughts allowed me to analyze my data early in the process (Charmaz, 2006).

Data were compared and scrutinized throughout the process of data collection and analysis by using the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data constructed during the same interview and data constructed from different interviews was compared. Similarities and differences within the data were documented in memos. My ideas, observations, and thoughts matter (Charmaz, 2006), so I captured them by recording them through memos and notes.

Focused codes were constructed from the frequently used initial codes which categorized my data best (Charmaz, 2006) by reviewing my line-by-line codes and reviewing my student interview memos. Coding interview data was an active process which required me to think, reflect, and act on my collected data and constructed codes (Charmaz, 2006). It was important for me to be open to my data; and not push the data into any of my preconceived codes (Charmaz, 2006). Themes were constructed following focused coding in order to best present the research findings. My thoughts and notes while they were active were captured by writing memos as I moved through line-by-line coding, focused coding, and identifying themes in order to capture my impact and subjectivity on the data.

The data of the interviews were analyzed by fracturing and coding the data, using focused coding procedures (Charmaz, 2006), in order to identify themes within each interview. After initially coding the interview data memos were written of what I see going on in the data. Following the focused coding process, similar code words were clustered together in order to reduce the number of codes into clusters. After clustering,

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the clusters were reduced to themes within the data. Research memos were written after themes were developed from the data.

Through memos, my thoughts and beliefs were captured of what the data are showing, how the data was being coded, and my process of analysis. Themes were identified following the coding stage and are presented in the findings of the research using the students' words by using quotes as much as possible in order to provide details and perspective of the students' experience. Following analysis of the data, the identified themes were viewed to determine whether the data support or contradict previous studies and research.

## Validity Issues

For this qualitative study, I was the instrument used to collect the data (Maxwell, 2013). Validity decisions were interwoven throughout the research process (Maxwell, 2013). As a current student affairs administrator in higher education, I guarded against any assumptions I have related to student success for stopout students. I did this by listing these assumptions prior to gathering data in research memos and continued to write research memos as I moved back and forth through the research design, data collection, and analysis. Analysis of the data was done for this study's data and was independent of existing theories of stopout students (Vagle, 2014). Memo writing allowed for reflection on how I was impacting the research and how the research was impacting me. It was necessary to identify my subjectivity and reactivity throughout the research process (Maxwell, 2013). Maxwell defined reactivity as "the influence of the researcher on the setting or individuals studied" (p. 124).

I was also aware of my reactivity (Maxwell, 2013) and how I was impacting the

research study. One precautionary step followed was not to lead the students down preselected paths during interviews. For each interview, open-ended questions were prepared related to the purpose of each interview on my interview guide (Seidman, 2013). I remained mindful of my goal to allow the students to take me through their story, in their words, though the paths they select. I asked follow up questions for my clarification to understand more about situations the students mention in passing or when clarification was needed. Clarifying the students' words assisted me in capturing and articulating their experiences.

Another strategy to ensure validity of the study was to follow Patton's (2002) advice of considering different explanations for the data. It was important not to accept the first conclusion, but to continue seeking alternative solutions, and looking for the "best fit" for the data (Patton, 2002, p. 553). I understand my analysis is one interpretation of the data (Vagle, 2014). Therefore, to construct the themes for the data, I asked myself critical questions about the data and captured my ideas and reasoning in research memos. In order to maintain accuracy of the study, analysis and findings were kept within the context (Merriam, 2002; Vagle, 2014) of the students' experiences.

The themes identified through this research were my interpretation of the stopout student experience because my interpretation is one of many (Vagle, 2014). Each of the interviews were recorded for audio and transcribed verbatim. The participants were asked to review the interview transcripts in order to have accurate content for interpretation. Patton (2002) referred to this strategy as an analytical triangulation approach. This strategy is also referred to as member checking (Creswell, 2002; Maxwell, 2013). This process allowed the participants to correct the interview transcripts

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and provided accurate transcripts. While analyzing and coding the data, as much of the students' words were used as possible. By utilizing a three-interview series, having participants review interview transcripts, transcribing researcher memos, recording interviews, transcribing interviews, and triangulating data, it is believed I am able to validate the data and report the study findings with integrity.

## Ethical Issues

The student information I received from the Registrar was kept confidential as to not violate any laws and policies related to student records. Student information was filed in a locked file cabinet so that student information was not accessed by anyone who should not have them. Protection of student records was a high priority. Because I work at the institution where the students attend, I explained to them that no person other than me will know their identity. In order to protect their identity, we agreed on pseudonym names for each student interviewed during this research. I also wanted each student to be assured that I will maintain their confidentiality throughout the research, and that they were free to tell me about their student experiences without any fear or hesitation of someone finding out who they are individually.

In accordance with the guidelines of VSU, a request for review was submitted and approved by the VSU IRB to interview six participants for this study. Prior to conducting the first interview with each student, each participant completed an informed consent form (Seidman, 2013). The students were explained that they may choose not to participate in the study if at any point they wanted to withdraw. I wanted the students to remain comfortable to share their experiences for this research. During the interview sessions, I was not sure what I may hear as I asked the students to walk me through their

experiences as stopout students. From the students, I heard emotional stories of tragedy experienced in their life. No matter where the interview went, it was my ethical responsibility to end each interview as a normal conversation (Morse et al., 2009) with positive responses (Charmaz, 2006). When deciding between ethics or science, I choose an ethical decision (Giorgi, 2009).

## Summary

This chapter describes the research design, the research location, provides student demographics for the research site, and lists the research questions guiding this study. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling and using contact visit meetings using the research study criteria: current students who are 25 years or older returning to college after being out of college for at least four semesters. Data was collected through researcher memos, student contact information form, and recorded interviews with participants using Seidman's (2013) three step interview approach. Data was analyzed using line-by-line coding, followed by focused coding, reduction into clusters, concluding into identified themes. Validity and ethical issues are also addressed in this chapter.

Chapter IV

FINDINGS

This study sought to better understand the experiences of stopout college students and identify strategies that support efforts by community colleges to increase student graduation rates. Three research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the college experiences of stopout students returning to college?

RQ2: What strategies did the identified stopout students employ while attending college?

RQ3: What strategies did the identified college employ to increase stopout student graduation rates?

Bean and Metzner's (1985) student attrition model for nontraditional students, Spady's (1971) conceptual model, Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure, and Astin's (1985) theory of student involvement were used to framework the experiences and strategies of stopout students in a community college in a southern state.

A basic interpretive approach (Merriam, 2002) was used to answer the research questions for this study to understand the experiences of stopout students returning to college and allowed students to make meaning of their experiences. The study sample comprised of five returning stopout students at one community college in southwest Georgia. Participants were required to meet the following criteria to be included in the study: returning to college after being out of college at least four consecutive semesters and be at least 25 years old. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants'

demographic information (i.e., Pseudonym, age, sex, college attendance gap, and family dynamic).

Table 1

*Participants' Demographics Profiles*

| Pseudonym | Age | Gender | Attendance Gap | Family Dynamics |
|-----------|-----|--------|----------------|-----------------|
| Summer | 42 | Female | Three years | Never married, No children |
| Sabrina | 49 | Female | Six years | Married, Two adult children |
| Katie | 30 | Female | Three years | Married, Two children (5, 8) One adult stepson |
| Autumn | 39 | Female | 16 years | Separated, Divorce pending, Two children (8, 10) |
| Bruce | 31 | Male | Nine years | Married, Four children (1, 1, 4, 6) |
| Duke | 37 | Male | Employee for 12 years | Married, One child (5) |

With the assistance of the Registrar, students who met the profile of my population were identified and invited to participate in the study through email. Emails were sent to all 118 identified students within the population, explaining the purpose of this study and inviting them to participate in the study. When a student interested in participating in the study contacted the researcher, an individual meeting was scheduled with the student so the researcher could explain the study in detail, hear the student voice information about themselves and their experiences, answer any questions related to the

study, and collect the student information form from the student.

Seidman's three series interview approach (2013) was used to collect thick data. Five students were interviewed three times to share personal experiences and learn about their educational history, their family dynamics, their work responsibilities, and their experiences as a student returning to college. Additionally, one college administrator was interviewed twice to learn how the college and state system views stopout students and to learn how the college assisted stopout students who returned to college.

Each interview was conducted face-to-face on campus and recorded with a digital recorder for voice transmission. All interviews were transcribed into Microsoft Word documents on a password-protected computer. The interviews were scheduled for 90-minute sessions, using an interview guide for each interview to help keep focus on the purpose of the interview. Participants received a copy of the interview transcript to check for accuracy and make editorial suggestions for revision. In addition to interviewing students, researcher memos were written throughout the research process to reflect how I may be influencing the research, how the research is influencing me, and how I am constructing the data. The memos included my perceptions of the students' comfort level during the individual meeting and my observations of the students during the individual meeting.

Additionally, my thoughts on each student's experience and the level of rapport I had with the student during the individual meeting were included in research memos. Key words or phrases mentioned during the individual meetings were also captured. Reflecting on the individual meetings and capturing my thoughts and perceptions through research memos assisted me in selecting students to participate in this study. The same

process of audibly recording memos was followed after each student interview and throughout this research project. All of the audibly recorded memos were transcribed into Microsoft Word and the memos were saved on a computer. This process of data collection allowed for the collection of meaningful data from stopout students returning to college.

<center>Narrative of Participants</center>

<center>*Summer*</center>

Summer is a 42-year old, Caucasian female, who is single with no children. Summer lives by herself, works part-time, and attends college part-time throughout the day. Summer did not graduate from high school, but earned her GED (General Education Diploma) and associates degree from the current college before transferring to a regional university in southwest Georgia. She stopped attending the regional university due to several hardships. First, she lacked adequate advising to help her navigate the college system more efficiently. She lamented, "I couldn't get any help. They put me into the wrong program; they put me in the wrong major." She also felt very isolated and not valued. She complained, "I didn't like the way they treated me." She experienced total communication breakdown with college staff and "couldn't ever get anyone … every time I called over there I never got a call back." Summer blames the college for not inducting/orienting her properly into the college and experiencing very poor student services. This resulted in her eventual decision to drop out of college. She stated, "I had to initiate all the calls. I didn't know the schedule or anything like that. I never received a packet or letter."

For 3 years thereafter, Summer did not feel that college was meant for her. She

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explained that her decision to return to college to pursue a Bachelor degree in Management was driven by personal desire "to come back to school to further my education and to get a better job and not have to depend on anybody." She felt that a degree in Management was in line with her current job dealing with finances and leading employees, and a sure pathway to career advancement. Summer felt that higher education can be very empowering. She stated:

> ...being able to communicate right in the world, being able to understand what is going on, being able to give people what they need. If you have a good education you are able to know what you are doing in life. Education makes your life better because you know more; you can do more things, and be more productive in the world.

Summer was more self-assured and motivated about college and her future. She envisioned higher education as her key to a better life. She stated:

> I can see the goal of my future can be stronger. The stuff that I'm learning, I can see how it's going to go on to my part time job...I can see the benefits of learning new stuff. I can see how I can apply it to the job that I have. It ... gave me a little bit more meaning.

### Sabrina

Sabrina is a 49-year old, Caucasian, married mother of two adult children and grandmother of one child. One child is married and the other attends a university in a neighboring state. Sabrina lives with her husband, works full-time, and attends college part-time in the evening. Sabrina first started attending Griffin State College as an adult a few years after high school. She has started and stopped college two times, and this is

her third time returning to college.

Sabrina left college the first time due to changes in her family life. Upon her return, she found it difficult to balance family and college. She described her struggle to juggle starting a new family, college and her job. She stated, "I was pregnant, and then ... new baby, working full-time at the school ... trying to keep infants and the 6-year-old together and a husband." During this time of her life she felt like she was "sinking" amid her numerous responsibilities and at that time the idea of college was out of the question.

Sabrina finally returned to college after raising her children. Several factors inspired her return to college. First, she felt like time was running out for her to attain a college education and also to satisfy her ego/self-esteem. She stated,

> I want to do it for myself for one. I look at it and see [that] I only have a few
> more [credit] hours to get a 2-year degree, and if I can get a 2-year degree
> then why can't I go ahead and finish the other 2 [years] and get a 4-year
> degree.

Secondly, she wanted to be a role model for her children. She stated,

> ... my oldest child did not finish her 2 years....and I was preaching at her ...
> about going back to school and her comment was 'Mama you cannot preach at me
> when you did not do yours – you didn't finish yours.' I said 'okay, I'll show you
> little girl – I'll finish mine.... If I can do it – you can do it.'

Economic factors and prospects of career advancement also motivated her to go back to college. She feels that jobs will be easier to find with a college education. She said, "I can get a job anywhere in a business somewhere and not just settle .... I'm tired of just settling for a job just because I don't have a degree. I don't want to do that anymore." In

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a sense she believed that education is liberating and is a social ladder to a more desirable life.

Sabrina stressed the value of college education as something one acquires and it becomes part of your life. She explained that "... you can't put a dollar amount on it because once you get it you can't take it away, that's what I tell my child." As a stopout student Sabrina has found a way to balance family, school, and work priorities. Family is "... top priority ... next is school work." Her daily routines are now characterized with work, house chores, "... cook and clean, wash clothes..." and late nights "studying" instead of watching TV and relaxing during the weekends. "Then on Tuesday and Thursday I come out here [for night classes]."

*Katie*

Katie is a 30-year old, Caucasian, married mother of two biological children (ages 5, 8) and one adult stepson. Katie lives with her husband and children, is a full-time mom, and attends college full-time during the day while her children are in school. Katie first attended Griffin State College at the age of 18 to study for her GED and Nurse Aide program. After completing her Nurse's Aide program, she enrolled in the teacher education program, but decided to stop college and focus on her growing family. At the time she struggled with a difficult pregnancy. She was worried that the stress of college would cause her to have "... a miscarriage." She also complained that at the time she was not aware of any college support to help her deal with the demands of school and family.

Katie later enrolled in a university online program, but decided to stop attending that college because it was not challenging enough. She was not having any issues with the online university, was making good grades, accepted into an honors program, but she

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wanted a more challenging environment. She said, "I didn't feel that I was being challenged enough [online] because I was making a perfect score." Katie was more comfortable returning to college now that her children were attending. She emphasized her commitment to the notion of active parenting. She explained, "I wanted to make sure that I didn't have to pawn [my kids] off on somebody. I went back [to college] … because they are in school all day so now I can go back to what I wanted to do." Before returning to college this semester, Katie was out of college for 3 years. She blamed the college's poor student services for her failure to pursue college at that time. She lamented,

> They (college personnel) were not as friendly and as nice as they are now. Now
> you walk in the building and people are smiling, when you walked in before they
> would turn around so they wouldn't see you. The atmosphere is different.

Katie described her motivation to seek a college education, "To better my life, to better my kids' life." For her, college education is liberating and a ticket to a better life. She said, "I do not like being dependent at all. I do not like being dependent on him (husband) or anybody." She also wants to be a role model for her children. She stated, "I want them (kids) to be independent too and I want them to know that in life if you want something you have to work for it, it is not going to be handed to you." Katie deeply appreciated the value of a college education as being "priceless." She stated:

> Education is important. You cannot go anywhere in life without education. The
> value of an education is important. You cannot go out and do great things without
> an education. Even if you are not talking about college, an education in general
> you have to have the knowledge to be able to do things correctly.

Returning to college has provided more structure and social opportunities for Katie. She reflected:

I guess I will say it brings more structure to my life. It changes your whole outlook on life. Coming back is different. The first time when I came it wasn't like this time. This time coming back is different because I know I'm ready to get this done. It takes up the bits and pieces of my day where I didn't have anything to do it takes up that time. I enjoy it, even though everyday it may not look like I do. I have more friends. Social wise I'm more social now then I was before.

*Autumn*

Autumn is a 39-year old, Caucasian mother of two children (ages 8, 10). She is currently separated from her husband (with pending divorce). She lives with her children, works part-time as a substitute teacher and attends college part-time while her children are in school. Through the past year she acknowledged the separation from her husband has been difficult, but believed she must be strong for her children.

Autumn described herself as an average student in high school who first attended college at a community college in a different state. She stopped attending college because college was getting in the way of her romantic life and she lost interest in college. She described distance as the main factor. She expressed:

I commuted back and forth [to see him]. I lived in Florida. Once I started seeing him that's all I was interested in - just commuting back and forth from Florida to Georgia. ... It was just a decision that I made at the time. I decided that I did not have time to go back; I had a full time job. When I wasn't working I was [commuting]. That's why I decided not go back [to college].

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She said there was nothing that could have prevented her from leaving college. "I was more interested in him than I was in going to college."

Before returning to college this semester, Autumn was out of college for 16 years. Her children motivated her to return to college after separating from her husband. She stated:

They are my motivators. I want to do this for them. That's why I'm going back. And to show myself that I can do it. I'm determined to. It's going to be a lot harder this time. I'm single but I've got two kids now and I've got them to think about. Their needs come first. It's not easy...[having] kids and studying ...it takes a lot of time management and discipline. My goal is to get my degree as with anybody that goes back to college and to get a job.

She wanted to be a role model for her children.

Autumn returned to college this time to prepare for a career in education to become a teacher in order to provide for her family; and she did not want to have any regrets for not completing college. In addition, she was also motivated to graduate from college and be the first in her family to graduate from college. This distinction in her family meant a lot to her. She highly valued college education and felt that "it's something to be very proud of." She currently feels that she has the necessary support to come back to college. Since returning to college, her outlook on life has improved. Autumn was very optimistic about college and already looking forward to graduation day. She stated, "I have something to look forward to. It's exciting. Every step I take forward in this process, it's just a great feeling, giving me a good outlook. I'm looking forward to getting my degree."

*Bruce*

Bruce is a 31-year old, African American father of four children. He lives with his wife and children, works full-time as a purchasing agent and attends college part-time throughout the day by adjusting his work and class schedules. Bruce described himself as a "watcher" and "kind of standoffish." He is unsatisfied with his job and wanted to change careers to work with computers. His parents and in-laws live nearby and help Bruce and his wife with childcare. His current goal was to graduate with a degree in Computer Information Systems and be able to provide for his family.

Bruce first attended Griffin State College right out of high school for 2 years and stopped attending college to join the military because he believed military service was his civic duty. Bruce eloquently expressed his patriotism, "I feel that you have no right to badmouth your government if you weren't willing to be a member of your government." Bruce felt that his patriotic obligation of serving in the U.S. military was a good way to break the monotony of being in school for 9 years and also participate in defending his nation. He stated, "…it was a way to … clear my head before I came back and focused in on what I needed to do. There was nothing against the school…but I had to get a mental break." Serving in the military and taking some time away from college helped him to mentally prepare for college.

Bruce understood the need of a focused academic plan in order to graduate. He regretted his lack of focus his first time in college, but was thankful for the current support he received from the college while currently enrolled. Bruce complained that his first college attempt was not very successful because the college was not student friendly and did not offer students any meaningful guidance in choosing courses. As a result he

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felt like he had lost a lot of money and time taking courses he did not need to advance his career trajectory. He gave an example of the support he received from college personnel since returning to college to keep him focused on completion, "I signed up for four classes because at orientation it was on my paperwork to take the class. The second day of class or a week later or something, admissions called me" because he was registered for a class he did not need for graduation. Bruce appreciated that someone at the college was looking at his records and making sure he did not take unnecessary classes. He said:

> Had she been here when I was first here she could have stopped me from taking…any other nonsense class. I think that would've been the best thing for me at the time. Because remember when you first come out of school you are used to that kind of structured environment.

Reflecting on his prior experience in college he acknowledged he lacked focus, "I had way too many classes that I should not have been taking."

After 9 years out of college, Bruce decided to return to college this semester to receive the training necessary to start a new career. He believed returning to college was a risk because he was determined to start college without his employer's support if necessary. Several factors motivated Bruce to return to college: prospects of a better future and career advancement opportunities, inspiration from his wife, and a desire to achieve a sense of actualization. He expressed these sentiments as follows:

> … my wife is going to school here for nursing …I can't do any better in my current position besides moving up to my boss's job and unless she is going to die today they are not going to bump me up. And I'm not really doing what I enjoy. With computers I can find my sense of satisfaction.

Returning to college has provided him a new "lease on life" and he wants to graduate to start a new career, provide more income for his family, and more opportunities for his children.

<center>*Duke*</center>

Duke is a 37-year old, Caucasian male who has worked at Griffin State College for 12 years. Duke is married and has one child. He is a former student of Griffin State College. He earned a Bachelor's Degree in Accounting and a Masters of Business Administration from two separate regional universities. Duke was interviewed to provide an institutional perspective of stopout students. During his 12 years of service as an employee at Griffin State College, Duke has worked in the Business Office as a payroll accountant and for the last 11 years has worked in Student Services at the college. His work experiences in Student Services include Admissions, Financial Aid, Academic Advising, Student Discipline, and Testing Services. He currently serves as the Registrar for this institution, and supervises all functions and personnel within Student Services as the Associate Dean of Student Affairs.

Duke displayed a great sense of pride about working at the college because of his ability to help students better themselves and their families. Duke stated:

> I like the fact that we are able to meet people where they are and to change lives…It's just a good feeling to know I contributed to helping that person. Now they are going to go out and be a productive member of society, have a family and live a good life.

Duke believed deeply the college should be committed to assisting adult students attend college and be successful. He pointed to some services the college offers to assist adult

students in their transition to college as new student orientation, First Year Experience program, tutoring services, and peer mentoring. Duke values students, and expects the same from his staff. He is committed to meeting students where they are and assisting them to a better future through college education. He summed up his commitment to student success, "The barriers that we can eliminate we need to eliminate. The barriers that the student has that they can maybe get over, we need to throw them a rope and help them get over."

## Data Analysis

Data analysis was ongoing throughout this research, and the goal was to understand the experiences of stopout college students and identify strategies that support efforts by colleges to increase student graduation rates. I was actively engaged in the data collection and analysis to meet my goals (Maxwell, 2013). Each interview and all research memos were analyzed. Throughout the process, the interview transcripts and research memos were compared for similarities and differences to include reflection of the theoretical framework of this study. Continuous review process followed Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative analysis method.

Initial coding of transcribed interviews began by utilizing line-by-line coding of the interview (Charmaz, 2006). Codes were created by naming data through the participants' words and experiences; and this researcher's interpretation of their meaning (Charmaz, 2006). See sample codes in *Table 2*. After the line-by-line coding of the interview was completed, a memo was transcribed to capture my thoughts and perceptions. Capturing my thoughts allowed me to analyze my data early in the process (Charmaz, 2006).

Table 2

*Examples of Some of the Initial Codes Used*

| Participant Codes | |
|---|---|
| Code | Code Description |
| FS | Family Support – the support a student receives from their family to return to college and meet their requirements in college. |
| M | Motivation – the students' motivation to return to college this time. |
| TM | Time Management – how the students' manage their time related to college, family, work, and life. |

| College Codes | |
|---|---|
| Code | Code Description |
| CN | College Needs – adjustments and improvements the student participants recommended the college to make to improve the student experience for stopout students. |
| CV | Convenience – references when participants described the level of convenience for the students to return to college. |
| EP | Enrollment Process – how the participants described the enrollment process to return to college and to stay in college. |

Following the initial line-by-line coding, focused codes were constructed from the

frequently used initial codes which categorized my data best (Charmaz, 2006). By

reviewing line-by-line codes and reviewing my memos, focused codes were created to

best reduce the number of initial codes and capture the meaning of the data. An example

of a focused code is presented in *Table 3*.

Table 3

*Example of a Focused Code Created from Line-by-Line Coding*

| Focused Code Created based on Line-by-Line Coding | Sample Line-by-Line Coding Used to Create a Focused Code |
|---|---|
| Support identified for student success returning to college | 1. [I need] Flexibility of classes. For a married person with young kids who are also in school that flexibility. Without it you're either going to hurt your family by missing time out with them...or you're going to mess up on your job. If you have flexible hours...you can still get your education. |

(IB)

2. I have tremendous support from [my employer and coworkers]. When I told them that I was going back to [college] I had 100 percent support. People said congratulations…this is what you are cut out for. All that stuff is stuff that I need to hear. That's just stuff that helps me to realize that I'm on the right path. (IA)

3. I've got full support. If I just didn't have to work! That would be really good. I'd rather stay home and do all my college work. Some families don't support the adults coming back to school. Some [adult students] have children and don't have the help for someone to look after them. (ISa)

4. It would be the financial support. That helps. Tutoring services. That's the main thing. That helps. Teachers that are willing to help, that are supportive. Academic advisors that are there to help you when you need it. (IK)

5. [I need] Patient teachers. If they don't have a good attitude I just can't work with them. You can tell when there is someone there that just doesn't want to be there. They're just there to make the money. Pretty much having good teachers. Having people that are there to ask questions if you need it. (ISu)

Note. IB = Interview with Bruce, IA = Interview with Autumn, ISa = Interview with Sabrina, IK = Interview with Katie, and ISu = Interview with Summer.

Themes were developed following focused coding in order to best present the interpretations of the research findings. Through memos, my thoughts and beliefs captured what the data was showing, how the data was being coded, and my process of

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analysis. Themes were identified following the coding stage and are presented in the next section.

## Discussion of Themes

### *Factors Influencing College Selection*

All of the students in this study were driven to return to college by their desires to improve their career trajectories. This research theme supports Hensley and Kinser's (2001) research that stopout students may return to college after evaluating their goals or following significant changes in their life. Bruce and Sabrina desired to leave their current employer for better jobs. Bruce was not satisfied with his career and was returning to college to receive the training he needed to start a new career in computer systems. He described his current employment as "I can't do any better in my current position besides moving up to my boss' job and...I'm not really doing what I enjoy." He expressed, "For my own mental sanity [I want] a job that I actually enjoy doing every day." He understood that additional education is necessary for him to launch a new career in computer systems. Similar to Bruce, Sabrina was ready to leave her current job but needs a degree in business to find another job with a comparable salary. Sabrina expressed:

> My goal is to leave where I'm at (current job) but I know I will not make what
> I'm making unless I have a degree in my hand. So I could be hired elsewhere
> with a degree in my hand and make what I'm making, well more.

She feels stuck at her current job, and views a college degree as an opportunity to make more money.

A desire for a better future for their families motivated Bruce, Autumn, and Katie

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to return to college to give them the credentials to start a new career. Bruce perceived a new career as an opportunity to have a better future, "My motivation is for not only my personal betterment but for the betterment of my family. I would like for them to have better things." Autumn was returning to college to become an elementary teacher. She had experience as a substitute teacher and enjoys teaching, but she lacked teaching credentials. She explained, "My goal is to get my degree...and to get a job. My choice for degree is early education. I...have been in that field over the last three years as a substitute [teacher]." Her experience as a substitute teacher influenced her decision to return to college for elementary education. Katie's career goal was to work with cancer patients as a radiation therapist. She wanted to finish her college degree "to better my life, to better my kids' life." She had prior work experience in low paying, service positions and understood the value of a college education. She explained her decision to return to college, "I wanted something different out of life. I don't want to have to struggle." A better financial future for her family is a strong motivator for Katie's return to college.

Sabrina expressed frustration for taking on low-paying jobs because she did not have a college degree. She aspired to leave her current position but she "makes good money" and it is difficult to find a job with comparable salary without a college degree. She desired to achieve more professionally. Sabrina reflected:

I want to be able to say I got a degree; and...that I...even at 49-years old, I can

get a job anywhere in a business somewhere and not just settle – not just settle

I'm tired of just settling for a job just because I don't have a degree. I don't want

to do that anymore...I would love to...move onto a different job and make better money.

Sabrina was motivated to finish college and apply for more jobs and make more money in other careers. "I want to make the same money, if not more, and have my degree." In addition to the financial rewards the degree would provide, finishing college would also increase her confidence and pride. She wanted to "have a degree not just say *some* college, and to...have a good chance of getting the job."

Autumn, Katie, and Summer returned to college to explore the opportunities that come with college education. For Autumn college was "...something that I've always wanted to do ... I want to show myself that I can do it...get my degree and become a teacher." Katie believed that college education is liberating. She stated, "I love my husband to death but I do not like being dependent on him or anybody." She also wanted to be a role model for her children and she "wants them to be independent too and... to work for it." Summer equated a college degree with providing meaning to her life. In addition to the career and increased salary the degree would provide her, a college degree will validate her value as an individual (Sweet & Moen, 2007). She said a college degree would "give me some meaning." Summer described her motivation for college as "get a good job and not have to depend on anybody to help me...I want to get a bachelor's [degree], I want to be able to...have an education and get a good paying job." The opportunity to get a good job in an enjoyable career motivated Summer to pursue her college degree.

All student participants chose to attend GSC because of its convenient location. This notion of location supports Cohen and Brawer's (2003) idea that community college

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students choose to enroll because of the institution's convenient location. Bruce said "location is the most important thing when looking for a college…if it is in a bad location…that is going to hurt you." In subsequent interviews he explained his college choice, "It's local, so I don't have to do a bunch of driving and it's a good environment." Summer chose GSC because "it feels like home," as she reflected on how she belongs at GSC (Spady, 1971). Location of the college was the major factor in Autumn's choice to attend as she sought balance with her children, work, and college.

In addition to the convenience of location, Katie was attracted by the fact that she was already familiar with the college. She stated, "… I have already been here and I already know people who already go here, I have been here before. I am not but maybe eight miles down the road. That is pretty much why I chose to come here." Sabrina said that in addition to location, she rated the college professors highly, and this is the only college available to her within her neighborhood. She shared, "It is close…there's no other college to go to around here anyway. I never had a problem with any of the professors. They have always been good to me anytime I needed help people here will help me." Katie and Sabrina each felt comfortable at GSC and that they belonged at GSC. The data from this study concluded students feel they belong at an institution and feel comfortable returning to an institution through positive interactions with faculty and staff. This data supports Spady's (1971) conceptual model, which reported students are more likely to be successful in college when they believe they belong, or fit, at the institution.

All participants in this study expressed high levels of satisfaction with the college's efficient enrollment process since their return. Summer was appreciative of the

"easier process of applying ... smooth sailing getting in." She attributed her positive feelings about college to the fact she knew some of the college staff members from her previous college experience. She stated, "I go to Vince and he made sure I signed up...because I was comfortable with Vince. I knew he would help me. When you have a connection it just helps you a lot. I felt more comfortable." Sabrina was also impressed with student quality of advising offered to her. She stated, "[When] I came up here and didn't know what I needed to take and it was almost like a daze. He [Vince] was very supportive. When I left that day all the way home, I was going 'I'm registered, I'm going to school.'" Summer and Sabrina's positive interactions led them to feel a part of the college community and feel valued (Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1993).

Bruce eloquently described the highly organized enrollment process as "Everything I needed was right in one spot...that's been the most helpful..." Bruce's description of multiple departments and functions being in one location supports Li and Killian (1999) recommendation for college leaders to establish a center on campus to assist students. Autumn's enrollment experience was very similar to Sabrina's. She reflected, "If I have a question it's answered...[it's] kind of a well-oiled machine and that's what I need. I can't have complications...They cover all the bases. Any concerns I have are addressed even before I ask." When describing ease of college experience, Autumn said:

> It seems like [college staff] here have really thought out what the complications would be for a student and [the staff has] uncomplicated that. [The staff has] addressed those issues that would present problems for a student...It's uncomplicated. [The college has] exceeded my expectations.

The students described how student services assisted them in enrolling at GSC (Kasworm et al., 2002) and how the service helped them feel connected to the college community (Lau, 2003). Lau encouraged college leaders to intentionally create environments on campus so students will feel more connected to the institution. Summer, Bruce, and Autumn described how they easily reenrolled in college because staff and resources were available in one location (testing, admissions, financial aid, academic advising, and registrar).

*Role Conflict and Time Management*

All student respondents self-identified their need to manage time and priorities related to their lives, families, employment, and college in order to be successful in college. They described struggles managing and negotiating time commitments, and how they felt pulled by external factors (Bean & Metzer, 1985). Bean and Metzer found external factors impact nontraditional students more than traditional students. Identified external factors impacting nontraditional student persistence include family responsibilities, work hours, finances, and child care. Bean and Metzer found students will leave college even when academically successful. Autumn, a single mother of two going through a divorce, described a tight schedule where she juggles work and family responsibilities. She lamented, "It's definitely a juggling act. I'm having ... to find time to study ... late at night whenever the kids are in bed. Their needs come first. Once their needs are met and I've got them situated then I do what I need to do for here (college)." Sabrina struggled to fit school time into her daily schedule, "At times when supper is cooking I'm running to my computer and when that is done then I'm sitting there half the night." She valued her family and feels obligated to be with them. Sabrina said:

I still have to spend time with my husband and I have to spend time with my children, so you just have to juggle it (time). Life is busy during the week with a full time job, night classes, and household duties...my top priority is family then next is school work if I'm going to stay in here.

The student respondents in this study offered meaningful time management advice to adults considering returning to college. Sabrina advised students to "Do what you can [and] take your time in everything you do." The demands on adult students are great: employment, family, and "...then throw school in there, you'll go really crazy." Katie advises adult students returning to college to be organized and prioritize their time in order to be successful in college. "If you're not organized and you aren't prioritizing your time you are going to be in a mess, especially if you are going full time." Her life outside of college is demanding and she knows if her time is not prioritized "...something is going to be left. It's easy to forget...it really is." Autumn identified the most important skill for an adult student as "Time management." With her obligations and responsibilities outside of college she sees the importance in managing her time. She describes time management as "...a skill, being able to juggle college and children and home life and stuff. That's the most important skill." Autumn reflected on her experience returning to college and how scheduling time to study for college needed to become a priority. Bruce attributed the most important skill for an adult student as "knowing how to manage your time." Because he had a full time job and a family at home he must manage his time effectively in order to be a successful student. He said, "As an adult most of us already have a job...[and] coming to school requires extra focus that your normal student doesn't have to worry about." In the evening he has a wife and four

children to care for and "...deadline to meet for [my classes]. So I think that the best attribute you have to have as an adult student is you've got to know how to manage your time." He advised other students if they do not manage their time they are "not going to make it. You can get all the tutoring you want. If you can't manage your time...you can hang it up. You've got to have ... a mental time clock. That's how you'll succeed."

The data from this study suggest that stopout students returning to college are more likely to implement and follow a system to manage their responsibilities in order to be successful. Katie took college work very seriously and gave it her best. She shared an incident when she prioritized attending class despite not feeling well. The following anecdote neatly expresses her determination:

> Some days it is hard and some days it is not...the day before yesterday I would not have looked like this and I would not have been cheery and talkative because I was in a lot of pain. But I struggled through that and still came. It's just prioritizing and knowing what is the most important.

Summer also prioritized college responsibilities and was highly organized. She kept a schedule of upcoming assignment due dates, quiz dates, and test dates, and she sets "a certain time" to complete her assignments and online quizzes. Bruce was fortunate to have a flexible supervisor who allowed him to come into work early, stay late at work, or make up the work time he misses during the day to take college classes. After work, Bruce helped his wife at home with their four children. Bruce completed college coursework after his children were in bed. Bruce did not want college responsibilities to interfere with his family. He adamantly stated, "I will never take the kid's time. I can always do mine (college responsibilities) in the middle of the night." Bruce managed his

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time with his work, family, and children through negotiating his work schedule and by completing his college work at night and weekends.

While looking forward to graduating from college, the students described the importance of managing time as key to college success. In order to stay on track and graduate, Summer planned to "Put college first, everything else second, [and] set up times to do that." Katie shared similar sentiments, "I just have to prioritize my time. When they (children) are at home I'm at home. When they are asleep, I do my school work." She understood the need to prioritize time and "stick to it." Autumn's biggest challenge returning to college was "scheduling and…finding time to study." In order to be successful, Autumn plans to "prioritize…time management [and] keep taking those small steps towards my goal."

### *Institutional Strengths and Challenges*

This theme examines stopout students' constant struggle to find flexible and adult-focused programs. Respondents in the study reported efforts to seek flexible and fast paced course offerings to allow them to meet their educational goals while still balancing work and family responsibilities. Matthews and Lumina Foundation for Education (2010) stated the needs of adult stopout students should become a greater priority for colleges and universities. College experiences of stopout students may enable community colleges strategically and tactically target areas most in need of immediate improvement. Student respondents of this study reported priorities specific to stopout students including academic registration, and customer service to allow them to meet their educational goals while still balancing work and family responsibilities.

Students of this study reported receiving support from individual faculty and staff, on campus services including enrollment processes. Bruce felt "relaxed" at the new student orientation "because [orientation staff] had already relaxed us" by communicating that college personnel will assist and "see you until the end." Knowing that he was not alone and expected to ask for help "relaxed" Bruce and gave him confidence for his first day of class. Sabrina appreciated having convenient free access to college personnel on the phone, and her favorite thing about the college is "the people." More importantly, she valued personal attention and service rather than a recording or visiting a website. She stated, "I can talk to somebody, if I need to talk to them, I call and they…help me out." Bruce and Summer praised the guidance provided by college personnel. Summer stated, "having that trustworthy help is probably the strongest value" at the college and "that's (help) something anybody going to school needs." Knowing from "day one" help is available and resources are available to graduate from college excited Bruce and confirmed his decision to return to college. Bruce received a phone call from his academic advisor letting him know he did not need to take four classes this semester, that one of his classes were unnecessary for his major. Bruce interpreted that phone call as the college wants him to graduate and "we are not going to let you leave us again. We are going to make sure you get what you need to get your degree…" The phone call and support he received "was a big help" to Bruce. Summer expressed satisfaction with her advisors and attributes her current college positive experience to having "a good advisor … someone who cares about your academic success." Katie underscored the important role of academic advisors. For her, "academic advisors … are there to help you when you need [assistance]." Katie also highly valued the support of faculty on academic

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matters as "something you really need." Participants of this study felt valued (Tinto, 1993), connected (Astin, 1985), and a part of the college (Spady, 1971) because of the student services they received (Kasworm et al., 2002) and the positive interactions they experienced from college personnel. Kasworm et al., (2002) found new student orientation programs and tutoring services serve as opportunities for institutions to build connections with students. Bruce and Katie each felt supported, relaxed, and prepared after attending new student orientation at GSC.

According to Chickering and Gamson, (1987), Kuh, (2001), and Arredondo (1995), faculty in the classrooms play a tremendous role in assisting students being successful academically, and play a pivotal role in student success and completion. Chickering and Gamson (1987) found a student's academic performance is impacted by student-faculty contact; and Kuh (2001) concluded students are more academically motivated through positive student faculty contact. Arredondo (1995) reported students are more likely to aspire to higher degrees through student-faculty contact. In order to be successful in college, Katie needs faculty "who are willing to actually help you instead of just blow you off." The first time she was attending the same college, she felt neglected and undervalued by the faculty. She described her previous faculty as being "so blunt...and intimidating" which influenced her to stop attending the class and left college in the middle of the semester because she did not feel valued or appreciated. Returning to college this time around, she appreciated faculty "who are willing to help you" and who "can actually laugh and make jokes." Interestingly, her most enjoyable class this semester is the one she stopped taking the last time at the college because her faculty member in the class this semester is "hilarious....and willing to listen." Katie's story

describing how a negative interaction with faculty influenced her to leave college affirms

Napoli and Wortman's (1998) findings that negative interactions in college can cause a

student to leave the institution and Tinto's theory of departure (1993). Conversely,

Katie's current experiences with faculty demonstrate how positive faculty experiences

encourage student retention and support findings by Sauchuk (2003) and Mutter (1992)

that positive relationship with faculty impacts student satisfaction and persistence.

Sabrina shared a story describing her math teacher's care for his students' success. She

was taking a math class at night and had a teacher who stayed late to assist students with

math. She knew the teacher cared about his students' success because he was willing to

assist them outside of class time and "he wanted us to pass [the class]." Sabrina said,

"It's satisfying to me, to know he cared about me and that I came out of there with a good

grade." Summer received help outside of class from her English faculty, "she gave me

some extra worksheets…[and] she would meet with me and talk with me." Because of

her prior experiences with faculty when she was attending college the first time, Katie

was reluctant to ask her math teacher for help in class this semester. Katie reported how

her math teacher was sensitive and responsive to student needs. Katie said the teacher

was "very, very observant...[and] she probably saw my frustration and knew something

was wrong." Katie described the faculty initiated assistance as "…a big relief" and was

comforted to know faculty are willing to assist students. It made Katie feel valued

knowing she "didn't have to figure it out on your own" and to learn that faculty are

"going to help you learn how to do it." Katie's classroom experience supports Tinto's

(1975) research that positive campus interactions strengthen student persistence and

Chickering and Gamson's (1987) research that student-faculty contact impacts academic

performance. Before this positive interaction with her faculty member, Katie was reluctant to ask for help. Because of the support she received from faculty she is more assured, confident, and more willing to ask for assistance.

Adult stopout students have many responsibilities as they must manage their lives in addition to college and they do not want college policies and practices to be complicated or further complicate their lives. Cross (1981) referred to these as institutional barriers which prevent students from being successful in college. Autumn stated coming to college cannot be complicated, and she appreciates that college personnel have uncomplicated the college process. She said, "[college personnel] here have really thought out what the complications would be for a student and…addressed those issues that would present problems for a student." She was happy to know that enrollment, advising, scheduling, and communication concerns were addressed. Autumn was not worried "because it's already been addressed. It's uncomplicated." Summer could sense "body language" when faculty cared about them. She knows when faculty are concerned for their students by how faculty respond to questions and "how they act in the class." Autumn associated faculty and staff caring with the way "they ask questions." She felt a sense of connection when faculty asked students questions that showed faculty engagement and concern for the students' success, which "speaks volumes about a college." On the other hand Sabrina thought staff demonstrated caring by "… making sure … they have everything prepared to register, and prepared for financial aid." Autumn said her experience returning to college "…has exceeded my expectations" because the help and support she received from faculty and staff returning to college.

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She felt relaxed knowing everything was taken care of allowing her to focus on her grades, family, and work.

*Influence of Family and Peer Relationships*

This theme explores the role played by family and peers in their return to college. Sabrina stated that retuning students need both family support and self-determination to return to college. She expressed the importance of both "...a family that's going to support them....[and] the drive to want to do it." Data from this study suggests that the level of responsibilities (employment, spouse, children, community) may influence the extent of external support necessary for stopout students to be successful in college. Sabrina passionately articulated the importance of belief in oneself, "You have to sit down and just take the time and do it. It's tough but you've got to do it." Sabrina emphasized adult students need the support of family to make it in college. "Some families don't support the adults coming back to school. Some have children and don't have the help for someone to look after them." She shared the following anecdote of another student who benefited from family support: "I was talking to a lady today and she was telling me that her daughter decided to come back to school and she helped her with her kids and...she finished. And that was good. I said if she hadn't helped her she may not have finished. I think its family." The data from this research highlights how family support impacts a student's performance in college.

All married student participants (Katie, Sabrina, Bruce) attributed their successful return to college to the support and encouragement received from their spouses. Bruce adjusted his work schedule to accommodate his class schedule. This meant leaving his house early in the morning and returning late in the evening. His wife "supports and

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encourages" him in school and his need to adjust his schedule. Katie expressed gratitude for the support she received from her husband around the house with the children, "if he wasn't there to actually help most days it would be chaotic because there is no way that I could do my best" without him. Sabrina said her husband is "real supportive......he helps me around the house...he knows this is something I want to do." Katie received "contact encouragement" from her husband, mom, and children. Sabrina said "Thank goodness I have a supportive husband," who keeps her from getting too frazzled trying to balance home, work, and college. Before returning to college, Sabrina negotiated returning to college with her husband by showing him how few classes she has left to finish her degree along with the class schedule. Sabrina's husband told her, "Go do it." Prior to reenrolling in college, Sabrina and her husband weighed the benefits and sacrifices necessary to complete college, they concluded completing her degree will be valuable, and they both made sacrifices for her to return to college. Sabrina's process of deciding to return to school validates St. John et al.'s (2000) college choice nexus model that students initially weigh the pros and cons of enrolling in college. Once enrolled in college, student persistence is determined by their college experiences and performance academically.

Summer and Autumn drew support from friends, mentors, and parents. Summer described her best friend as her "biggest supporter." Since returning to school, he continued to encourage Summer and show interest in her classes and work. Autumn received emotional support from her parents and described them as "the greatest group of parents" who are "a phone call away." She reported her mother calls to check on her throughout the week and "she constantly prays all the time." In addition to family

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support, Katie also received support from a former middle school teacher who now serves as her mentor. She stated, "...we keep in contact all the time...she keeps up with me checking to see what I'm doing, making sure I am staying motivated in school, making sure my goals are prioritized."

Employers also played a pivotal role in encouraging and supporting participants in their efforts to return to college. For example, Bruce's employer allowed him to adjust his work schedule so he can attend college classes during the day around his work schedule. Autumn eloquently described her employer's support, "I have tremendous support from [my employer]. When I told them that I was going back to get my degree I had 100 percent support." Her coworkers encouraged her by saying, "congratulations, you will be great...this is what you are cut out for." Autumn described the verbal support from her coworkers as something she needs to hear and appreciates hearing, "that helps me to realize that I'm on the right path." Sabrina's employer offered her flexibility with her work schedule; "if I need to leave early or something...my boss is real supportive" and he wants her to finish her degree.

### Summary

This chapter provided brief narratives of each stopout student describing how they interpreted their college experiences, construct their worlds, and the meanings they attributed to their experiences (Merriam, 2002); and discussion of research themes constructed from the data collected in this study. A basic interpretive approach (Merriam, 2002) was used to answer the research questions for this study to understand the experiences of stopout students returning to college and allowed students to make meaning of their experiences (Merriam, 2002). The study sample comprised of five

stopout students at one community college in southwest Georgia who returned to college after being out of college at least four consecutive semesters and was at least 25 years old.

Chapter 5 will provide a discussion of the findings and research questions, the limitations and implications of this study, and final conclusions of the study.

## Chapter V

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to better understand the experiences of stopout college students and identify strategies that support efforts by colleges to increase student graduation rates. Additionally, this study empowered stopout students by giving them a voice to express their day-to-day experiences returning to community college. My goal was to not only understand the experiences of stopout students, but also to identify strategies colleges can implement in order to assist stopout students in successfully completing college. Using interviews, documents, and personal memos I sought to inductively generate themes to answer three research questions:

RQ1: What are the college experiences of stopout students returning to college?

RQ2: What strategies did the identified stopout students employ while attending college?

RQ3: What strategies did the identified college employ to increase stopout student graduation rates?

Purposeful sampling procedures (Patton, 2002) were used to select five stopout students at one community college in South Georgia who returned to college after being out of college at least four consecutive semesters and were at least 25 years old. One college administrator with at least 10 years of experience working in college administration was interviewed to get the college perspective regarding stopout students. Seidman's (2013) three-series interview protocols were used to collect data.

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Following each interview, full transcripts of the interview were sent to participants as validity check between interviews. The research participants provided their edits to ensure accurate interview transcripts (Maxwell, 2013; Seidman, 2013). Data sources also included institutional website, policies and procedures, marketing materials, and documents.

Constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was utilized to compare and contrast data from interview transcripts and research memos compiled throughout the study. Four major themes were constructed capturing the experiences of stopout students. The themes were: factors influencing college selection; role conflict and time management; institutional strengths and challenges; and influence of family and peer relationships. The themes illustrated in *Table 4* are fluid and the boundaries between them are permeable. For example, it is not evident where the factors influencing college selection and the influence of family and peer relationships begin and end.

Table 4

*Characteristics of Themes of Each Stopout Student*

| Themes | Stopout Student Participants | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Summer (F) | Sabrina (F) | Katie (F) | Autumn (F) | Bruce (M) |
| Factors influencing college selection | + | + | + | + | + |
| Role conflict and time management | - | + | + | + | - |
| Institutional strengths and challenges | + | + | + | + | + |

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| Influence of family and peer relationships | - | + | + | + | + |

Key:  F = female student; M = male student

The purpose of this final chapter is to discuss each theme in relation to the relevant literature.  Finally, the chapter will conclude with highlights of study's limitations, research implications, and opportunities for future research.

## Discussion of Themes

### Theme I: Factors Influencing College Selection

A variety of factors influenced the students' decision to enroll in college. Factors such as motivation to return to college, future employment opportunities, campus location, student services, and convenient class schedule played a major factor in this study.

### Motivation to Return

This sub-theme reflected student's motivation to return to college.  The student participants of this study reflected on the various factors that encouraged them to pursue college education.  Stopout students suggested the current economic downturn may have forced them to consider new career opportunities in an effort to increase family incomes. Sabrina and Bruce believed that higher education is the bridge to bigger pay checks. Sabrina lamented, "I would love to…move onto a different job and make better money. Isn't that what everyone goes to college for?"  The idea of college education leading to higher income is affirmed by the U.S. Department of Labor (2014), which reported college graduates earn 53% higher salaries than workers without higher college degrees.

In addition, Bruce needed a college education to realize his ambition to become

an expert in computer information systems. He stated, "With computers I can find my sense of satisfaction" and he is completing this college degree to earn "a proper reference." Similarly, Autumn, and Katie were ambitious to attain college degrees and begin new careers in education and healthcare. Autumn specified, "My goal is to get my degree... and to get a job" as a teacher. Katie, a mother of three children, indicated strong motivation to finish college and begin her career in healthcare by the "opportunity is to have a better life...provide for my kids and not have to be dependent on anybody else." Summer who suffered from low esteem believed a college degree would be a way of validating her self-worth. She stressed her motivation to finish her "degree and get a good job and not have to depend on anybody to help me because they make you feel like dirt."

Bruce, Sabrina, Katie, and Autumn articulated their children also served as additional motivation to return to college. The ripple effect of education was reiterated by The National Center for Education Statistics (2005). They reported adults with bachelor's degrees are more likely to have children who are better educated. The same report exemplified how parents completing their college degree serve as their children's role models because children consistently select their parent as their top role model and how role models shape the behaviors of children.

*Accessibility*

All respondents affirmed the convenient location as the main driving force to choose their current college. All five student participants and the one college personnel articulated the importance convenience plays in stopout students returning to college. This finding supports Cohen and Brawer's (2003) idea that community college students

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choose to enroll because of the institution's convenient location. Summer explained how the college location led her to attend GSC, "I'm more comfortable here…I live about 10 minutes away…and if I need help I can get it." Bruce chose to attend GSC because "it is local… I can take all the classes I need because I have a support system here." Since Duke has been working at the college (12 years), he believes the overwhelming majority of students choose to attend GSC because it is "close to home" and all five of the students chose to attend GSC because of its location.

Personalized attention prior to enrollment indicated student's perception of how they experience the admissions process. Student participants reported positively on college personnel for being both accessible and friendly making the reenrollment process relatively easy. Katie reflected on feelings of being supported and was more self-assured after attending new student orientation. Before attending new student orientation Katie felt "nervous" because she "didn't want to be the only old person in there." When she left new student orientation she felt "confident…ready to come back…ready to start…more reassured" because "everybody was willing to help." Sabrina and Summer were pleasantly surprised about how easy it was for each of them to reenroll in college and register for classes. Both students decided to return to college a few weeks before the semester started and were able to reenroll in college and register for classes in one day. Students described how student services assisted them enrolling at GSC. This notion was supported by Kasworm et al.'s (2002) findings of the importance new student orientation, tutoring services, and student life play in assisting students being successful in community college. Kasworm et al. (2002) reported institutions have opportunities to build connections with students through campus life, new student orientation programs,

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and tutoring services.

Summer, Katie, and Bruce described feelings of being part of the college community because they were treated respectfully and participated in campus activities and clubs. Lau's (2003) study on how student services should be designed to assist students feel connected to the college community supports my study finding. Student participants in this study described staff and resources being available in one location (testing, admissions, financial aid, academic advising, and registrar) during their reenrollment process and how students were welcomed and assisted while attending new student orientation.

The convenient schedule sub-theme reflected the importance of class schedules for stopout students. The college in this study designed a class schedule that is friendly to the needs of stopout students and values the presence of these students. This notion is in line with Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure that promotes student persistence through positive experiences. According to Tinto, a student's commitment to persist is either strengthened or weakened by the institutions ability to make students feel valued. Student participants in this study reported, college class meetings being conveniently scheduled to accommodate students' work and family commitments. All student participants based their college choice on the scheduling flexibility that allowed them to continue with their day-to-day responsibilities of work and family. They scheduled college classes around family, work, and leisure in order to fit their schedule. Autumn was elated to learn classes she needed were offered during the day, she described the course offerings as "flexible class times…available for me and the times…that I needed that would work with my schedule." Sabrina took night classes after work and said the

classes "are scheduled very well," allowing her to work full-time and take classes in the evening. The data from this study suggest stopout students returning to college expect a simple reenrollment process, available academic classes, and accessible faculty and staff.

*Theme II: Role Conflict and Time Management*

Student respondents reflected the struggle experienced prioritizing time between academic pursuits and other life commitments. Married participants wrestled with family commitments versus school. While each of the participants in this study were motivated to return to college, they also felt pulled away from college by their jobs, families, and friends supporting Bean and Metzner's (1985) student attrition model for nontraditional students. This model contends that external factors can pull students away from college and impact their success in college. The mothers in this study (Sabrina, Katie, Autumn) appeared to be dealing with the prescribed traditional gender roles of household duties and childcare. According to Coltrane (1998), gender roles are based on the different expectations that individuals, groups, and societies have of individuals based on their sex. Gender roles give individuals cues about what sort of behavior is believed to be appropriate for each sex. In this study Sabrina, Katie, and Autumn described conflict to "juggle" time in order to meet the expectations of their families and to be academically successful. On the other hand, married participants in this study (Bruce, Sabrina, Katie) described the importance of communicating with their spouse in order to negotiate household duties and chores. Summer, who is single with no children, also described difficulties managing her time for studying, completing assignments, working, and social time.

*Theme III: Institutional Strengths and Challenges*

Student participants in this study reported several institutional norms/values affecting their college lives. Institutional factors are rules, norms, and routines that guide behavior (Scott, 2007). In this study the community college exhibited specific positive behaviors by officials meant to assist stopout students with processes such as registration, instruction, and support services. Student respondents reflected on the distinct differences in behavior between their first college experiences and their current experiences. Students complained of a mismatch between college norms and values towards adult students and staff behaviors in their first college experiences. Katie complained the college did not offer new student orientation the first time she attended GSC and when she had a concern she did not talk to anyone because she "didn't even know who to talk to." Sabrina blamed the college's prior insensitivities to working adult students when reflecting on her prior experiences with GSC, "Before...I had to fill out all the paperwork and send it all in...now you just come up here and fill it all out and you can get registered today." Stopout students in this study reported improved support which made them feel valued by the institution. Bruce described the support he received from his advisor as "We are not going to let you leave us again. We are going to make sure you get what you need to get your degree..."

This notion of institutions valuing students is captured by Tinto (1993) in his theory of student departure. Tinto contends a student's commitment to persist in college is either strengthened or weakened through his or her interaction with campus personnel. All of the participants in this study described how their interaction with faculty and staff impacted their enrollment in college. Katie and Summer gave very concrete examples of

how negative experiences with college personnel directly led them to leave college during the middle of the semester. Katie left college the last time without notifying anyone because of negative treatment she received from one faculty member. Summer left a previous college without notification because she did not feel supported by the faculty and staff and found it difficult to receive assistance.

Student participants in this study enrolled at GSC because they had positive communication with current personnel and all described the enrollment process as easy and uncomplicated. Sabrina was surprised how easy it was for her to return to college and how she was able reenroll and register "all in one day." Students in this study felt supported by staff throughout the enrollment process and supported by faculty in their classes. Even when the coursework was difficulty, Katie described faculty as "caring" and "attentive." The data from this study support Astin's (1985) theory of student involvement. The students in this study gave examples how their academic involvement has increased their connection with faculty and the institution. Bruce described how he was engaged by helping his fellow students in his computer class, "I was the only one in class who had already figured out the entire program so I got to help everybody in the class." Bruce described how his academic involvement has morphed into peer tutoring, "I don't want to let my fellow students down. If they have a question...I don't want to look at them and be like I don't know what to tell you."

*Theme IV: Influence of Family and Peer Relationships*

This theme examines the complex circumstances and barriers stopout students faced and the support they needed to overcome these barriers to complete a college degree. Of the five student participants, four have children, and three are currently

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married and another pending divorce. Additionally, four of the student participants are employed supporting Jacot, Frenay, and Cazan's (2010) idea that nontraditional students are more likely to have complex family and employment obligations in their personal lives. Jacot, Frenay, and Cazan (2010) reported, compared to traditional students, nontraditional students were more likely to be employed, be married, and have children. The five student participants in this study all reported positive encouragement they received from family and friends motivated them to be academically successful. Katie, Autumn, and Sabrina all described the role family played in their decision to leave college the first time, supporting Hensley and Kinser (2001) findings of the impact family plays in stopout student persistence. Hensley and Kinser stated receiving family support positively impacts stopout student persistence, and a lack of family support can negatively impact persistence.

All of the participants felt supported by family to return to college and complete their education. Cheng, Ickes, and Verhofstadt (2012) explained family support and academic performance impacts student success positively or negatively. In addition to family support, working students also enjoyed support from their employer to be successful in college. Bruce, Autumn, and Sabrina all described the support they each received from their coworkers and supervisors to return to college. Bruce adjusted his work schedule to attend classes during the day. Sabrina's supervisor supported her returning to college and granted her flexibility to leave work early if necessary. The data from this research suggests stopout students need supportive people in their lives in order to be successful returning to college. The support and resources provided by an institution may not be enough if the individual lacks support outside of campus.

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Research Questions: Final Discussions Summary

In summary of the findings discussed within the four themes, I address research questions posed in this study. What are the college experiences of stopout students returning to college? The students in my study had mixed experiences returning to college this time, and were looking forward to brighter futures. Positive experiences may be attributed to students' internal motivation, a convenient campus location, college support services, convenient class scheduling, and future employment opportunities. All the students in this study were motivated to return to college for career advancement and the opportunity to have a better future. Within the role conflict and time management theme the participants discussed how returning to college changed their lives by reducing their amount of leisure time. All of the students in this study prioritized college as their number two priority in their lives (family was number one), and all of the participants were planning to graduate from college.

All the students in this study valued the personal attention received from faculty and staff; and positive interactions with college personnel are important to each student. The data from this study suggest a student's interaction with college faculty and staff impacts the student's decision to leave or persist in college. Students will leave an institution without notifying anyone if they have a negative interaction with faculty and staff. In addition to on campus influences, stopout students returning to college were also influenced by their familys and friends to persist or leave college. All of the participants in this study identified at least one person close to them who encouraged them to pursue college education.

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On a negative note, Bruce and Autumn encountered hardships with faculty members. Bruce was unhappy with one faculty member who disrespectfully treated him. He complained, "I have never written an e-mail…and the first word was 'obviously'… that just pissed me off…right now I can care less what happens in that class…" This may suggest a need for faculty training to communicate effectively with adult learners. Autumn felt the extended absence of a faculty member resulted in missed learning time. She lamented:

> …we are having issues in my math class and …we sit in the classroom only to find out we are not going to have a teacher that day….[so] we got here for no reason…That's the one class that's not really delivering right now. I'm anxious to see how whoever is in charge…is going to try to pick up the slack where the stuff has not been taught for the last few weeks.

What strategies did the identified stopout students employ while attending college? All respondents employed different strategies based on their individual characteristics to be successful in college. Student characteristics including marriage, divorce, children, and employment had a big influence on strategies employed. Although all students prioritized academic work and scheduled time for studying and completing assignments they all struggled with balancing school, family, and employment. Bruce and Autumn had to devise school strategies that accommodated raising small children. Bruce is a father of four children (one school going age and three still at home). He is an active parent who attends to school work after his "kids are in bed." Autumn, a mother of two children who goes to school during the day and works part time, also attends to her children and household routine before completing her academic responsibilities.

Katie, a mother of three (two are school age), prefers to do her school work while on campus before she picks up her children from school. Summer is single and prefers to do her college work during the day and "in between classes." Sabrina allots time for college work on the nights she does not have classes and on the weekends.

The students with children at home (Bruce, Autumn, Katie) described a constant struggle to "juggle" their schedule and demonstrated guilt if college took time away from their children. Even while their children served as motivation to return to college, their children also pulled them away from college. Even as a single student, Summer still felt pressure to be with her extended family who lives in town and to be available for her friends. To be successful in college, the married students (Bruce, Sabrina, Katie) communicated and negotiated with their spouses a schedule to allow them to complete their academic responsibilities and their household responsibilities. All students in this study received support from loved ones and encouragement to be successful in college.

What strategies did the identified college employ to increase stopout student graduation rate? The college used a variety of measures to accommodate students' needs as adult learners. These included flexible class scheduling, friendly student support services, and financial aid. Students in this study reported the institutions effort to schedule classes throughout the day and evening to cater for the different student characteristics. In order to become more convenient for students to attend college, GSC has increased the number of online classes, evening classes, and offers weekend cohorts.

The college in this study improved student recruitment to increase the enrollment of stopout students. Duke reported a big push to recruit more adult learners to return to college. He stated, "We hired two recruiters that now visit the high schools and…are

focusing on nontraditional recruiting." A thorough examination of the college's materials and documents, the institution's recruiting materials revealed a deliberate effort to target adult students by featuring adult students on the website and recruiting publications. The institution is a member of the state system's initiative to recruit stopout students to return to college. In addition to traditional recruiting efforts (high school visits, college fairs, etc.), the institution was visible at community events off campus, hosting open houses on campus, and meeting with businesses to recruit their employees to return to college.

Other college strategies included policy changes in learning support and prior learning assessment that reduces student's time in college. The host institution for this study served as a pilot campus for the state's current learning support policy. Institutional and state leaders saw students taking too long to complete their learning support credits, and piloted a plan to allow students to take learning support credit concurrently with college level courses. Doing so allowed students to exit out of learning support quicker and allowed students the opportunity to begin earning college credits sooner. According to Duke, "Definitely…learning support is one of the keys" GSC and state officials made to assist stopout students. In addition to changes in learning support, the institution grants college credit to a student with prior experience in the subject before they enroll in college. Duke said the college has "done a big push to help military students…to come out and get college credit…those things that they did while they were in the service." Providing college credit for their experience reduced a student's time to graduation.

Additionally, residents in two neighboring states are able to attend the institution and pay in state tuition. The institution allows for a stopout student to easily be admitted

and register for classes. In 2014, GSC raised money through the college foundation to provide GAP scholarships for students to assist students who did not qualify for federal financial aid in order to allow students to stay in college. Duke explained how GAP scholarships assisted students at GSC, "many students that are coming to us…are not in the best financial situation…. it covers the gap between what they were awarded and what was the remaining balance." Two of the students in this study shared that receiving a GAP scholarship assisted them in returning to college by reducing their financial responsibilities.

<center>Limitations and Implications for Future Studies</center>

In this section I examine research limitations and speculate on policy implications. It is important to acknowledge that I am employed at the institution where this study was conducted and could have led participants to raise particular issues and ignore others. The scope of the study was limited to current students who have previously stopped out of college attending one community college located in the southeast within a main campus and an academic site about 50 miles from the main campus in southwest Georgia. Additionally, themes presented in this study are only one interpretation of the experiences of stopout students returning to community college. Data for this study was collected from multiple students from the same institution. Each student is at a different stage in their educational journey and has various family and work dynamics, thus the experiences from this study are not generalizable to all students.

An additional limitation that could have affected the study was the participants' unwillingness to be completely transparent. They may have guarded their responses out of fear of retribution or simply unwillingness to share private information. When

meeting with participants during the contact visit, I explained the importance of sharing their stories and protocol for maintaining their confidentiality. Throughout the study my subjectivity was checked and captured by composing a researcher identity memo following each contact visit, interview, during data analysis, and reflection (Maxwell, 2013).

Although this study focused on stopout students, it has broader implications, particularly for attracting and keeping adult stopout students. For example, the study described the everyday dynamics of five stopout students, which might need to be incorporated into the college environment of community colleges in a southern state. Another feature apparent in the study is the notion that stopout students are motived to create a better future by completing their college degree. This study illustrated how the five stopout students were inclined to adopt college coping strategies. If the stopout students used time management as a strategy to effectively overcome some of the challenges of adults returning, then the colleges in the south need to create an environment that fosters efficiency as a modus operandi at all levels of the college community wherever feasible for both learning and teaching.

The experiences of stopout students returning to college are important for college leaders to understand in order to help them create a positive learning experience for stopout students. Related to the stopout college student's experience returning to college, college leaders should evaluate and assess their institution's policies and procedures, which affect the student's experience even before their first day of class. Institutional barriers such as policy and procedures, enrollment procedures, and course schedule along with the student's personal characteristics may prevent students who wish to return to

college.

In particular, adult stopout students returning to college want a simple enrollment process and flexibility to select class schedules. All students participating in this study reported the importance of a simplified enrollment (or readmission) process. Sabrina and Autumn reported they would not have returned to college if the process was difficult or time consuming. It is important for students to be able to enroll into classes, which fit their schedule outside of college. All of the students in this study conveyed preference for flexible class scheduling to allow them to take classes around their family and employment commitments.

Adult students returning to college may be fearful taking college classes again because they have not been in school in some time, and they may not be sure how to balance life and college demands. In order to assist students with transitioning back to college, college personnel should provide stopout students with academic tutorials to help them reengage with academics, and refresh their minds before their first day of class. Specifically the majority of the students in this study expressed need for a refresh in math, writing, and time management.

All participants in this study highly valued personnel communication with a faculty or staff members. They preferred face-to-face and telephone interactions rather than email. This may suggest their desire to feel valued. Stopout students highlighted instances where they experienced caring faculty staff members who were there to offer assistance. With this in mind, college leaders must evaluate their institutional practices when communicating with stopout students retuning to college. Students value the opportunity to effectively communicate both inside and outside the classroom. All

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respondents reported on the way college personnel related to them reflected how they were valued. Faculty and staff awareness of the needs and sensitivity to the characteristics of stopout students may be improved by training seminars and further research. Early identification of the student characteristics is extremely important. Supportive faculty and staff may make a difference in persistence and success of stopout students.

## Recommendations for Future Research

This study was a qualitative study of students returning to college at one community college. A quantitative study of the factors influencing college choice in the state may expand literature on the needs of stopout students. First, repeat the study at a four year institution or a researcher could conduct a qualitative study which follows students from their college reenrollment through college graduation. Subsequent research can confirm or challenge findings of this study and also add to the literature.

Additionally, a researcher could study stopout students returning to college at more than one institution. It would be interesting to see if the students' experiences would be similar or different depending on their institution. Additional research may include academic data or add additional demographic data as criteria such as academic GPA, household income, or online students.

Moreover, a researcher could study stopout students with military experience who are returning to college. In my study one of the students originally left college to join the military and is now returning to college, he consistently related his college experience with his military experience.

Additional studies could examine role conflict experienced by stopout students

returning to college and its impact on student identity.  Further examination of the needs of stopout students may assist college personnel developing support systems for adult students experiencing role conflict or overload.

## Final Conclusions

Stopout students are motivated to complete college for a better future, and want college programs and services to fit within their current life and responsibilities.  College personnel should devise policies and practices that are easy to complete including student matriculation, course scheduling, communication with students, and availability of faculty and support services (including counseling, tutoring, advising, and financial aid). Stopout students value relationships with faculty and staff, and college leaders should concentrate on cultivating positive relationships with stopout students beginning with recruitment through graduation in order to increase graduate rates of stopout students.

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# APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Form

Thank you for the agreeing to participant in this research study.

The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of stopout college students and identify strategies that support efforts by colleges to increase student graduation rates.

You are being asked to participate in a research project entitled *"Stopout Students: What are Their Experiences Returning to Community College?"* which is being conducted by *Sam Mayhew,* a *student* at Valdosta State University. This research is anonymous; readers of the research will not be able to associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate in the research, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your participation in the research serves as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 or older.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to *Sam Mayhew* at *xxx-xxx-xxxx* or samayhew@valdosta.edu. This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-259-5045 or irb@valdosta.edu.

Student Name: _____

(Printed)

Student Signature: _____

# APPENDIX B

## Student Contact Information

The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of stopout college students and identify strategies that support efforts by colleges to increase student graduation rates.

Student contact information

Name:

Home address:


Primary email address:
Secondary email address:


Mobile phone number:
Home phone number:
Best time(s) to call:


How many people do you currently live with?




How many children/family members currently live with you?




Describe how other people depend on you in a typical day:

How many hours per week do you currently work?




Describe your current work schedule:




Describe your social and civic involvement outside of work and school (religious, athletics, volunteer, etc.):




Why did you decide to come back to college?

# APPENDIX C

## Email to Potential Students

Dear Student,

My name is Sam Mayhew and I am inviting you to participate in a research project here at xxxx College. I am conducting research to understand the experiences of college students who are returning to college, and I am inviting you to participate in this study. I want to learn your story about your experiences returning to college.

The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of stopout college students and identify strategies that support efforts by colleges to increase student graduation rates.

This research is anonymous; readers of the research will not be able to associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary and you must be at least 25 years of age to participate in this study.

Please email me at xxxx or call me at xxx-xxx-xxxx to let me know if you are interested in participating in this research so I can coordinate a day and time for us to meet on campus. Please contact me if you have any questions. I look forward to hearing your story!!

Sincerely,

# APPENDIX D

## Interview Guide

**Interview Questions**

<u>**Interview One**</u>

One important aspect of research is being able to describe each participant by creating a profile. Please explain your family background.

How would you describe yourself.

Describe your education experiences up through today, please share experiences when you were growing up as a child and in high school.

Describe what motivated you to return to college.

Describe the support you received from your family growing up.

Before you started college, who in your family had attended college?

Please explain your educational background prior to reentering college...the time you started college and stopped attending.

What were your goals upon reentry to college?

Why did you decide to come back to college?

What factors influenced your decision to attend your current college?

What are you majoring in and/or what career are you pursuing? Why?

Please share with me the things that are most important to you when looking for a college.

How are you integrating family responsibilities into your college duties and performance?

Describe your external commitments outside of college or goals you have returning to college.

Describe any outside influences that impacted your goals or commitment while at your current college.

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What impacted your decision to leave college the first time?

Who at the college did you talk to about the difficulties you were having?

Please describe your ideal learning situation…this does not need to be specific to college.

How do you learn best?

What could have been done to prevent you from leaving college?

Share a story how the college gave you support toward your education.

Was there any incident or major influence that impacted your departure decision? If so,

please explain.

What kind of hobbies and activities do you enjoy in your spare time?

Reflect on an incident or situation from your past in which you had to make a difficult
decision.
Describe the situation and the process you used to make the difficult decision.

How are your needs different from the needs of students coming straight from high

school?

What do you do after a stressful day at school

If your education progresses as you like, what would be the next step in your career?

In your own words describe some attributes of an educated person.

Describe the value of an education.

Describe a situation when you doubted yourself in an academic setting.

Tell me what is unique or remarkable about you

Do you have any questions that you would like to ask of me?

Thank you for participating in this interview.  We will meet again on

_____

*Last time we met, we discussed _____. I have provided a transcript of our interview. Please review the transcript to verify I accurately captured the intent of your responses. If you see any discrepancies please let me know.*

Why did you choose to attend this college?

What do you like most about this college?

Describe how you felt attending new student orientation.

What experiences do you recall most after coming back to college?

What activities are you involved in at the college?

Describe your best day of college.

Describe your most difficult day of college.

Thinking about the academic advising you have received....Describe your best advising

session.... Describe your worst advising session.

How would you describe your experience with the institution since returning to college.

If you could change anything related with the college, what change would have assisted

you returning back to college?

What needs do you believe were not met when you returned to college?

Describe your best classroom experience after coming back to college.

Now please describe your worst classroom experience after coming back to college.

Please describe what stands out most in your mind when recalling your overall academic

experience when you returned to college.

How did you choose a major when you returned to college?

What kind of support do you need to be successful in college?

What support systems do you believe that you were lacking while returning to college?

What support systems do you feel that should be offered to help students adapt to their academic and/or social environment when returning to college?

Describe your college experience since returning to college.

What are some financial aid options available for older students?

How would you describe this institution to someone who is visiting for the first time?

What have you learned about your institution while being a student?

If you were given the opportunity to advise the college President, how would you improve the overall student learning experience at our institution?

Describe a satisfying or meaningful experience during your time as a student at XXX College.

Describe a learning experience that has been unsuccessful and why.

How did you get into this major? What jobs and experiences led you to this college?

Describe how you are treated by faculty and staff.

What courses have proved to be the most valuable to you in your college experience?

What do you think is the biggest challenge facing adult college students today?

How do you decide what gets top priority when scheduling your time?

What advice would you give an adult student who is starting college here?

Is there anything else that we did not address about your experience returning to college?

Do you have any questions that you would like to ask of me?

Thank you for participating in this interview. We will meet again on

_____

## Interview Three

*Last time we met, we discussed _____.  I have provided a transcript of our interview.  Please review the transcript to verify I accurately captured the intent of your responses.  If you see any discrepancies please let me know.*

Making Meaning

Describe how returning to college has changed your life.

What information do you wish you knew when you returned to college?

Describe your motivation to finish your degree.

Describe a time when you felt a) discouraged because of your educational experience

and, b) encouraged because of your educational experience?

Describe a situation when you have questioned your self-worth in college.

Share a story of an accomplishments you are proud of.

In what type of learning environment are you most productive?

If you evaluated yourself as a student…how would you evaluate yourself?

Tell me about a risk you took since returning to college.  What did you learn about

yourself?

If you were given a "free pass" to spend your extra college energies in an area of your

choosing, what would you choose and what benefit would it bring to the campus?

How do you stay engaged and passionate about your college responsibilities?

What attributes or skills do you think are most important for an adult XXX College

student?

At this point in the process, how are you feeling about our institution?

What expectations do you have of your instructors/administrators? How do they know

this?

Describe a situation when you have shown initiative in a situation and the result.

What strategies do you have for maintaining contact with instructors/students?

What do you see yourself doing five years from now?

What have you learned from your participation in extra-curricular activities?

What are your own special abilities?

Describe an example of a college situation in which you were not proud of your performance.

What learning-related values are strongest in this college?

What characteristics are most important in a good student/instructor?

Give a specific example of a college policy you conformed to with which you did not agree.

Describe an instance where you had to think on your feet to extricate yourself from a difficult situation.

Related to your personal and professional like, how do you define success?

If you were to grade the college, how would you grade them?

How do you plan to stay current on your college trajectory?

What challenges have you faced when seeking academic advisement? How did you handle them?

Who has served as your role model throughout your college experience?

When you leave here today, what are the most important things you want me to remember about you?

Do you have any questions that you would like to ask of me?

In a previous interview you mentioned_____, please elaborate more.

Thank you for participating in this study. Your participation is appreciated very much. I will be sharing the analysis and results with you. I want to confirm I have your correct contact information.

APPENDIX E

IRB Exemption

## PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

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**PROTOCOL NUMBER:**   IRB-03238-2015                 **INVESTIGATOR:**   Sam Mayhew

**PROJECT TITLE:**   Stopout Students: What are Their Experiences Returning to Community College?

---

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:**

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board oversight under Exemption Category(ies) :1. You may begin your study immediately. If the nature of the research project changes such that exemption criteria may no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research.

---

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS/SUGGESTIONS:**

Although not a requirement for exemption, the following suggestions are offered by the IRB Administrator to enhance the protection of participants and/or strengthen the research proposal:

**NONE**

☐ If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at irb@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.

---

## Elizabeth W. Olphie          8/14/15

Elizabeth W. Olphie, IRB Administrator          Date

*Thank you for submitting an IRB application.*
*Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-259-5045.*

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*Revised: 12.13.12*