Why Have You Stayed?

The stories of persistence and

the experiences of continuously enrolled Keene State College students

By

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Patricia Anne Halloran, Author, February 4, 2016

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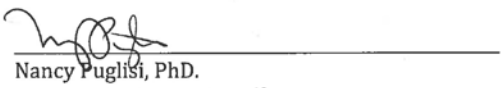

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When state funding for higher education is the lowest in the country, the existence of a public, liberal arts college in New Hampshire is dependent on student tuition. Looking beyond recruitment efforts enrollment management must focus on the retention of students. Studies of retention often examine why students leave an institution not why they stay. This hermeneutic phenomenological study analyzes the stories of Keene State College students who have been continuously enrolled at the institution to senior year. How can these stories of persistence inform retention efforts?

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Abstract

When state funding for higher education is the lowest in the country, the existence of a public liberal arts college in New Hampshire is dependent on student tuition. Looking beyond recruitment efforts, enrollment management must focus on the retention of students. Studies of retention often examine why students leave an institution not why they stay.

This hermeneutic phenomenological study analyzes the stories of Keene State College students who have been continuously enrolled at the institution to senior year. Using Kuh's research on engagement, Astin's work in involvement, and Tinto's focus on integration as a theoretic framework, findings support these three themes as the reasons Keene State College students persisted to senior year. The platforms of first year living communities, orientation, and academic advising emerge as important vehicles to increase retention efforts at Keene State College.

CHAPTER 1 – Introduction

In 2011 the Pew Research Center in collaboration with the Chronicle in Higher Education created a study asking *is college worth it?* (Adams, 2011; Taylor, Parker, Fry, Chon & Associates, 2011). Telephone surveys were conducted with 2,142 adults age 18 and older and 1,055 college presidents representing two and four year private, public and for-profit institutions were queried by questionnaire. Of the parents surveyed in the Pew Center Research study (2011), 94% desired a college education for their child. Distinguishing between the value of a college education and the cost of a college education was an important component of the Is College Worth It? study. Of the public surveyed 5% said that college held excellent value and 35% responded that the value was good. College attendance was rated with excellent value by 17% of the college presidents and 59% attributed the experience with good value (Taylor et al, 2011). When asked how useful college was 74% of the public respondents associated the experience with the development of knowledge and intellectual growth, 69% with personal growth, and 55% as preparation for a job or career. Of the general public surveyed 86% agreed that college was a good investment in increasing potential earning power (Reaping the Benefits, 1998; Investment Payoff, 2004;Taylor et al, 2011).

Between 1989-1990 and 2009-2010 the average college tuition grew from $2,936.00 to $7,020.00 (at 2009 dollars) at four-year institutions- an increase of 139%. Among full-time undergraduates at public and private nonprofit four-year institutions, the median published tuition and fee price in 2014-2015 was $11,500.00 (Baum & Ma, 2009,

2014). Published in-state tuition and fees at public four-year institutions ranged from $4,646.00 in Wyoming and $6,138.00 in Alaska to $14,419.00 in Vermont and $14,712.00 in New Hampshire (Baum & Ma, 2014). To put these tuition increases in perspective a look at national income levels is necessary.

> An average income was lower in inflation-adjusted-dollars in 2013 than it had been in 2003 for all but the highest income families. How this impacts college affordability in clear. The average published tuition and fees for in-state students attending public four-year colleges rose by $6,324.00 (in 2014 dollars) between 1983-2013. This is 71% of the increase in income ($8,936.00) of the middle 20% of families that same period and 19% of the income ($70,821.00) of the 20% of families in the highest income bracket. (Baum & Ma, 2014, p. 4).

The median salary for a college president is $392,150.00 (Fuller, 2012). In the Pew Research study (2011) 42% of college presidents agreed that college was affordable for most people. The same response was provided by 22% of the general public surveyed. Even with the steady rise in recent decades of college enrollment levels (Baum & Ma, 2009, 2011; Cheslock & Hughes, 2011), the majority of young adults in this country do not attend a four-year college because of financial reasons. Reasons why they did not attend college were asked of 311 adults aged 18-24 who do not have a four-year college degree and who are not currently enrolled in school. Of those surveyed 67% need to support family, 57% would rather work or make money, and 48% cannot afford school (Taylor et al, 2011).

About two-thirds of fulltime students pay for college with the assistance of grant aid. Many students receive federal tax credits and deductions to help cover costs (Baum & Ma, 2014). The federal government has a major impact on higher education but the influence of state governing policy is larger (Cheslock & Hughes, 2011). State governments direct institutional subsidies through appropriations and funding for capital projects, offer financial aid directly to students, and play a major role in overseeing the institutions by helping to shape tuition and fees (Cheslock & Hughes, 2011).

When tuition rises it is expected that state grant aid will rise but appropriations by state governments have not kept pace with growing national enrollments and rising costs. The term full-time equivalent student is one of the key metrics for measuring enrollment in colleges and universities (OECD, 2003). For a full-time equivalent student (FTE) state grant aid fell from $8,000.00 to $7,000.00 between 1980 and 2004 (figures in 2004 dollars) (Cheslock & Hughes, 2011). In 2013-2014 a full-time equivalent student (FTE) at a four-year public institution received $7,161.00 in state funding which was 23% less than the $9,290.00 (in 2013 dollars) received in 2007-2008. The 2013-2014 state appropriations per FTE ranged from $3,184.00 in New Hampshire and $3,494.00 in Colorado to $14,045.00 in Wyoming and $18,857.00 in Alaska (Baum & Ma, 2014).

Adams (2011), reporting on the Pew Center research, determined that, yes, college is still worth it. When 94% of surveyed adults desire college attendance for their children and 86% of respondents view college as a good investment enrolling in college is still a viable option (Taylor et al, 2011). Despite rising tuition and declining state aid college is worth it when students persist to degree completion to realize the increased

earning power of a college degree so the burden of accrued debt can be managed in feasible ways (Adam, 2011; Taylor et al, 2011; Baum & Ma, 2009, 2014).

Retention is one of the most common ways students, parents, and stakeholders evaluate the effectiveness of colleges (Hagedorn, 2005). A positive reputation increases the college's ability to attract and recruit the best students and faculty. Retention efforts should be as systematic in character as recruitment methods (Tinto, 1987). Just as a college identifies strategies for specific recruitment market areas based on demographic needs, colleges should be fully aware of the stages and cyclical needs of students once they are enrolled in an institution. Plans for retention should be as strategic as recruitment efforts and start as early as possible to maintain enrollment. A fluid enrollment management program identifies the beginning of retention strategies the moment a student files an application to a college (Tinto, 1987).

As colleges and universities continue to face conservative funding, examinations of the costs incurred in recruitment are necessary. Identifying related costs of recruitment will provide colleges the information needed to re-evaluate the importance of retention. Pressures in a competitive market with a dwindling student population require colleges and universities to continue quality programs with less. The shift in colleges looking closely at retention strategies is not only a way to relieve the stress of recruitment but a means to be responsible to the institution fiscally and to the students the institution has recruited. "When a student leaves college before identifying and achieving an educational goal, the economy and the society in general lose. When a student leaves college before identifying and achieving an educational goal, that student loses" (Habley, 2012, p. 84). Habley, Bloom and Robbins (2012) challenge colleges to weigh the costs

of improved facilities and recurring recruitment efforts in a competitive market without looking closely at the cost of retention. "When a student leaves college there are no winners" (Habley, Bloom & Robbins 2012, p. 84). The student loses momentum and the value of a completed degree (Reaping the Benefits, 1998) and the college loses tuition and related fees that would have accrued if the student persisted (Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012).

Statement of the Problem

Awareness of the intersection of persistence and retention helps frame the importance of identifying strategies that result in progression for students in postsecondary institutions. Unfortunately, minimal changes have occurred in the last 40 years in retention strategies and attrition causes (Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012). It remains of great importance to continue to investigate the factors of persistence to understand why retention data has not changed.

The impact of college attendance and degree completion is more than just the economic benefit that is most often touted but includes both cognitive and noncognitive gains as well (Astin, Panos & Creager, 1967). The Institute for Higher Education Policy, the Ford Foundation, and the Education Resource Institute published Reaping the Benefits-Defining the Public and Private Value of Going to College (1998) in an effort to familiarize a public that was becoming skeptical of the importance of a college degree in the light of ever-increasing costs (Reaping the Benefits, 1998). The public benefits of the study outlined how society as a whole would benefit from a better-educated public. The private benefits identified the individual gains garnered by a person with a college degree.

A recent report by the Center for Economic Advisers (2014) attributes increasing college degree attainment to the benefits attributed to degree completion. In 2013, 47% of 25-34 year olds had received a postsecondary degree. This is in part a response to decades of rising returns for college graduates and the income inequality between college-educated and less-educated individuals. A commitment to higher education is a response to a labor market that rewards more educated workers. A four-year degree yields approximately $570,000.00 more in lifetime earnings than a high school diploma alone, while a two-year degree earns $170,000.00 more (U.S. Treasury, 2014).

The purpose of this study was to identify the conditions that have enabled Keene State College first semester seniors to persist. As challenges in funding and recruitment are explored identifying the reasons why students stay enrolled in college becomes important.

Though state funding to higher education has improved in the past year and the gap between the state with the highest level of public support (Illinois) and the state with lowest level of public support (New Hampshire) has narrowed from a 53% spread to a 27% margin (Mitchell, 2014; Rivard, 2014), New Hampshire continues to receive the lowest state appropriation in the country (State Higher Education Finance Report FY13, 2013). New Hampshire FTE students receive $3,184.00 in state aid compared to the highest ranked state in the country, Alaska, with a state appropriation per FTE of $18,857.00. Conversely, in-state tuition for students in New Hampshire is the highest rate in the country of four-year public institutions at $14,712.00 compared to a low of $4,646.00 in Wyoming (Baum & Ma, 2014). High tuition is a deterrent to college enrollment. Newer states to the union, Wyoming-1890 and Alaska-1959, continue to

spend more government funds on public higher education and charge lower tuition and fee levels (Cheslock & Hughes, 2011). Statehood in 1788 (New Hampshire) is not considered new (Statehood Dates, 2015).

The University System of New Hampshire requested a state appropriation of $100 million in FY2016 to restore the state support at the level it was in FY2009 (Leach, 2014). A budget based on the current funding of $84 million with a 3% increase in FY 2017 would maintain the level of funding of more than a decade ago (Leach, 2014). New Hampshire has struggled with higher education funding for years. The state is also the leader in the country in average debt load with an average debt per student of $32,795.00 upon graduation with a default rate of 8.4%. This figure is 11% higher than the national average of $28,400.00 (Douglas-Gabriel, 2014).

A shift in demographics resulting in fewer graduating high school seniors has resulted in greater competition among college recruiters for fewer college applicants across the nation (Murnane, 2013; Turrentine, 2013). The change in high school graduates from 2008-2009 to 2018-2019 will be especially apparent in the Northeast (-9.4%) and the Midwest (-5.3%) (Knocking at the College Door (WICHE), 2012). One of the reasons for this demographic shift is a move away from high-tuition northern industrial states and towards low-tuition Sun Belt states (Cheslock & Hughes, 2011). Growth in public higher education enrollment from 2002-2012 was 3% in Illinois and 37% in Florida, a trend that has been apparent since 1989. Further evidence of changing demographics identifies the percent of students beginning college in 2012 who enrolled at institutions in their home state. Vermont was low at 53% followed by New Hampshire at 56% with high enrollments in California at 90% and Utah with 91% (Baum & Ma, 2014).

The demographic shift also includes an expected 30% increase of Hispanics to the United States population by 2050. Minorities are expected to be the majority (CNN, 2008). Currently college attendance, associate degree completion, and bachelor degree completion of Hispanic students compared to white (non-Hispanic) students lags considerably as shown in Table 1. This is especially true in comparing bachelor degree attainment between white (19.9% of the population) and Hispanic (8.8% of the population) students; more than twice the number of white students complete a Bachelor's degree compared to Hispanic students.

Table 1 *Comparison of college attendance and degree attainment of white and non-white students*

	Some College (%)	Associate's Degree (%)	Bachelor's Degree (%)
White (non-Hispanic)	20.0	9.2	19.9
Hispanic (of any race)	15.6	5.8	8.8
All races	19.5	8.5	17.7

Adapted from U.S. Census Bureau (2010c).

As the racial demographics of the country change predominately white public colleges dependent on enrollment will need to determine ways to recruit and retain a more diverse student population.

It is not enough to look just at changing demographic statistics in the study of persistence. It is equally important to identify the needs of a changing college age population. Extensive studies of millennial students (individuals born between 1982 – 2001) provide insight into what matters and how colleges can respond to the educational and social demands of students to increase the potential for progression and degree completion (Strauss & Howe, 2000, 2003; CEA, 2014).

In May 2014 Keene State College successfully recruited the largest entering class in a six-year period at 1282 students. This number was higher than predicted based on projections of declining high school graduates and deposits as of May 13, 2014 (Kahn & House, 2014). Non-resident tuition accounts for 65.2% of matriculated tuition amount and 35.2% of all fund revenue. The FY 15 revenue budget is comprised of 78% student generated income making recruitment and retention of students as the primary source of institutional financial support important (Kahn & House, 2014). Despite this good year, applications for the 2015 incoming class were down. Speculation attributes this to the October, 2014 Pumpkin Riots when close to a thousand college students rioted in neighborhoods abutting the annual Keene Pumpkin Festival (Admission's Daily Trends, 2014). Difficult situations continued to challenge Keene State College with the March 27, 2015 release of the findings of a year-long investigation of sexual improprieties in the athletics' department (Frazier, 2015) and a campus lockdown on April 1, 2015 due to a shooter in close campus proximity (Sentinel Staff, 2015). Dependence on recruitment efforts in light of possible challenges requires the need to ask students why they have stayed and to incorporate those answers into a system that increases retention.

Keene State College has a first year retention rate of 77% (Turrentine, 2013) and the president of the College has challenged the campus to raise the retention rate to 85% within a five-year period. Keene State College has responded to the challenges of low state appropriations for higher education, fewer high school graduates, a tuition driven economy, and the drive to reduce attrition by looking for new ways to retain students. Pressures in a competitive market with a dwindling student population require colleges and universities to continue quality programs with less. An institution's cost must be

offset by the sum of the tuition revenue plus non-tuition revenue. From this perspective tuition must be increased whenever costs rise by a larger amount than non-tuition revenue. In a tuition dominated economy like Keene State College retaining students and encouraging persistence would prove to mitigate the potential of rising tuition costs, limiting the cycle of increases in higher education prices that lead to substantial declines in a student's propensity to enroll (Adams, 2011; Cheslock & Hughes, 2011).

The shift in colleges looking closely at retention strategies is not only a way to relieve the stress of recruitment but a means to be responsible to the institution fiscally and to the students the institution has recruited.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the conditions that enabled Keene State College first semester seniors to persist. Discovering how to do more with less demonstrates the need for greater numbers of persisting, degree completing students with less funding and fewer student applicants. In reviewing funding challenges in higher education, the continued value of a college degree, the changing demographics of college applicants, and the evolving profiles of college attendees a foundation is built to identify the conditions that will increase the retention and persistence of college students. The deep study of one institution, Keene State College, and the cohort of students who have been continuously enrolled at the college since the fall of 2012, has identified the conditions that have enabled persistence. The outcomes of this study can be used to increase the persistence and retention of students at Keene State College and other institutions. The knowledge gained from this inquiry shows the importance of not just getting students but keeping them.

A declining number of high school graduates in the Northeast (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE, 2012) and low state appropriations for higher education in the state of New Hampshire that require functional dependence on tuition at Keene State College (State Higher Education Finance Report FY13, 2013; FY15 Budget Narrative, 2014) support this research. The persistence of Keene State College students reduces the need for higher levels of incoming students and the continued tuition gained by persisting students fuels the economy of the institution. Tinto (1987) reports that institutions of higher education have come to view retention of students to degree completion as the only reasonable course of action left to ensure the institution's survival.

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center released a report on July 10, 2014 that identified a decline of 1.2 percentage points since 2009 in the portion of first-time U.S. students who return to college for a second year (Fain, 2014, p. 1). Though the study did not focus on specific reasons for the decline these findings are particularly troubling in light of the national emphasis on college completion. America has slipped from the top position of the highest number of degree attaining 25-34 year olds in 1990 in the world to the 12th rank in recent years (House, 2012). President Obama has set the goal that by 2020 the United States will regain the reputation of having the highest number of college graduates in the world. Unfortunately, 64% of college presidents question the reality of that goal (Taylor et al, 2011). To learn the personal reasons for persistence from progressing students provides insight in current, relevant, and meaningful ways to increase degree completion.

Retention and persistence data is primarily based on first to second year progression (National Collegiate Retention and Persistence Rates, 2014). Literature on freshman year experience, retention, and success for first year students is abundant (Gardner, 1986; Barefoot, 2000; Schrader & Brown, 2008). John N. Gardner is largely responsible for founding the first year experience in 1982 at the National Resource Center affiliated with the University of South Carolina (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). As the Center grew to validate the importance of beyond the first year, a body of knowledge around the sophomore experience emerged that has resulted in an increase in specific efforts to retain sophomores (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2007; Tobolowsky, 2008; Hunter, Tobolowsky, Gardner, et.al., 2009;). Research on the experience, persistence, and success of college juniors and seniors is not as copious and an important reason for this study. Dr. Catherine Turrentine, Director of Institutional Research and Assessment at Keene State College, relates "we lose about one-fourth of our first year cohort before the sophomore year and about another 10% before the junior year. Almost no one leaves between junior and senior years" (Personal communication, 7/15/2014). The transition from junior year completion and the beginning weeks of senior year is an opportunity to celebrate a student's persistence having successfully escaped the odds of attrition. Interviewing students early in the senior year allowed for reflection on this phenomenon before the stressors of impending graduation and transition beyond college set in. Though research is plentiful on the topic of why students drop out of college (Brunsden, Davies, Shevlin, et. al., 2000; Cassel, 2003; Barefoot, 2004; Araque, Roldan, & Salguero, 2009; Waktola, 2014) it is far less so for the topic of persistence among first semester seniors in four –year colleges. The question

of why college students have persisted through the initial three years of enrollment is underrepresented in research.

Research Question

The research question guiding this study is: what are the factors, variables, or conditions that have contributed to the persistence of continuously enrolled members of the 2012 entering cohort at Keene State College? Simply stated, the researcher asked, why have you stayed?

The literature has identified the following areas as having an impact on persistence because of the prevalence of potential faculty interaction (Spady, 1970, 1971; Astin, 1977, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Tinto, 1987; Light, 2001; Kuh et al; 2005): orientation, living learning communities, and academic advising. As shared experiences of a majority of Keene State College students the researcher explored the impact of these variables within the framework of the data collection.

Study Design

This research is shaped by the studies on retention and persistence conducted by Astin (1977, 1993), Tinto (1987), and Kuh (2005). Persistence, in post-secondary education, defines a student who enrolls full-time, continuously, pursuing a degree with the expectation of completion within four to six years (Astin, 1977; Hagedorn, 2005; Habley et al, 2012). Involvement, integration, and engagement are all terms related to persistence. Though the terms are often used interchangeably distinguishing definitions are helpful to illustrate the numerous contributing variables that build the foundation for persistence. Involvement is student related. It is the student who becomes involved. Integration is a relationship between the student and the institution. Engagement occurs

when the institution provides an environment to provide opportunities for students to become involved (Wolf-Wendel, Ward & Kinzie, 2009).

The research of Astin (1977, 1993) on involvement and what matters in college, Tinto (1987) on integration and Kuh (2005) on engagement identify factors that contribute to answering the question of why students persist. Bean's (1981) synthesis of many attrition theories touches upon the three domains of involvement, integration, and engagement to provide a blueprint for student progression.

The Researcher

The researcher has been employed by Keene State College for 22 years. The focus of her work has been with first year students, students in academic difficulty, and the academic and career advising of undecided students. The researcher has been a member of numerous campus efforts to identify means to retain students. She is a member of the Enrollment Management Committee and reports directly to the Associate Vice President of Enrollment Management (AVPEM). A concentration on the retention and persistence of students is the basis of her work.

The researcher was an undergraduate student who transferred from one college at the end of her sophomore year. She has considered herself an accidental, albeit academically successful, student in her subsequent degree pursuits. It was not until her doctoral program when she began to develop an identity of what it means to be a student affiliated with an institution, a cohort of students, and a goal. Personal reflection has been important but researching why students have persisted for four years especially in an undergraduate setting where numerous and varied obstacles exist is of great interest.

Methodology

This study utilized a hermeneutic phenomenology methodology. Phenomenological research is the study of the lived experience and the meaning inherent in that (van Manen, 1990). It looks at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of everyday experiences by identifying the essence of the experience so it can be better understood. Phenomenologists are interested in gaining a deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by many individuals (Moustakas, 1994). The motto of phenomenology is Zuden Sachen –let's get down to what matters (van Manen, 1990, p. 184).

Interpretation of related lived experiences is the basis of hermeneutics. Hermeneutic phenomenology is less restrictive than pure phenomenology in that attention is paid to the human world and all its aspects. The researcher meets the individual where they are naturally engaged in their world (van Manen, 1990). Champlin-Scharff's (2010) work in advising in the hermeneutic tradition has been shaped by the work of Nakkula and Ravitch (1998, cited in Champlin-Scharff, 2010) in their discussion of the four concepts of existential understanding.

The four concepts are specifically helpful to determine what shapes an individual's lived experience:

- **Interpretation** is the meaning determined by the significance it has with the individual
- **Connectedness (Being-with)** is the degree which an individual is separate or not separate, makes sense of things in relation to others or identifies as a member of a group and how this "being-with" impacts his/her interpretation of an experience

- **World (Being-in the world)** looks at an individual's world in the way of social and historical context and how that plays a substantial role in the formation of interpretation and meaning. This may include factors like race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and religion as well as other contributing factors such as books read, sports played, or number of siblings.
- **Time** is part of the process of existence; the context through which one endures and changes. Time is the connection of the past/present/future and the framework through which interpretation takes place (Champlin-Scharff, 2010, pp. 61-62).

This study analyzed the data of student's stories to determine reasons for their persistence at Keene State College. Where phenomenology strives to identify the essence of an experience or a universal understanding, hermeneutics realizes there is more than one truth. This allows multiple stories to be told, interpretations to be made, and themes and truths to be discovered with the understanding that "truths" shift as the conditions in which an individual lives in the world fluctuate and move.

Limitations

The potential for bias in this study is significant. The setting is a single institution. The institution is very familiar to the researcher and some of the research participants are known entities. To address this, the researcher chose a research methodology that allowed for bias and preconception to be addressed and incorporated. A phenomenological methodology required the researcher to become aware of one's biases and assumptions in order to bracket them or set them aside to engage the

experience without pre-conceived notions about what was found in the investigation (Laverty, 2003).

The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED, 2010) is redefining the EdD as a professional practice doctorate distinct from the PhD. In order to acknowledge the benefits of individuals researching important issues often within their workplace, the Carnegie Project (2010) has adopted the title scholarly practitioner or individuals capable of blending their professional knowledge with theories and methodologies identified through research that improve their workplace. This requires the researcher to transition from a normative to analytical, a personal to intellectual, and a particular to a universal stance (Zambo, 2014). Similar to the hermeneutic phenomenological methodology that recognizes and incorporates biases into research, the moniker of a scholarly practitioner acknowledged the intimate connection the researcher has with the topic. The researcher frequently reviewed biases as data was analyzed.

Closely examining the persistence of students at one institution has its limitations as the outcome cannot be generalized (Spady, 1971). Yet Tinto (1993) cited the importance of institution specific studies to provide better information about students than national studies might. Institution specific studies can provide insight into circumstances resulting in policy initiatives that will have a greater impact and be more relevant for an institution than conclusions from a national perspective (Tinto, 1993; Wilson, 2005).

Assumptions

It is assumed that hermeneutic phenomenology is the best way to gather the stories of continuously enrolled Keene State College students who have persisted to their senior year.

Summary

Despite the cost of college, the public still views attaining a degree as a valuable endeavor. Persistence is integral to degree completion. The purpose of this study was to identify the conditions that enabled Keene State College first semester seniors to persist. The researcher asked participants: why have you stayed?

Public post-secondary institutions face the challenges of recruiting students, providing adequate financial support for students, containing tuition costs, and maintaining conditions and a campus climate that are attractive to potential students and their families. By identifying those challenges, the realization that retention is as important as recruitment becomes readily apparent.

A single institution study by a researcher with long and close ties to the institution provides both limitations and advantages. Bias is a limitation that is addressed by the chosen research methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology and the recognition that the researcher assumed the identity of a scholarly practitioner, incorporating research within the foundation of her career.

Advantages to a single institution study serve to directly impact policy and practices at Keene State College to better support the endeavors of the campus community. Findings have the potential to improve retention rates and ultimately, graduation rates and to develop institutional knowledge about persistence. This study can

be replicated at other colleges and universities. The following literature review will strengthen the argument that this research is timely and important.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Conditions challenging persistence in college and degree completion exist. Global competition confronts the recognized status of higher education in the United States (House, 2012). The changing demands and characteristics of new college students require constant reassessment of pedagogy and success measures (Howe and Strauss, 2000, 2003). Ebbs and flows in state funding create unpredictable tuition costs and the propensity for high student debt load (Baum & Ma, 2014), yet the value and benefits of a college degree are undeniable (Reaping the Benefits, 1998). Expanding on the challenges, focusing on the research of persistence, and identifying general conditions that support retention and persistence will be examined in the literature that follows to inform the answer to the question of why continuously enrolled Keene State College students have persisted to their senior year.

Higher Education

History of Public Higher Education in New Hampshire

The value of higher education has long been recognized in the United States. Higher education and the importance of its public, democratic role was a topic Thomas Jefferson addressed in 1821 as a means to influence the nation's democratic values while preserving individual liberties (Reaping the Benefits, 1998). Harvard College (founded 1636), Yale (founded 1701), and the University of Georgia (founded 1785) were the first state-supported institutions of higher learning endorsing a strongly held public role.

The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 established the country's first land grant institutions to respond to a new industrial era to provide practical education to the industrial classes (Committee on Education and the Workforce, 1998). The University of New Hampshire was founded in 1866 (About UNH, 2014) as one of the earliest land grant colleges in the country. These institutions focused on teaching agriculture, science, and engineering (Land-grant Heritage, 2014).

In 1866 the University of New Hampshire was chartered as an independent body responsible for its own personnel, purchasing, design and construction, financial record keeping, and other administrative and support systems independent from the state (About USNH, 2014). Prior to 1963, its own Board of Trustees governed the University of New Hampshire. The State Board of Education governed the two Teacher's Colleges in New Hampshire, Keene State College and Plymouth State College (now Plymouth State University). The University System of New Hampshire (USNH) was the outcome to the charge of developing a plan to cope with an anticipated explosion in student enrollment in the state (About USNH, 2014).

In 1963 the New Hampshire legislature instructed the Trustees of the University of New Hampshire to extend what was once an autonomous functioning resource to the colleges of Keene State and Plymouth State. The president of the University of New Hampshire was assigned responsibility of leading and overseeing the merger. In 1974, recognizing the steadily increasing time the University of New Hampshire officers devoted to the growing system, the University System of New Hampshire separated from the University of New Hampshire with new staff officers and support personnel. The responsibility of overseeing the system was removed from the job description of the

University of New Hampshire president. The position of Chancellor of the University System of New Hampshire as chief executive academic officer and with the expectation of establishing campus president reporting lines was approved in 1974 and enacted in 1975 with the first University System of New Hampshire Chancellor, Dr. Bruce Poulton (About USNH, 2014)

High points of what has transpired in the University System of New Hampshire in the last thirty years include:

- 1975-1983: The School for Continuing Studies became the School of Lifelong Learning which became Granite State College within the Chancellor Reno years
- 1986-1992: Updated mission statements for each institution, decentralization of selected administrative functions in the areas of personnel, purchasing, construction, and financial control
- 2011: $4.84 million budget cut from the existing $100 million budget (in decline since 2009)
- 2011-2012: Proposal of House Bill 1692
- 2014: $3 million rescission from the system per Governor Hassan

(About USNH, 2014)

John Dewey, in 1916, argued that education plays a central moral role in the nation's well-being and must be supported (Wilshire, 1990). It was not until 1980, close to 340 years after the founding of Harvard College, when public support to higher education slowed that the private benefits of higher education began to dominate

discussions (Reaping the Benefits, 1998). The introduction of Barack Obama's College Scorecard highlights the importance of the public benefits of college attendance once again as America competes on an international scale with countries ranking higher in college completers. America has slipped from the top position of highest number of degree attaining 25-34 year olds in 1990 in the world to the 12th rank in recent years (College Scorecard, 2012). President Obama has set a goal that by 2020 the United States will regain the reputation of having the highest number of college graduates in the world. The steps to reach that goal will include discussions of the benefit of a college education from both public and private perspectives. Balancing the private economic benefits with the social, democratic, and civic gains of higher education will honor the intentions of forefathers and address the concerns of 2020.

Benefits of Completing a Degree

The impact of college attendance and degree completion is more than just the economic benefit that is most often touted. Astin (1977) identified factors that were attributed to degree completion in a longitudinal analysis. He found that long-term impacts included a more liberal political view, increased satisfaction with job, marriage, and life in general. College completers were found to have a greater level of general knowledge and held relatively high level jobs, making more money than non-completers.

The Institute for Higher Education Policy, the Ford Foundation, and the Education Resource Institute published *Reaping the Benefits-Defining the Public and Private Value of Going to College* in 1998 in an effort to familiarize a public that was becoming skeptical of the importance of a college degree in the light of ever-increasing costs (Reaping the Benefits, 1998). Using the 1998 Reaping the Benefits report as a

foundation the Institute for Higher Education Policy published The Investment Payoff, a 50 State Analysis of the Public and Private Benefits of Higher Education in 2004. This study condensed the 20 benefits cited in Reaping the Benefits (1998) to six including:

- Private economic benefits
    - Higher personal income
    - Lower unemployment
- Public economic benefits
    - Decreased reliance on public assistance
- Private social benefits
    - Better health
- Public social benefits
    - Increased volunteerism
    - Increased voting participation

(The Investment Payoff, 2004).

The study was published for several reasons. Unless the public and private benefits of a college degree were known, policy makers and the public would redirect funding to other priorities such as prisons and healthcare resulting in declines in state and federal support and the consequent rise in tuition for a college degree (Reaping the Benefits, 1998). Since the 1970s scrutiny of the value of higher education has increased and an accurate and complete outline of benefits, both public and private, is necessary in a climate that often views pursuing a higher education degree as an over-priced endeavor (Reaping the Benefits, 1998). Turnover in the legislative body of higher education policymakers requires a reminder of why continued funding and attention to higher

education is important. Understanding the continuum of benefits resulting from college completion is necessary (Reaping the Benefits, 1998).

In 2004, 21.8% of the population of New Hampshire age 25 or older held a bachelor's degree (The Investment Payoff, 2004). Between 2008 and 2012 that number rose to 33.4% (Census Bureau, 2008-2012). In every category identified by the Institute for Higher Education Policy, New Hampshire residents with a bachelor's degree fared better than their state mates with high school diplomas. (The Investment Payoff, 2004). Table 2 illustrates the advantages of obtaining a college degree for New Hampshire residents. Bachelor's degree attainment benefits the individual as seen by the 92.3% difference in potential annual earnings between a high school diploma holder and a baccalaureate degree holder. Obtaining a college degree also contributes to the public good as indicated by the difference in volunteerism and voting activity among high school degree holders and baccalaureate degree holders.

Table 2 *Public and private benefits of education in New Hampshire*

	High School Diploma	Baccalaureate Degree	% Difference between HS Diploma and Bac Degree
Personal Income	$27,585.00	$53,051.00	92.3%
Unemployment Rate	4.1%	1,8%	-55.5%
Received Public Assistance	0.4%	0.6%	24.9%
Health: good, very good, excellent	88.2%	94.2%	6.8%
Volunteerism	32.4%	45.9%	41.8%
Voting Activity	62.9%	85.4%	35.8%

(The Investment Payoff, 2004)

A recent report by the Center for Economic Advisers (2014) attributes an increasing number of college degree attainers to the benefits attributed to degree

completion. In 2013, 47% of 25-34 year olds had received a postsecondary degree. This is in part a response to decades of rising returns for college graduates and the income inequality between college-educated and less-educated individuals. A commitment to higher education is a response to a labor market that rewards more educated workers. A four-year degree yields approximately $570,000.00 more in lifetime earnings than a high school diploma alone, while a two-year degree earns $170,000.00 more (U.S. Treasury, 2014).

Though the value of a college education from both a public and private perspective was the focus of the study, the authors of Reaping the Benefits (1998) urged a close look at the tendency for the country to focus on the private economic benefits of a college degree. A shift away from the public and democratic purposes of higher education may endanger the continued health and vibrancy of higher education and the society it serves (Reaping the Benefits, 1998).

Diminished public support for higher education could have the following consequences:

- Growing social and economic disparities;
- Increasing public expenditures on social welfare programs;
- Inability to compete in an increasingly technological society;
- Stagnation or declining quality of living;
- Decreasing health and life expectancy; and
- Diminishing civic engagement and responsibility (Reaping the Benefits, 1998).

The benefits of a college degree are numerous within both private and public realms. Continued support of degree attainment benefits society as a whole.

The Cost of Higher Education in New Hampshire

House Bill 1692

House Bill 1692, passed and adopted by the New Hampshire House of Representatives on March 27, 2012, proposed to eliminate the office of the chancellor of the University System of New Hampshire and transfer all powers and duties of the chancellor to the Board of Trustees of the University System of New Hampshire. The bill proposed reducing the size of the system office from 71 employees to 12 (New Hampshire Business Review, 2/2/4/12) and folding the chancellor's office functions into the state treasurer's office (New Hampshire Public Radio, 3/12/12). The financial rationale in eliminating the chancellor's office identified a savings of $12 million a year in administrative costs. The savings would be better used in holding down tuition rates (New Hampshire Telegraph, 3/24/12). Opponents of the bill argued that the move could cost the state and schools $12.25 million in 2013 and the two years following as the colleges that comprise the University System hired people to do what was done in one place (Concord Monitor, 2/9/12).

Keene State Today (spring 2012) published a statement that responded to declining resources for higher education funding in the state of New Hampshire. "Dead last (again). For the third year running, fiscal years 2009-2012, New Hampshire ranks dead last in state support for higher education per $1000.00 of per capita income. The 2011-2012 figures: $1.39 per student, is less than half of Colorado, the 49th ranking state, and compares to a high of $11.29 per student in North Carolina. The national average is $5.62 per student". The burden of sustaining a public institution of higher education that is supported by declining state appropriations results in increased tuition rates. There are

two theories that account for rising tuition in public higher education. The "market power model" that proclaims that subsidies and grants to students increase demand which gives colleges more ability to raise tuition or the "spending constraint model" which argues that rising tuition is the obvious consequence of declining state appropriations" (Fethke, 2012).

Prior to the proposal of House Bill 1692 the University System of New Hampshire Board of Trustees recognized that in the rapidly changing world of higher education historical and once reliable systems needed rethinking. In his testimony on HB 1692 before the New Hampshire House of Representatives on January 25, 2012, the University of New Hampshire President Mark Huddleston stated:

> The world of higher education is changing dramatically. The traditional business model is broken. Public resources are constrained. Tuition costs are outstripping the ability of families to pay. Competition for students is increasing. New models of teaching and learning are rushing toward us. "Brain power" demands from our knowledge-driven economy are nearly overwhelming. In the new world of higher education, in order to fulfill their mission colleges and universities have to become far more nimble, flexible, innovative, and market-smart. Anything that creates inefficiency or resembles unnecessary bureaucracy will be lethal. (Huddleston, 2012).

According to the New Hampshire General Court bill status system and the official

docket of House Bill 1692 on May 23, 2012, close to six months after the bill was introduced on January 4, 2012, the State Senate refused to accede the request to make changes in the administration of the University System of New Hampshire. The bill originally introduced to the House Education committee apparently died in the Senate Finance committee (Defending NH Public Education, 2012).

The controversy around HB 1692 illustrates the relationship New Hampshire has with higher education. The state provides the least amount of money for support of higher education institutions and the attending students in the country. Subsequently, students in New Hampshire have the highest debt load among their peers in the United States (Douglas-Gabriel, 2014). For the state to entertain a bill deconstructing the system supporting higher education is not surprising and reinforces the importance of looking differently at higher education in New Hampshire. For this study that would be through the lens of persistence and retention.

New Hampshire Funding Now

The University System of New Hampshire has requested a state appropriation of $100 million in FY2016 to restore the state support at the level it was in FY2009 (Leach, 2014). A budget based on the current funding of $84 million with a 3% increase in FY 2017 would maintain the level of funding of more than a decade ago. The University System was committed to another two-year tuition freeze for in-state students following a similar commitment for FY 2014 and 2015 (Leach, 2014). That decision was rescinded for the 2015 academic year.

New Hampshire has struggled with higher education funding for years. The state is also the leader in the country in average debt load with an average per student of

$32,795.00 upon graduation with a default rate of 8.4%. This figure is 11% higher than the national average of $28,400.00. (Douglas-Gabriel, 2014). One of the reasons for high debt load is the level of need-based state grant aid. New Hampshire's Leveraged Incentive Grant Program awarded $540,000.00 in 2009-2010 but was not funded in the 2011 budget so it was not available in 2011-2012 or 2012-2013 academic years (McBain, 2011). Cutting need-based aid is dependent on the fiscal health of a state and the state's philosophy of how financial aid should be distributed. Total student outstanding loan debt surpassed $1 trillion by the end of the second quarter in 2014, making it the second largest category of household debt. In part, this increase is due to the Millennial generation (students born between 1982 – 2001) and to the changing composition of students, including a larger share of students from lower-income families who need to take out more loans. Other contributing factors include: rising tuition as state governments cut funding; parent's impaired ability to use the equity in their homes to offset some portion of their children's college costs; and the fact that students are taking longer to repay their loans.

Consistent with these factors, average real per borrower debt increased from $24,000.00 in 2004 to $30,000.00 in 2012 (Oreopoulis, von Wachter, & Heisz, 2012). Approximately 50% of students borrowed loans during the 2013-2014 school years, up from 30% in the mid-1990s (Goldman Sachs, 2014). Default rates on loan repayment appear to be concentrated among borrowers who do not graduate from a four-year institution and those attending for-profit institutions. Since borrowers may also receive lower returns to their educations from not completing or from attending for-profits, the burden of paying back their loans may present an even greater financial challenge

(Demming, Yutchman, Abulafi, Goldin & Katz, 2014). Despite the challenges the state of New Hampshire faces the value and benefit of a college degree are compelling. Even with limited funding and increased debt load evidence shows that New Hampshire residents benefit from a college degree (The Investment Payoff, 2004).

Recruitment or Retention?

During the academic year 1980-1981 appropriations from state and local governments comprised approximately 50% of the total revenue for public colleges and universities. By 1999-2000 one-third of public institutional revenues were provided by state and local governments (NCES, 2004). Revenues per FTE student from all government sources at public institutions decreased by 11 percent from 2007–08 to 2012–13 (from $15,237 to $13,520) (NCES, 2015). A decline in funding support requires colleges and universities to look closely at the costs related to recruiting a student and retaining a student (Astin, 1977).

The recruitment process is a cyclical one providing a clear beginning and a clear ending. Retention is a continuous process (Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012). The cost of recruiting a student is derived by dividing the number of newly enrolled students by the associated recruitment costs including salaries for admissions personnel as well as travel, telephone, printing, supplies, postage, advertising, and equipment (Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012).

Noel Levitz surveyed 221 colleges and universities (143 private, 56 public) to develop the cost of recruiting an undergraduate student in 2013 (Noel Levitz, 2013). Recruitment budgets for 2011-2012 to 2013-2014 have remained the same for one third of the private college responders, slightly more than one half of public four-year college

responders, and one fourth of public two year responders. Significant increases are noted in the number of recruited students on an admission counselor's (FTE) caseload (Noel Levitz, 2013).

A shift in demographics resulting in fewer graduating high school seniors has resulted in greater competition for fewer college applicants across the nation (Murnane, 2013; Turrentine, 2013). The change in high school graduates from 2008-2009 to 2018-2019 will be especially apparent in the Northeast (-9.4%) and the Midwest (-5.3%). Both the South (+10.9%) and the West (+1.0%) regions of the country will experience an overall increase of high school graduates (Knocking at the College Door, 2012). Competition among institutions for college age students has increased yet admission budgets for recruiting those students remains stagnant (Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012). The need to retain students to augment the discrepancy between what is available in recruitment dollars and the increasing effort it takes to recruit students becomes ever more important.

College Students

The Millennial Generation

General descriptors

A generation is defined by a specific time period and shared experiences (Elam, Stratton & Gibson, 2007). Characteristics of a generation evolve in a cyclical fashion filling a void left by their predecessors, accepting earlier ideas, rejecting others and creating their own (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Demographically, the Millennial Generation (born from 1982 – 2001) is more ethnically diverse than the Baby Boomers (born from 1945-1960) or Generation X (born from 1961-1981). Their families are smaller, parents

better educated and household income higher (Howe & Strauss, 2003; Bland, Melton, Welle & Bigham, 2012). Many Millennials came of age with the start of the recession in 2007 so important life decisions about educational and career plans were uncertain (Council of Economic Advisers, 2014). The Millennials are known as generous and practical multitaskers. Howe and Strauss (2000) identify seven descriptors of Millennials that include: special; sheltered; confident; conventional; team-oriented; achieving; and pressured. This study sample is focused on students in the Millennial Generation.

Millennial students are more likely to study social sciences or applied fields like communication, criminal justice, and library sciences (Council of Economic Advisers, 2014). There has been a significant decline in students majoring in education since the Baby Boomers were in college. The decrease is explained by a move away from education degrees by female students. Of the women graduating from college in the early 1970s 35% earned a degree in education but only 12% in 2011 (CEA, 2014). Business degrees have become more popular with women rising from 9% in 1970 to 16% in 2011 though there has been an overall drop in interest in baccalaureate business degrees (CEA, 2014). The number of Millennials studying science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields is slightly lower than that of past generations. Due to a larger population of college students the numbers of majors in STEM fields has increased though the expansion is slightly lower than other majors (CEA, 2014). The share of Millennials choosing computer and information science majors has fallen over time with a pronounced drop among women. In 1987, 2.9% of female graduates with a bachelor's degree received a degree in computer and information sciences (CIS) and comprised 36% of all majors in the discipline. In 2011 only 1.1% of women graduated with a degree in

CIS and females comprised only 18% of all CIS graduates. The number of males graduating with a CIS degree in that period fell but only slightly (CEA, 2014).

Technology and parents

Millennials have come of age in a world in which the frontiers of technology have appeared unlimited (Berkeley Data Science, 2005). Advances in computer processing power, along with widespread access to cellphones and the Internet, have changed how Millennials communicate and interact with one another. Three quarters of Millennials have an account on a social networking site, compared with only half of Generation Xers and less than a third of Baby Boomers (Taylor & Keeter, 2010).

The role of parents in the lives of Millennials is strengthened by constant connection and is evidenced as both a positive and a negative. This is the first generation to also have tech savvy parents who participate in texting and online chat conversations throughout their day (Levine and Dean, 2012). Junco and Mastrodicaso (2007) found students reported speaking with parents on an average of one and one-half times per day with students initiating 57.6% of the calls. Top conversation topics included checking in (82%), academic success (75.7%), and social life (66.5%). Close parental relationships are acknowledged by Millennials and, as high school students, roughly half say that it is important to them to live close to their friends and family compared to 29% of Baby Boomers and 40% of Generation Xers (CEA, 2014). Parental influence may strengthen the characteristics of being special and sheltered that Howe and Strauss (2000) have identified in their literature.

Transition issues

Much, Wagener, Breikreutz, and Hellenbrand (2014) explored issues that traditional undergraduate students of the Millennial generation experience as they transition to college as perceived by university staff. Three distinct categories with corresponding themes emerged. Professional staff who were interviewed identified category 1 as the student perception of being exempt from following rules. Within this category the repeating themes of "I am the exception to the rules" and "I abide by my own conduct code" emerged (Much, et al. 2014). The authors attributed this feeling of exemption to the over-accommodating tendency of parents and the reminder that their children are special (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Category 2 was passivity to approaching problems and the two outstanding themes were a tendency to blame and the idea that if problems are ignored they might go away (Much, et al, 2014). The authors attribute these tendencies to parents who rescue and inhibit students from acquiring the skills to recognize and solve their own problems. Category 3 was dependence on others for problem solving with the related theme of parental involvement and the expectation that problems will be solved by others (Much, et al, 2014).

Much et al (2014) credited the findings of their study to the fact that Millennial students are raised in protected environments with a high level of parent interaction. Leaving the sheltered environment of home and transitioning to college can result in the feeling of pressure characteristic of current college students (Howe and Strauss, 2000). For the Millennials stress is caused not only by leaving the sheltered environment of home but by beginning the college selection and entrance process with the start of a

recession in 2007 (CEA, 2014). The discomfort of leaving home and the uncertainty of the future creates a stressful environment. In addition, with technology and instant contact (Junco & Mastrodicaso, 2007) the world is at the fingertips of the Millennials. They are resilient but simultaneously overloaded and stressed out with the worries of the world (Bland, Melton, Welle & Bigham, 2012).

Stress tolerance

Bland, Melton, Welle, and Bigham (2012) studied the stress tolerance level among Millennial college students. The study measured the relationship between certain lifestyle habits, coping strategies, and stress tolerance. Results were categorized to identify top stressful life events and daily hassles and the top coping mechanisms to handle the stress (Bland, Melton, Welle & Bigham, 2012). Top stressful life events included pressure to do well in school and parental expectations, change in living conditions, beginning college, and identifying a major career choice. The top four daily hassles included tests, procrastination, text messaging, and lack of sleep (Bland, Melton, Welle & Bigham, 2012). These results portray a population still trying to please parents and busy with meeting academic requirements. They also reflect on the predominately freshmen population of the study. It is not until the authors look at stress coping mechanisms that the results transcend entering college students and address the needs of all college students (Bland, Melton, Welle & Bigham, 2012).

Frequent reported methods to cope with stress included listening to music, sleep, engaging in social interaction, and relaxing. Also included was surfing the Internet, participating in Internet social networks, calling mom, and prayer (Bland, Melton, Welle & Bigham, 2012). The study initially identified students with a high ability for stress

tolerance and those with a low ability for stress tolerance. The authors (2012) found students with differing tolerance levels employ coping methods differently. The majority of students employ strategies that put them at greater risk for stress. A significant protector from stress and one that will increase tolerance is feeling supported by family, friends, and teachers. Social support may provide the foundation for developing high stress tolerance in Millennial students (Bland, Melton, Welle & Bigham, 2012). Those methods seen as reliance on external coping sources or avoidant coping strategies, the authors (2012) attribute to lower stress tolerance levels. Encouraging students to make their own decisions without the intervention of parents and school officials is a way for students to increase their stress tolerance ratio (Bland, Melton, Welle & Bigham, 2012; Much et al, 2014; Junco & Mastrodicaso, 2007). The balance of a supportive network with the freedom to take individual and independent actions appears to set the stage for thriving and persistence. Are those conditions evident at Keene State College and will they be important factors in the persistence of students?

Keene State College

Mission

Keene State College is branded as the public liberal arts college of New Hampshire. The mission of the college is to prepare promising students to think critically and creatively, to engage in active citizenship, and to pursue meaningful work. The liberal arts mission is dedicated to the development of knowledge and skills necessary for students to meet the challenges of the changing world (Keene State College Mission and Values, 2014).

As a public institution, Keene State provides educational opportunities for all qualified students and continues its heritage of service to New Hampshire and the New England region. Inspired by the College motto "Enter to Learn – Go Forth to Serve," Keene State College focuses on rigorous academic programs and a tradition of small classes, faculty-student research and creative projects, and community service. (Keene State College Portrait, 2013-2014). In fall 2013, the College enrolled 5,516 students including 4,648 undergraduate students, 85 graduate students, and 783 continuing education students. Half of the College's student population comes from out-of-state, with representation from 27 states plus the District of Columbia as well as 10 foreign countries. The student-faculty ratio at Keene State College is 17:1, and the school has 57 percent of its classes with fewer than 20 students. The most popular majors at Keene State College are education, safety and occupational health, psychology, health science, nursing, management, film studies, English, and communication (Keene State College Portrait, 2013-2014).

Keene State College is a member of the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC). Founded in 1987, COPLAC recognizes the importance of a liberal arts and sciences education for success in a complex world. The organization consists of 28 colleges and universities in 26 states and one Canadian province providing members a benchmark for excellence and a collegial structure for discourse (COPLAC, 2014).

Funding

Like all colleges in the University System of New Hampshire, Keene State College pledged a second two-year commitment to freeze in-state tuition (Leach, 2014). With the recently announced $18 million in budget cuts, with $3 million of the total from

the University System of New Hampshire, the continued commitment to the in-state tuition freeze was rescinded (Rogers, 11/24/14).

In of May 2014 Keene State College successfully recruited the largest entering class in a six-year period at 1282 students. This number was higher than predicted based on projections of declining high school graduates and deposits as of May 13, 2014 (Kahn & House, 2014). The total financial full-time enrollment (FFTE) was 4,818, which was 41 students above the AY14 projection but 80 students lower than the AY13 final number. Non-resident tuition accounts for 65.2% of matriculated tuition amount and 35.2% of all fund revenue. 78% of the FY15 revenue budget is primarily student driven (Kahn & House, 2014).

The dependency on a student driven budget makes retention a priority. Reorganization in administration in 2014 and the appointment of new Vice President of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management was a strategic move to create a focus on maximizing enrollment management efforts. The VPSA-EM hired a new position, Associate Vice President of Enrollment Management, to formalize a strategic plan around enrollment management for the college (Kahn & House, 2014).

Keene State College received 6,484 applications for the fall, 2014 semester. 5,096 students were admitted and 1,266 enrolled (Common Data Set, 2014). The retention rate of the college is 77% (Common Data Set, 2014). The average whole cohort first to second year retention rate for Keene State College's official peer institutions is 85%, and has remained at that level for many years (Key Strategic Planning Assumptions, 2011). The Keene State President Dr. Anne Huot would like to reach that rate. Habley, Bloom, and Robbins (2012) urge the importance of looking at the unique

characteristics of a student body rather than general comparator statistics in creating retention strategies for a college or university.

Keene State College Students

Common data sets

The Common Data Set (CDS) is a joint effort by the higher education community and publishers including the College Board, Peterson's, U.S. News and World Report and others to establish and develop clear standard definitions on the data items used in educational research (Petersons, 1998). CDS is an important initiative to improve the comparability of data reported by colleges and to assist colleges and universities to ask survey questions in a standard way. The Common Data Set for 2014-2015 builds a demographic picture of Keene State College students. Statistics were compiled on October 15, 2014 which reflects an R + 30 image of the college population (registration plus 30 class days into the semester). This snapshot allows for the settling that occurs within the first month a college's academic semester accounting for students who enroll and do not show up or those who withdraw from the college in the early days of the semester. Higher education enrollment data is fluid. According to Keene State College Dean of Students, Dr. Gail Zimmerman, withdraws, conduct expulsions and suspensions will impact enrollment data. Diminished care leave, and leaves of absence for personal or financial reasons will impact the semester head count but since students remain matriculated under these circumstances they are still considered enrolled by the college (personal communication, 12/1/14).

The total Keene State College student count, as of October 15, 2014, was 4957. This number included 4,841 undergraduate and 116 graduate students. 4,619 students

were fulltime and enrolled in 12 or more credits and 338 students were part-time. Of the 4,841 full-time undergraduates both full-time and part-time 2,100 were male and 2,741 were female. Two students identified as non-resident aliens; 54 as Hispanic/Latino; 49 as Black or non-Hispanic; 4051 as White/non-Hispanic; 11 as American Indian; 56 as Asian; 2 as Native Hawaiian; 96 as two or more races/non-Hispanic; an 420 students reported a race or ethnicity as unknown (Common Data Set, 2014).

Admission decisions are based on an open admission policy for most students which is defined as virtually all secondary school graduates or students with a Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED) are admitted without regard to academic record, test scores, or other qualifications (Common Data Set, 2014). Some selectivity of admission is applied for out-of-state students. According to Peg Richmond, Director of Admissions at Keene State College, the college is considered a traditional college in the selectivity criteria identifying SAT scores of 1290-1650, and the top 50% of the high school class. Keene State does not apply different criteria to out-of-state applicants (personal communication, 12/8/2014; National Collegiate Retention and Persistence to Degree Rates, 2014). This identification differs from the language used in the Common Data Set.

Comparative Common Data Set for the current Keene State College student population (2014-2015: sophomore; 2013-2014: juniors; 2012-2013: seniors) indicates noteworthy changes in cumulative high school grade point average, SAT scores, and high school class rank percentages. An increase in out-of-state students is also noted. The retention rates for each of the current classes recorded were: 2013-2014: 77%; 2012-2013: 76%; 2011-2012: 76%; and 2010-2011: 79% (Common Data Sets, 2014, 2013,

2012, 2011). Table 3 examines how the academic profiles of Keene State College students have changed in the last four years indicating a decline in the important academic markers of high school grade point average, SAT scores, and high school rank. Retention rates have remained stable or risen slightly.

The purpose of this study is to identify the conditions that have enabled Keene State College first semester seniors to persist. Of particular interest in Table 3 are the SAT scores, high school rank, and average high school grade point average of the incoming 2012 cohort indicating a higher level of academic performance than their successors. These will be interesting indicators to note during interviews with study participants in regard to academic rigor and persistence.

Table 3 *Comparative common data for Keene State College incoming cohorts 2011-2014*

	Current Sophomores 2014-2015	**Current Juniors 2013-2014**	**Current Seniors 2012-2013**
SATs 500-599	**36%**	**36%**	**38%**
SATs 400-499	**46%**	**48%**	**43%**
Top Half H.S Graduating Class	**54%**	**56%**	**60%**
Bottom Half H.S.Graduating Class	**46%**	**44%**	**40%**
Average H.S GPA	**2.95**	**2.92**	**2.98**
As freshmen, Fulltime men enrolled	**546**	**509**	**480**
As freshmen, Fulltime women enrolled	**721**	**745**	**706**
Out-of-state (total enrolled academic year)	**54%**	**51%**	**50%**
% students residing on campus (total enrolled academic year)	**57%**	**55%**	**54%**
% students residing off campus (total enrolled academic year)	**43%**	**45%**	**46%**
# of students awarded aid	**893**	**864**	**867**
# of students receiving scholarships	**488**	**392**	**244**
Average debt upon graduation	**$33,796.00**	**$33,402.00**	**$33,248.00**

(Common Data Sets, 2014, 2013, 2012, 2011)

Involvement

In addition to data available through the office of Institutional Research, Keene State College students are described from information provided by campus program directors and coordinators. In the 2013-2014 academic year 375 students played on Keene State's Division Three athletic teams; 214 students (145 men and 69 women) participated in intramural sports; approximately 1700 students were involved in 132 clubs and organizations with 400 of the 1700 students holding Executive Board positions; and 327 first year students were involved in nine Residential Life theme parliaments (personal communication John Ratliff, Athletic Director, 12/4/2014; Lynne Andrews, Director of Recreational Sports, 12/10/2014; Jennifer Ferrell, Director of Involvement, 12/8/2014; Casey Wilson Coordinator First Year Residential Experience, 12/4/2014). These numbers provide insight on the opportunities provided by Keene State for engagement and the level of involvement experienced by the students.

Of the 4,841 currently enrolled students 3,153 have declared an academic major. In the fall of 2013 755 students attended drop in course registration advising and 958 students attended in fall, 2014. For the past three semesters (fall, 2013; spring, 2014, fall, 2014) 907 students have attended Career and Internship Fairs meeting with an average of 56 different employer groups at each event (personal communication Elizabeth Nieckoski, Information Technologist Registrar's office, 12/4/2014; Carol Clark, Senior Program Assistant, Academic and Career Advising, 12/4/2014). In April, 2014 181 students participated in the Academic Excellence Conference and 702 students were members of 25 honors societies. In the 2013-2014 academic year, 138 peer tutors in the Aspire Program received 932 tutor requests, the Math Center employed 23 student tutors

and recorded 2,917 visits to the center and the Center for Writing's 15 peer tutors managed 1,656 requests for assistance (personal communication Donna Hinds, Academic Program Services Assistant, 12/5/2014; Katie Robinson, Educational Program, Coordinator, Aspire program, 12/4/2014; Eileen Phillips, Director, Math Center, 12/4/2014; Phyllis Benay, Director Center for Writing, 12/4/2014). If the information in Table 3 identifies the need for more support services to maintain retention rates for a lower academic performing population then Keene State College is not only providing services but students are accessing them.

In the 2013-2014 academic year, 1,261 students were employed on campus and the Dining Commons served 1,026,325 meals averaging 3,500 visits per week. The Counseling Center scheduled over 3,000 appointments and the Center for Health and Wellness estimated 333 visits per week in the 2013-2014 academic year. The Center for Health and Wellness has noted a 20% increase in appointments in fall 2014 (personal communication Karen Crawford, Assistant Director, Human Resources 12/5/2014; Josef Quirinale, General Manager, Zorn Dining Commons, 12/4/2014; Mona Anderson, Assistant Director, Counseling Center, 12/5/2014; Christine Burke, Director, Center for Health and Wellness, 12/4/2014). The Study Away program provided opportunities for travel to 184 Keene State College in the 2013-2014 academic year and 434 students logged 10,198 service hours with 43 organizations locally, nationally, and abroad (personal communication Skye Stephenson, Director Study Away Program 12/15/14; Jessica Gagne Cloutier, Coordinator of Community Service, 12/15/14). This data illustrates not only opportunities to become engaged at Keene State College (Kuh, 2005) but are indicative of students who are involved (Astin, 1977, 1993). Persistence is

influenced by engagement, involvement, and integration (Wolf-Wendel, Ward & Kinzie, 2009). This study will determine if any of these factors have contributed to the persistence of continuously enrolled Keene State College students.

Entering cohort, 2012

The purpose of this study is to identify the conditions that have enabled Keene State College first semester seniors to persist. The current enrolled senior class at Keene State College entered as the 2012 cohort with a headcount of 1186 students. This class was the smallest incoming class since 2010 and remains the smallest class as of 2014. In-state students numbered 502 students and 680 students were out-of-state. The combined average SAT scores were 1467, lower than the preceding two cohorts and higher than the two classes to follow. The national average was 1498 (Factbook, 2014). 40% of the 2012 cohort was male and 60% female. Of the entering class 440 or 37% was first generation, the lowest percentage in two years preceding and the two years following the 2012 cohort by at least 4 % (Common Data Sets, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014). Table 4 outlines enrollment data for the 2012 cohort (current seniors). The retention rate from first year to second year for the 2012 cohort was 76.4% and the retention rate from first to third year is 67.5%. This is slightly higher than Turrentine's general predictions of Keene State College retention rates of 65% from first to third year (Turrentine, 2011). Determining reasons for persistence of this cohort will be informative in relation to numbers that paint a slightly higher than predicted picture of attrition. Table 4 provides numbers while this study will provide stories of why members of this cohort have persisted.

Table 4 *Enrollment data for the 2012 cohort*

Semester and Year	Enrollment	Retention Percentage
Fall, 2012	1186	
Fall, 2013	1000	76.4%
Fall, 2014	945	67.5%
Fall, 2015	889	62.8%

(Factbook, 2015)

According to the Factbook (2014) 281 of the current senior class entered the college with an intended academic program in arts and humanities; 444 in professional studies; 396 in sciences and social sciences, and 278 as undecided. Several education majors chose two academic areas (1399/1186). In the 2014-2015 academic year 228 of this cohort lived on campus and 717 live off. An in-state 2012 student paid $11,800.00 in tuition and fees. In the fall of 2014 the student paid $12,776.00. An out-of-state member of the 2012 cohort paid $19,260.00 in tuition and fees in fall 2012 and $20,161.00 in fall 2014. Room and board in fall 2012 was $8,530.00 and in fall 2014 $9,008.00 (Factbook, 2014). Insight into who the study sample for this research is provided a foundation from which stories could be told and reasons for persistence identified.

The Keene Pumpkin Festival

Enrollment management is a combination of recruitment and retention. Keene State College has experienced success in recruitment efforts for many years hitting a target number consistently (Factbook, 2014). Retention of Keene State students has been important but has now become critical as the institution faces a significant shortfall for the incoming 2015 fall class (Admission Trends, 2015) due in part to a series of events including the highly publicized Pumpkin Festival Riots.

The Keene Pumpkin Festival, an annual event that is a point of pride for the city of Keene, was held Friday through Sunday, October 18-20, 2014. In 2013 the festival set a world record of 30,581 carved and lighted jack-o-lanterns. Large parties have become frequent events most every weekend in Keene and in recent years the Pumpkin Festival has attracted revelers from other local colleges and beyond (Edes, Fox, & Kanno-Young, 2014).

Police were monitoring a large party on Saturday afternoon, October 19, 2014 when attendees began throwing bottles and other objects injuring individuals. Before the night was over a thousand students, many from Keene State College as well as the University of New Hampshire, the University of Rhode Island, and the University of Massachusetts, ripped out street signs, over-turned a car, damaged home property, began small fires and took to the streets where they were met by police in riot gear (Edes, Fox, & Kanno-Young, 2014). Police made 84 arrests during the weekend of the riots. An additional 16 were arrested after the riots-nine from Keene State College. Keene State disciplined 170 students for 235 violations. 39 students were put on probation, 18 were fined, 14 must pay restitution, nine were suspended, and two were expelled. Lower level sanctions resulted in official warnings, educational sanctions, and restrictions (Nilsen, 2014).

The Pumpkin Fest Riots and Mayhem made local, national, and international news. A statement from Keene State College president Anne Huot on Sunday, October 19, 2014 reported that the city and campus were calm and safe. She reported the close alliance the college would establish with the city to help repair damages and find long-term solutions (Huot, 2014). Students not only want to feel safe but must feel safe in

order to succeed in college where belonging and self-confidence are critical (Maslow, 1943; McLeod, 2007).

A crisis on a college campus could lead prospective students and families to reconsider their decision to apply or attend. Factors such as media coverage, the timing of the crisis, and the nature of the crisis all contribute to the decision of applicants (Kelsay, 2007). An event like the Pumpkin Riots followed extensively by the media, occurring at the height of recruitment season in October, and threatening the safety of Keene State students had an impact on applications for the fall 2015 incoming class. On December 8, 2014 Keene State College Admissions had received 2,517 applications. One-year prior the college had received 2,740 applications and on 12/8/2012 2,688 applications (Admission's Daily Trends, 2014).

Immediately after the riots, on Sunday October 20, 2014 several hundred Keene State students started cleaning up the city, apologizing to residents, and talking about their shame, anger, and confusion (Fox and Smith, 2014). On Monday October 21, 2014 over 900 students and 100 faculty and staff held an all-campus meeting to begin the healing process and discuss moving forward. President Huot encouraged the students to be the catalyst for meaningful change (Huot, 2014). On December 2, 2014 the college and community came together to discuss next steps. Advocates for continuing Keene's annual Pumpkin Festival said the loss of revenue to local businesses and non-profits would be devastating but others supported ending the festival for fear riots would occur again (Plenda, 2014; Shanahan, 2014). On December 6, 2014 a group of 20 Keene State College students redefined the riot by carrying signs that said **R**espectful **I**ntelligent **O**wls

Together and We Are Keene. The students delivered cookies and apologies to local businesses and first responders (Coogan, 2014).

Anna Glassman (2014), a reporter for the Keene State College student newspaper, the Equinox, wrote in the Thursday, October 23, 2014 edition:

> Many Keene State College students long to show the community and country that they are not defined by flawed representations strangers place on the entire student body. We must eliminate the distorted view of the Keene State College community as a whole. We have been labeled and scorned by strangers. Let's show them the true passion of a Keene State College Owl (Glassman, 2014).

Student Kathleen Langlands was quoted, "I know what we truly are and that' what matters to me" (Glassman, 2014). The event illustrates the tension between efforts to recruit new students when conditions are less than ideal and the necessity to retain those students currently enrolled.

Persistence

Definitions

Someone who persists is defined as a person who goes on resolutely or stubbornly despite opposition, inopportunity, or wanting or one who continues firmly or obstinately (Merriam Webster Online Dictionary, 2014). Persistence, in postsecondary education, defines a student who enrolls full-time, continuously, pursuing a degree with the expectation of completion within four to six years (Astin, 1977; Hagedorn, 2005; Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012).

The Integrated Post-Secondary Education System (IPEDS) is a system of surveys that are conducted annually by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Data is gathered from every college, university, and technical or vocational institution that provides federal financial aid. The data is used to describe and analyze trends in United States postsecondary education (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems, 2014). Persistence is defined by the graduation rates of students who enroll in an institution and complete a degree from that institution within six years (Institutional Retention and Graduation Rates for Undergraduate Students, 2014). Among first-time, full-time undergraduate students who enrolled in 2006, the six-year graduation rate was 57% at public institutions, 66% at private nonprofit institutions, and 32% at private for-profit institutions. Levels of institutional selectivity further defined data (Institutional Retention and Graduation Rates for Undergraduate Students, 2014).

The American College Testing Program (ACT) corroborates the IPED definition of persistence as the percentage of students completing a degree within a designated time at the same institution based on year of enrollment (ACT Institutional Data, 2014). Variables for accurate reporting include level of selectivity based on ACT or SAT scores and admission from a specific percentile of graduating high school class (National Collegiate Retention and Persistence to Degree Rates, 2014). Table 5 defines how college selectivity ratings are determined and Table 6 reports subsequent graduation rates based on selectivity ratings. According to the Common Data Set (2012) Keene State College is defined as having “an open admission policy but selective admission for out-of-state students and some programs” (p 7). Peg Richmond, Director of Admissions at Keene State College, considers the college traditional in the selectivity criteria identifying

SAT scores of 1290-1650, and the top 50% of the high school class. Keene State College's average SAT scores concur with the data in Table 5 but the four-year graduation rate at Keene State is 53% (Factbook, 2014) contradicting the data in Table 6 for colleges with a traditional or open selectivity rating. Knowing why students persist is not only important for enrollment management but also to provide the conditions that will enable students to complete a degree as soon as possible. Factoring into a longer time to degree completion is a student's accruement of financial debt. Minimizing a student's debt load is not only of benefit to the individual but to the public (The Investment Payoff, 2004). A study of persistence at an institution with an open or traditional selectivity rating will address these concerns.

Table 5 *Variables contributing to institutional selectivity ratings*

Selectivity Level	ACT (Middle 50%)	SAT (Middle 50%)	Definition
Highly Selective	25-30	1710-2000	Top 10% of H.S. Class
Selective	21-26	1470-1770	Top 25% of H.S. Class
Traditional	18-24	1290-1650	Top 50% of H.S. Class
Liberal	17-22	1230-1480	Bottom 50% of H.S. Class
Open	16-21	1170-1480	H.S Diploma or Equivalent

(National Collegiate Retention and Persistence to Degree Rates, 2014).

Table 6 *Time to degree completion based on selectivity*

	Four Years	Five Years	Six Years
Selective	51.3%	62.9%	65.8%
Traditional	22.5%	36.0%	40.6%

(National Collegiate Retention and Persistence Rates, 2014)

ACT defines retention as the percent of first time/full-time students who first enroll in the fall semester and are also enrolled the following fall at the same institution (National Collegiate Retention and Persistence Rates, 2014). It is important to note that the retention rate is a short term measure that covers only one year and is not adjusted for students who may leave a college after the first year and before graduation (Hagedorn, 2005). Table 7 reports the average retention rates within a public baccalaureate granting institution categorized as either selective or traditional between fall 2012 and fall 2013. The retention rate of Keene State College, an open or traditional public institution, was 76.4% for the same time period exceeding both general and public institutions in Table 7 (Factbook, 2014).

Table 7 *Retention rates for post-secondary educational institutions based on selectivity*

General Public Institutions	64.2%
Selective Public Institutions	83.5%
Traditional Public Institutions	68.7%

(National Collegiate Retention and Persistence Rates, 2014).

The definitions of higher education persistence (degree completion) and retention are shared by higher education statistic reporting agencies including the College Portrait,

a program created as part of the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) in an effort to provide greater transparency and accountability to individuals researching colleges. Over 300 public and private colleges participate in the organization (College Portrait, 2014). The College Board, in an effort to collect and analyze data identifying the institutional impact on persistence and retention, uses a similar definition (How Colleges Organize Themselves to Increase Student Persistence: Four Year Institutions, 2009). For the purpose of this study, persistence is defined as a student, with no post-matriculation earned credits from another institution, who enrolls full-time and continuously at Keene State College pursuing a degree with the expectation of completing that degree within four to six years.

Central to Tinto's early research on retention was the concept of integration which included interaction between the students and the institution (Tinto, 2006). Early work on student retention ushered in the age of involvement as defined by among others A.W. Astin (1977). Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt and Associates (2005) studied 20 effective higher education institutions and incorporated the concept of engagement and high impact practices offered by the institutions to assure student connection. Involvement, integration, and engagement are all terms that are related to student persistence. Involvement is student related. It is the student who becomes involved and there are variables that result in involvement. Integration is a relationship between the student and the campus. Engagement speaks to an environment created by a campus to provide opportunities (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). Student persistence is a result of all three.

In discussing academic progress for college students the terms persistence and retention are often used interchangeably. The National Center for Education Statistics (2003) differentiates the terms by using retention as an institutional measure and persistence as student measure; the institution retains and the student persists. Habley, Bloom and Robbins (2012) define retention as "a cumulative process beginning at the point of first enrollment and continuing until students achieve their educational goals" (p. 92). The absence of continuous enrollment and the specificity of degree completion is what distinguish persistence from retention. Retention is measured by whether a student stayed or left (Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012).

Considerable energy in the higher education community has resulted in an expanded understanding of persistence, degree completion, and retention but this understanding has not resulted in a concomitant improvement in student success in college (Habley, et al, 2012). Habley, Bloom and Robbins (2012) note that retention outcomes and predictions have not changed in forty years. Tinto (1982) concurs by referring to a 45 % departure rate that persisted throughout the 1900s. Speculation on why outcomes and rates of retention and persistence have not changed loops back to the variables of attrition and connection that have been consistently studied through the decades:

- student background variables
- interaction by students within the institution
- the influence of environmental variables (finances, family support)
- the presence of attitudinal variables (a subjective evaluation of perceived quality and self-satisfaction with the institution)

- student intention

(Bean, 1980; Metz, 2002).

These factors address the student and overlook the impact the institution has on student persistence. These components are largely the fabric of a college student's life and despite the societal changes that have transpired in forty years the impact of these components on a college student's progression and retention remain unchanged (Astin, 1977; Tinto, 1987; Kuh et al., 2005, Habley, et al, 2012).

Persistence and Departure

Research on persistence is often tied with other definitions relevant to the topic of student progression in college. The terms student departure, attrition, student persistence, and student retention are different dimensions of the same issue. Departure refers to decisions made by students to voluntarily leave their college or university. In contrast, student persistence and student retention refer to the enrollment of students (Braxton, Brier & Steele, 2007). In Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure (1987) persistence is the inverse of a student's departure from college however Tinto cautions that leaving is not the mirror image of staying. Knowing why students leave does not always tell institutions what they can do to help students stay (Tinto, 2006).

Though Habley et al (2012) focus on the factors that contribute to persistence their view of student success questions who benefits from degree completion; the institution or the student? The authors are strong student advocates and define student success as achieving educational goals regardless of the institution where those goals are attained or how many colleges were attended or in what time it takes to complete an individual educational goal (Stratton, O'Toole, & Wetzel, 2006; Habley, et al, 2012).

This position is counter to the importance of the continuous enrollment criteria of this study that may determine that a sense of place is an important factor for persistence. The significance of continuous enrollment reflects Kuh et al's (2005) study of Documenting Effective Educational Practices (DEEP) schools and the effort made by the institutions noted to develop, in students, a strong attachment to campus as a powerful sense of place that becomes part of their identity. Durrell (1969) states that the important determinant of any culture is the spirit of the place. Jiven and Larkham (2003) say that a group identity is closely linked with the form and history of place. Individuals and society integrate through their value systems to form a sense of place.

The research of Astin (1977, 1993) on involvement and what matters in college, Tinto (1987, 1993, 1999, 2003, 2006) on integration and Kuh (1991, 2000. 2003, 2005) on engagement identify factors that contribute to answering the question of why students persist. Bean's (1981) synthesis of many attrition theories touches upon the three domains of involvement, integration, and engagement to provide a blueprint for student progression.

Involvement

Student involvement is defined as the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student devotes to the academic experience (Astin, 1977). Involvement is further defined as what a student does or how he or she behaves not necessarily what a student thinks or feels (Astin, 1977). For the purpose of this study involvement will refer to those components of college life the student is actively tied or connected to.

Astin (1977) identified the importance of involvement including research, honors programs, academics, social activities, athletics, Greek Life, and student government.

Student-faculty interaction has a stronger relationship to student satisfaction with the college experience than any other involvement variable. Student satisfaction with an institution measures the student's satisfaction with the total undergraduate experience as well as specific aspects of that experience ranging from relationships with faculty, curriculum and instruction, student life, individual support services, and facilities (Astin, 1993). Student satisfaction is often determined by asking the question "if you had the opportunity would you re-enroll in this college?" Astin (1993) determined that a direct association existed between student satisfaction in college and retention.

If involvement factors, especially interactions with faculty, contribute to student satisfaction then involvement in the institution positively adds to retention. In turn, a student's academic and personal development can be enhanced by expansive involvement (Astin, 1993). Academic and personal development aligns with Habley et al's (2012) prioritization of academic performance and the dimensions that create academic performance as an indicator of persistence.

Integration

Integration is defined along two dimensions; the academic and the social. Academic integration occurs when a student becomes attached to the intellectual life of the college. Social integration occurs when students create relationships and connections outside of the classroom (Tinto, 1993). For the purposes of this study integration occurs when a student's curricular or academic life intersects with their co-curricular or social life.

Spady (1970) developed a sociological model for the drop-out process that looked at the departure process from an interdisciplinary approach involving a student's

interaction with the college environment. The student's personal attributes are exposed to the institutional influences, expectations, and demands. When successful integration occurs normative congruence results (Spady, 1970). Normative congruence is defined as a fit between a student's academic life and their personal domain. The two spheres intersect to create meaning for the individual. Spady (1970) associated college progression with intellectual development and friendship support.

Vincent Tinto (1993) identifies three major sources of student departure: academic difficulties; the inability of individuals to resolve their educational and occupational goals; and their failure to become incorporated in the intellectual and social life of the institution. Tinto's "Model of Institutional Departure" (1975) refined and expanded Spady's (1970, 1971) models stating that, to persist, students need to integrate into the formal (academic performance) and informal (faculty and staff interaction) academic systems and the formal (extra-curricular activities) and the informal (peer-group interactions) social systems. Though Tinto (2006) cautions that the reasons a student leaves an institution may not be the same reasons a student would remain at that institution knowledge of attrition factors can serve to inform persistence work just as looking at the inverse of departure to inform retention efforts (Tinto, 1987). Both persistence and departure data serve as a barometer of the social and intellectual health of the institutional life as much as the experience of the students within the institutions (Tinto, 1987).

Persistence is seen as a series of passages as the student becomes incorporated in a new community. These passages include separation, transition, and incorporation (Tinto, 1987). Experiences are designed to integrate the individual into the social and

intellectual life of the institution. The more integrative or satisfying an experience is, the greater the likelihood of persistence. If there is a lack of integration as evidence by incongruence, isolation, or a lack of interaction a student is more likely to attrit (Tinto, 1987). Tinto (1987) identifies lack of sufficient contact as the top reason a student leaves college. This corroborates with Astin's (1993) research on the importance of student-faculty interactions.

Orientation programs are the beginning of integration. Programs are designed to introduce new students to the academic life through interactions with faculty and to the social life by offering a residential overnight and a preliminary introduction to all the institution has to offer through co-curricular opportunities. Information should include formal and informal (social and intellectual communities) and personal contacts. Orientation provides the opportunity to develop important personal linkages that are the basis of the eventual incorporation into the social and intellectual life of the institution (Tinto, 1987). Astin (1993) would suggest that orientation is where formalized student-faculty involvement begins. Integration assumes that the institution is not separate from the student and both the institution and the student demonstrate a level of commitment to persistence (Tinto, 1987). Institutions should provide a full range of experiences as multiple ways to retain students. The primary commitment of the institutions should be to their students (Tinto, 1987). If integration is integral to persistence, then Orientation Programs are the first step in developing conditions that encourage persistence.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1979) questioned the strength of both pre-enrollment variables and post-matriculation conditions to conclude that what happens during the freshman year may be more important than particular commitments, background

characteristics, aspirations, or aptitudes which a student brings to college. This is consistent with earlier research and leads into George Kuh's extensive research on engagement (Kuh, 2003; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 2005). Kuh et al (2005) concludes what happens in college is what matters.

Engagement

"Engagement is defined as the time and energy that students devote to educationally sound activities inside and outside of the classroom and the policies and practices that institutions use to induce students to take part in these activities" (Kuh, 2003, p. 25). For the purpose of this study engagement will be the practices Keene State College has incorporated to promote learning inside and outside of the classroom.

Contributing to academic performance is academic preparation and motivation. The best way to increase the number of successful students would be to admit only those with the best academic preparation and the highest level of motivation (Kuh et al, 2005). Demographics and evidence of who is attending college paints a different picture. Kuh (2005) finds that what students do during college counts more toward what they learn and whether they will persist than who they are or where they go to school.

Just as integration into a college involves both student and institutional commitment (Tinto, 1987) student engagement has two key components that contribute to success or satisfaction (Kuh, 2005; Astin, 1993). The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success (Kuh, 2005), satisfaction (Astin, 1977, 1993), and integration (Tinto, 1987). The second is the way the institution allocates resources

and constructs learning opportunities and services to encourage students to participate and benefit (Kuh, 2005).

In 2005 Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt and Associates published their findings documenting effective educational practices (DEEP) with 20 varied colleges and universities with proven histories of effectiveness. The 20 institutions were among the 716 colleges and universities reviewed annually through the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2015). In Kuh et al's findings (2005) the 20 institutions studied displayed common characteristics as well as practices that revealed unique profiles. Six features that foster engagement and persistence were identified.

- A living mission and a lived educational philosophy
- Unshakeable focus on student learning
- Environment adapted for educational enrichment
- Clearly marked pathways to student success
- An improvement ethos
- Shared responsibility for educational quality and success (Kuh, 2005)

The research around institutional engagement is a reminder that whether students are retained or graduate ultimately rests with the student. However, institutional actions and systems can make a difference (Wilson, 2005).

A synthesis model

John P. Bean not only developed an industrial model of student attrition (Bean, 1978, 1980) but a synthesis of many attrition and retention models to develop a framework that resonates with the work of Astin (1977, 1993), Tinto (1987), and Kuh

(2005). Bean's model of attrition (1978, 1980) is based on a student's frequent assessment of the value of the college experience and taking action regarding that value. The model is a sequence that begins with an object (situation) followed by a perception (cognition) resulting in an appraisal (value judgment) concluding with an emotion. If the object or situation is within the student's academic or social domain, the student will acknowledge the experience and assess how the experience contributes to the perceived college journey. This assessment elicits an emotion or behavior. The more satisfying the experience the less likely the student is to depart (Tinto, 1987).

Bean's synthesis of attrition models (1981) identifies four variable headings that influence a student's decision to stay at or leave an institution. Heading one are background variables representing facts about students before entering college. Of particular interest to admission committees both Astin (1977, 1993) and Tinto (1987) discuss the influence of pre-matriculation factors to some degree. Heading two are organizational variables as indicators of the student's interaction with the institution and reflective of variables that can be administratively manipulated (Bean, 1981). Astin (1977, 1993), Tinto (1987), and Kuh (2005) all emphasize the role of the institution in the student's decision to persist. Heading three are environmental variables that the institution has no control over such as military draft, economic cycles, or social forces (Bean, 1981). Environmental factors were not predominating in Astin's (1977, 1993), Tinto's (1987), and Kuh's (2005) work but referenced. Heading four are attitudinal and outcome variables that are student directed and include value of one's education, self-development, satisfaction, confidence, adjustment, loyalty, and major and occupational certainty. These factors were inherent in the research of Astin (1977, 1993), Tinto

(1987), and Kuh (2005) in reference to student satisfaction and involvement, integration, time on task, and effort.

Bean's synthesized model (1981) looks at any of these variables as predictors of attrition. If the inverse is true, these variables could predict persistence. Bean's model (1981) contains 55 different variables among the four major headings. His desire to reduce the variables to one or two important ones cannot be done until the relative contribution to the attrition, retention, dropout, and persistence literature is known.

Retention and persistence work largely remain a student affairs function and an institutional add on (Tinto, 2006). Research in involvement, integration, and engagement calls for meaningful and far-reaching institutional efforts of collaboration within and among university divisions and departments. Tinto's (1987) extensive work on integration illustrates the importance of a balanced academic and social life. Kuh (2003) stresses the importance of what happens inside and outside the classroom as important to persistence. These relationships are imperative to effective retention programs and efforts. Both academic affairs and student affairs can work collaboratively to facilitate student transition into and throughout the college by providing support, knowledge, and awareness of the many resources campuses provide (Braxton & Mudy, 2001).

Persistence Variables

The variables that contribute to persistence are numerous. Spady's (1970, 1971) research reflects the importance of the integration of variables rather than isolating single indicators as a guarantee of persistence. The composite of many variables often viewed situationally is important to research on persistence.

Pre-matriculation Factors

There is value in pre-matriculation predictors to determine a student's progression but what really impacts persistence are post enrollment conditions (Spady, 1970, 1971; Kuh et al, 2005; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Rising high school GPAs, an increase in dual enrollment numbers and a large number of students enrolling and testing in Advanced Placement would, at one level, lead one to determine that entering college freshman are better prepared than their predecessors. Grade inflation, vast differences in the structures of dual enrollment, and large numbers of Advanced Placement test takers with scores less than 2 lead elsewhere. In addition, national test scores across the board: reading and quantitative literacy, science and benchmarks for success indicate that US high school students are not prepared for college (Habley et al., 2012). Articulating the difference in predictors of persistence prior to enrollment and conditions for persistence once enrolled is important. Kuh (2005) emphasized that what students do during college counts more for what they learn and whether they will persist than who they are or where they go to school. However, ignoring pre-enrollment factors entirely is not possible. These are the facets that lead Admission Programs to the decision to admit students or not.

Allowing for a ten-year adjustment to parental salary, Stratton, O'Toole and Wetzel (2005) capture the primary predictors of persistence for an incoming college student:

> (The student) is an 18-year-old, white male who begins college in the fall term immediately following high school graduation, whose parents have completed college and have an income between $30,000.00 and $50,000.00 The student who as an average first

> year GPA, attends a private four-year-college that is between 10 and 100 miles from his parent's home, is unmarried and not a parent, and lives in an area with 5.6% unemployment rates. The student has standard expected earnings and does not receive financial aid. Our model predicts that an individual with these characteristics has a 90.2% probability of being continuously enrolled, a 7.5% probability of stopping out, and a 2.3% probability of dropping out. A low GPA is shown to decrease the probability of continuous enrollment from 90.2% to 71.8% (Stratton, O'Toole, Wetzel, 2005, p 17-18).

Post-Matriculation Factors

This incomplete list identifies components of retention and persistence as identified through pre-enrollment and post-matriculation.

The number one predictor of persistence is academic performance (Spady, 1970, 1971; Stratton, O'Toole & Wetzel, 2006; Habley, et al, 2012). College grade point averages (GPA) define academic performance providing information concerning actual performance, which more directly influences the probability of receiving the benefits of college and the likelihood of completing a program of study (Stratton, O'Toole & Wetzel, 2006). Astin's research (1977) indicates that 33.1% of students obtain the same grades in high school and college. His research also shows that 19.7% of students obtained higher grades in high school than in college and 42.2% obtain lower grades in college than in high school. This information is important if persistence factors were

limited to just academic performance. This study is designed to identify additional factors.

Both Stratton et al (2005) and Tinto (1987) cite a student's choice of college as a variable important to persistence. Institutions should clearly articulate the mission, institutional identity, expectations, and rules in all recruitment materials (Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Nora, 2001; Kuh et al, 2005; Wilson et al, 2005; Braxton & Brier, 2007). In the 2014 documentary *If These Halls Could Talk,* a Latina student reflected that she arrived on her college campus wooed by the glossy brochures and appealing websites depicting a diverse student body. Reality was a different story and she talks of finally finding the Latino student who caught her eye on the brochure. He admitted that he, and now she, were two of a very small, multicultural population. She felt betrayed (Wah, 2014).

Financial aid is often identified as a reason for persistence (Astin, 1977; Tinto, 1987; Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Ishitani et al, 2002; Stratton et al, 2005). Some financial aid should be awarded to all students because it yields social integration especially for those who demonstrate small need. If aid is denied it is erroneous to assume that a small gap can be met independently (Braxton & McClendon, 2001). Loans are negatively related to persistence. Grants have a positive effect, whether awarded alone or in conjunction with a loan and receiving aid based on merit increases persistence (Ishitani et al, 2002). Work-study reduced drop-out probabilities in the first year and had less of an impact from that point forward (Ishitani et al, 2002).

Motivational control (student's ability to stay goal-directed, act on tasks and demands of academic coursework, and sustain energy to successfully fulfill these

academic task demands), emotional control (a student's ability to manage the anxieties and stresses associated with daily college life), and social control (feelings of being connected to others and to feeling actively engaged and participating in college life) all contribute to academic performance which contributes to persistence (Habley, et al, 2012). Academic achievement is also affected by intellectual self-esteem, aspirations for further study, and the successful pursuit of career (Astin, 1977).

For new students entering college transition programs (Tinto, 1987; Kuh et al, 2005; Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot & Associates, 2005; Nobel et al, 2007; Braxton & Briel, 2007; Habley et al, 2012) and freshman interest groups (Tinto & Goodsell, 1993; Tinto, 1999, 2003; Marrero & Beckett, 2005; Ratliff, 2008) are valuable tools in supporting persistence.

Once a student is matriculated early alert systems (Kuh et al, 2005); career planning (Astin, 1977; Tinto, 1987; Braxton & McClendon, 2001. Habley et al, 2012); skill development (Habley et al, 2012); extra-curricular activities (Astin, 1977; Tinto, 1987; Braxton & Briel, 2007); counseling (Tinto, 1987); residential life (Astin, 1977; Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Nobel et al, 2007); collaborative and cooperative learning (Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Light, 2001; Kuh et al, 2005) and; peer support (Kapraun & Coldren, 1982; Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Light , 2001; Kuh et al, 2005) all provide a solid foundation for potential persistence.

Orientation, Residential Learning Communities, and Academic Advising

The link between faculty connections and persistence is often cited (Spady, 1970, 1971; Astin, 1977; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Tinto, 1987; Light, 2001; Kuh et al; 2005). Increasing the opportunities for students to encounter faculty in meaningful ways

is important to persistence. Exposing students to a rich intellectual and social life in college creates an atmosphere encouraging persistence (Spady, 1970, 1971; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Tinto, 1987). Higher education research has focused on many contributors to college or university student success, including pre-college preparation, transition or orientation programs, academic rigor and academic and social support systems to name a few. The potential impact of faculty on student success far outweighs all others (Stevenson, Buchanon & Sharpe, 2006).

Investigating, in depth, the following three areas of orientation and the beginning of integration into the college community, living learning communities, and academic advising to explore and establish an academic life and to develop relationships with faculty, paint a link of continuity from the first day of orientation to the present moment that will be helpful in researching why Keene State College students persist. These three areas maximize a student's potential to interact with faculty and to integrate the academic and social domains of the college experience. At Keene State College they are the closest to shared events that all students will experience.

Initial transition programs are often associated with efforts to engage and support first year students (Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, & Associates, 2005). They might include first year seminars, developmental education, Supplemental Instruction, learning communities, first year advising, orientation programs, first year living communities, and the First Year Experience. For the purposes of this study initial transition programs will focus on orientation and living learning communities.

Orientation

The goals of transition programs are to provide a period of passage between the old and the new before the full adoption of new norms and the separation from the old occurs. Transition programs provide time for accepting new norms and behaviors as the integration into college begins, and to separate from, at least some of, the values, norms, and behaviors of past communities (Habley et al, 2012). Orientation programs provide a clear and cogent introduction to the intellectual, cultural, and social facets of the institution. Orientation is viewed as an important tool for student recruitment, acculturation, and retention (Jacobs, 2003).

Many institutions have implemented continuing orientation programs via a first year program and/or course (Perigo & Upcraft, 1989). The addition of continuing orientation programs reinforces a changed view that orientation is a comprehensive process rather than a singular event (Braxton & Brier, 2007; Habley et al, 2012). Future trends for orientation programs look at delivery modes as new technologies emerge while maintaining a major focus on acculturation and retention. Fostering environments that are responsive to the individual needs of students who may diverge from the traditional age and residential profile will be important (CAS, 2013). Responding in ways to help students succeed in a technology-based environment that requires new ways of communicating with classmates and instructors will be valuable.

Orientation is one of forty-three areas addressed by the Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS). The mission of orientation programs must facilitate the transition of new students by initiating the integration into the intellectual, cultural, and social facets of the institution (CAS, 2013). Orientation programs must

collaborate with all members of the institution to promote student learning and development, persistence and success and contribute to the students' realization of their potential in preparing for satisfying and productive lives (Kuh et all, 2005; CAS, 2013).

Orientation programs are consistent with institutional missions and identify relevant learning and developmental outcomes in the following areas: knowledge acquisition, integration, construction, and application; cognitive complexity; intrapersonal development; interpersonal competencies; humanitarianism and civic engagement; and practical competence (CAS, 2013). Orientation programs are intentionally designed to aid students and their parents/guardians in understanding the nature and purpose of higher education, the institutional history and traditions as well as its laws and policies (CAS, 2013).

Residential Learning Communities

Residence halls have evolved from just places to live to places to live and learn. Zeller (2005) cites the research of Ernst Boyer (1987) who reported on the "separation, sometimes to the point of isolation, between academic and social life on campus" (pg. 5). Since 1987 efforts have been made to strengthen the link between a student's social and intellectual integration into college (Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1987, 1993).

For residence halls to become learning environments the following are necessary:

- Quality student to student interactions
- Quality faculty to student interactions
- Quality study environments and significant hours devoted to studying
- Opportunities for altruism and social activism

- Quality social engagement opportunities between students
- Promotion of diversity and discussion of racial/ethnic issues with other students
- Promotion of mentoring and tutoring connections between students (Astin, 1993).

Fundamental program initiatives, primarily designed for first year students, work to promote new student success, link a student's academic life to their social life, and connect in-class and out-of-class experiences (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Stassen, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004; Pasque & Murphy, 2005; Zeller, 2005; Frazier & Eighmy, 2012).

Residential learning communities organize on-campus living arrangements so students with similar interests live in close physical proximity, which increases opportunities for out-of-class interactions and supplementary learning. A learning community is a relationship that combines experiential and reflective learning. Its goal should be to close the gap between the experiences students have inside the classroom and outside the classroom allowing them to continue the learning experiences after they have left the classroom (Frazier & Eighmy, 2012). Learning community programs can create a seamless environment to engage students in their own learning while bridging the academic and social experiences of students.

Learning communities operationalize a social constructivist approach to knowledge acquisition. L.S. Vygotsky thought the mind extended beyond the skin and that cognition was not just an individualistic phenomenon but is reliant on social interactions as well (Au, 2007). In residential learning communities involved peers, faculty, and staff become a student's More Knowledgeable Other (Au, 2007). A student

enters the residential learning community with a knowledge base that is predicated by pre-enrollment variables. When this knowledge base is recognized and filled with external information by faculty, staff, and peers scaffolding occurs allowing the student to reposition for the next task (Nye, 2007).

Lenning and Ebbers (as cited in Zhao & Kuh, 2004) identify learning communities in four generic forms: 1) curricular learning communities, 2) classroom learning communities, 3) residential learning communities, and; 4) student-type learning communities. Residential learning communities can be clustered into three thematic groups: 1) transition programs; 2) academic honors programs, and; 3) curriculum based programs (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003).

Residential learning communities provide students opportunities to access academic services such as tutoring, advising, study groups, interact with faculty on an informal basis, and experience sustained interaction with peers (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). From this, students develop skill in working in groups and the realization that their living environment is supportive of their endeavors. This realization links with Tinto's (1987, 1993) "rites of passage". The third phase, incorporation into the institutional setting, can happen when significant others such as family can step back because the institution has filled in. Incorporation leads to persistence (Nora, 2001).

Inkelas and Weisman (2003) attribute involvement (Astin, 1977), integration (Tinto, 1993), and engagement (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 1991) as outcomes of residential learning communities. The correlation between the effort students put into their experiences or the more involved or engaged students are with their college environment, the more likely they are to exhibit positive cognitive and affective

development (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). A learning community, because of its interdisciplinary and interactive nature, can introduce students to complex and active thinking rather than the passive, "right" answer thinking characteristic of a traditional classroom (Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Research on the outcomes of residential learning communities found that participating students were more likely to connect with an affinity group of peers, which is important to retention, success, and personal development (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Inkelas and Weisman (2003) found that participants in residential learning communities exceeded peers who were members of traditional residences with a greater likelihood to be involved with campus activities, interact with instructors and peers, and show greater gains or higher levels of intellectual development.

The importance of faculty in successful residential learning communities is clear (Inkelas& Weisman, 2003; Stassen, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004; Zeller, 2005; Frazier & Eighmy, 2012). But when interactions with peers and faculty are controlled, the positive effects of residential learning communities are substantially diminished (Pascarella & Terezini, 1991). This suggests that residential learning communities exert their positive effects through the interpersonal relationships they foster or facilitate between the major socializing agents of peers and faculty. Frazier and Eighmy (2012) called for greater, not less, faculty and staff involvement in residential learning communities that may not be as formally linked to curriculum but loosely linked to faculty research or interest areas. The authors found that when there were more faculty and residential staff interactions with students, there was positive impact on students' perceived satisfaction with all aspects of their living and learning experience. Fewer interactions yielded a more negative impact

on students' satisfaction (Frazier & Eighmy, 2012). Interestingly, students who evaluated their residential living experience less positively were still very satisfied with the decision to attend the researched university and pleased with their ability to connect with peers.

Academic Advising

Academic advising is an essential element in the success and persistence of postsecondary students (NACADA, 2006a). Academic Advising is one of forty-three areas addressed by the Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education. The mission of academic advising is to assist students in the development of meaningful educational goals. To do that the institution must have a clearly written statement pertaining to academic advising that must include program goals and expectations of advisors and advisees (CAS, Advising, 2013). One component Kuh et al (2005) identify among highly effective colleges is a living mission and a lived educational philosophy. With clear expectations, identification of a campus ethos, and articulated and accessible rights and responsibility statements the pathways for student success are identified (Kuh, et al, 2005; Kezar, 2007). With clear expectations in place both students and advisors can assume shared responsibility in the advising process. However, the ultimate responsibility for making decisions about educational plans and life goals is the student's (CAS, Advising 2013)

Those involved with academic advising must promote student growth and development, assist students in assessing their interests and abilities, advise on the selection of appropriate courses and other educational experiences, clarify institutional policies and procedures, reinforce student self-direction and self-sufficiency, and refer students to other resources on campus as necessary (CAS, Advising, 2013).

Overview

In the third version of the What Works in Student Retention survey, Habley and McLanahan (2004) identified three main categories of practices responsible for the greatest contribution to retention in four-year public colleges. The survey was administered to 947 institutions and responses indicated academic advising, first year programs, and learning support as the most effective tools to enhance retention. Richard Light (2001) states, "Good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience" (p. 81). Effective advising is collaboration between professional and faculty advisors (Kaproun and Coldren, 1982). Similar to Spady's (1970, 1971) theory that departure from college is an integration of variables; academic advising is recognized as a contributor to persistence in concert with other campus conditions. Advising's impact is minimized when done in isolation (Kaproun & Coldren, 1982).

Academic advising can potentially facilitate retention by stimulating a positive, personalized relationship between students and faculty. Such a relationship can evolve into interactions between students and professors that transcend the perception of the faculty member as a dispenser of knowledge (Kaproun & Coldren, 1982; Tinto, 2006). Astin (1977) identifies a student faculty interaction as the strongest relationship linked to student satisfaction than any other variable. Student interaction with faculty is a measure of the student's self-esteem (Astin, 1977). The image of the intimidating faculty member may stand in the way of connection but the assumption that all faculty have the skills to develop a satisfying relationship with a student is as misdirected as the idea that all students have the confidence or self-esteem to take the first step in building a

relationship. Developing appropriate training programs is essential for faculty to implement the procedural and substantive responsibilities of advising effectively (Kaproun & Coldren, 1982; Light, 2001). Advising is a specialized task and not necessarily a natural skill that all faculty possess (Wilson, 2005). Educationally meaningful student-faculty interaction just doesn't happen; it is expected, nurtured, and supported (Kuh & Kinzie, 2005).

A significant number of students may not distinguish or benefit from the difference of course registration advising and academic advising that includes planning, mentoring, and referral to resources (Hermanowicz, 2004). Academic advising includes both procedural and substantive responsibilities. Among the substantive responsibilities it is incumbent on advisors to assist each advisee in developing a realistic program of student planning and an appropriate long-range academic plan; evaluate academic progress; and assist each advisee in initially exploring an appropriate long-range educational goal (Kaproun & Coldren, 1982; Habley et al, 2012). Advising relationships begin at orientation (Braxton & Brier, 2007), are intentional (Habley et al, 2012) and are valued (Kuh & Kinzie, 2005). Mentoring evolves from academic advising and includes asking questions to determine congruence: does an academic and career path "fit"? And what is the relationship between academic work and the student's personal life? (Light, 2001; Kuh & Kinzie, 2005; Habley, et al, 2012).

Types and strategies of advising

The design of an advising program must be compatible with institutional structure and student needs (King, 2008). Factors influencing advising include:

- Institutional mission

- Student population
- The role of the faculty
- Budget
- Organizational structure.

The CAS for Academic Advising (2013) emphasizes the necessity of someone to coordinate advising and the provision of strong advisor development programs. Campus advising must have an articulated vision and adequate funding. Effective advising is not a closed system and cannot be done in isolation. Academic advising is often referred to as the hub of the wheel with connections to all other campus offices and services. Advising cannot be successful without collaboration and cooperation among the areas that support it (Habley, 2004).

Who advises?

The role of an academic advisor is to engage in a series of interpersonal interactions with students for the purpose of facilitating student learning and outcomes (NACADA, 2006). Faculty have served in some advising or mentoring capacity throughout the history of higher education (Hemwall, 2008). As expectations grew to teach larger and more numerous classes, produce a substantial quantity of scholarly publications, and serve on a growing number of administrative committees, faculty relationships with students changed and the idea of recognized and formal faculty advising developed (Hemwall, 2008).

The importance of faculty advising is undeniable. Research by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) and Tinto (1993) identify the critical connection between formal and informal faculty contact and learning and retention. Vying to maintain faculty

connections to advising while other responsibilities grow and acknowledging the importance of advising has led to the growth of professional advising centers on campuses (NACADA, 2005). Professional academic advisors focus on advising activities that promote the academic success of students with attention to general student development (Self, 2008).

Students and advising

Richard Light (2001) concludes that successful advising is about relationships. Students are more impressed by the advisor who asks questions or poses challenges that force students to think about the relationship of their academic work to their personal lives. Being known to an advisor, having a professional advisor, and receiving warmth and support from the advisor factor into student satisfaction in advising (Mottorella, Fritzsche & Cerabino, 2004). The type of advising whether prescriptive or developmental is less important than the depth of the relationship, type of advisor, and the emotional nature of the advising relationship.

For many advisors, relational competencies are the most challenging to learn. Developing personal self-efficacy and confidence around their skills and credibility contributes to the ability to nurture the success of students (Hughey, 2011). Once a safe, interpersonal relationship is established the advisor can effectively confront and challenge students on behaviors and actions that may be counterproductive to success. Doing this may result in an advisee's supported movement through the steps that result in change, bring them closer to their goals, and, ultimately, degree completion (Hughey, 2011). Though every advising contact is an opportunity for meaningful interaction

awareness that advising is a cultural and culture bound activity is foundational in creating a system that works.

Persistence Variables at Keene State College

Keene State College Orientation Program

Until August 2009 Keene State College held an annual First Year Orientation Program in June for all new first time students. In 2008 the director and coordinator of the First Year Orientation Program proposed to the President and the Cabinet a significant change in program structure from a June to August model. Capitalizing on best practice in the orientation field motivated the desire to propose a change in orientation that could best be achieved by an August program. Those practices included:

- Introducing a strong learning community
- Building the foundation of academic success
- Welcoming students and families to the campus community
- Promoting student interactions with faculty and staff; and
- Conveying the values and traditions of the new institution

(Mullendore and Banahan, 2005, p.391).

The August program was renamed New Student Orientation and was inclusive of both first time and transfer students. Program components of the August Orientation included New Student Convocation and more time with more faculty. The importance of faculty connection to persistence is indisputable (Spady, 1970, 1971; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Tinto, 1987; Astin, 1993: Light, 2001; Kuh et al; 2005) and in an attempt to capitalize on that the August program begins a day with New Student Convocation, a tradition led by the president of the college. Convocation is followed by

three hours of student-faculty interaction to discuss school identity and academic discipline specifics. Undecided students are asked to choose a major session.

The August program allowed for greater representation of campus constituencies with a Resource Fair, broad presence of Student Affairs programs and functions, expanded opportunities for socialization, an entire day of Residential Life programming, and an introduction to the city of Keene with Downtown Days. The few concerns of the program focused on a less than robust parent program and retention at the Orientation Program sessions.

Caring for parents and families is a significant component of overall campus relations. Parents and family members need to feel secure, respected and accepted (Golden, 2001). Nora (2001) examines the "rites of passage" in Tinto's Student Integration Model (1987, 1993) and the connection to parental and family encouragement and support. The three rites of passage include separation, transition, and incorporation. Tinto theorizes that the three areas must be fully realized before a student is integrated into a college setting which impacts persistence. Nora (2001) challenges noting that the three phases are neither distinct nor temporal and function in an overlapping way. The rites of passage represent, to a certain degree, a disengagement from past communities including family but do not represent a rejection of those influences. In fact, discarding emotional bonds and close relationships with the significant others of family, peers, and communities may hinder successful transition (Tinto, 1987, 1993; Nora, 2001).

The separation phase requires encouragement, positive gestures, and a support system to help students acknowledge the existence of a safety net allowing an easier transition from high school to college. The transition phase often finds students between

two worlds. "they are neither strongly bound to the past, nor yet firmly tied to the future" (Tinto, 1993, pp. 97). The more informed a parent is and the less frightened or opposed to the new point of view and perceptions a student develops in college the more successful a student's transition into the new environment (Nora, 2001). A well-developed, respectful, and sensitive orientation program can be the foundation for parents to develop the skills they need to offer support and understanding of the stages of integration.

Both Tinto (1993) and Nora (2001) recognize the importance of the incorporation phase to persistence. This is a time when college faculty, students, and staff are particularly helpful in offering assistance to students as they become rooted in both the formal and informal domains of the institution. For parents the opportunity to meet faculty and staff through an orientation program is integral in relinquishing the primary locus of control so a student may become fully acculturated in the new environment. Comfort in the necessary, daily personal contacts with faculty, students, and staff is critical for both students and families. Without it incorporation and, subsequently, persistence will not occur (Nora, 2001).

Orientation programs are a primary vehicle for transition. Astin (1977) refers to orientation as integration that directly links to Tinto's (1987, 1993) theories of student integration and what enhances persistence. Participating in orientation sessions directly fosters social integration and positive indirect effects on persistence (Braxton & McClendon, 2001).

Deggs and associates (2011) studied the impact of not attending orientation. Though students gained knowledge of campus procedures and policies and degree requirements

within their first year regardless of orientation attendance, the authors found that students who did not attend were not participating in or attending campus activities at the same rate as attendees (Deggs, 2011). Robbins (2009) found that some studies on the impact of orientation concluded that orientation programs have a limited impact on persistence. Deggs' (2011) research finds that students who have attended orientation or not still develop an affinity to the institution and plan to continue. Of concern, is the potential for nominal extracurricular participation of non-attenders. Both Kuh (2005) and Tinto (1987, 1993) report that engagement and formal and informal social integration is an important factor in persistence.

The arrival of a new Associate Vice President of Enrollment Management, a charge by the Keene State President, and the importance of both a well-developed parent program and high attendance at orientation programs has led Keene State College full circle. In 2015 the college re-introduced a June Orientation Program with the added attraction of the August program renamed Welcome Week.

Keene State College does not have a continued orientation program or a first year seminar. The linking of Open Houses, Admitted Student Days, June Orientation, Orientation Leader facilitated electronic summer communication, Welcome Week and Parent/Family Weekend is an effort to move from orientation as an event to a process (Habley, 2012).

Residential Learning Communities at Keene State College

Is the term residential learning community a catchall phrase that incorporates a great variety of models? Do less elaborate models constitute residential learning communities and, if so, do they foster the same outcomes as their more sophisticated

neighbors? The models vary from humble opportunities for students to make their own connections with little faculty involvement to models with deep curricular and faculty coordination (Stassen, 2003).

First year living learning communities (LLC) began at Keene State College in 2006 with the hire of current Associate Dean of Students and Director of Residential Life Kent Drake-Deese. Known as parliaments, in honor of the infant mascot the Keene State owl, LLCs were present in only accessible residence halls. The LLCs were affinity, theme, or special interest communities and the learning component included a requirement for all LLCs to present a program to the entire residence hall. Students were involved in community service and in collaboration with other LLCs. A favorite cooperative program was Dinner and a Movie provided by the Epicurious and Film Society LLCs. Resident Directors and Resident Assistants provided guidance. Very few faculty were involved and those LLCs without faculty were more successful. In 2015 the LLCs are now connected with the strategic initiatives of the campus and focus on legacy, health, and academic honors, to name a few. Faculty involvement remains minimal.

Keene State College implemented an on campus residence requirement for all first and second year students in 2011. The decision was driven by three factors: revenue, the desire to increase constituent trust in the residential life system, and research indicating that students living on campus were retained at a higher rate than those living off (personal communication, Kent Drake-Deese, 2/12/2015). The college will open a new residence hall in the fall of 2016 to alleviate the crowding the residential requirement has created and to respond to the Keene State president's desire that all first year students reside in a living learning community. The building will maximize the potential for

numerous LLCs by including space for 350 students, double loaded corridors to promote traffic, lots of open space, highly flexible classrooms with movable walls, technology, and a faculty apartment. The design is both contemporary with lots of glass and light and old school with common bathrooms at the end of the hall to encourage movement and lessen isolation. Each corridor has space for 29 students, which is the optimal size for an LLC.

Faculty have been on the planning committee from the start. Drake-Deese now waits for the college to endorse LLCs as part of the culture and to attach value to the endeavor. Without a strong administrative voice his fear is that faculty will not respond. The benefits to faculty include an opportunity to teach outside of the box, to incorporate experiential learning in their instruction, and to be assured every logistic is handled by Residential Life staff. For students, an LLC provides a concrete way to integrate their social domain with their academic life.

Keene State College: Culture and Commitment to Academic Advising

Keene State College developed a strategic plan in 2015. Before an all campus meeting on January 30, 2015, eight themes for discussion were posted. One of those themes was campus culture described as the importance of strengthening campus culture-student/social, but also faculty/academic; the importance of civility, accountability, sense of community, commitment to sustainability, improved town/gown relations, and shared values (Keeling and Associates, 2015). Participants of the campus event were asked to attach sticky notes with questions or comments on each of eight themes. Comments posted on campus culture asked “what is it?” and stated, “without this there is nothing else”.

"Advising evolves from an institution's culture, values, and practices and is delivered in accordance with these standards" (CAS, Advising, 2013). Until Keene State defines its culture to a point where it can be clearly articulated, academic advising will remain inconsistent with no clear plan but a great deal of interest and the belief that enhanced advising at Keene State will solve problems. Academic advising is just one of many variables that, when integrated with other institutional commitments, will make a difference in persistence (Spady, 1970, 1971; Habley, 2004).

In the spring of 2015, 2,966 undergraduates at Keene State were declared majors with an active faculty advisor. Professionals in the Academic and Career Advising program advised 331 students. These students are first year, undecided. Under graduate students numbering 1032 are currently undeclared and have no active advisor (personal communication, H. Bailey, 2/16/2015). For the last two spring semesters (2014, 2015) new students and parents have been apprised of Keene State's advising plan as defined by the academic deans. Undecided students are assigned a professional advisor who is responsible for outreach, dissemination of relevant first year advising information, and publication of a first year newsletter. The plan shifts a bit for students with an educational goal.

> Students who have provided information to the college about their specific area of academic interest will have their names and contact information forwarded to the department chair of the area in which they've expressed an interest. The department chair, or faculty from the department who are assisting in advising, will contact the student with information about how to access support for academic

> planning and for course registration advising. Departments develop their own discipline-specific advising plan, based on the number of advisees and advisors in each discipline but all students will have an assigned advisor" (personal communication, A. Miller, 12/3/2014).

The model resembles a split-model of advising Habley (1983) describes where special populations are advised by professional advisors (first year, undecided) and are then transitioned to faculty. However, Keene State has a significant gap in the model and 1,032 students are not formally connected with an advisor.

Keene State realizes the importance of advising but a strong top administrative voice is needed to move the process forward. Academic advising will not emerge as a critical dimension of a college or university unless a total institutional commitment to this premise exits (Kapraun & Coldren, 1982). Specifically, faculty must believe that advising is one of their functions (Kapraun & Coldren, 1982) and that academic advising is valued, rewarded, and supported by the institution (Kuh et al, 2005).

Charlie Nutt, the Executive Director of NACADA posted his predictions of what higher education will look like in the not so distant future (2014):

- Students and their families will choose higher education institutions based as much on the success of their students as on the success of their sports teams,
- Colleges and universities will be more centralized than decentralized because arbitrary walls will come down.

Collaboration and cooperation will be the expected norm not the desired dream,

- There will be more distinct roles between faculty who teach and advise and faculty who research,
- Academic advising experiences will be viewed as instructional and, thus, will blur the role of faculty and advisors,
- Student persistence and retention will drive decision-making to an extent that we can't truly imagine today. (p 1)

Summary

The pursuit of a post-secondary degree has been historically tied to the greater ability to contribute to the public good. Public institutions of higher education in New Hampshire were founded on this premise. The advantage of a college degree is now seen to contribute to private and public good as illustrated by increased personal earnings as well as greater volunteerism and voting activity among New Hampshire degree holders.

A student pursuing a college degree in New Hampshire is met with low state support to higher education, diminished need-based aid resulting in increased student borrowing, and significant debt upon graduation. Yet, Keene State College has consistently met their recruitment target until the 2015-2016 academic year. A series of negative events has resulted in a decline in enrollment for the 2015 fall semester.

The purpose of this study is to identify the conditions that enabled Keene State College first semester seniors to persist. Findings from this study will contribute to retention strategies for Keene State College. When it becomes clear that an institution of

higher education cannot rely on recruitment alone to maintain their college population, methods to encourage persistence become critical.

There are many sources of definitions for persistence of college students. For the purpose of this study, persistence is defined as a student, with no post-matriculation earned credits from other institutions, who enrolls full-time and continuously at Keene State College pursuing a degree with the expectation of completing that degree within four to six years.

The research of Astin (1977, 993), Tinto (1987, 1993, 1999, 2003, 2006), and Kuh (1991, 2000, 2003, 2005) and their respective work on involvement, integration, and engagement set the groundwork for, not only, the institution's responsibility in providing a foundation for persistence but the critical participation of the student in the process. This study looks at the specific variables that contribute to persistence within the framework of involvement, integration, and engagement. This research will determine what variables matter.

The study of a single institution requires the voices of the students intimately involved in the day to day of that institution. "When persistence is the governing term, we take our directions from students. What did they do that resulted in attainment? What structures do we need to offer so that future students can follow the same paths? What do we think works here?" (Adelman, 2006, p 138).

To answer the question of why students at Keene State College stay their stories will be recorded. Van Manen (2009) identifies the most captivating stories as those which will help us understand better what is most common, most taken-for-granted, and what concerns us most ordinarily and directly.

Chapter 3-Methodology

Introduction

Competing priorities are often at odds with the funding of higher education (Morris, 2015). Small states struggle to determine how to finance all the needs of their citizens. Examining and defending the value of a college education requires constant monitoring to assure that state dollars are directed to supporting students as they pursue a degree (Reaping the Benefits, 1998). The rising cost of college and the increasing debt load of graduates (Baum & Ma, 2014) calls the question of why students stay enrolled. What are the reasons for persistence despite the increasing odds of not staying to ultimately complete a degree?

Institutions struggle with stagnant recruiting budgets and shifting demographic scenes that make recruiting first time college students a challenge (Cheslock & Hughes, 2011; Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012; WICHE, 2012). Colleges respond with expensive facility upgrades (Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012) adding to the burden of cost for students. Looking at retaining students once they enter a college and monitoring persistence to degree completion is not only a benefit to the institution financially (Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012) but to the attendees. Students who culminate their college experience with a diploma will reap both public and private benefits (Reaping the Benefits, 1998) and acquire improved means to address accrued college debt.

Persistence is a shared responsibility of the student and the institution (Astin, 1977, 1993; Tinto, 1987; Kuh, 2005). The student sets the stage for retention with pre-matriculation attributes and accomplishments that may increase the likelihood of

persistence (Astin, 1977, 1993). However, it is what happens once the student matriculates that really matters (Tinto, 1987; Kuh, 2005).

Keene State College loses 23% of students to attrition between freshman and sophomore year and another 10% between sophomore and junior year (Turrentine, 2011). A 77% retention rate is competitive among four-year public institutions yet the climate of higher education in New Hampshire (Morris, 2015) makes Keene State College particularly vulnerable. In addition, the president of the college has charged the institution to attain an 85% retention rate within five years (Turrentine, 2014). Recent events on campus have created conditions that challenge recruitment (Eddes, Fox & Kanno-Young, 2014) and make retention of students all that much more important.

The purpose of this study was to identify the conditions that have enabled Keene State College first semester seniors to persist. Participants are members of the entering 2012 cohort who have persisted to the early months of their senior year. These students have stayed creating a shared lived experience that constitutes a phenomenology methodology (Moustakas, 1994). Every participant's story is different and honoring the essence of their experience and the truth of their reflection creates the foundation for a hermeneutic phenomenological study (van Manen, 1990).

Qualitative Research

The intent of this study was to collect the stories of continuously enrolled Keene State College students as they reflected on the reasons for persistence to the beginning of their senior year. Qualitative research was chosen for this study because "it permits inquiry into selected issues in great depth with careful attention to detail, context, and nuance" (Patton, 2002, p 227). Qualitative research is used when a problem or issue

needs to be explored, when the researcher wants to empower individuals to share their stories and hear their voices, and to develop theories when partial or inadequate theories exist for certain populations and samples or existing theories do not adequately capture the complexity of the problem examined (Cresswell, 2013). By working with students closely in a deep study, the researcher intended to explore persistence at this institution in new ways.

This researcher investigated what it meant to persist to senior year for a select group of Keene State College students. Slife and Melling (2012) talk about the non-observables of research. Quantitative inquiries emphasize the observable. Activities that lead to persistence such as attending dance recitals, the number of tutoring appointments completed, or evidence of membership in a fraternity may be quantifiable. But the meaning and impact of those activities is an unobservable leading the researcher to ask questions, find out about experiences, and hear stories (Patton, 2002). Qualitative methods of inquiry facilitated the search for the meaning of these students' experience of persistence.

Consideration of Alternate Qualitative Methods

Case Study

Case studies depend on clearly defining the object of study or case (Patton, 2002). Necessary to this methodology is to define a case that can be bounded or described within certain parameters such as place and time (Cresswell, 2013). Single cases or studies independently build or confirm a growing theory regarding a phenomenon. The new theory does not emerge quickly but will develop over time as research is extended from one case to the next and more and more data is collected (Dooley, 2002).

Incumbent in a case study approach is the necessity to provide details of all aspects of the case (Patton, 2002). Illustrating this is when a case study approach is applied to a program evaluation. The process looks at multiple components of the program-geographical, cultural, organizational, and historical contexts as well as internal and external operations (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). The purpose of this study was to focus on the single shared experience of persistence by capturing the rich details of that experience. The researcher was not looking at evaluating a program but instead individual student experiences.

Ethnography

The central and guiding assumption of ethnography is that any human group of people interacting together for a period of time will evolve as a culture (Patton, 2002). An ethnographic study examines shared patterns of behavior, beliefs, and language of the culture (Cresswell, 2013).

Ethnography enables the investigator to gather valid and reliable data through development of close and continuing contact with those being studied (Gold, 1977) often immersing the researcher into the day-to-day lives of participants (Cresswell, 2013). Ethnographic methods can be used to instigate change in contemporary society by examining social problems and in evaluating the culture of a program (Patton, 2009).

The purpose of this study was to identify the conditions that enabled Keene State College first semester seniors to persist. Ethnographers, unlike phenomenologists, develop a theory of what they hope to find. The goal of ethnography is to develop a greater understanding of how the group works (Cresswell, 2013). This researcher studied the individual students within that group of persisting first semester seniors.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is meant to build theory rather than test theory (Patton, 2002). It is a method that consists of systematic, yet flexible, guidelines for collecting and analyzing data to construct theories that are grounded in data themselves (Charmaz, 2006). The researcher generates a general explanation or theory of a process, an action, or an interaction shaped by the views of a large number of participants (Cresswell, 2013).

The grounded theory researcher simultaneously makes analytic sense of each participant's related, narrated experience (Charmaz, 2006) as an emerging theory grows from each interview (Cresswell, 2013). Data, from the start, is sorted and separated through qualitative coding. The codes point the researcher toward areas for continued exploration. (Charmaz, 2006).

This study analyzed the data of participants at the completion of interviews and focus group (s) to determine the essence of the experience of persistence. The researcher identified themes from analyzing all data rather than develop a theory as data is being collected.

Phenomenology

This research study utilized hermeneutic phenomenology. "Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences" (van Manen, 1990, p. 9). A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experience of a concept or phenomenon (Cresswell, 2013).

Phenomenology focuses on exploring how human beings make

sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness,

> both individually and as shared meaning. The researcher engages interviews to thoroughly capture and describe how people experience some phenomenon-how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others. (Patton, 2002, p. 104)

In presenting phenomenology as a chosen qualitative approach and data collection method it is important to attempt to define the philosophical underpinnings and evolution of the approach. The development of phenomenology is attributed to Hegel (1770-1831) and Husserl (1859-1938). "Hegel defined phenomenology as knowledge as it appears to consciousness, the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one's immediate awareness and experience " (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26).

Husserl challenged that all knowledge is based on the individual's inner evidence without the influence of external variables (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl's phenomenology strived to reduce outside influences from an individual's search for meaning. Heidegger (1889-1976) was trained by Husserl in phenomenological intentionality and reduction. He is connected with the development of hermeneutic phenomenology, which illustrates the details and seemingly trivial aspects within an experience to create meaning and achieve a sense of understanding (Laverty, 2003). Heidegger deviated from Husserl because he saw humans as concerned creatures with an emphasis on their fate in the world (Laverty, 2003). Heidegger (1927) argued that the human entity should be understood in terms of how it makes its meaning in the world. Who we are is constituted through the process of interpretation. An individual's meaning is shaped by the social

and historical context within which she/he is situated. Stories matter and things have meaning within the framework of the individual's life.

Gadamer (1900-2002) moved Heidegger's work to a practical application in an effort to clarify the conditions in which understanding occurs. Language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs and understanding occurs in interpreting. Gadamer also challenged Husserl's insistence on removing outside influences on meaning through, bracketing, and reductionism (Moustakas, 1994). He said that research methods are not totally objective, separate or value free from the user (Laverty, 2003). Gadamer refers to the elements of prejudice and fore-meanings as the means by which we orient ourselves to a topic and states: "the important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's fore-meanings (Wilcke, 2002, p. 269). The recognition of bias as integral in the meaning making process was important in this study since the researcher is so connected to the research topic.

Phenomenology was determined to be the most appropriate methodology for this study for the following reasons:

- The phenomenon of persistence to senior year of continuously enrolled Keene State College students has been identified.
- The interpretation of the individual stories of each participant is possible.
- The shared lived experience of persistence allowed the researcher to deeply study the topic and to analyze responses thematically to determine the essence of the experience.
- The researcher's biases were recognized and incorporated into the methodology.

A brief overview of two types of phenomenology follow with a more extensive overview of the hermeneutic tradition which is the selected methodology for this study.

Transcendental

Husserl is the founder of transcendental phenomenology, which is marked by knowing, not being, reductionism, and bracketing (Dowling, 2007). Moustakas (1994) describes transcendental phenomenology when everything is perceived freshly as if for the first time. Knowledge is based on intuition and essence guides transcendental phenomenology.

At the core of transcendental phenomenology is bracketing or reductionism. Through phenomenological reduction the essence of the phenomenon under investigation may be brought to light (Dowling, 2007). The terms reduction and bracketing are used interchangeably in most literature and involve suspending one's various beliefs in the reality of the natural world in order to study the essential structures of the world (van Manen, 1990; Wilcke, 2002; Laverty, 2003). Bracketing imposes not just a filter but a barrier between the individual and outside influences so the acquisition of meaning is seen as an internal and pure pursuit.

A transcendental approach was not selected for this study largely due to the researcher's bias and close and long standing connection to the topic of study. Though closely examined and monitored, preconceptions, prejudices, and biases were inherent in this research. Successfully filtering them was not possible as transcendental phenomenology prescribed.

Hermeneutic

In contrast to transcendental phenomenology a hermeneutical approach asks the researcher to engage in a process of self-reflection to quite a different end than that of pure phenomenology. Specifically, the biases and assumptions of the researcher are not bracketed or set aside but rather are embedded and essential to the interpretive process. The researcher is called, on an ongoing basis, to give considerable thought to their own experience and explicitly claim the ways in which their position or experience relates to the issues being researched (Laverty, 2003).

Figure 1 illustrates the check and balance system in hermeneutic phenomenology known as the hermeneutic circle. This is the researcher's interpretation of the hermeneutic circle. Developed by Gadamer, the hermeneutic circle is an ever-expanding circle of interpretation and understanding (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). It is the whole in terms of details or parts and the parts or details in terms of the whole. The circle allows for dynamic movement of understanding from projection to topic to new projection and from whole to part to whole (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). The whole is the essence of the lived experience but creating that essence are themes or parts that have emerged from the research. As analysis moves forward the wholes and the parts will be revisited frequently.

In using the hermeneutic circle, the researcher engages a cyclical investigation. By asking the questions; what are the parts of persistence and how are they understood and how does understanding the reasons (parts) of persistence help define what is persistence (the whole), the researcher identified additional emerging questions in an attempt to understand the whole of persistence supported by its parts. Information was gathered and

more questions were asked to develop a deep understanding of the experience of persistence. The end of the circle occurs when one has reached a place of sensible meaning, free from contradiction (Laverty, 2003; Patton, 2002).

Figure 1: *An illustration of investigating persistence through the lens of a hermeneutic circle*

For this study hermeneutic phenomenology provided the basis to collect rich and descriptive data for the reasons of why continuously enrolled Keene State College students persisted to senior year. By providing research participants an opportunity to tell their stories of persistence within the context of a shared experience an understanding of persistence at Keene State College was developed. In the hermeneutic tradition of phenomenology the researcher had an opportunity to examine her biases around this phenomenon to further allow the voices of students to emerge.

Population and Sample

Sample size in a qualitative study is a choice or balance of depth and breadth (Patton, 2002). If breadth or a large number of participants is a goal then the depth of time spent with one subject may be compromised. According to Patton (2002) this is not a right or wrong, good or bad choice but more an issue of resources, time, and interests of those involved. Though there are no rules for sampling in qualitative research (Patton, 2002), when using a phenomenological methodology, Cresswell (2013) recommends studying between five and 25 subjects and one phenomenon. For this study, the researcher identified eleven participants to interview.

The purpose of this study was to identify the conditions that have enabled Keene State College first semester seniors to persist. Senior status at Keene State is defined as a minimum of 90 earned credits (Course Catalog, 2015). The initial sample of students who meet the minimum criteria was not be available until June 2015. It was anticipated that number would be between 900-1000 students (Senior Survey, 2013). The importance of working with seniors in the early part of their final academic year is to recognize that phenomenology is not introspective but retrospective (van Manen, 1990). This was a good time for students to reflect on the previous three years. Equally important was to narrow the population to a manageable size.

Finding the Sample (N)

The sampling methods used in this study were purposeful and random sampling. (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2007; Sadler, Lee, Lim & Fullerton, 2010; Anderson & Braud, 2011; Boudah, 2011). Purposeful sampling serves to seek out persons who have had a particular kind of experience. The researcher is strategic in choosing a sample that has

certain characteristics and meets similar criteria and have experienced a certain phenomenon (Anderson & Braud, 2011; Boudah, 2011). Cresswell (2007) notes much more narrow sampling strategies occur in a phenomenological study as it is essential that all participants have experienced the phenomena being studied.

Random sampling adds credibility to the sample when the potential purposeful sample is too large (Cresswell, 2007). Patton (2002) and Anderson and Braud (2011) utilize random sampling when the sample will be representative of the larger population and the intent of the study can safely proceed. Utilizing random sampling begins to approach the recommended size sample for a phenomenological study (Cresswell, 2007) and focus on depth rather than breadth (Patton, 2002).

The criteria employed to create the sample for this study included the following:

- Students who entered Keene State College in the fall, 2012 semester with no previous experience of matriculation at another college,
- Students who have earned only Keene State College credits post matriculation,
- Students who have been continuously enrolled in classes at Keene State College from fall, 2012 through fall, 2015 excluding summer sessions,
- Students in good academic standing with a minimum 2.0 cumulative grade point average (Keene State College Course Catalog, 2015),
- Students who have earned between 90-100 credits.

The 2012 cohort consists of 1172 students (Factbook, 2014). Applying all above criteria with the exception of “have earned only Keene State College credits post matriculation” and adjusting the earned credit range resulted in the following:

- 90-100 earned credits (322 students)

- 90-110 earned credits (393 students)
- 90-120 earned credits (407 students)

Applying all sample criteria resulted in a sample of 267 students as of August 17, 2015. **The N for this study is 267**.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

The researcher obtained approval from the Keene State College Institutional Review Board which has a reciprocal agreement of research consent with Plymouth State University. A copy of the interview questions and the consent form were submitted in the IRB process. The researcher employed four data collection methods in this study: survey, interview, focus group, and field notes.

Survey

> Surveys are used to gauge the status of particular variables within a sample of respondents. Survey methods include interviews or completion of questionnaires and yield data from respondents. Generally, the information is gathered from a large group of participants. Survey methods are generally used to measure attitudes, decisions, needs, behaviors, lifestyles, affiliations, and/or demographics of the sample chosen (Boudah, 2011, p 158).

Surveys are designed to include structured options (choice options) and structured open-ended responses (Boudah, 2011). (See Appendix A for survey questions). The survey included questions seeking responses about participation in New Student Orientation, first year living communities and academic advising. These three areas have the greatest

potential of a common, shared experience in the cohort, are evidenced as contributing to persistence and retention, and were a focus of the researcher's literature review.

The survey was created with Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com) and with the support of the Keene State College director of Institutional Research and Keene State's Qualtric's administrator. On Friday, July 31, 2015 the survey was distributed as a pilot to Academic and Career Advising colleagues, 2015 Orientation Leaders, and Dr. Sue Castriotta (57 recipients) (Appendix A). The survey was accompanied by a cover email (Appendix B).

The pilot survey yielded 35 responses. Changes were made as a result of pilot feedback:

- Back button option was installed for each question,
- A range option rather than a definitive option in the Orientation attendance question,
- The last and second to the last questions were switched to create a more obvious end to the survey,
- More explicit language was added to two questions.

With the incentive of winning a $100.00 Amazon gift card in a drawing of survey completers the survey launched on August 17, 2015 at approximately 3:00 pm to 267 recipients. By 7:00 pm six responses had been received. The second launch was September 8 and the third September 16. The Survey ended on September 23. Each survey launch was accompanied by an email (Appendix C). Table 8 outlines the survey launches and the associated responses. On the advice of Dr. Turrentine in Institutional Research it was decided to launch the survey three times, each time contacting the entire sample by email including an explanatory message and the embedded survey link. The

decline of responses indicated in the results below show a saturation point was close. The survey was begun by 91 respondents (34.3%) and completed by 76 respondents (28.4%). Data for this research was drawn from the 76 completers. In a literature review conducted by Nulty (2008) comparing the response rates of paper based surveys to online surveys the author found an average range of a 20-47% response rate on electronic surveys. On average paper surveys had a higher response rate by 23 points (Nulty, 2008).

Table 8 *Survey launch and associated responses*

Launch	# of Responses	% of N
First Launch 8/17/15	43	16.4
Second Launch 9/8/15	29	10.8
Third Launch 9/16/15	19	7.1
Totals	91	34.3

Interviews

The primary tool of inquiry were individual interviews with 11 study participants who share the lived experience of persisting as a continuously enrolled Keene State College student to senior year. The purpose of interviewing is to allow the audience to enter the person's perspective. Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowledgeable, and explicit. Important to the

process is a genuine interest in and caring about the perspective of other people (Patton, 2002).

> The purpose of the interview is that it may be used as a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon (van Manen, 1990, p. 66).

The interview questions were a combination of standardized, open-ended questions that were presented in the same order for all participants and an interview guide where the interviewer might ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate (Patton, 2002) (Appendix D). The convenience of a standardized, open-ended question interview is the relative ease of data analysis because all responses align in order. The beauty of the interview guide is the freedom to explore (Patton, 2002).

Respondents to the survey were asked to self-identify if they were willing to meet with the researcher for an individual interview. Of the 76 students who completed the survey, 16 (21%) indicated interest in further conversation. The researcher emailed all 16 on October 10, 2015 to determine continued interest in an interview. Of the original 16, 11 respondents (14.4%) scheduled individual interviews with the researcher beginning November 2 and ending on November 12.

The interviews were conducted in the Academic and Career Advising Center at Keene State College. This is a neutral and familiar location to students. The researcher used QuickTime on a Mac laptop for recording purposes and to better attend to each participant during the interview process. Prior to the start of each interview participants were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix E). The researcher crafted a set of

questions (Appendix D). All questions were answered by all subjects to enable a structure of alignment for data analysis. However, the researcher did ask questions that elucidated or illuminated some answers of the participants (Patton, 2002).

Focus Group

According to Patton (2002) the power of focus groups resides in their being targeted. The topics are narrowly focused usually seeking reactions to a shared experience. As the third method of data collection to address the issue of triangulation the researcher hoped survey responses would lead to a focus group dynamic. The researcher looked closely for athletic affiliations, fraternity and sorority membership, consistent club and organization trends but nothing stood out until an examination of campus jobs occurred. The researcher identified five survey respondents who indicated holding the same campus job from the first semester of freshman year to the senior year.

None of the five students indicated an interest in a one-on-one interview with the researcher so the researcher contacted all by email on October 21 thanking each for their participation in the survey, acknowledging that they did not indicate an interest in further communication with the researcher but highlighting the researcher's interest in a student's experience of holding a campus job for four years. Of the 5 students contacted 3 agreed to meet with the researcher for a focus group on November 19.

The interviews were conducted in the Academic and Career Advising Center at Keene State College. This is a neutral and familiar location to students. Prior to the start of each interview participants were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix E). The researcher recorded the focus group discussion with Quick Time on a Mac laptop. Each participant identified herself before she spoke so transcribing was eased and the

awkwardness of filming the session was avoided. A set of questions were followed (Appendix F) yet the researcher took the liberty to elucidate and illuminate as necessary (Patton, 2002).

Field Notes

The researcher kept field notes containing a description of everything that occurred during the interview that the researcher found noteworthy (Patton, 2002) (Appendix G). This is the time for the researcher's own feelings, reactions to the experience, and reflections about the personal meaning of the interview to be appropriately recorded in keeping with the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology and the incorporation of the researcher's self and biases. The field notes were not part of the data analysis process

Data Storage

All interviews were recorded during the process and transcribed carefully (Cresswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). Similar care was taken for storing data and maintaining the privacy of all participants. Each survey responder was assigned a number and each interview and focus group participant was assigned a pseudonym in an effort to protect their identities. Electronic consent forms were the entry to the survey-without agreeing to participate further entrance to the survey was prohibited. All signed consent forms for the interview and focus group participants are kept in a location off campus.

Two copies were made of each interview and the focus group transcriptions. The open-ended answers to the survey were compiled and two copies were made of this document. The reason for the two copies was to aid in the organization of data. The mechanical process of sorting cards, cutting, and pasting will remain the heart of

qualitative analysis (Patton, 1987). Analyzing qualitative data is a creative process not formulaic. The researcher develops their own system recognizing the intellectual rigor and hard, thoughtful work entailed (Patton, 1987). All hard copies were kept in an off campus location. Electronic copies of data are stored on a password protected laptop or on a thumb drive in the possession of the researcher.

All interviews were held in the Academic and Career Advising Center on campus in the same room. The researcher provided bottled water and small Tootsie Rolls for the interview participants and muffins and coffee for the focus group. Each individual participant was thanked with a small box of local chocolates.

Summary

After a thorough review of qualitative research methods, the researcher determined that hermeneutic phenomenology provided the basis to collect rich and descriptive data for the reasons of why continuously enrolled Keene State College students persisted to senior year. By providing research participants an opportunity to tell their stories of persistence within the context of a shared experience an understanding of persistence at Keene State College is developed.

The premier data for this study was collected from Keene State College students who have been continuously enrolled and have persisted to senior year. Data for this study was collected from four sources: a survey; participant interviews; a focus group; and field notes. Data from the survey was analyzed to determine common topics for the focus groups. Agreement to participate in a subsequent interview was also gleaned from the surveys. Each interview and focus group was recorded. The researcher transcribed each transaction in detail and verbatim to create a complete transcript of each encounter.

Chapter 3 spoke to the data collection method for the study. In Chapter 4 information related to the data organization and analysis will be explored.

Chapter Four – Findings and Data Analysis

Introduction

To determine why continuously enrolled Keene State College students who entered in the Fall of 2012 have persisted to senior year a hermeneutic phenomenology methodology was chosen. The data collection methods were described in Chapter 3. These included a survey, individual interviews, a focus group, and field notes. Field notes were maintained for each interview and focus group participants but were not used in the data analysis process. With this methodology, data from open-ended survey responses, interviews, and a focus group were organized in categories resulting in three themes. This process involved analyzing the data into meaningful segments by assigning names to the segments. The researcher then identified the frequency of each meaningful segment within open-ended survey, interview and focus group responses. The segments were combined into broader categories and then distilled further into themes (Creswell, 2013; Saldana, 2013).

Chapter 4 is organized in the following sections: data organization, data reduction, emerging themes, and limitations.

Data Organization

Survey

Boudah (2011) categorizes surveys within descriptive quantitative research as a tool often used in educational research. Survey methods are generally used to measure attitudes, decisions, needs, behavior, lifestyles, affiliations and/or demographics of the

sample chosen (Boudah, 2011). Descriptive methods have a place in qualitative research as well as quantitative and Bryman (2006) would argue that a survey in qualitative methodology can serve at least two purposes: triangulation where the emphasis is placed on corroboration between quantitative and qualitative data and development where one method (survey) is used to develop and inform other methods.

A survey instrument was included in this study to organize respondents in a way to identify interview and focus group participants and to solicit additional perspectives from a group of students regarding the reasons they have persisted at Keene State College to senior year. Open-ended answers from the survey supported themes from the interviews and focus groups.

Female survey responders far outnumbered male responders at 85% compared to 15%. Four home states were represented among responders: 42% were from Massachusetts, 34% resided in New Hampshire, 14% of responders were from Connecticut, and 10% from New York. One hundred percent of survey responders were of non-Hispanic ethnicity while 88% indicated they were white, 2% American or Alaskan Native, and 10% did not indicate race. Academic majors were evenly divided among the three academic schools in the college with 36% of responders indicating a major in Professional and Graduate Studies, 34% in Sciences and Social Sciences, and 30% in Arts and Humanities.

In addition to this demographic profile Table 9 summarizes the answers to the close-ended questions of the survey respondents. The researcher was interested in responses to questions involving participation in the New Student Orientation (August, 2012), residence in a First Year Parliament or living-learning community, and frequency

of academic advising as often shared experiences of all students at Keene State College. Determining if New Student Orientation, first year living communities, and academic advising impacted the persistence of the students in the fall 2012 cohort is a research question for this study. By examining the quantified answers of the study participants as well as the open-ended responses of survey participants, interview responses, and information from the focus group, the researcher can start to answer this question.

Table 9 *Survey results: close-ended questions*

QUESTION	ANSWER (S)	RESPONSES	PERCENTAGE
Q2: Did you attend New Student Orientation in 2012, the year you started at Keene State College?	Yes, between 75% and 100%	49	64%
	Yes, between 50% and 75%	14	18%
	Yes, less than 50% of the program	11	14%
	No, I did not attend	2	3%
	Total	76	100%
Q4: Did you participate in a First Year Parliament or a living learning community?	No, I did not participate.	62	82%
	Yes.	14	18%
	Total	76	100%
Q6: Do you have a faculty advisor (an official faculty member in your declared major)?	Yes	76	100%
	No	0	0%
	Total	76	100%
Q7: How often do you typically meet with your faculty advisor?	Less than once a semester	17	22%
	Once a semester	27	36%
	More than once a semester	32	42%
	Total	76	100%

Though there are no rules for sampling in qualitative research (Patton, 2002), when using a phenomenological methodology, Creswell (2013) recommends studying between five and 25 subjects and one phenomenon. Of the 76 respondents to the survey

16 students indicated an interest in further conversation. Each of the 16 students was emailed twice to further determine their interest in participating in an interview. Of those 16 students 11 confirmed and interviews were conducted. Per Table 10, the respondents represented four New England states. Of the interview participants three were male and 8 were female; one studied an Arts and Humanities major, five were declared in the school of Professional and Graduate Studies and five in the school of Sciences and Social Sciences. Liberal arts majors (teaching candidates) and double majors were found in the area of Arts and Humanities and Sciences and Social Sciences. The subject's participation in New Student Orientation, first year living communities, and academic advising was pulled from the survey results as this was query of possible persistence in this study. These areas were further explored in the interview.

Table 10 *Individual interviews: participant demographics*

	Major	Gender	Home State	Student Orientation Attendance	First Year Residence	Frequency of faculty advisor meetings	Examples of Involvement	Job
Tammy	Management with economics minor	Female	Massachusetts	50-75%	Holloway Parliament	More than once a semester	Intramural Sports	Campus job for one year/currently works off campus
Jane	Secondary Education and Spanish with minors in math and statistics	Female	New York	75-100%	Holloway Parliament	More than once a semester	Spanish Club, academic honors societies, Global Cultural Club	Resident Assistant, Peer Advisor, Sodexo
Sally	Elementary Education and Psychology	Female	Massachusetts	75-100%	Non thematic housing	Less than once a semester	Track and Field, Cross Country, orientation Leader	Child Development Center, TRIO Programs
Nancy	Psychology with a minor in Substance Abuse and Addictions	Female	New Hampshire	75-100%	Non thematic housing	More than once a semester		
Katie	Safety and Occupational Health	Female	Massachusetts	75-100%	Non thematic housing	Less than once a semester	Recreational soccer, honors society, major's professional organization	Child Development Center, Help Desk, TA/works off campus

Carol	Math	Female	New Hampshire	50-75%	Non thematic housing	More than once a semester	Cross country, track and fired, Mentors in Violence Prevention, Walk-A-Mile-Committee, Math Club	Eco-Reps, R.O.C.K.S
John	Political Science	Male	Massachusetts	Less than 50%	Non thematic housing	More than once a semester	Improvisational Group, campus radio station, undergraduate research	Off campus job
Mark	Communication with a theatre minor	Male	New York	75-100%	Non thematic housing	Once a semester	Debate Club and Alternative Spring Break	Phonathon, Marketing and Communication Department/off campus job
Erica	Elementary education and psychology	Female	New York	75-100%	Non thematic housing	More than once a semester	Sorority, Circle K, Student Government, Students Today-Alumni Tomorrow	Office of Disability Services
Clark	Safety and Occupational Health with a management minor	Male	New Hampshire	75-100%	Non thematic housing	More than once a semester	Student Activities Council, OWL Nation, professional organization for major	SAC Events Coordinator
Alison	Sociology and Holocaust and Genocide Studies with a minor in psychology	Female	Massachusetts	75-100%	Holloway Parliament	Once a semester	Honor societies, Debate Club, American Democracy Project, Student Board of Advisors for Food Services, Beautiful Links, intramural sports	Admission's Tour Guide, Sociology Department

Focus Group

The participants for an on-campus employment focus group were identified because they had been continuously employed within a campus department for four years. These students did not self-select but were recruited by the researcher. Invitations to five students who met the criteria of having held the same work-study, campus job for four years were issued and three students agreed to participate in a focus group. All three participants were female and they represented majors in all three schools of Arts and

Humanities, Professional and Graduate Studies and Sciences and Social Sciences. The jobs the women hold fell under diverse reporting lines within the college structure. Redfern Arts Performing Center is within the School of Arts and Humanities, R.O.C.K.S (Recycling on Campus Keene State) falls within the division of Finance and Planning and the Parking Office is within Student Affairs reinforcing the fact that work-study, campus jobs are experiences that can expose students to numerous opportunities in the college life. For this focus group, the shared experience of persisting students was a long held campus job but the stories of each participant on how this experience mattered were unique (van Manen, 1990). Table 11 provides information about each focus group participant.

Table 11 *On-campus employment focus group: participant demographics*

	Academic Major	Gender	Home State	Student Orientation Attendance	First Year Residence	Frequency of faculty advising meetings	Examples of Involvement	Job
Annie	English literature and secondary education with a writing minor	Female	New Hampshire	75-100%	Non thematic housing	Once a semester	Honor's society	Redfern Performing Arts Center
Veronica	Chemistry with biology minor	Female	Connecticut	75-100%	Non thematic housing	Once a semester	KSC Dance Team	Campus Parking Office
Chelsea	Holocaust and Genocide Studies with minors in geography and German	Female	Massachusetts	75-100%	Non thematic housing	More than once a semester	Honor's society, Holocaust and Genocide Awareness Club	R.O.C.K.S (Recycling on Campus Keene State)

Data Reduction

The researcher reviewed transcripts of the open-ended survey responses, individual interviews, and the focus group looking for repeated comments of the variables and conditions that participants identified as contributing to persistence.

Labeling and establishing these repeated reasons for persistence was the first step in content analysis, which involved identifying coherent and important examples, themes, and patterns in the data (Patton, 1987).

Initially, 18 specific categories were identified during the organization phase of the data review. Those codes included academic major, advising, community connections, faculty and staff contact, residential learning communities, friends, integrating identity, involvement, mattering, motivation, opportunities, orientation, physical space and place, presumed and actual support for success, recognition, support, authentic self and witnessing personal and professional growth.

Table 12 lists the frequency of responses in each of 18 categories. The percentage of responses within each data method is listed as well as a compilation percentage for each category. For this study, if a response rate was above 50% in any one data method (open-ended survey responses, interviews, focus group) the rate was high enough for the researcher to consider the category as a viable reason for persistence and to investigate further the participant's comments about how the variable made a difference. There were areas that were initially identified such as expectations, internships, and intensive academic support that were too narrow to include as a category. The researcher combined intestinal fortitude with motivation to create the single category of motivation.

Table 12 *Frequency of responses within the 18 initial data analysis categories*

	Open Ended Survey Responses (62 unique respondents)	Interviews (11 participants)	Focus Group (3 participants	Total (76 respondents)
Friends	62%	45%	100%	76%
Physical Space and Place	8%	82%	33%	20%
Integrative Identity	16%	100%	100%	31%
Academic Major	29%	82%	33%	37%
Faculty and Staff Contact	55%	90%	100%	62%
Presumed and Actual Support for Success	19%	45%	67%	25%
Mattering	5%	64%	67%	16%
Witnessing Personal and Professional Growth	11%	100%	100%	28%
Motivation	10%	64%	67%	20%
Involvement	34%	64%	0%	37%
Recognition	8%	73%	100%	21%
Support	34%	82%	67%	42%
Community Connection	21%	82%	33%	30%
Opportunities	13%	45%	67%	20%
Authentic Self	0%	64%	0%	9%
Academic Advising	100%	100%	100%	100%
Residential Learning Communities	100%	100%	100%	100%
New Student Orientation	100%	100%	100%	100%

Once the categories were identified, the researcher once again reviewed every transcript for qualitative examples of the experience in the participant's own words. Moustakas (1994) refers to this as phenomenological reduction or horizontaling as an effort to identify all non-overlapping, non-repetitive statements made by the participants involved. Once the frequency of categories were assessed and qualitative statements were identified to support the categories, the researcher distilled the data further (data reduction, Patton, 1987) to begin to connect categories to themes.

Emerging Themes

The researcher identified specific data categories to support and emphasize the connection between experiences and reflections of the participants of this study. The researcher used the definitions of engagement, involvement, and integration provided, respectively by, Kuh, Astin, and Tinto, as a guide. These three concepts were identified in the literature review as the tenets of persistence and retention in a higher education setting. A definition for each theme was adapted from the original so it would better support the evidence from this study and be specific to the persistence of students at Keene State College. The researcher identified categories from the data collection that aligned with those definitions. These seemingly separate foci build to the essence of engagement, involvement, and integration to inform how conditions for persistence can be constructed or strengthened at Keene State College.

Table 13 organizes the original categories of the initial data review within the three emergent themes of engagement, involvement, and integration. A specific category may be relevant to more than one theme but for the purpose of data analysis for

this study the researcher has carefully chosen categories that best support one of the three themes and has aligned them in that manner. Categories were placed in each theme based on the original definition of the theme as defined by the experts. The researcher interpreted the categories to closely replicate the original definitions yet allow for new definitions of engagement, involvement, and integration specific to Keene State College to emerge.

Table 13 *Category and code alignment with emerging themes*

ENGAGMENT	INVOLVEMENT	INTEGRATION
Physical Space	Opportunities	Academic Major
Friends: Social Connectedness	Motivation	Faculty and Staff Contact
Authentic Self	Community Connection	Presumed and actual support for success
	Support	Mattering
	Recognition	Witnessing Personal and Professional Growth
		Integrative Identity

Once the categories culled from the data analysis were organized within the framework of the retention and persistence concepts of engagement, involvement, and integration the researcher could begin to identify qualitative statements from study participants to support the new Keene State College definition for each theme.

As result of thorough data review three new definitions for the themes of engagement, involvement, and integration emerged to identify the conditions and reasons why continuously enrolled Keene State College students from the entering Fall 2012 cohort have persisted to senior year. Answers to the question “why have you stayed” focus on the necessity of being **engaged** by and to the institution, **involved** in the campus community resulting in clear and intentional **integration** of both academic and social

lives. Not only do these themes reflect the seminal research of this study they present a rich fabric of what it means to be an engaged, involved, and integrated member of the Keene State College community and how those domains can increase persistence.

Evidence of thematic connections

As the themes of engagement, involvement, and integration were identified and defined for Keene State College the data was reviewed again to determine if the themes were apparent in each of the data collection methods. Table 14 illustrates that thematic connections are present in open-ended survey responses, interview responses and focus group responses. Participant statements for each theme are matched with each method of data collection. A detailed explanation of each theme replete with participant comments follows Table 14.

Table 14 *Evidence of thematic connections from data collection methods*

	ENGAGEMENT	**INVOLVEMENT**	**INTEGRATION**
OPEN-ENDED SURVEY RESPONSES	I not only realized my education is so crucial for my knowledge but to help others get this knowledge. It helped me realize that I have a purpose to express unto others the many things I have learned in my education. It also really helped me to see the big picture in things (#28 Witnessing Personal and Professional Growth)	Pumpkin Fest, 2014: The experience was tragic but resulted in the Keene community coming together and for me learning to appreciate the campus and the town on a whole other level. (#50 – Community Connection)	Going to the film festival every year has contributed to me staying at Keene State. My best friend is a film major and I love getting to see her work very year. I also love seeing the music videos that everyone worked so hard to create. I like the sense of community everyone feels watching the music videos and cheering on everyone's hard work. I know that many of the film majors are stressing out to their projects finished and it's nice appreciating their work ad their artistic integrity.(#20 – Integrated Identity).
INTERVIEW RESPONSES	What do I do? So I called my sister-what do you do when your only friend transfers? And she said, OK you need to put	Ya, that's what kept me here. I had hope for the RA job and I got accepted and it just seems to be a good niche and that has	So I knew I had to pay back my loan and I just wanted to bring change. I know it's just not me. I've heard of so many

	yourself out there. So I talked to my roommates and I said I want to do track with you guys. And I said, I'm not good at it, I don't necessarily love it but I need to make new friends. So, they were like, OK and they brought me to the coach and we talked about me doing track and that weekend they brought me to hang out with all the girls on the track team and, I was actually talking with a girl about it this past week, like I showed up and they treated me like I had been there the whole time…all of the girls did and I couldn't be more grateful for that.(Sally - Involvement).	become my niche on campus (Jane – support).	other people who couldn't go to Keene State College or any college because of money and that was, like, irritating. Free public education all your life and now to have a good life you need a college degree but you can't afford it so have fun working at McDonald's? It just didn't add up. S I started looking into ways to change it and I found the Dr. Pepper Challenge (Jane – Mattering).
FOCUS GROUP RESPONSES	It really is a comfortable place to be. You make friends. Like I met my best friend at the Redfern my sophomore year and we're like attached at the hip. (Annie – Friends and Social Connectedness)	My boss asked me if I was interested in a promotion. I didn't have to apply (Chelsea – Recognition)	The people I have met here pushed me into becoming a better student and have shown me how far I can push myself. (Veronica – Presumed and actual support for success)

The researcher wanted to emphasize the importance of the categories identified through data analysis by making sure that each of the three data collection methods touched upon a majority of those categories. Table 14, above, illustrates those occurrences. Supporting statements for each category within the three themes of engagement, involvement, and integration will continue to strengthen the connection of the data to the conditions for persistence at Keene State College.

Theme 1: Engagement

Introduction

For the purpose of this study engagement is defined as the outcome when a student is anchored to the college through connection. Evidence from data analysis of the

three data collection methods indicate that place, friends, and allowing for the emergence of authentic self are important to being anchored by connection. Keene State College students attest that the physical place, making friends, and allowing for the recognition of their authentic self are essential to developing a sense of belonging to signify engagement has occurred. By reviewing the categories identified from the data analysis, the researcher determined that an immediate attachment to the physical space of Keene State College anchors the student to the environment. Feeling comfortable, safe, and being able to "see myself" here is indicative that the student has developed a connection. Once that connection is made, friends and social connectedness maintains the engagement especially if the initial feeling of "seeing myself" here translates into an environment where students can be their true selves.

Sense of Place

For participants in this study, the physical space of Keene State College was important as evidenced in open-ended survey responses, interviews and focus groups. Based upon the researcher's criteria of a 50% or higher frequency of response rate in any one data collection method, the interviews allowed for a closer look at the meaning of place as 81% or 9 of the 11 respondents mentioned the significance of place. Interviews were followed by a 33% response from the focus group (1 participant) and an 8% response from the survey (5 respondents).

Participants in this study clearly delineated their comments between the attraction of the physical landscape and their almost immediate attachment and the connection to the campus and Keene communities. For the purpose of this study place attachment was viewed as an anchor that assisted in engaging students to the college contributing to

persistence. The following personal comments support place as an important entity to engagement and persistence.

- So, there's a feeling, a sense of safety and security and this is a place I would like to live. And also, just like, I think, personally, I loved the look of Appian Way (main walkway through campus) and how Appian Way was the main road that led to many other roads. And then, I just thought, there's the balance of building and balance of landscape. They had Fiske Quad and I saw everyone sitting on Fiske Quad and I was, like, oh my god, I can't wait to sit on Fiske Quad with my friends and things like that. I just kind of got a positive feeling and I got a positive vision of what my college experience would be on that campus (Mark)
- I think the campus embraced me. I felt like I was home (Clark),
- This really feels like home (Veronica).
- Our campus is beautiful and Keene State offers so much. It made me want to stay here (#32).

The physical aspect of the campus provided an opportunity for new students to visualize themselves as a member of Keene State College. The physical landscape continued to be an anchoring mechanism for study participants.

Social Connectedness and Belonging

The importance of friends was the fourth most frequent comment identified in data analysis. An overall response rate of 76% was recorded for all three data methods. All the focus group participants referred to the importance of friends in persistence (100% or

3 out of 3 participants), 45% (5 out of 11) of interview participants reference the importance of friends, and 62% of survey respondents made reference to friends (39 of 62 respondents). The statements below support the importance of friends to the initial engagement to Keene State College and to continued persistence.

- I probably wouldn't have stayed if it weren't for my friends (# 80),
- I met my best friend at Keene State freshman year and she has encouraged me to be a better person and I am very thankful for that friendship (#32),
- I have made incredible friends here (Clark),
- It's definitely the friendships that I've made (Chelsea),
- My friend has been there for me since the beginning. She helped me find myself and accept who I am. She has been there for me through all the good and the bad times. She has been my number one supporter (#13),
- My friends have integrated me into feeling a part of KSC (#86),

Retention data is largely linked to the first year of a college student's experience. Factors that have been identified as those important to retention (measured from first to second year) such as peer groups are those that continue to matter in persistence to senior year as evidenced by the responses of the first semester seniors in this study.

Authentic Self

The final category in engagement was evidence that participants felt their authentic self or true self was respected at Keene State College. The researcher identified this as a component in engagement and an outcome of the statement that focused on the

student's ability to "see themselves" at Keene State College upon assessing the physical plant. Authentic self was an area that was not overwhelmingly supported by all study participants but important enough in the interviews to include in further analysis as it exceeded the researcher's 50% frequency threshold for investigation. None of the survey respondents or focus group participants mentioned authentic self but 64% (7 of 11) participants in the interviews referred to this.

- It's just kind of made me like more…this will sound cheesy…like more of the person I am. Like I'm not afraid to say, no, I don't want to go out and drink tonight. I don't need to do that every night. Not like, hey, I'm going to stay and write this paper. No, I'm not going to lunch with you because all you're going to do is sit on your phone and I don't need a friend like that. You know, it's just made me more confident in the issues I'm in and to not go with the flow (Jane),
- College has given me a voice because, everyone dreads middle school but middle school was actually the worst time of my life and high school helped me transition away from that a little more. College has been kind of the perfect medium of that. I don't go with the flow. I don't go with just what other people say but I also have met some of the greatest people I know will always be there if I need them. It's definitely given me that sense of you can do it and you can do this by yourself but know that you have the backing of others so that's how it has changed me (Erica).

With an anchor in place forged by the physical space of the campus, the recognition of the importance of friends, and the respect for who you are, students are introduced into the campus community and begin the foundation that results in persistence. Involvement, as the second theme in this study, is what enhances and expands the student's engagement to Keene State by providing opportunities, channeling self-motivation, creating the avenue for community connections and recognizing a student's efforts.

Theme 2: Involvement

Introduction

For the purpose of this study involvement refers to those components of college life the student is actively tied or connected to. Involvement as an activity as well as persistence theory was deemed important by study participants. Of the total study, 37% identified involvement as important including 34% of survey (21 of 62) responders and 64% of interview participants (7 of 11). Involvement, as an activity, was not as clearly evident in the focus group responses. The data from this study indicates that becoming involved includes availability of opportunities, motivation to access the opportunities, a community that encourages involvement, support and recognition of students demonstrating involvement.

Opportunities

Keene State prides itself on providing numerous and varied opportunities for student involvement. In the fall of 2014, the College offered 132 clubs and organizations and the number continues to grow (personal communication Jennifer Ferrell, Director of Involvement, 12/8/2014). Recognition of those opportunities was cited by 20% of all

study responders. The importance of opportunities as a component of involvement and subsequently, persistence, was stated by 66% (2 of 3) focus group responders, 45% (5 of 11) interview participants, and 13% (8 of 62) open-ended survey responders. Statements from study participants assist in illustrating the opportunities available at Keene State College.

- There's stuff to do around here. There's always something going on (Nancy),
- Keene's opportunities that they have for students are too much. There's so many opportunities where sometimes I have to take a step back and say I'm still a student (Erica),
- Get involved and take every opportunity you can because it's a once in a lifetime thing (Clark),
- Just the fact of having a stable job that I know I'm welcomed back to every year and knowing that I have that income to help me through is why I stayed (Veronica),
- I'm president of the English Honors Society so a lot of things have stemmed from the confidence that I've gained at the Redfern. So, I would thank the Redfern for sort of binging me out of that. I know I can be a leader if I have to so it's been really fun, actually, to find that out about myself through the job (Annie),
- I take my job, granted I do it everywhere, I take my job outside. I just take my job to the next level and, umm, it just, I don't know, it's always on my mind and has become a huge part of who I am

> and has definitely shaped my experience at Keene like I couldn't imagine (Chelsea).

For several of the study participants, opportunities came in the form of a campus job that impacted their persistence. For others it was the knowledge that Keene State College provided many opportunities for them to get involved

Motivation

The researcher combined intestinal fortitude which was categorized as "I'm not a quitter", "I had no choice", and "it was too late to transfer" with clear statements of motivation for a combined category of motivation. Motivation is what kept students involved enough with the environment to persist. The compiled percentage of study participants who identified motivation as important to persistence was 20%. Focus group participants found motivation most important at 66% (2 of 3), followed by interview subjects at 64% (7 of 11), and finally survey responders at 10% (6 of 62).

- When I was struggling with being homesick my first year those fitness classes really helped me get my mind off things (# 77),
- I'm really the first person attending college. I don't know, I kind of think that made a little push for me to go because, one, there's no options in B (hometown). There's absolutely nothing and I knew I wanted to get a degree in something and, ahh, it just, I don't know, it felt right to come. To go (Nancy),
- My first Involvement Fair I walked up to the Student Gov table and they were like, oh, like do you want to run for a position? I

> said yes. And they said what position do you want to run for? And I said president (laughter). I don't run for anything else because what else do I have to lose? I don't know anyone at the school, I need to know some people so I was president of my class for the first two years and I quickly got enveloped in every other organization I could (Erica).

Motivation was evident in other comments from participants. One interview participant was motivated by the idea that a college degree would mitigate financial stress. Another was motivated by the fact that he was now in an environment where he was recognized for his own skills and not, as he thought, by those of his friendship with another student.

Community Connections

An important by-product to involvement is developing a sense of community. As a member of a community the sense of belonging critical to engagement is reinforced. This category included both on-campus community and the larger Keene, New Hampshire community. Study participants were clear to delineate their comments about community either as their immediate surroundings or the greater Keene, New Hampshire environs. Of the interview participants 82% commented on the importance of community (9 of 11), followed by 33% of the focus group (1 of 3) and a 21% response rate from survey responders (13 of 62) for a total of a 30% response rate of all study participants.

- So, I think it's that kind of you know one person then you know five other people and then you know 25 other people. That's been really pivotal for me getting involved in all these things (Alison),
- Keene State College has tailored a lot of their programing and the overall student experience to know that not everyone in the college is the same (Mark),
- We just, ya, we just create an accepting environment for people (John).

The college's close proximity to the city of Keene creates opportunities and tensions (Edes, Fox & Kanno-Young, 2014). According to one survey responder the aftermath of the Pumpkin Festival in 2014 was a primary reason why she stayed at the college:

- All the town meetings and the campus meetings with the President made me feel even closer with my community and my fellow students (#23)
- Being a citizen here in Keene, N.H., umm, I have realized that everything I am doing in a positive way is affecting the town and also everything you did in a negative way is affecting the town. I am so fortunate to go to a school that, umm, is not just a town with a college in it. It really is a college town. We're so lucky to have the town just as they are lucky to have us (Erica),
- Ya, we're in a college town and we're in college but these people have lived here way longer than us who are only here for a short

> period of time. You show more respect and obviously you get it if you give it. I've noticed that a lot (Tammy).

Involvement results in a connection to the campus or the city contributing to the persistence of participants of this study.

Support

Though involvement was repeatedly cited as an important reason why study participants stayed at Keene State College support is necessary to incorporate the component of involvement into a busy life. Support was cited as important to persistence by 42% of the study participants. The necessity of support was identified by 34% of survey responders (21 of 62), 82% of interview participants (9 of 11), and 67% of the focus group (2 of 3). In describing the importance of support, participants responded:

- I struggled a lot my freshman year to figure out what I wanted to do and what degree I wanted to obtain, whether or not college was even for me. I think the support of my family helped keep me here at Keene State. I also had only a handful of friends before I joined Delta Xi Phi (sorority), now I meet new people all the time and always have someone to talk to. I just think support in general is vital to staying in school for four years and coming out with a degree (# 19).
- Especially our team went through a lot of changes. And there have been times that I didn't think I would be able to manage everything. (researcher: How did you do that?) Just the support of

> other people who were in the same situation and being able to go home and vent and know that somebody else understood (Carol).

Several study participants wrote about the community formed by the KSC Dance Team. A survey responder describes the experience:

- Being a part of an organization where everyone is supporting and cheering one another is unbelievably rewarding. I have never been part of such a strong family-oriented group. These girls change the lives of so many people myself included (#36).

Another participant talked about the support of a peer:

- The one person who has honestly allowed me to be successful has got to be one of my best friends, N.Y. We clicked instantly when we moved on campus. We both loved our RA and I think she could tell when I was still adjusting, like, I wanted to break out of my shell but I didn't know how. So, N. would, legit every Thursday night, would come on and bang on my door and wouldn't stop banging until I opened it and then she would say we're going to SAC – Student Activities Council (Clark).

Others found support elsewhere:

- My first year here the seniors were very accepting (John),
- My parents back me 100% whatever I do (Nancy),
- My sister who pushed me to reach beyond my limits (#70),
- My amazing friends (# 49 and #52).

Erica summarized the importance of support, "I have learned, and this has been like a 3-year lesson, that I can't do everything on my own. I've learned I need to use those around me to help."

Recognition

Support is necessary for students to incorporate involvement in their lives. The encouragement, reassurance, and urging of friends and family is often what it takes for a student to step out and try something new. Of all the participants in this study, 21% found that external recognition was important to fuel the continued momentum of involvement. The importance of recognition was cited by 8% of survey responders (5 of 62), 73% of interview participants (8 of 11), and 100% of the focus group (3 of 3). A survey responder wrote about winning an academic award for excellence in American Studies:

- This reminded me that what I'm doing does make a difference and that people take notice of hard work. It encouraged me to keep going and to finish out my senior year strong (#59),
- To finally be recognized (by the President of Keene State College) for all this hard work that I was putting not just into my parliament but my students and to meet all these higher up people I would never have a chance to meet. That was definitely a high point (Jane),
- I guess maybe just the sense of accomplishment and we all work really hard and it's nice to see it payoff (Carol).

Recognizing students for their efforts was valuable to many study participants. Recognition often translates into being seen as a contributing member of a community. As students became personally anchored to the Keene State College community, engaging in their environment, involvement offered the opportunities and the recognition to enhance the experience of being a Keene State College student. Integration, the third theme in this study, brings the personal, social, and co-curricular life of the student together with the academic persona.

Theme 3: Integration

Introduction

For the purpose of this study integration occurs when a student's curricular or academic life intersects with their co-curricular or social life. At Keene State College intentional integration of these two student domains is most often accomplished through academic departments so that the categories that fall under integration in this study include academic major, faculty and staff contact, presumed and actual support for success, mattering, and witnessing personal and professional growth.

An integrated identity was developed when the two domains of student life intersected; the academic and the social. Testimonies of integration occurring were shared by 31% of all study participants. All of the interview and focus group participants (100%) cited examples of integration in their Keene State College experience followed by 16% of survey responders (10 of 62). Descriptions of integrative experiences were abundant among study participants:

- I've gotten good connections and networking through the college so its bettered my career and helped me move on to wherever I'm going to go (Tammy),
- Just having those different experiences throughout the class was great instead of just being there and taking tests. Going and listening and kind of like applying (Nancy)
- To be a student here in academic fields and in external activities – there's so much to offer and people are always willing to help you (Clark),
- I go to conferences and I go to other schools and other places because of the organizations that I have joined from Keene State College, and, umm, and just sometimes that whole separation between…which is good because you're a student but you're an adult student (Erica),
- I've had an education that is open-minded and doesn't look at just theories, practicalities. They have great highlights and foundations of that but they also show you how you can implement this into society and into real life (Mark),
- Being able to attend the elementary school was an amazing experience for me because it allowed me to really get into my field and see if it was right or me (#41),
- Going to New Orleans and presenting to about 100 people on this topic (free community college tuition) and it was just unbelievable

> because I kept kind of stopping and thinking back to a couple of years before when I was sort of lost and not really in anything. And now I'm presenting to hundreds of people from all over the country at this conference. So, it was just a really neat turning point and it was, like, when we were on the panel I kept thinking am I really here? Am I supposed to be here kind of moment. Well, ya, I've worked really hard and I've gotten involved in this organization and I know what I'm talking about with this topic (Alison).

The integrated student develops from a firm foundation in the academic world of the college. Students attended conferences, visited schools, heard from guest speakers, and participated in service trips to enhance their learning.

Academic Major

A strong connection with academic programs at Keene State College was supported by 37% of study participants. Interview participants led the way with 82% naming the significance of an academic major (9 of 11). In addition, 33% of the focus group (1 of 3) and 29% of survey responders (18 of 62) identified academic major as important to persistence. Academic major comments were apparent in pre-admission or early in their matriculation as evidenced by these statements:

- I knew they had a good education program. So, I knew I wanted to be a teacher so that kind of confirmed why I should go here (Sally),

- So, ahh, I don't know. I just felt when I started taking political science courses, I felt really accepted right into the program almost immediately (John),
- Taking a Women and Gender Studies course helped me decide what major I wanted to pursue (#55),
- Why am I compromising something that's a passion of mine? I always thought of theatre as a hobby that I loved outside of the classroom. I realized why limit myself and give up on this because I didn't get into musical theatre schools? Why don't I just take up a minor and incorporate that? (Mark),
- Every single class I have taken at Keene State, umm, starting with the first semester that was picked during Orientation has helped me in my major (Erica),
- I always knew I wanted to be a teacher. I think I was ten and my camp director said, ya, my daughter is going to Keene State College to become a teacher. And I said, oh, that's cool. She said it's, like, the best teaching school in New Hampshire and I said – I'm going to go there. And it had my major. It was in my range. I still love New Hampshire so I applied. I got accepted and that was it. That was that (Jane).

Identification and strong commitment to academic programs were articulated throughout the four years as well.

- I've learned to love things I'm doing and being in college your major's what you want to do, hopefully, so you should be taking classes you enjoy and that helps (Sally),
- I really love research…and I think I loved the Holocaust and Genocide Studies major so much because it is so versatile and everybody over there has a second major or minor. Some tracks are really looking at…I think we all look at it through the specific lens of what the other major or minor is (Alison),
- After I took Math 171 for education majors, my teacher was like, wow, you're really good at this. Do you think you want to be a math teacher? And I said actually, ya, I think I do and so I decided to do math education and after doing math education I wanted to narrow it down to just math (Carol),
- The class size and the materials I was learning made all the difference. I was unsure of college until I dove into my major and fell in love with my classes (#86),
- I thought high school was a repressive thing implemented by society to repress children. I was not a fan of school at all and coming to Keene State College over the past these four years I realized I love to learn and that what I was learning in high school, the reason why I didn't like high school was because I wasn't learning things I was passionate about and it was very restrictive (Mark).

Study participants identified academic majors as a reason to attend Keene State College as well as a reason to persist. Comments ranged from the life-long dream of being a teacher, to discovering a major that was unique to Keene State College, to realizing that learning was a passion.

Faculty and Staff Contact

Because most integrated experiences (academic and co-curricular collaborations) originate in academic affairs, faculty and staff contact is very important. Participants in this study have developed deep and meaningful relationships with faculty and staff. Of all the study participants, 62% cited faculty and staff contact as important to persistence. Among survey responders 55% spoke to this area (34 of 62), 90% of interview participants (10 of 11), and 100% of the focus group (3 of 3).

- Meg Henning (Health Science faculty) is a strong influence on my continuing education here at Keene State. She always strives to be the best for her students and genuinely cares about our success throughout each semester. She is extremely helpful whether it be in the classroom with something we don't understand or out of the classroom with internships, resumes, and life in general (#4),
- The Safety teachers made me stay and love my major. They are so dedicated and love what they do. They always make you feel welcome and help you with anything (#18),

- Dr. Jennings has made me love psychology even more than when I started at KSC. She is so passionate about what she does and she makes me excited to see what the future holds for me (#38),
- And Dr. Landau (Communication Department), she's probably one of the reasons I stayed at KSC. She's an incredible woman. I love what she stands up for and I love how she's so open and she's pushy about what she believes in and I think it's very admirable for women to be that outspoken and she doesn't take crap (Mark),
- Professor Cuper (Education Department) is an incredible educator who has inspired me to be the best teacher I can be. She definitely motivated me to go to class, put in the effort, and to genuinely care about educators. I had her as a professor for multiple years throughout my time at KSC and she is certainly an asset to the college (#20),
- Umm, certain people have just grabbed me at the right time. When I wanted a first chance Aaron (Residential Life) grabbed me and put me on his staff. The next time, when I was so fed up with the math department, Proffe (Spanish Department) grabbed me and he was so awesome and so welcoming and just this excited person for Spanish. I can't think of transferring and taking more time but I wouldn't go because Pru (Education Department) is so amazing. And, like, I know I can rely on her. So it's just been certain people that have, ya, exactly have gravitated to me at the right time (Jane),

- I sort have this friendship with them (campus employers) and I know I can count on them because they can count on me (Annie),
- So, I had my meeting with Liz (Admissions) and I mean you walk into her office and she's so unintimidating and has such a personable way about her. So, I said I love you and I want to work for you and I've pretty much been in her office every day since. She's basically my life advisor (Alison),
- I think my high point is meeting with Mark (TRIO Programs) every week. He helps me with, like, how to approach different things. Different stuff like that. My role with it is just listening to him and what he has to say. Intensely, just taking everything he says and applying it and if there are some things I don't agree with I don't take it to heart (Nancy),
- You forget, sometime, to say thank you. I feel like I sound like my mom here…I think that's one of the biggest things because we need to realize that we are all incredibly grateful to be here and a big part of that is the staff and faculty of Keene State College (Erica).

Staff and, primarily, faculty played a critical role in the persistence of participants in this study. Faculty are not only teachers but advisors, mentors, and, in some cases, friends. Staff are viewed as supportive in helping to navigate the larger college experience.

Faculty and staff contact, within the theme of integration, is specific to academic pursuits. Within the theme of involvement, support was also cited as a larger entity including college personnel, peers, family, and additional entities. Presumed or actual support for success is an area that transcends all three of the themes.

Presumed or Actual Support for Success

Coupled with the connections of support, guidance, and mentoring study participants have made with faculty and staff, is the frequent refrain of presumed or actual support for success. This differs from a singular connection between a student and college personnel and resembles more an institutional safety net, with a universal "they", that allows for risk taking and manifests as mattering that will be discussed next. Different from the tangible support offered on page 135, presumed support is an unspoken understanding that the college and those who work for the college will not let a student fail. Of the interview and focus group participants 45% and 67%, respectively (5 of 11 and 2 of 3), cited this occurrence as evident followed by 19% of survey responders (12 of 62) accounting for 25% of all study participants.

- They go out of their ways to help you and push you to success (#18),
- But they all want to see you bloom and it's like when you struggle they're willing to help you any way they can because they want to see everyone succeed (Clark),
- It's kind of like when you leave high school, professors won't help you but I've never had that problem here. Everyone is willing to

see you pass and they want to see you succeed. It's not like they want to fail you (Tammy),

- Ya, but no definitely, it helps and made me feel like they're wanting us to get a job and helping us succeed (Katie),
- I felt that in all my classes I had professors who wanted to see me succeed. They challenged me but definitely were there for help and support even outside of our class. I know that whenever I have a problem or am struggling I can feel comfortable to talk to them (#41),
- Once I found the RA nook and found you don't have to drink every weekend and you can focus on your studies and people are here to back you up that was much more…(Jane),
- I think that the relationship I have with her is the best I've had at any job really. I think that I appreciate the way she understands that when I am here I'm sort of a student first if something were to come up (Annie).

The participants spoke about a caring environment as evidenced by the presumed and actual support for success. In some conversations students were unable to provide evidence that "all professors want to see you bloom" but instead had a felt sense that this is what happened at Keene State College. This sense of support translates to mattering. What was noted is that mattering was important when extended to the individual participant yet just as important when a participant had the opportunity to demonstrate mattering to others.

Mattering

"Mattering refers to our belief, whether right or wrong, that we matter to someone else. This belief acts as a motivator" (Shlossberg, 1989, p 7). Mattering factored as an important variable for persistence to 16% of the study participants. Instances of mattering were mentioned by 67% of the focus group (2 of 3), 64% of the interview participants (7 of 11), and 5% of the survey responders (3 of 62). Study participants demonstrated that mattering is cyclical. When a student feels they matter, they, in turn, extend mattering to others

- Wow. I can impact one person. Not only has Tasha passed something on to me but I have the gift to pass along to someone else (Clark),
- The friends that I made in the education major are friends that I will have for the rest of my life. It made me feel a part of a bigger picture. My role mattered and people depended on me (# 56),
- I was a T.A (Teacher's Assistant) because of the T.A. who helped me out and I wanted to help other students so I took Safety Awareness and I just graded papers. But I was there if people wanted more understanding because I wanted to help students (Katie),
- When you're younger you aren't really sure how you can move forward or how you're going to be later on in life. Even looking back at graduating from high school I was just like, whatever, just going to college-not a big deal. But now I'm graduating from

> college and what am I going to do after this? How am I going to do things that will impact more than just myself? And I guess that I feel I could influence more than just a small group of people at this point. From doing orientation, from being in a classroom, just seeing the smile on a kid's face or, hey, finally learning something and knowing that could impact me more than one person (Sally).

In this study, to matter has provided meaning to the integrated experience of the academic and co-curricular life of the college student. Efforts make a difference not only to the individual's life and to that of others.

Witnessing Personal and Professional Growth

Growth in both personal and professional domains was cited by 25% of the study participants. All interview and focus group participants recognized that change has occurred in who they are since entering Keene State College in 2012 (100%). Of the survey responders 11% talked about change (7 of 62). Adopting the best practice of integrating academic and co-curricular experiences with the opportunity to reflect and incorporate has been an important reason why students have stayed at Keene State College.

- They (faculty) have helped me understand that I will not always know the answers at once but that is the point of my college experience, to learn. Both my advisors and a few recognizable

teachers have just given me confidence and made me feel like I was on the right path (# 28),

- I think in college, like, this is your chance to grow as a person and I feel like freshman to senior year, I'm not the student I was freshman year and my experiences in the community and in my academics have really shaped me into a more mature person and more conscious person that I am today (Mark),
- I am almost 100% different then I was as a senior in high school. Umm, my grades and over all participation has changed drastically in classes. Maybe it's just because I'm doing things I enjoy, that I like. I would tell myself to just be dedicated cuz that's how I've been since I've been here (Carol),
- So, I guess I care more now? Umm, I guess I'm more attached to my work and I want to discover things now. And understand how to learn I guess which might be part of that. I actually, I really care about Political Science and I think it's important and I take pride in that (John),
- But now I want to understand it, I want to. This is something I'm doing for the rest of my life and I'm paying a lot of money for it. I've had three internships so I think I have more of an understanding of a lot of different things (Katie),
- A student in my class talked about how he had schizophrenia and after hearing what he had gone through it changed my view on

> everything. This experience really changed the way I look at people. It made me realize that you never really know what someone is struggling with just by looking at them. I've learned from this class that psychology is so important because it lets us help people in so many different ways. Definitely, I have learned that anyone can do anything if they really want (#38).

Personal and professional growth incorporates what practical experience brings to the learning environment and has been important to Keene State College students as they look toward transitioning from college to life beyond Keene State.

- This is all kind of like the real world; a mirror kind of thing (Chelsea),
- I'm kind of dorky but I'm at that point in my life where I like going to these meetings and get so excited by showing my opinions and having my input in all these different places. I think of this kind of as my job (Alison),
- College has shown me how to get an amazing education. I'm involved in so many clubs. I've changed and developed into the man my mom wants me to be (laughter). I've taken on opportunities; I've gone out of my way to help others. It's really formed me into this fun loving individual that I want to be and I want people to see me as that. Getting my voice out there like, hey, I matter, too (Clark).

Through data analysis, the researcher identified 18 categories that described the factors, variables, and conditions that have contributed to the persistence of continuously enrolled Keene State College students to their senior year. The three themes of engagement, involvement, and integration are primary to the persistence of Keene State College students. In answering the question "why have you stayed?" study participants offered reasons that allied with being an engaged and active member of the college community living a life that blended the curricular and co-curricular experiences of the institution.

New Student Orientation, Residential Living Communities, Academic Advising

There are three primary research questions for this study. In the first part of Chapter 4 the researcher discussed the factors, variables, or conditions that have contributed to the persistence of continuously enrolled members of the 2012 entering cohort at Keene State College. These factors emerged as answers to the second research question: why have you stayed? The third question asked how the shared experiences of New Student Orientation, first year residential learning communities, and academic advising impacted persistence. These three variables have been identified in the literature review as contributing to persistence primarily due to the increased potential of interacting with faculty which is an important connection to persistence (Stevenson, Buchanon & Sharpe, 2006) and were selected because Keene State College has devoted a great deal of attention to these areas through programming, task forces, planning committees, dedicated funding for a new residence hall, and positions.

New Student Orientation

For the new class entering Keene State College in the fall of 2012 New Student Orientation was a pre-semester, residential program for five days in August prior to semester start. The program coordinator hired 45 orientation leaders to guide and support new students through a series of programs and events sponsored by both academic and student affairs and Residential Life. Program attendance was not mandatory.

All participants in this study (100%) responded to the question about attendance at New Student Orientation. Of the participants in this study responding to the survey 64% attended between 75-100% of New Student Orientation, 18% attended between 50-75%, 14% attended less than 50%, and 3% of respondents did not attend the program. Responses of interview and focus group participants are embedded within the overall response analysis. Of the interview participants, 8 attended 75-100% of the program, two attended 50-75%, and one attended less than 50%. All three of the focus group members attended between 75-100% of New Student Orientation.

Participant comments fell into three general areas: making friends, orientation leaders, and programming. The most important connection was noted by the number of responses regarding making friends and meeting orientation leaders. Programming, for far fewer respondents, was important.

Making friends

- I met, like, three of my close friends were in my group and I've been friends with them ever since (Tammy),
- I only knew my roommates so it was a place where I met people and it's actually funny because I still say hi to the people I met (Katie),

- I met two friends during Orientation who were amazing (Jane),
- I think some of my best memories of everyone coming together it happened during Orientation week when there was nobody else here and none of us knew what we were doing (Alison).

Meeting orientation leaders

- OK, so, Bonnie was my orientation leader and I still stay in contact with her-Orientation Group 2. And she helped us, my career so much. Orientation didn't seem like a job because of how she approached it (Erica),
- I think over the years I'm more chill and I'm not as uptight and I think I got that from my o leader, Stefan (Clark),
- I think the small group being split up really helped me to have one person to connect with and ask questions to, the orientation leader. So, I feel that really helped me out. I don't remember the different events that went on (Nancy).

Programming

- I felt it was important because it gave me an overview of the school and once the Orientation was over I knew where a lot of things were on campus. I knew where resources were (Mark),
- What I recall is the only one I didn't go to was the play (No Zebras, No Excuses-sexual assault/harassment) and I kind of wish I did. I recall just getting more familiar with the campus (Katie),

- I actually decided to do No Zebras after seeing it. I said this is awesome. I want to do No Zebras so I did (Carol),
- So I guess orientation kept me going to things, like I was staying involved and I think if we didn't have that I would have just sat in my room and cried whereas I could be upset in my room and then go and interact. Be forced to interact. So, I guess those two weeks really forced me to stay rather than to want to stay. It was definitely like you've got to be here (Sally).

New Student Orientation is a vehicle for the development of friends which is important to the engagement of a student at Keene State College.

First Year Learning Communities

Residential learning communities provide students opportunities to access academic services such as tutoring, advising, study groups, interact with faculty on an informal basis, and experience sustained interaction with peers (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). For study participants, a residential learning community was offered their first year in the only physically accessible first year hall, Holloway Hall. Community housing was thematically organized, co-facilitated by a faculty or staff advisor and a residential assistant. Participating students indicated their theme preference on their housing application. These learning communities are called parliaments. All participants in this study (100%) responded to the question about first year residential housing. Of the survey respondents for this study 18% indicated participating in a parliament in the first year. Responses of interview and focus group participants are embedded within the overall response analysis. Of the interview participants, three lived in Holloway parliaments and

8 lived in non-thematic housing. All three of the focus group members lived in non-thematic housing.

Important to residential living and persistence is the link of learning to living. For the students of the fall 2012 cohort a living-learning community included thematic housing. Though study participants provided favorable comments about living on campus, theme housing, as evidenced by the Holloway parliaments, was not as favorably assessed.

First year housing

- Freshman year in **Monadnock** was great. The tight knit community was awesome (Clark),
- I did actually like **Randall**. I had one roommate I picked and then we had a random one (Katie),
- We became really tight with everyone that was on my floor **(Carle).** I'm still really good friends with most of the people who lived there (Tammy),
- It was a real small community because it's small. It's such a small dorm. When I joined a sorority I knew those girls and I was comfortable with them already because of **Fiske** and the environment (Erica).

Holloway parliament community

- No, ahh, my whole parliament, our RA told us, was the trouble parliament because you could smell alcohol walking down (Jane),

- Ya, I don't really know how they put us together. That wasn't even one of my three choices (John),
- I have no idea how I ended in there. I must have picked it but I really wanted to live in Holloway so I must have just picked that. I was really looking at an art major so OK sounds good. Umm, my roommate was an athlete. I don't know how she got in there and my other roommate was an acting major so I guess that made sense. It was a really cool group of people and I really have the bet memories being there (Alison).

The compelling nature of residential living appears to be the opportunity to make friends and develop community and less about pursuing a thematic interest.

Academic Advising

Academic advising is an essential element in the success and persistence of postsecondary students (NACADA, 2006a). Keene State College has struggled for years to establish a comprehensive advising plan. When this group of study participants entered the college in 2012 each student was referred to an academic department chair depending on their educational goal or, if undecided, assigned a professional advisor from the Academic and Career Advising Center. How each academic department interacted with their educational goal advisees was different but many students were without faculty advising until they formally declared a major.

At the time of this study participants, as seniors, are connected to faculty in different ways than those of first year students but comments on advising cover the spectrum. All

participants in this study (100%) responded to the question about the frequency of faculty academic advising. Of the survey respondents 22% met with their faculty advisor less than once a semester, 36% met with their advisor once a semester, and 42% met more than once a semester. Responses of interview and focus group participants are embedded within the overall response analysis. Of the interview participants, two met with their advisor less than once a semester, two met with their advisor once a semester, and 7 met with their advisor more than once a semester. Of the focus group members, two met with their advisor once a semester and one met with her advisor more than once a semester.

- I was really disappointed with the way advising went my freshman year because I wasn't given an advisor until I declared my major but you couldn't until you took certain courses. And I hated that because I didn't feel a connection with any of my professors (Sally),
- Umm, I've only had a couple of meetings with Bendix about course registration. Umm, whenever I meet I kind of consider Wes, Mike, and Bill my advisors (John),
- Unfortunately, with Dr. Mount-Allison- we're not as close as I am with other faculty (Mark),
- Ahh, I used to but now I feel like I've got it down so I don't. I saw her once last semester (Katie),
- I see him to decide which classes I should be taking and now we're sort of talking about what I want to do when I graduate.

He wants me to sign up for all these conferences and academic excellence and stuff like that (Carol),

- It's really been amazing. I can honestly go and see her whenever and I can talk to her about anything from school to stress (Clark),
- It's been great. My advisors have helped me so much. They also, umm, have just taken the time to go above and beyond (Erica),
- Not only has he helped me academically but he has relieved a lot of stress when I am overwhelmed with school and work (# 57),
- I go to her at least every week to just- I have no idea what to do right now, and she'll help me do that. I reach out to her when I need her (Tammy),
- He is so inspiring and brings out my passion for my major and career path (Chelsea).

Academic Advising has become more important to study participants as they have moved through their career at Keene State College. But, according to the literature, academic advising is not just important for upper class students once they have declared a major but for entering students as they are adjusting to the college environment and traversing academics as they determine a major.

Orientation, first year living communities, and academic advising, as the closest to shared events all Keene State college students will experience, provide opportunities

for connection. Whether it was making friends in orientation, living with roommates in first year halls or connecting with faculty on some level through advising close connections were fundamental to persistence.

Limitations

The potential for bias in this study was significant. Even though only four of the 76 participants were known entities to the researcher, the setting was a very familiar, single institution. A phenomenological methodology was chosen to expressly address the biases by providing the continuous opportunity to check and recheck data outcomes during analysis. Multiple steps were taken to avoid evaluator bias as has been stated in Chapter 1 and again in Chapter 3.

Closely examining the persistence of students at one institution has its limitations as the outcomes cannot be generalized (Spady, 19701). The sample was purposeful and deliberate which also limits the possibility of generalizing outcomes to other institutions (Patton, 1987). The research design, however, can be applied to other college and university populations.

Researchers struggle with the interpretation of qualitative data and this is a limitation (Patton, 1987). Triangulating qualitative methods can be a limitation in a study when comparing different sources of data. What was said in private (survey) with what was said in public (interviews and focus group) can cause the collection and analysis to be inconsistent (Patton, 1987).

The researcher's field notes, completed at the close of each of the 11 interviews and the focus group and filed with the materials from each of those events, will indicate that, despite best efforts, there were inconsistencies in the interview conditions (differing

days and times and fluctuating room temperatures). The selection of the subjects in any study is a limitation and this study is no exception. In an effort to construct a sample that would best represent the population that has been continuously enrolled at Keene State College and closely resembles first semester seniors, the researcher defined the population narrowly with an earned total of 90-100 credits. Senior standing is defined by 90 or more credits so this definition excluded potential, senior participants.

Summary

An initial data review of why continuously enrolled students entering Keene State College in fall 2012 persisted to their senior year revealed 18 categories to explain the phenomenon. The researcher determined the frequency of these categories within all data and then supported them with qualitative statements from the study participants. Three themes emerged to explain why these students have stayed. Those themes are Keene State College specific definitions of engagement, involvement, and integration that originate from primary retention and persistence theorists Kuh, Astin, and Tinto. Though foundational literature defines the themes, attributes specific to Keene State College students explain the nuances of each theme. Enhanced by the words of study participants the reader gains insight into the many dimensions that contribute to persistence in college. Study participants had the opportunity to reflect on the commonly shared experiences of New Student Orientation, Residential Learning Communities, and academic advising during the interviews and in the open-ended section of the survey. Analysis of that data indicate similar factors and variables that were identified in the thorough review of open-ended survey responses and interview and focus group

transcripts. These three experiences have at their core the opportunity for students to connect and make friends.

In Chapter 5 the researcher will dig deeper to discern what the data analysis findings really mean to the persistence of continuously enrolled Keene State College students.

Chapter Five

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify the conditions that enabled continuously enrolled Keene State College students to persist to senior year. By using a hermeneutic phenomenology method data was collected from a survey, interviews, and a focus group to answer the question why have you stayed? Study participants had the opportunity to tell their stories of persistence within the context of a shared experience. During the interview process, by asking participants questions about what has contributed to their persistence at Keene State College, the researcher delved deep into those parts of the experience to get a better sense of the meaning of persistence as a whole.

From careful and thorough data organization and analysis three themes emerged to provide insight to why Keene State College students have persisted: engagement, involvement and integration. The themes are condensed entities of the whole or the essence of the lived experience.

Chapter 5 is organized in the following sections: conclusions and recommendations, recommendations for further research, and closing.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors, variables, or conditions that have contributed to the persistence of continuously enrolled members of the 2012 entering cohort at Keene State College. Simply stated, the researcher asked, why have you stayed? What this study has led to is an understanding that the conditions for persistence are dependent on a number of variables that can be distilled to three essential themes. Through careful analysis of the data the researcher has found the persistence of Keene State College students to senior year is enhanced by a student's engagement to the institution, the student's involvement with the institution, and the integration of his or her institutional life. The student and the college each play a significant role in persistence, but it is the student who ultimately prevails as the most important to persistence. The persistence and retention theories of Kuh (1991, 2000, 2003, 2005), Astin (1977, 1993) and Tinto (1987, 1993, 1999, 2003, 2006) served as a framework for the development of a Keene State College specific definition encompassing the factors, variables, and conditions that have contributed to the persistence of continuously enrolled students of the 2012 entering cohort. There have been elements of this study that need further investigation to identify their role in creating the foundation for engagement,

involvement, and integration. The honesty and the articulateness of the study participants has added to the multi-dimensionality of each of these themes making them not only Keene State College specific but elemental to persistence on other college campuses.

Engagement, involvement, and integration illustrate a continuum of student development and maturity often sharing attributes at each stage. In answering the question "why did you stay?" it became clear that the study participants felt they belonged at Keene State College. This was demonstrated through a connection to the campus, the friends they made, and the respect they felt in embodying their authentic self. Through this recognized sense of belonging and connection the participants became engaged or anchored to Keene State.

Involvement served as an enhancer for continued connection to the institution. The college offered numerous opportunities for involvement but the students needed to avail themselves of these opportunities. It was not enough to join clubs, play sports, and assume leadership positions for the participants. Recognition for these efforts of involvement contributed to students believing in themselves and strengthening their anchor to Keene State College. Involvement became integral to engagement.

Integration allowed the participants to blur the lines between what appears to be two relatively disparate lives – the curricular or academic and the co-curricular or social. Maintaining two identities, that of a classroom learner and that of a young adult in a college town, was not as conducive as blending the two to begin to define a meaningful and multi-dimensional life. Staff and, especially, faculty became the conduit for integration to occur. Identifying closely with an academic major and developing an identity as a scholar of that major, was an important function for recognition of

integration. It was through these integrated experiences that the greatest amount of personal and professional growth was revealed. The College assured the participants they mattered which, when internalized, once again anchored the student to Keene State as a productive and responsible member of the community.

Persistence begins in the freshman year. How can the reflections of persisting seniors impact new college students? What I, the researcher, now know is that the persistence of Keene State College students is largely dependent on providing students with opportunities to come to know themselves and find the value in their unique college experience. This study highlighted the economic and social benefits of obtaining a college degree by citing increased earning potential as well as greater contributions to society through voting and community involvement. Unique value rests more on finding purpose and meaning in this enormous endeavor.

Students enter college under the fog of an existential vacuum (Frankl, 1985). Many left an environment where they had accomplished a great deal and knew the rules. The new college student soon realizes that new expectations exist, both internally and externally, for greater accomplishments. Tied with this is the tension and pressure that surrounds “becoming someone” during the college years. Defining the purpose for attending college is to, potentially, find the value.

With 62% of study participants citing the importance of staff and faculty connection to persistence research indicating the significance of these relationships is confirmed. These connections are greater than the caring culture a college provides through all of its employees and more about a deep and personal relationship with a faculty member that goes beyond the classroom. Caught up in the responsibilities of

committees, departmental obligations, research, and scholarly pursuits do faculty have the time, the recognition, and the support to develop the relationships with students that need to happen to maximize persistence?

Inherent in a discussion about the importance of faculty connection is an examination of the classroom. When interview participants were asked how they had changed as a learner in the last four years many reflected on their high school experience as negative. School was repressive, students were tuned-out and apathetic or grade inflation was rampant. Participants commented positively on academic experiences at Keene State College that had made a difference and contributed to their persistence. Students spoke about the importance of being recognized by teaching faculty, about classes that were taught around a table in a discussion format focusing on a heavy reading assignment or the experience of undergraduate research. Study participants looked for a different type of classroom experience from the high school environment. They were interested in being regarded as self-directed learners developing relationships with faculty who were guides rather than wizards.

Through student stories the importance of combining the theory with practice, the classroom with the workplace, and the academic realm with the co-curricular has become even more evident. Within this recognition is the importance of finding a major that provides challenge, satisfaction, joy, and, for most students, a means to an end and the answer to how can I pay my bills?

This study is about identifying the reasons continuously enrolled students at Keene State College persisted to senior year. The findings of the research associate engagement, involvement, and integration with the persistence of Keene State College

students. Persistence begins the moment a student steps on campus. Learning from seniors about why they stayed and applying those lessons to programming for new students is a way to guarantee that persistence begins as early as possible. I have connected my recommendations to the three programs or experiences that are shared by Keene State College students. Study participants communicated that New Student Orientation, residential learning communities, and academic advising contributed to their persistence at Keene State College.

Making friends for Keene State College students is fundamental to engagement and anchoring to the college community. These friendships contribute to a sense of belonging and the freedom for students to be their authentic selves. The participants saw New Student Orientation as a time to make friends despite the extensive programming and introduction to the academic life of the college. These are my recommendations for New Student Orientation to become a vehicle to enhance the conditions for engagement to the college:

- In an effort to develop relationships, build in more unstructured time for students to share their stories.
- Each year introduce a new tradition that is targeted to the incoming class and becomes part of their legacy to the college assisting in the development of Keene State College student identity and purpose and meaning.
- Utilize orientation leaders as mentors beyond the orientation program. Provide funding for continued, intentional contacts throughout the first semester.
- Implement a first year seminar or an extended orientation program focused on issues of emerging adulthood or the University of Texas Mindset Intervention

(Tough, 2014), a program providing messages and strategies to increase a sense of belonging.

For Keene State College students contributing to the community and being recognized for those efforts is fundamental to persistence. Community building and recognition are important outcomes of involvement for Keene State College students. Students regarded living on campus as the first step in developing a larger campus community. Students viewed participating in residential learning communities as an opportunity to meet a wide range of people with different interests who might or might not become close friends but would certainly continue to be a recognizable member of the same community. As the college moves toward a more formalized model of Living Learning Communities with the opening of a new residence hall in fall 2016 it is important to remember that a narrow community focus needs to be balanced by opportunities to develop a broader sense of community as deemed valuable by study participants. These are my recommendations for residential learning communities:

- Rethink the idea of exclusive freshman housing. As students look for explanations of what it means to be a member of this new environment, utilize upper class students as guides.
- Damage to residence halls at Keene State College occurs with some frequency. Incorporate residents as much as possible in the governance and programming of their residence hall. Recognize students for their participation in taking positive steps to create residential communities.

- Create incentives for faculty to engage in a living learning community as another way for students to form early connections with faculty. Create as many occasions as possible for students to interact informally with faculty and to integrate the curricular with the co-curricular.
- Look closely at thematic residential communities as a more affordable option to the LLCs. Deliberate placements recognizing a student's interest should be practice. Consider a faculty component in the thematic housing structure. This would be a less time intensive commitment for faculty yet beneficial to students. Identify ways for varied thematic interests to intersect providing opportunities for broad community building.

For Keene State College students, relationships with faculty as teachers, advisors, mentors, and, in some cases, friends were critical to their persistence and integration into the college environment. Academic advising, as a senior student, was an important component of college life yet less regarded as important in the early years of a Keene State College career. Knowing what I do now about the importance of the faculty connection to the persistence of Keene State College students these are my recommendations for academic advising:

- During Orientation encourage faculty to set expectations for a different kind of academic experience from the high school experience.
- Assist faculty in developing greater skills around transitional advising from high school to college; from on campus to off campus; from academic year to summer. Identify the myriad of issues facing students beyond academics that impact the advising relationship.

- Support a student in realizing his or her passion. Find ways to make that passion an economic reality.
- Advise in clusters from a career advising perspective: Rutgers model (Broyles & Williams, 2015). Assist students in identifying a broad industry of interest. Relate a broad range of academic majors to that industry. This approach broadens the scope of possibilities, opportunities for involvement, and integrated academic and co-curricular experiences.

The participants in this study have stayed because a sense of belonging and purpose resulted in an anchoring engagement to the college. They were recognized and supported as active and involved members of the Keene campus and city communities. Their distinct life as a student was integrated with that of a contributing, authentic member of a larger entity where they mattered and could make a difference. Participant's stories have helped to determine the variables to increase persistence for all Keene State College students. Using the shared experiences of New Student Orientation, residential learning communities and academic advising will increase the chances that persistence begins the day a new student steps on campus.

Recommendations for Further Research

The limitations of this study point to topics of further research in the area of persistence at Keene State College. The narrow criteria to establish a sample omitted many students who had earned more than 100 credits but are still considered seniors. Expanding the sample size to determine if the same themes for persistence hold true would be important.

An emphasis on continuously enrolled students excluded any student with transfer credits from this study. As Keene State College puts greater emphasis in recruiting transfer students researching what conditions, variables, or factors impact their persistence will be essential to a successful recruitment and retention endeavor.

The responses of several students that they were meant to be at Keene State College for some reason bears further investigation to find the root cause of statements like these. Examples include:

- This is where I need to be (Alison),
- I was chosen to be here for a reason (Clark),
- It was meant to be – to figure this out (Nancy)
- I feel that there is a reason why I am at KSC. There's a reason why life put me at KSC. I cannot tell you what it is. I cannot explain to you why I have that feeling. I just know that I was brought to Keene State College for a reason. There have been just too many eye-opening experiences here for me not to think that is true (Mark).

I included those "meant to be" statements within my study of search for purpose and meaning by interpreting Frankl's (1985) comments that search for purpose and meaning often embodies a degree of spirituality. For lack of better placement these statements appeared spiritual in nature. Further research around similar statements and persistence would add to my body of knowledge around why Keene State College students persist.

Many students graduate from college with a staggering amount of debt. A few of the participants referred to financial hardships and responsibilities. More students,

however, referred to becoming their real or authentic self while a student at Keene State College. I would like to know how many students compromise the pursuit of a major or interests that reflect their true self and replace their "calling" with a major that appears to be more appropriate and responsible to paying off loans. This study identified the importance for Keene State College students to feel secure in being "themselves". Is there a correlation between persistence and pursuing a major a student is passionate about rather than feels obligated, for whatever reasons, to pursue?

A limitation of a single institution study is that the findings cannot be generalized. However, the design of this study can be applied to other institutions as they explore persistence. By researching additional components, at Keene State College, that would encompass a broader population of students who have persisted to the first semester of senior year the application potential of this study design will be expanded.

Closing

Despite the cost of a college education the public still views attaining a college degree as a valuable endeavor. As Keene State College faces continued challenges in recruiting students, the persistence and retention of enrolled students becomes a priority. The research of Kuh (1991, 2000, 2003, 2005), Astin (1977, 1993), and Tinto (1987, 1993, 1999, 2003, 2006) and their respective work on engagement, involvement, and integration set the groundwork for, not only, the institution's responsibility in providing a foundation for persistence but the critical participation of the student in the process.

This study is designed around hermeneutic phenomenology, a method that provided the basis to collect rich and descriptive data for the reasons why continuously enrolled Keene State College students persisted to senior year. The study looked at the specific variables that contributed to persistence within the framework of engagement, involvement, and integration. The participant's stories determined the variables that mattered.

When I started the dissertation process I had questions I wanted to answer. Fundamentally, I wanted to know why students stayed at Keene State College. What holds this study together are my research questions. The data indicate that engagement, involvement, and integration are the factors, variables, and conditions that have contributed to the persistence of continuously enrolled students of the 2012 entering cohort at Keene State College. Persistence at Keene State College is a formula that combines engagement with involvement with integration. No one theme takes precedent over another.

As shared experiences for a majority of Keene State College students, orientation provides an opportunity to make friends, residential learning communities facilitate the building of community, and academic advising enables connections with faculty. These are all factors study participants reported as important to persistence. The shared experiences of New Student Orientation, residential learning communities, and academic advising are the links from what I learned from Keene State College seniors about their persistence to what can become the foundations to create an environment of persistence for new students.

Even though the emergent themes of this study closely aligned with the seminal research of Kuh, Astin, and Tinto a difference is noted. This study illuminates a greater emphasis on the student. The partnership between the institution and the student is a strong one in persistence but, ultimately, the needs of students lie in making friends and belonging, feeling mattered rather than marginalized, being recognized and known, and feeling connected. These are relatively low budget items but require the increased time and awareness of everyone in the institution. It is incumbent on the institution to pay attention to the stories our students tell about why they stayed.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Survey

Congratulations and welcome to your senior year. I am conducting research for a doctoral degree on the persistence of continuously enrolled Keene State College students. You began at the college in the fall of 2012 and approximately 33% of your starting cohort has left Keene State (23% between freshman and sophomore year and 10% between sophomore and junior year). Your progression to this point is cause for celebration.

I am very interested to learn why Keene State College students persist and this survey is a start to gathering data. If you would like to participate in an interview you will have an opportunity to indicate your interest at the end of survey. I am interested in your story.

Thanks very much for your time.

Name (First, MI, Last)

Major Minor

Hometown

1. Did you attend New Student orientation in August 2012 – the year you started at Keene State College?

- o Approximately 100% of the program
- o Approximately 50% of the program
- o Less than 50% of the program

2. Have you lived on campus? Y N

If yes, indicate all the residence halls you have lived in:

- o 27 Appleton Street
- o 361 Main Street
- o 83-85 Blake Street
- o Carle hall

- Fiske Hall
- Holloway Hall
- Huntress Hall
- Monadnock hall
- One Butler Court
- Owl's Nest
- Pondside
  - ✓ I
  - ✓ II
  - ✓ III
- Randall Hall
- Bushnell Apartments
- Tisdale Townhouses

2a. Did you participate in a First Year Parliament or living learning community?

Name: (open ended)

3. Do you have a faculty academic advisor? Y N

How often do you meet with your advisor?

- Less than once a semester
- Once a semester
- More than once a semester

4. Have you been involved in clubs and organizations? Y N

List all that apply (open-ended)

5. Have you held a campus job? Y N

Where? (open-ended)

6. Are you a member of an athletic team? Y N

Which one? (open-ended)

7. Are you a member of a fraternity or a sorority? Y N

Which one? (open-ended)

8. Have you lived off campus? Y N

- Longer than one year
- Approximately one year
- Less than one year

9. Have you worked off campus during the academic year? Y N

- Longer than one year
- Approximately one year
- Less than one year

How satisfied have been with the following (slider scale)

Very satisfied Satisfied Not Satisfied

Your academic program

Academic advising

Ability to connect with faculty

Chances to gain practical experience from your academic program

Your career preparedness

Engaged discussion with and learning from your classmates

Being exposed to new ideas and ways of thinking

Living situation on campus

Living situation off campus

Social environment

Open-Ended Responses

Identify one significant person in the last three years who has contributed to your persistence.

Identify one experience in the last three years that has contributed to your persistence.

Anything else you would like add?

Are you interested in participating in a one-on-one interview with the researcher to further explore your persistence at Keene State College? Y N

APPENDIX B

Cover email accompanying pilot survey

Dear friends,

I need your help. The link below is to a survey that I will soon distribute to first semester seniors who meet specific criteria for my study on persistence (asking the question: why have you stayed?). Some of you may receive my survey for real and participate in research for my doctoral dissertation that I am completing through Plymouth State University.

For now, however, this is a pilot. I would love for you to take the survey (as many times as you want by accessing the link embedded in the email) to help me determine if there are any glitches to the process. What I'm looking for specifically:

- Do the questions make sense?
- Is the flow of the survey clear?
- Are there any pages that appear too long and cumbersome?
- If you "read" through the Consent Form (pg. 1) and agree to take the survey do you proceed or do you bounce to the end of the process with a thanks?
- Any other observations/suggestions/or ideas you may have

Unfortunately, taking the pilot does not enter you in the drawing for the $100.00 Amazon gift card but you will have my eternal appreciation.

I'm going to ask Phoebe to post a little note on the O Staff Facebook page referring you all to your email. Thanks, Phoebe! Feel free to answer the question as if you were taking the real deal. It's fun for me to look at the responses and determine what the data looks like. The link will remain active until Friday, August 7th.

If none of this makes sense just email me. Thank you so much for your help. It is much appreciated.

Take care.

Pat

APPENDIX C

Email Messages to Study Sample

Email #1

Hello,

In the fall of 2012 you began at Keene State College as a first year student. Congratulations on the start of your senior year!

Approximately 33% of your starting fall 2012 cohort has left Keene State (23% between freshman and sophomore year and 10% between sophomore and junior year). Your progression to this point is cause for celebration.

I am conducting research for a doctoral dissertation on the persistence of Keene State College students. I want to know why you have stayed at the college. You have been chosen to participate in this study because you have earned between 90-100 credits, you are in good academic standing, you have never taken a leave of absence, and the only credits you have completed since you began at Keene State have been earned here.

Though there will be no direct benefit to you by completing this survey your participation is likely to help us find out more about how to increase retention at Keene State College**. All individuals who return completed surveys will be entered in a random drawing for a $100.00 Amazon gift card. You may be a lucky winner!**

I am very interested to learn the factors that contribute to why Keene State College students stay. This survey will start to gather data. If you would like to participate in a one-on-one interview with me you will have an opportunity to indicate your availability at the end of the survey. I am interested to hear your story.

This survey should take you about 5 to 7 minutes to complete. Please access the survey via this link: https://keenestatecollege.co1.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_etfdXyo9QhHTdw9

Thank you so much for your time.

Pat Halloran

EMAIL #3

All individuals who return completed surveys will be entered in a random drawing for gift card from Amazon worth $100.00. You may be a lucky winner!

Hello,

The semester is in full swing and you are beginning your senior year. This is certainly something to celebrate!

I am conducting research for a doctoral dissertation on the persistence of Keene State College students. So often higher education will discuss retention issues by examining why students have **left** a college. I want to know why you have stayed.

What made a difference to you in your time at Keene State that has supported you in reaching your senior year?

Consider completing the survey reached through the link below. It should only take you between 5-7 minutes.

Please access the survey via this link: https://keenestatecollege.co1.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_etfdXyo9QhHTdw9

Thank you if you have already completed the survey. If you haven't I could use your help!

Best of luck for a successful semester and I look forward to seeing you at Commencement in May.

Take care.

Pat Halloran

APPENDIX D

Interview Questions

Consent Form reviewed and signed.

Questions

Initial

1. How did you decided to attend Keene State College?

2. What was going on in your life then? How would you describe how you viewed attending college? What were some of your goals?

3. How would describe the person you were then?

4. Describe your experience at Keene State College.

5. What is it like to be a student at Keene State?

6. Describe how each of the following have influenced your persistence.

   - New Student Orientation: how did this help in introducing you to college life?
   - Living on campus
   - Academic advising

Intermediate

1. What has been your favorite class and why?

2. Describe the kinds of faculty interactions you have had.

3. What were some of the influences that have helped you remain at Keene State College?

4. Share a highlight of your time at Keene State. What made in a highpoint? Who was involved? What did they do that made it an important experience? What did you do that made it an important experience?

5. Who has been the most helpful or influential to you during this time? How has she/he been helpful or influential?

6. How has any organization contributed to your persistence? What did this organization help you with? How has it been helpful?

7. Give an example of when you were proactive in solving a problem in your college career.

8. How do you describe the reasons for your persistence to others?

Ending

1. Identify what stands out as the single most important thing that contributed to your progression.

2. How do you feel you have grown or changed as a person? A learner? As a citizen? What do these changes look like?

3. What do you value the most about Keene State College? What would you define as a core characteristic (without these Keene State would not be what it is)?

4. If there were one thing you would do differently what would that be and why?

5. How has college changed you? Do you have a better sense of who you are as a person? What your strengths and weaknesses are? What your aspirations are?

6. Is there anything that you might not have thought about before that occurred to you during this interview?

APPENDIX E

Informed Consent Form

This informed consent form is for Keene State College students in the fall semester of their senior year that I am inviting to participate in a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study titled "Why have you stayed? Stories of persistence and the experiences of continuously enrolled Keene State College students"

1. NATURE AND PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT:

This is a qualitative study designed to explore the reasons continuously enrolled Keene State College students have persisted through junior year. The study is developed on the premise that retaining students must become a primary focus of the institution as demographic and funding shifts occur impacting recruitment. The value of student's individual stories around the shared experience of persistence and why they stayed could change the culture of retention at Keene State College.

2. EXPLANATION OF PROCEDURES

Participants in this study will be asked to participate in an hour long, one-on-one interview with the researcher answering a series of open-ended questions. The questions will ask you to reflect on your years at Keene State and specifically those experiences and connections that have contributed to your persistence and progression. You will be encouraged to offer any relevant information outside of the formulated questions and to ask the researcher questions.

3. DISCOMFORTS AND RISKS

There is a risk that you may share some personal or confidential information by chance, or that you may feel uncomfortable talking about some of the topics. However, I do not wish for this to happen. You do not have to answer any questions you feel are too personal or if talking about them makes you uncomfortable.

4. BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefit to you but your participation is likely to help us find out more about how to increase retention at Keene State College.

5. CONFIDENTIALITY

I will not be sharing any information about you. The information that I collect from this research project will be kept private. Any information about you will have a number and pseudonym on it instead of your name. Only I will know what your number and faux name is and I will secure that information.

6. REFUSAL/WITHDRAWAL

Participation in this research is voluntary. You do not have to take part in this research if you do not wish to. You may stop participating in the interview at any time that you wish with no consequences. I will give you an opportunity to review your remarks, and you can ask to modify or remove portions of those, if you do not agree with my notes or if I did not understand you correctly.

7. DEBRIEFING

Once data has been collected you will have the opportunity to obtain further information on this project. At any time, if you find that you have additional questions about this study, you may contact Patricia A. Halloran at 802-380-6223.

8. SIGNATURES:

I acknowledge that I have read and understood the statement set forth above and agree to participate in this study.

Signature of Subject Date

Signature of Researcher Date

APPENDIX F

Focus Group Questions

Consent Form reviewed and signed.

Questions

Introductions

1. Name, Major, Hometown
2. Describe your place of work and your job responsibilities

General Questions

1. How did you come to work for your department?
2. Why did you return a second year?
3. As a senior, if people ask why you've stayed in the same job for four years, what is your answer?
4. Describe your relationship with your direct supervisor (who is that person in the scheme of the department?)
5. Has your campus job contributed to your overall persistence at Keene State? Why or why not?
6. Think back over the four years you've worked on campus and tell us your most enjoyable memory.
7. Suppose you were in charge and could make one change that would make your campus job better. What would that be?
8. If you had an opportunity to train or mentor new employees to your department what one or two pieces of advice would you share?
9. Is there anything you've learned from your campus work that you'll take with you when you leave KSC? Any lessons learned to apply elsewhere?
10. Has anything come to mind as we've been talking that you'd like to add and haven't yet?
11. Do you have any questions for me?

APPENDIX G

Field Notes

1. Demographics
   - Participant
   - Researcher
2. Specifics of the Interview
   - Day
   - Time
   - Other interview conditions worth noting
3. Participants willingness to share information (Researcher's observations)
4. Researcher's reflections, thoughts, and questions.
5. Other notes and comments