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Reasons for Academic Attrition Among Rural Community College Students by Way of Satisfactory Academic Progress

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REASONS FOR ACADEMIC ATTRITION AMONG RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS BY WAY OF SATISFACTORY ACADEMIC PROGRESS (SAP)

by

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Abstract

The purpose of the investigator's research was to examine reasons for attrition among rural community college students by way of Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) appeals. Seminal student departure theories of Spady (1971), Tinto (1993), Bean and Metzner (1985), and Braxton, Doyle, Jones, McLendon, Hirschy, and Hartley (2014) laid the foundation for this mixed methods investigation of challenges students face in meeting satisfactory academic progress as defined by federal financial aid guidelines: maintaining a 2.0 cumulative GPA, completing 67% of attempted coursework, and not exceeding the maximum time frame of credit hours for degree completion. Three broad categories of challenge emerged from coding of the quantitative sample of 1,171 students receiving financial aid from fall 2016 through summer 2018. Student academic performance is impacted by academic challenges, economic challenges, personal challenges, or a combination of two or more challenges. A combination of personal and academic challenges contributed to the majority of SAP violations. Quantitative analysis indicated students believed that making changes to their personal lives would make a difference in their academic success. Qualitative research utilized SAP student focus groups to explore in more detail the students' understanding of their SAP status and sense of personal responsibility. The qualitative research findings corroborated the quantitative research findings in that students knew what had contributed to their academic poor performance and identified their role in making the adjustments to academic improvement. In conclusion, the investigator found that the reasons for attrition in rural community college students by way of SAP appeals aligns with student retention models that identify external factors as having the most impact in the student's ability to maintain satisfactory academic progress toward credential completion.

Keywords: academic challenges, economic challenges, personal challenges, maximum time frame, course completion percentage, cumulative GPA, Satisfactory Academic Progress, student departure theory, retention.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Thomas Jefferson is often regarded as the founding father of public education. He has been called by his principal biographer, Dumas Malone (1948), "the foremost advocate of public education in the early United States" (p. 280). Jefferson valued public education because he believed democracy and education are interdependent. For democracy to flourish, its citizens must be educated. Universal public education creates the conditions for a more equitable distribution of opportunity for all, while at the same time preparing citizens to protect their freedoms (Carpenter, 2013). As Jefferson stated in a letter to James Madison: "Above all things I hope education of the common people will be attended to, convinced that on their good sense we may rely with the most security for the preservation of a due degree of liberty" (personal communication, December 20, 1787). Anthony Carnavale (2016), Research Director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, recognizes the political and cultural value of public education as well, and he places it in the context of 21st century economic reality:

> The economic value of college education and training has added a new economic emphasis to the broader postsecondary mission. In a modern republic, the higher education mission is still human flourishing; to empower individuals *to live fully in their time* (emphasis added). But, the 21st century version of the college mission also requires that students live free from economic or public dependency" (p. 1),

or as Carnavale worded it elsewhere, more dramatically: "It's hard to live fully in your time if you are living under a bridge" (p. 3).

Over 200 years separate the above statements by Jefferson and Carnavale, but both men are speaking – although indirectly – to the important dual role that community colleges play in

American postsecondary education. For both men, education has an "intrinsic as well as extrinsic value" (Carnevale, 2016, p. 3). Jefferson grew up in a household that valued reading, self-improvement, and learning which afforded him educational opportunities that his father was denied. Jefferson was aware that he was afforded opportunities others did not have (Peterson, 1984). These opportunities nurtured a desire to make education more accessible to the general population. Today, Jefferson is remembered unequivocally for his zealous support of public education (Carpenter, 2013). Carnevale extends the Jeffersonian conversation regarding accessible public education. He insists that community colleges strike a balance between the narrow vocational needs of its students and the broader educational goals associated with preparing students to promote and defend America's democratic ideals. While preparing its students for gainful employment, community colleges should also produce graduates who are capable of participating in American life as responsible and engaged citizens. Economic independence and responsible citizenship go hand in hand.

Striking this balance has been addressed by many who write about American postsecondary education (Carpenter, 2013; Lagemann & Lewis, 2012). While underscoring the need for balance, Carnevale nonetheless foregrounds the importance of economic security: "[the] inescapable reality is that ours is a society based on work" (Carnevale, 2016, p. 3). Those who do not have the knowledge and skill set necessary to get and keep a job that pays a living wage are denied an opportunity to engage fully in American life and promote democratic ideals. Although Jefferson and Carnevale agree that education prepares citizens for responsible political engagement and that an educated citizenry serves as a defense to our liberty and our economic well-being (Carpenter, 2013), Carnevale insists that economic well-being can be considered first among equals. He insists that the economic benefit of a college education and training adds

more importance to the broader mission of postsecondary education. If postsecondary education cannot produce an economic benefit for the student, it will be difficult for that student to sustain a commitment to democratic ideals (2016).

This vocational focus has become the centerpiece of the community college mission. Community colleges educate the common man and woman by providing readily accessible and affordable career pathways, thus providing educational opportunities for those who do not typically have the resources, family support, predisposition, or adequate public-school preparation to be admitted to more expensive and selective institutions. Open access is the hallmark of a community college education. Education, however, is an elusive goal if a student does not have the financial wherewithal to take advantage of it. Federal financial aid programs are the foundation upon which open access to educational opportunity is built. Hawley and Harris (2005) analyzed student attributes among first-year, community college students to better understand reasons for attrition. Of the five key attributes, the last two directly related to economic feasibility: (1) identifying their educational goal, (2) meeting commitments outside of college, and (3) delaying entry to postsecondary education from high school. Related to economic feasibility: students (4) had trouble financing college, and (5) anticipated working while attending college.

The ability to finance one's education has a direct bearing on student persistence and completion of a credential. Typically, community college students are less likely to be dependent upon their parents for finances and come from families with incomes in the lowest income quartile. Forty percent of undergraduate students attending public two-year institutions are dependent upon their families for financial support. Of the 40% of family-dependent community college students, 31% of the families were from the lowest family-income quartile. Four-year

institutions, by comparison, have 64% of family-dependent, senior-institution students, where 21% of families were at the lowest family-income quartile (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). There is a correlation between a student's socio-economic status and the likelihood that the student will persist. Students from low income families typically struggle to finance their education in addition to arriving underprepared (Falcon, 2015).

Numerous research over the last decade noted the impact that a postsecondary credential – even college education short of a credential – can have on a person's earning potential over a lifetime (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011; Carnevale & Smith, 2018; Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010; Harris, 2018; McClure, 2010; Schneider, 2015; Wang, 2017). People who do not complete a postsecondary education are falling out of the middle class. In 1970, only 26% of the middle class had postsecondary education credentials of any kind. In 2010, the Georgetown Center for Education and Workforce projected that 61% would need a postsecondary education by 2018, a projection of 22 million new degrees. In addition, the economy would require at least 4.7 million new workers with postsecondary certificates (Carnevale et al., 2010). Increasingly, a high school diploma alone will not position a high school graduate for a good job. An associate degree offers the high school graduate the best opportunity to upskill and obtain a good job because middle-skill jobs are increasingly available for those who have completed an associate degree. Between 1991 and 2016, jobs for workers with an associate degree increased by 83% (Carnevale, Strohl, Ridley, & Gulish, 2018). In Kentucky – where the institution under study is located – 54% of all jobs (1.1 million) will require some level of postsecondary education or training beyond high school in 2018 (Carnevale et al., 2010).

Middle-skill credentials, both certificates and associate degrees, translate into lifetime earning potential. Over a 40-year career for ages 25 to 64, having some postsecondary

education, even without earning an associate degree, adds nearly $250,000 to lifetime earnings (Carnevale & Smith, 2018). According to a 2011 study, *The College Payoff*, conducted by the Georgetown Center for Education and Workforce, the following was found to be true based on 2009 income data:

> Having some postsecondary education, even without earning a degree, adds nearly one quarter of a million dollars to lifetime earnings. Annual earnings rise to $38,700 ($18.69 per hour). Getting an Associate's degree adds another bump of nearly $200,000 in lifetime earnings. At $43,200 a year ($20.77 per hour), those with Associate's degrees earn nearly one-third more than those with just a high school diploma. These numbers demonstrate conclusively the advantage of non-baccalaureate postsecondary education (Carnevale et al., 2011, p. 4).

Clearly, the community college can have a dramatic impact on the lives of those who chose to take advantage of accessible and affordable education.

The lifetime economic benefits to a community college education are undeniable. Attending college, however, is expensive. The average amount of student loan debt upon graduation is $30,100 (Complete College America, 2017). This expense is likely to continue to increase. Community college tuition increases annually. In the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS), tuition has increased from $121 to $167 per credit hour over the last decade (KCTCS, 2008, p. 48; KCTCS, 2018). Over three-quarters of first time, full-time degree and certificate-seeking community college students rely on financial aid; moreover, that figure has increased from 62% in 2000-2001 to 78% in 2015-2016 (U. S. Department of Education, n.d.b.). The access to aid also warrants expectations and responsibilities on behalf of the student. The federal government expects students to behave

responsibly and make satisfactory academic progress. To that end, the federal aid program strictly limits the number of credit hours a student can take, and furthermore, expects a student to identify early on his or her academic program and not waste credit hours that don't apply to his or her chosen career pathway. If the community college mission is to provide an open access gateway to educational opportunity, then when students get the opportunity – either through self-pay or federal financial aid – they must make the best of the opportunity.

Unfortunately, students too often erect self-inflicted barriers borne of indecision or carelessness or poor judgement. Other barriers may be beyond their control. Regardless, student departure impacts retention and degree completion and has become a national issue. Sixty-two percent of entering fall 2016 community college freshmen persisted to continue college into the spring semester. The fall to fall retention rate for this cohort dropped to 48.9% (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). Beyond this fall to fall retention rate, only 5% of community college students nationally complete their associate degree within two years, only 14% complete the credential within three years, and only 18% graduate within four years (Complete College America, 2018). With few exceptions, persistence and retention rates for Kentucky community college institutions reflect the national trend. KCTCS student persistence rate for 2015 was 42.9%, with the individual community colleges in the system reporting persistence rates ranging from 34.2% to 54.9%.

Completing college is difficult. Thirty-one million Americans have earned some college credits but have not completed a degree. Shockingly, only 5% of full-time students have completed a two-year college degree on time (Complete College America, 2017). Today there is growing external pressure on postsecondary education to improve the number of degree and certificate completers because of the increasingly demonstrable link between the level of

educational attainment, quality of life, and global economic competition (West, 2012). It is important to understand why those students who do not make satisfactory academic progress and complete a credential fail to do so.

Community college enrollment, both nationally and in Kentucky, has declined, which elevates the importance of retaining those who do enroll. Nationally, from 2010 to 2014 enrollment in public two-year colleges has declined from 29% to 25% for full-time students, and from 44% to 42% for all students (Baum & Ma, 2016). In Kentucky, from 2011 to 2015 fall enrollment in public two-year postsecondary institutions dropped from 108,302 to 80,071, a decline of 26% (Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, 2016). Recently, enrollment has begun to level within the KCTCS, but remains significantly behind 2010 figures. Between 2010 and 2017, KCTCS unduplicated headcount enrollment dropped from 106,663 to 77,680, a 28.3% decline (Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, n.d.a). The particular KCTCS institution under examination for this study experienced an 18% decline in full-time equivalency (FTE) from fall 2008 to fall 2018, dropping from 2,032.3 to 1,662.8 (Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, n.d.b). Community colleges must make every effort to ensure those enrolled maintain satisfactory academic progress. Otherwise providing a low cost, open access educational opportunity to those who need it is a wasted opportunity. It is important to identify, in as much detail as possible, the characteristics associated with those students who don't make satisfactory progress so that colleges can bolster their support services to enhance academic success and degree completion.

The purpose of the investigator's study was to examine the reasons for attrition among rural community college students by way of Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) appeals. Investigating what impedes the progress of student academic success is important because of its

relationship to workforce development training. The economy is growing increasingly dependent upon community college workforce development training. Studies show that there are not enough postsecondary completers required to fill the over 15 million good jobs necessary for the United States to maintain its position in the global economy (Carnevale & Cheah, 2018; Carnevale et al., 2018). Economic projections point to a need for approximately 1 million more STEM-related professionals than the U.S. will produce by 2022 if the country is to maintain its economic standing in the world (Executive Office of the President of the United States, 2012). The investigator examined the various barriers students face in achieving their vocational educational goals, barriers that impede academic success and persistence to credential completion. The investigator explored: 1) the reasons for students having to reapply for financial aid due to their failure to meet satisfactory academic progress (SAP); 2) how these reasons align with the reasons identified in student departure theory literature; 3) how these reasons are impacted by institutional policies and practices; and 4) how these reasons relate to external institutional influences. Through the investigator's exploration of community college student SAPs, information was collected that can assist with the development of strategies and programs to proactively address the issues students identify. The following terms and definitions were used in the study.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are identified:

- *Attrition* – The number of individuals who leave a program of study before it has been completed (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2015).
- *Community college* – A community college, sometimes referred to as a junior college or technical college, is a tax-payer supported two-year institution of higher education. The term "community" is at the heart of a community college's mission. These schools offer a level of accessibility—in terms of time, finances, and geography—that cannot be found at most liberal arts colleges and private universities (Grove, 2018).
- *First generation college student* – An individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree; or in the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree (Higher Education Act, 1965).
- *Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)* – An online application form that must be completed for an individual to receive a grant, loan, or work-study funds to assist with the costs incurred in attaining a postsecondary institution credential (U. S. Department of Education, n.d.b.).
- *Nontraditional student* – A college student 25 years or older (U. S. Department of Education, n.d.a.).
- *Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP)* – Progress is defined by the following "pace of progression" criteria: 1) maintaining a cumulative 2.0 grade point average, 2) completing 67% of courses attempted in a term, and 3) moving toward successful completion of a credential within 150% of a credential timeframe (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

- *Student departure* – Previously enrolled students who do not reenroll or do not complete their intended degree program or set of courses (Tinto, 1993).
- *Student retention* – A measure of the rate at which students persist in their educational program at an institution, expressed as a percentage (U. S. Department of Education, n.d.a.).
- *Traditional student* – a college student under the age of 24 years old or younger (U. S. Department of Education, n.d.a.).

Chapter II: Literature Review

Community colleges in the United States exist to provide affordable and accessible postsecondary education close to home. In this regard, they serve to meet the educational needs and career aspirations of the working class. The mission of a community college is expansive and focuses on training students for quick entry into the workforce, upgrading the skills of incumbent workers, retraining dislocated workers, providing continuing education to business professionals, and delivering foundational coursework to students with the goal of completing a four-year degree. Sixty-seven percent of associate degrees, diplomas, and certifications awarded by community colleges in 2013 were work ready credentials which prepared student for an immediate launch into technical occupations (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). McClure (2010) touted community colleges as "economic saviors" for a depressed economy struggling to recover from the 2008 recession. For many people, their local community college is the only pathway to a better economic future. Presently, there are 1,103 community or junior colleges in the United States, comprised of 980 public institutions, 88 independent institutions, and 35 tribal institutions [American Association of Community Colleges, (AACC), 2018]. In fall 2014, 42% of all undergraduate students were enrolled in a two-year institution (Baum & Ma, 2016). Moreover, nearly half (46%) of all students who completed a degree at a four-year institution in 2013-2014 had enrolled in a community college at some point in the ten years prior (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2015). Over time, community colleges have become key partners in providing both technical education for the workforce and foundational coursework for transfer degrees so that students "can live fully in their time" (Carnevale, 2016).

History of Community Colleges

Students with academic challenges, often times "second chance" students who underperformed in high school or who sought employment immediately upon graduation from high school, are disproportionately enrolled in the public two-year system. Among college students who entered their first institution in 2010-2011, 51% of students attending two-year public institutions, as compared to 29% of students attending four-year public institutions, took developmental coursework (U.S. Department of Education, 2017a). It is this population that the American community college is best prepared to serve because its mission aligns with those Jeffersonian principles noted earlier. In 1779, Thomas Jefferson proposed a comprehensive design to educate citizens through the Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge to Citizens of Virginia (Carpenter, 2013). Subsequently, in 1787 the Northwest Ordinance provided land for educational purposes, leading to the establishment of the Jefferson Academy – which eventually was renamed Vincennes University, and remains one of the oldest two-year postsecondary institutions in the country. At its inception, schools like the Jefferson Academy were intended to meet educational needs that would provide social and economic mobility for children of farmers, shop owners, and factory workers (McCarthy, 2011).

Brint and Karabel (1989) noted that the creation of the community college institution was promoted by the self-interests of several large universities that hoped to broaden their scope of training and religious influence by moving vocational and workforce training to "junior" colleges. Three influential administrators from University of Michigan, University of Minnesota, and University of Chicago endorsed the idea that first and second year college studies could be completed in a separate institutional setting, leaving higher level work beginning with the third year to be completed in a four-year university setting (Medsker, 1960).

University leaders believed that universities would not realize their full potential as authentic research institutions if they retained freshman and sophomore students (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Thus, the impetus for the "junior college" movement began as a move to protect the distinguished image of senior institutions who were focused on research and enrolling only the strongest academic students who typically came from families of privilege. Unexceptional students could be routed to the "junior college," an extension, as it were, of the public secondary school system (McCarthy, 2011).

Mr. William Rainey Harper, former University of Chicago President, was the first to put a two-year institution model in place. In 1892, he separated the University of Chicago into two divisions: one was for the freshman and sophomore years of college, the other was for the junior and senior years. By 1896, they were officially entitled the junior college and the senior college of the University of Chicago. The university began awarding degrees to students who completed two years of study at the junior college, hoping that only the elite would continue on to the senior college (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Harper was instrumental in establishing the first experimental post-graduate high school program that academically paralleled the first two years of a four-year university experience, when he convinced area high school principal, J. Stanley Brown to offer college-level classes in the high schools. The premise was that the students who took college level courses while in high school would receive advanced standing at the University of Chicago (McCarthy, 2011). In 1901, Joliet College opened as the country's first independent public junior college (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Coley, 2000; Thelin, 2011).

Junior or community colleges grew quite rapidly in the succeeding decades. By 1922, there were 207 junior colleges enrolling 16,000 students and by 1940 there were 456 junior colleges enrolling 149,584 students (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; McCarthy, 2011; Thelin, 2011).

Two-year institutions were being established across the country, and with that, consideration was given to what role they should serve. In 1924, Leonard Koos published a study describing 21 separate purposes for the junior college. Eventually, a dominant twofold purpose emerged: to bring higher education to the middle-income masses and to enable universities to function as research institutions (Reynolds, 1965). By 1930, the number of junior colleges had grown and could be found in all but five states, with total enrollment peaking at 70,000 students. In the 1930s and 1940s, junior colleges began offering coursework in occupational areas, thus preparing students for either further collegiate work or immediate workforce placement which solidly established community colleges as meeting a niche in post-secondary education (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). By 1950, enrollment in public junior colleges had reached 168,043. By 1960, over 800,000 students were enrolled in 663 junior or community colleges (Reynolds, 1965; Thelin, 2011), and junior colleges were opening up each week during the 1960s (Thelin, 2011).

By 1976, community colleges were enrolling 34% of all students in higher education and by 1993 that number had increased to 37% (Coker & Kisker, 2010). By 1999, over 47% of all students enrolled in a postsecondary education institution was enrolled in a community college (U. S. Department of Education, 2001). As of fall, 2016 over 12 million students were enrolled in community colleges; 59% in credit bearing coursework (n = 7.1 million) and 41% enrolled in non-credit bearing coursework (n = 5.0 million) (AACC, 2018). Today the challenge of community colleges is to meet a variety of needs – deliver dual-credit courses to high school students, prepare traditional students for transfer to four-year institutions, provide continuing education for the workforce, and offer vocational and technical training to those desiring short-term training.

The growth of the community college movement is not surprising. Community colleges provide economic and social mobility to those who cannot afford to attend expensive residential universities. Community colleges have become a port of entry for lower income and underserved student populations (Thelin, 2011). Beverly Bower, director of the Bill Priest Center for Community College Education at the University of North Texas, summarizes the importance of two-year institutions in the following way: "[Community colleges] have a strong history of being flexible and accessible and being in touch with the needs of their local communities" (McClure, 2010, p. 9). Community colleges are viewed as an expansive, open highway to a better life just a few exits away – but only if a student can afford to attend. Low income students comprise a significant percentage of those who enroll; as a result, the federal Pell Grant financial aid program plays a critical role in making educational opportunities available to all. However, it is available only if students make satisfactory academic progress.

Academic challenges.

Community college students are less prepared for the academic rigor of college than their four-year institution counterparts. Over one-half of students entering a community college require remediation compared to approximately one-fifth of students entering a four-year institution (Complete College America, 2017). Among all first-year undergraduate students in the United States during the 2011-2012 academic year, 33% were enrolled in at least one developmental class, and among community college students, 40% were enrolled in at least one developmental education course (U. S. Department of Education, 2014). Although 86% of entering freshman community college students believe they are academically prepared for college, 68% place into at least one development course (Center for Community College Student Engagement [CCCSE], 2017a). Moreover,76% percent of community college students believe

that they are on track to attain their educational goals, only 39% of those students complete any type of credential within six years (CCCSE, 2016). In addition, community college students fluctuate in their attendance over the course of their progress toward the completion of a credential. Class attendance coincides with successful academic performance. Not surprisingly, poor performance is associated with poor academic performance, and satisfactory performance with regular attendance. Community college students' poor attendance is often due to external commitments and extenuating circumstances. These data are consistent with attendance patterns. A majority of two-year students who start full time but do not stay full time. Thirty-five percent (n = 22,450) of community college students who started full time their first semester did not continue as full-time by their third semester, reflected by a 17% decrease in full-time status (CCCSE, 2017a).

In addition to the barriers created by the students' misperceptions of their academic preparedness for college are the barriers created as students attempt to navigate the traditional structure of community college academic pathways. Recent research on the design of community college education pathways and student success suggests that structure and organization of academic plans may serve as a barrier to student success (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Holzer & Baum, 2017). The community college's "cafeteria model" creates a complicated, expansive menu of degree plans and courses to satisfy degree requirements for students to choose from without the benefit of a thorough orientation to college, goal-setting, and long-term career planning. Students undertake a schedule of classes whose applicability to their budding goals and career interests may not completely be clear without a distinct understanding of career and transfer opportunities. Students end up accumulating credit hours and investing

time and money in classes that may not ultimately relate to their educational and career goals. This environment may result in students not seeing the value in remaining enrolled in college.

Economic challenges.

Community colleges are viewed as affordable and accessible education providers. However, financing a college education, even at an affordable community college, can be a deterrent to student retention. There is often a significant gap between the awarded Pell Grant amount and the students' financial need. As recently as 2011-2012, the maximum Pell Grant award of $5,500 covered only 37% of the average total cost of attending a public two-year institution (CCCSE, 2017b). Since that time, financial aid has failed to keep pace with increases in tuition and fees (Seltzer, 2017). Students who do qualify for Pell Grant funds struggle economically and find that full aid is often not enough to cover the outlying costs of attending college (e.g. gas, childcare, school supplies). Family income has increased over the years, but it has not increased in proportion to the cost of education. Moreover, increased family income does not convert into additional money to support a student's educational goals. Median family income increased at an average rate of .03 percent between 2007 and 2016, but tuition increased at a higher rate (Douglas-Gabriel, 2017).

In 2016, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) sampled 99,721 students. Fifty-one percent of student respondents stated that their debt, which included credit cards, car loan debt, or money owed to family or friends, was more than they could manage (CCCSE, 2017b). Nearly 61% of Pell Grant recipients lived below the poverty level, which at the time was $21,756 for a family of four. Students perceived their economic stability as positively related to their ability to persist in college. CCSSE surveyed the degree to which students were satisfied with their present financial situation. Thirty-two percent responded that

they were not satisfied with their economic status. A closer look at the data shows that 63% of community college students work and 74% of community college students have dependents living with them. Both groups stated that they live paycheck to paycheck and have difficulty managing expenses while in college. Thirty percent of community college students surveyed stated that they stay enrolled to receive financial aid (CCCSE, 2017b).

Financial literacy can also be an obstacle to student persistence. Eitel and Martin (2009) conducted a two-phased survey of first-generation, female students attending a four-year University to identify perceived financial literacy needs and perceived barriers to persistence and degree completion. One third of the 204 student respondents were freshman class, with the remaining students split equally between the other student classifications. The majority of the participants were Caucasian (51.5%), with the balance made up of African American (21.3%), Hispanic American (19.3%), and Asian American (4.5%). The majority of students in the study perceived their financial needs to be great, but were uncertain what specific knowledge was needed to manage their budget more successfully (Eitel & Martin, 2009). A common perception was that their degree completion and gainful employment would solve their inability to manage money. However, students also perceived the institution as culpable in setting unreasonable requirements for aid, making the application process difficult to navigate, and controlling the disbursement of aid. The complex web of institutional financial aid policies and lack of adequate aid were listed as the two main barriers to their persistence and degree completion (Eitel & Martin, 2009).

The need to be employed while attending college is often a necessity for community college students. Porter and Umbach (2019) published a study of 6,079 students enrolled at 10 community colleges. The study was purposed with identifying the top 10 challenges frequently

cited by students. The balance of work and school and paying expenses were the most frequently cited, respectively. Thirty-four percent of respondents reported the balance of work and school to be a challenge. Six-one percent of the 34% reported their work hours do not leave enough time for studying; 49% reported their pay was not enough to cover expenses while in school; 36% reported their work schedule prevents them from using campus resources; 35% reported their work schedule conflicts with classes; and 26% reported their work schedule was not flexible during the semester. Based on the study, working while attending college is a necessity, but juggling work and school can be problematic. Even if a student's school schedule aligns with his or her work schedule, paying for living expenses can be an obstacle. Thirty-four percent of students completing the study reported that paying for the expenses of attending college was an obstacle and reported the following types of expenses: 71% reported living expenses; 58% reported books, software, and other course related supplies; 55% reported college tuition and student fees; and 11% reported childcare costs.

The very process of applying for financial assistance can create a barrier to first-semester community college students. McKinney and Novak (2012) conducted a study to examine the relationship between filing a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and "within-year" persistence among full- and part-time community college students. The study used longitudinal data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Survey (BPS:04/06) conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics. The survey sampled a cohort of students who began their college careers in 2003-2004 and followed that cohort for three years (2006). The study resulted in the following observations: 1) part-time students were less likely to persist if they did not complete a FAFSA than full-time students; 2) despite similarities between both groups with regard to demographics characteristics, social capital, and academic performance, part-time

students were equivalently different than full-time students when it came to their college experiences, FAFSA filing behavior, and persistence; 3) there was a positive association between students who met with their advisors and within-year persistence; and 4) students who participated in an academic support activity (e.g., tutoring) were 43% more likely to persist compared to students who never received academic support. The research analysis found that failure to file a FAFSA negatively impacts a community college student's ability to persist and that complicated policies and procedures can impact persistence.

Personal challenges.

Intrapersonal factors such as self-perception and mental health can impact student success. College can be a time for self-discovery and personal growth when faced with scholastic and social challenges. Students may be confronted with the need to re-evaluate their self-perception. They may become less secure when faced with negative feedback. For example, a student who was a Valedictorian in their small high school with eleven other Valedictorians may find it heartbreaking to place into a developmental math class or a student who is quite capable of juggling work and home life may find the task quite daunting when academic requirements are added to the mix. This can precipitate mental health issues which surface when faced with the stress of attending college. Seventy five percent of mental illnesses are onset by age 24, and 43.8 million adults, about one in five, experienced a mental illness in 2012, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, 2015). An estimated 26% of Americans ages 18 and older – about 1 in 4 adults – suffers from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year (John Hopkins Medicine, n.d.). These data suggest that the typical younger college-going student population is a particularly vulnerable population when viewed from a mental health perspective.

Based upon Bandura's (1997) model of self-efficacy, a student's self-perception of ability to handle a situation, solve a problem, or learn something new – based upon prior experience – can forecast a student's ability to handle challenges in the future. Similar to Bandura's model of self-efficacy, attribution theory (Van Overwalle, Mervielde, & De Schuyer, 1995) also focuses upon an individual's motivation but from the standpoint of one's locus of control perspective with regard to past outcomes and experiences. Students who have an internal locus of control and believe they have some say in the outcome of a situation or event, such as their performance on a test, are more likely to persist and be retained. Students who have an external locus of control and perceive the outcome of a situation or event is not within their control, but impacted by outside influences, are less motivated to act in situation. If a feeling of lack of control exists, it can serve as a dispositional barrier that will impede a student's ability to persist.

A student's self-perception of their ability to succeed academically, low self-confidence, and negative past educational experiences can contribute to students' poor academic performance and withdrawal from college (Keith, 2007; Spellman, 2007). Martin, Galentino, and Townsend (2014) conducted research on what characteristics and behaviors are common among community college students who persist and graduate. The setting for their study was a large, public community college in the southeastern part of the United States located 30 miles from a metropolitan area. The study was designed around semi-structured interviews with three financial aid administrators, three college administrators, three faculty, three staff college advisors, and seventeen students. College employees were solicited based upon their position and interaction with the student population. The student participants were solicited based upon personal referrals by faculty or staff. College employees were interviewed and the students were randomly assigned to one of three focus groups. Interview and focus group questions were

structured around three broad categories of entering student characteristics (e.g., cultural capital, college plans, and academic preparedness). Martin et al. (2014) found that students can compensate for typical predictors of low college persistence if they establish clear goals, demonstrate strong motivation, manage external demands, and exhibit a strong sense of self-empowerment. The authors also reported that academic and social integration had no effect on persistence of the graduates interviewed.

Students' ability to manage stress aids in the successful emotional adjustment to college. Students who are able to self-regulate during stressful times adapt more easily to college. Students who maintain social connections without isolating also adapt more easily. Skowron, Wester, and Azen (2004) conducted a study to determine a students' ability to distinguish between thoughts and feelings in an emotional situation which could affect their academic performance and personal adjustment to college. They found that college stress was negatively related to greater levels of a students' differentiation of self and was positively related to successful college adjustment. The successful adjustment is a result of the students' ability to self-regulate emotional reactivity to stress, maintain social connections with others, and avoid isolation (Skowron et al., 2004).

Goodman (2017) noted that the mental health of college students, while a concern, is not adequately addressed by most institutions. Policies and support structures are lacking. Gruttadaro and Crudo (2012) conducted The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) survey of college students from two-year and four-year institutions. Students self-identified the following mental illness diagnoses: depression (27%), bipolar disorder (24%), other disorders including borderline personality disorder, eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and autism spectrum (12%), and anxiety (11%). Seventy-one percent were attending public or

private four-year institutions, and 19% were attending community colleges. Sixty-four percent of the survey respondents reported that they were no longer attending college because of a mental health-related reason, of that percentage more than 45% of those did not receive accommodations and 50% did not access mental health support and services. Fifty-percent of survey respondents disclosed that they were concerned about the stigma associated with a mental illness so did not disclose their mental health condition to their college.

Seventy-five percent of mental health issues manifest in early adulthood, before the age of 25 years old. It is not surprising, then, that students often experience their first onset of a mental health issues while in college. A Healthy Minds Study of a sampling of 34,217 college aged students over 100 campuses using questions that incorporated criteria from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of the American Psychological Association (APA) to determine what percentage of college aged students are likely to have a mental disorder, what percentage have sought treatment, and the impact of untreated mental health disorders on academic performance (Eisenberg & Lipson 2016). The survey resulted in the following diagnosis data: moderate to mild depression (25%), anxiety (21%), severe depression (10%), non-suicidal self-injury (10%), suicidal ideation (10%), and 8% eating disorders (8%). Sixty-one percent of the students with mental diagnoses were not getting treatment and 51% of the students surveyed perceived that a stigma would be associated with them seeking treatment and people would think less of them (Eisenberg & Lipson, 2016). Pedrelli, Nyer, Yeung, Zulauf, and Wilens (2015) found that mental illness in college students can be exacerbated by the stress of managing the demands of academics along with work responsibilities and personal commitments. This finding aligns with research by the California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA) and RAND Corporation comparing community college students to their four-year counterparts found that

community college students had higher rates of impaired academic performance due to mental health issues, received less information about campus mental health and wellness support, and received and used a minimal number of mental health referrals (National Council on Disability, 2017). Although there is more awareness about the need to provide mental health services on community college campuses, there are very few two-year institutions that provide this service. In a 2012 American College Counseling Association (ACCA) study of 294 community college counselors from 198 two-year institutions in 43 states, only 13% of community colleges provided mental health counseling services to their students (AACA, 2013). Of the remaining two-year institutions not providing service, 22% outsourced services by contract, and 22% immediately referred students to off-campus providers.

Compared to students at four-year institutions, community college students have a wider range of family backgrounds. Thirty-eight percent of two-year institution undergraduates enrolled in 2008 came from families where neither parent was educated beyond high school (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). First-generation college students (FGCS) often lack familial support. Many low-income FGCS parents view college as an endeavor for the wealthy and do not emotionally support their child's or family member's desire to go to college (Korsmo, 2014). Of those who support their child or family member's college aspirations, parents or family members without college experience do not understand the amount of time and focus academic coursework requires (Sparkman, Maulding, & Roberts, 2012). These first-generation college students are at risk of dropping out of college without completing a credential or degree (McFadden, 2015). In the RISC 2017-18 study of challenges facing community college students, 30% of the students (n = 6,079) reported meeting demands of family commitments as a challenge to being a successful student. Of the students (n = 1,844) responding that family commitments

were an obstacle to their success in college: 72% reported balancing demands of family and college; 35% reported difficulty in dealing with health of family or personal; 13% reported difficulty in finding childcare; and 11% reported family does not support me going to school (Porter & Umbach, 2019). Typically, these first-generation students are challenged by a variety of pre-college disadvantages: lack of basic knowledge about college, lower levels of family support, lower levels of family income, poor academic preparation, and undiagnosed mental health issues (Gruttarado & Crudo, 2012; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004).

Financial Aid

The cost of postsecondary education looms large as an aforementioned factor that contributes to student departure. Without financial aid, postsecondary opportunities would be unavailable to the population typically served by community colleges. Financial aid is a necessity and an expectation for community college students. There are three types of federal financial aid. Pell Grants and Supplemental Equal Opportunity Grants (SEOG) – intended specifically for low-income students – make up the first type of federal financial aid funds. Grants do not have to be repaid by the student. The second type of federal aid is Federal Work Study. Students can secure part-time employment at their institution or an off-campus non-profit community service agency and earn money while attending college classes. The third type of federal financial aid is Direct Student Loans. These loans are either subsidized or unsubsidized. A subsidized loan does not accrue interest while a student is in school half-time or during a deferment period. Six months after graduation or dropping below half-time enrollment status, interest begins to accrue and the student begins to pay the loan back. An unsubsidized loan accrues interest while the student is in-school or in a deferment or grace period. Unlike a subsidized loan, the student is responsible for the interest from the time the unsubsidized loan is

disbursed until payment is made in full. Nationally, 38% of students enrolled in a public community college receive Pell Grant federal aid (Baum & Ma, 2016). At the institution being studied, over 52% of students enrolled receive financial aid to subsidize their education. Of that 52%, 85% receive a Pell Grant award (MCC, 2018). In 2015-2016, 58% of all community college students received aid of some kind; 34% received federal grants, 13% received federal loans, 23% received state aid, and 7% received institutional aid (U.S. Department of Education, 2018b). Adding work study, institutional grants, and other institutional sources this figure increased to 78% (U. S. Department of Education, 2017b).

Government commitment to financial aid programming has not always been the case. In Colonial America, financial aid awards were modeled after that of Europe whereby students were sponsored by wealthy patrons, received church charity, or pooled student resources to pay instructors for their instruction (Thelin, 2011; Fuller, 2014). Following the Revolutionary War (1775-1782), the U.S. expanded into the west and established colleges outside of the Colonies. Colleges had to maintain affordable costs and provide some form of monetary assistance to garner student interest in response to the need to support the growth of educational institutions in the west. Education, previously available to only students of privilege and aristocracy, became available to a more diverse economic population (Wilkinson, 2005). Harvard was the first institution to develop a private student lending agency – the Harvard Loan Program - whereby students could secure a zero-interest loan for education. The Harvard General Beneficiary Fund was created in 1838 through the donations of wealthy alumni and benefactors (Fuller, 2014). Charles W. Eliot, Harvard College President from 1875-1876, spoke strongly about the importance of providing beneficiary aid to students: “young men of ability to [earn] an education, when their families are not able to help them, seems a peculiarly judicious and useful

charity…" (The American Home Missionary Society, 1879, p. 19). Other Ivy League and state institutions soon followed suit and similar loan programs were established in the mid to late 1800s (Cohen & Kisker, 2009; Thelin, 2011).

A notable impact on the financial aid system was the authorization of the 1944 Servicemen's Readjustment Act, labeled the GI Bill of Rights, which was established to assist servicemen in their post-World War II adjustment to civilian life (Kantrowitz, 2018). At the end of the war an estimated 15 million servicemen and 350,000 servicewomen returned to civilian life uneducated, ill-prepared for civilian employment opportunities, and living at an impoverished level (Greenberg, 2004). The GI Bill provided returning servicemen and women educational support for collegiate, vocational, or on-the-job training in the form of free tuition and books, and a living expense stipend for up to 48 months depending upon length of service (Greenberg, 2004). By 1947, veterans accounted for 49 percent of college enrollments reflected in the increase in college and university enrollments from 1940 where an estimated 1.5 million students were enrolled compared to 1950 where an estimated 2.7 million students were enrolled. (Greenberg, 2004). The GI bill placed the federal government in the important role as the financier of higher education for many people (Fuller, 2014). The G.I. Bill established the present structure of federal student aid to servicemen, which laid the foundation for awarding aid to non-enlisted citizens and paved the way to the funding education directly to students rather than to institutions (Fuller, 2014).

The financial aid system structure we know today originated with the 1965 Higher Education Act (HEA) which authorized federal student financial aid programs, such as the Educational Opportunity Grant Program, which we now know as the Pell Grant, and the Guaranteed Student Loan Program, the precursor to the Stafford Loan (Kantrowitz, 2018). Title

IV of the HEA represented the first overt federal commitment to leveling the field of college affordability for economically challenged students (Gladieux, 1995). Federal student aid programs were the primary system for providing educational access for low-income students. Three HEA programs (Educational Opportunity Grants, College Work Study, and National Direct Loans) were created by the federal government for institutions contingent upon the institutions subsidizing low-income student education costs based upon their meeting the requirements defined in a federal government needs-assessment (St. John, Daun-Barnett & Moronski-Chapman, 2013).

The federal government established specific criteria for student financial aid eligibility. Key among them are the following criteria:

- the student must demonstrate financial need which can be defined as the difference between the cost of attendance (COA) at a college and the student's expected family contribution (EFC) to the cost of attending a post-secondary institution;
- the student must be enrolled or accepted for enrollment at an institution for the purpose of obtaining an educational credential recognized by that institution;
- the student must maintain satisfactory academic progress in college or career school, as defined by the school's standards for satisfactory progress toward credential completion;
- the student will show qualification to obtain a college or career school education through the completion of a high school diploma or General Education Development (GED) certificate, the completion or a high school education through a homeschool setting, or by meeting one of the following "ability to benefit" alternatives: passing an approved "ability-to-benefit: test or completing six credit hours or equivalent course work toward a degree or certificate (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Meeting eligibility for financial aid does not guarantee the student will continue to receive aid throughout the course of their education. Financial aid is not awarded without stipulations. In order for a student to continue to be eligible for financial aid, the student must maintain "satisfactory progress" toward the completion of a credential.

Satisfactory academic progress.

The Education Amendments of 1976, PL94-482, reauthorized the Higher Education Act, adding Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) requirements (United States of America 94th Congress, 1976). For students to continue to receive financial aid assistance through Title IV, students must demonstrate "satisfactory progress" toward the completion of a credential: a certificate, diploma, or degree (Bennett & Grothe, 1982; U. S. Department of Education, 2017). Satisfactory academic progress is defined as making satisfactory grades as measured "against the norm," completing enough classes or credit hours as measured "against a percentage norm", and completing a credential within a "normal time frame" (Bennett & Grothe, 1982, p. 1.).

Federal policy requires that SAP must be evaluated at the end of each academic year, but the determination of satisfactory progress is left up to the institution. The institution must establish a rational satisfactory academic progress policy for determining whether an otherwise eligible student is making reasonable academic advancement on an academic pathway toward credential completion (Satisfactory Academic Progress, 2010). Schudde and Scott-Clayton (2014) noted that colleges and universities typically define positive academic progress by the criteria of achieving a 2.0 cumulative grade point average (GPA), completion of 67% of coursework attempted in a semester, and anticipated completion of a credential within the maximum credit hour time frame to earn said credential, which is 150 percent of the credit hours needed for the degree.

An institution's SAP policy must be as stringent as the academic policy applied to students not receiving assistance through Title IV programs (Satisfactory Academic Progress, 2010; U. S. Department of Education, n.d.b.). Each institution is charged with establishing reasonable guidelines that incorporate quantitative and qualitative review of student appeals. The institution must establish how often the institution will evaluate student progress toward credential completion, what will happen if the student fails to make satisfactory academic progress, and acceptable reasons for failing to meet satisfactory academic progress (Satisfactory Academic Progress, 2010). While students who failed to meet an institution's SAP standards are not eligible to receive aid, there is the caveat of appeal based upon the demonstration of the student facing "undue hardship" which may allow the student to be considered for policy exception (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Undue hardships can be defined by the institution, but typically reflect a disturbing life event such as the death of a family member, personal illness, or injury. The federal policy changed to include a warning period in 2011, which requires all institutions to warn students prior to the termination of federal aid funding (Schudde & Scott-Clayton, 2014). Two research studies were conducted by the Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment research studies on the consequences of SAP policy on first-time community college students. The authors offer that SAP policy can serve as a financial incentive for students which may boost their academic effort early in their college career, as well as an important signal about academic performance at post-secondary institutions for graduation. Performance based scholarships have been found to cultivate satisfactory academic performance (Barrow, Richburg-Hayes, Rouse, & Brock, 2014; Barrow & Rouse, 2013; Schudde & Scott-Clayton, 2014; Scott-Clayton, 2011).

Kentucky Community and Technical College System SAP policy.

The Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS) follows the federal guidelines for measurement of satisfactory academic progress and has established the following measures: two quantitative measures – a student must maintain a cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA) of 2.0 or higher and a student must successfully complete at least 67% of all credit hours attempted; and a maximum time frame measure – a student must successfully complete his/her credential in his/her chosen major within a maximum time frame of 150% of the number of credit hours required to graduate from that program (e.g., all classes required to graduate plus an additional 50%) (Satisfactory Academic Progress, 2010). Per KCTCS policy, satisfactory academic progress is evaluated at the end of each term. Students who do not meet the financial aid SAP requirements of a cumulative GPA of 2.0, completion of 67% of all credit hours attempted, and pace progression toward the completion of their degree on a timely schedule are placed on a warning for the next semester. When students reach 110% percent of completing their degree, they are flagged for not meeting pace progression to complete their degree within 150% of their required credit hours. They are eligible to receive aid for the additional semester, but have to assure that they are following their academic plan to meet SAP requirements and that they are only taking the courses required for their program of study.

Each KCTCS college has a Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) Committee that reviews student financial aid SAP appeals. The number of members and make-up of the committee from faculty and professional staff ranks is up to the discretion of the Financial Aid Director. While each college follows KCTCS SAP guidelines, the institutions has the ability to determine their own policy for evaluating a student's appeal for continued financial aid. The committee reviews SAP appeals and make the decision to approve or deny the student's appeal

based upon the criteria of acceptable and unacceptable appeal reasons. Students are notified through their KCTCS email the decision rendered on their appeal. If a student's appeal is denied, the student can continue taking coursework for a semester at their own expense and appeal the next semester. If the student's SAP is approved, the student will have aid awarded for the semester but must only take classes required for the declared major. Failure to meet any combination of two consecutive terms of cumulative GPA and/or quantitative standards results in the student's financial aid being suspended. Students who appeal for the third time typically are not approved and required to pay for a class for the upcoming semester to show due diligence in working to improve their academic record consistent with SAP requirements. However, there is no limit to the number of times a student can file a SAP appeal.

Student Departure

It is important to take a look at the foundational theories that explain student departure and attrition before the principal investigator can explore the reasons for attrition in a rural Kentucky community college through the lens of SAPs. Concerns are reasons why students do not persist in college and why they depart. Perhaps measures can be taken to prevent student early departure if reasons can be identified. Seminal works will be reviewed along with more recent student departure models that give special attention to the nontraditional, commuter (e.g., community college) student. A review of student departure models will provide a theoretical model of reasons attributed to student attrition and more specifically student attrition in community colleges. This will set the foundation to explore student attrition through the lens of the Satisfactory Academic Progress appeals process at a small community college.

Undergraduate dropout process model.

William G. Spady developed one of earliest theories to explain why students drop out of college. Based upon a sociological lens, Spady (1971) studied the undergraduate student drop out process and voluntary institutional departure in light of Emile Durkheim's theory of suicide (Durkheim, 1951). This theory proposed to explain how sociological principles could help explain why rates of suicide were different between countries and dissimilar when comparing parts of the same country. Durkheim's concept of egotistical suicide was of special note to Spady as it explained how someone could take their own life if they feel they are not able to assimilate into society and make meaningful relationships in society. Spady theorized that a college student's social integration into the college community was based upon five variables unique to the student: academic potential, adaptation to social norms, grade performance, intellectual development, and friendship support. Spady conducted a longitudinal study with 683 students at the University of Chicago in 1965. He was interested in how the interactions between students and their college environment might have some bearing on their academic persistence and retention. The result of this student-environment interaction determines the degree to which the student will integrate into the academic and social systems of the college which determines the student's persistence in college. Spady determined that the student's decision to stay is based on grades and scholarly growth and the student's ability to conform to social standards and cultivate supportive social relationships. Spady determined that students' decision to stay or leave their institutions had a direct link to grade performance. In summary, student persistence was related directly to the student's ability to meet the challenge of academic expectations as opposed the student's social support networks and connection to the institution itself (Spady, 1971). Spady's model of student departure is shown in Diagram 1.

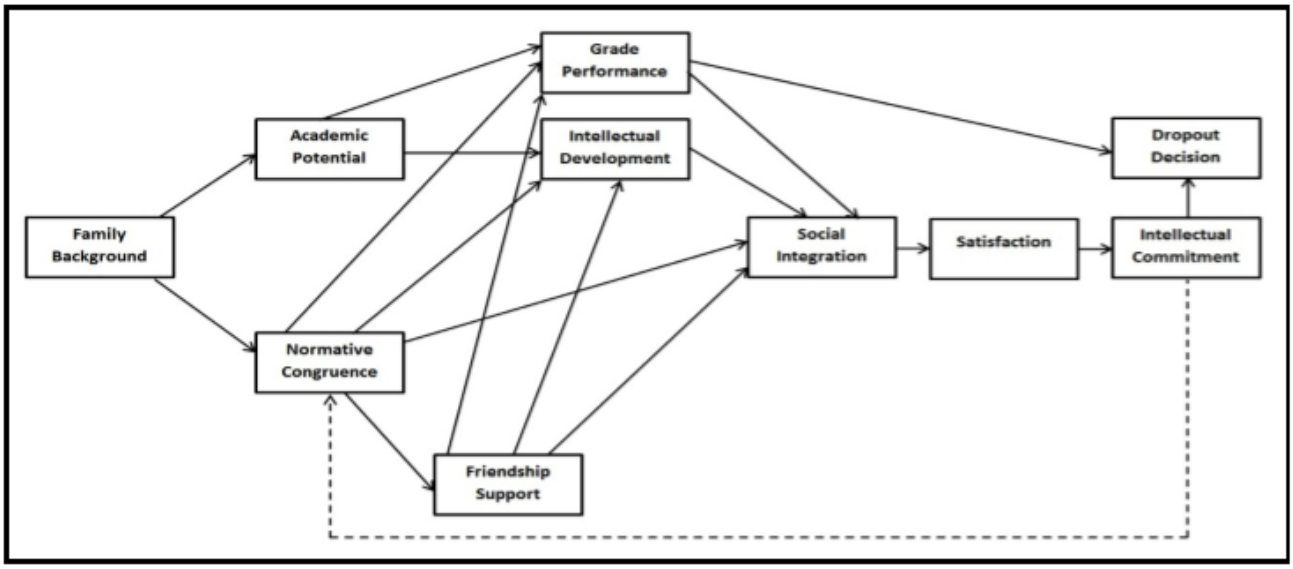

Diagram 1: Undergraduate Dropout Process Model (Spady, 1971).

Institutional theory of student departure.

Vincent Tinto (1993) expanded on the Undergraduate Dropout Process Model by interpreting student departure through a social anthropological theory whereby a student's successful academic and social affiliation with the academic institution could determine the student's satisfaction and persistence. The student's success in transitioning from high school to college can be explained as a series of steps completed in a "rite of passage" (Tinto, 1993). Student institutional departure occurs as the result of the student's unsuccessful movement through these steps thus having an unsatisfactory connection to the academic and social systems of the institution. Tinto based his anthropological model of student departure on Van Gennep's (1960) archetypal study of that proposed that an individual's transmission from membership in one group to another is based upon three phases of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation (Tinto, 1993; Van Gennep, 1960). Each stage assists in moving an individual along from youth to adulthood and could be applied to a variety of situations. Van Gennep (1960) stated that the

ceremonial aspect of an individual separating and transitioning to another group or situation in life contributes to the individual transitioning and successfully integrating into the new group or situation. For example, the traditional high school graduation announcement and celebration after graduation serve as ritual events to mark the end of the individual's belonging to one organization and social system, then entering another type of system, whether it be academic or occupational, that typically follow a high school graduation. Tinto's (1993) reference of Van Geppe's passages model serves to lay a foundation for the type of transition students must make when enrolling in college for the first semester. The students must transition from their family environment, peers, high school social system, and known academic expectations into new social and academic systems (Tinto, 1993).

The first stage a college student experiences is "separation" whereby the student breaks away from the membership in their various communities (e.g., high school, family, church, organizations). This can be very difficult for some students, resulting in depression and isolation. Tinto noted that the ability for a student to leave one setting is an important first step to persistence in other situations, like college. "Transition" is the second stage of passage for the new college student. This stage follows after separation has occurred and is marked by the introduction to new and different norms, attitudes, and cultures and departure from old norms, attitudes, and cultures. The degree to which a student can navigate the transition phase successfully is incumbent upon the student's responses to the changes inherent in separating from the old life and stepping into a new one. The final stage in Van Geppe's passage model is "incorporation", which is the student's ability to become assimilated into the new situation (Van Geppe, 1960). Tinto stated that a clear formality does not exist by which a student is ushered into the new academic and social systems, but that freshman programs, fraternities and sororities,

intramural sports can provide an avenue for integration; however, most freshman students navigate their incorporation into the college setting solo (Tinto, 1993).

The degree to which the student feels integrated academically and socially is influenced by the student's academic preparedness, family background, race, gender, and social attainment (Tinto, 1993). This sense of integration influences the student's commitment to the institution and the personal goal of college credential completion. Tinto's research was focused on the longitudinal process of student departure and explains how the different experiences students have within the institution attribute to different forms of departure. Tinto offers several hypotheses to explain why a student leaves an institution versus staying to complete a credential. They are summarized below:

- student's entry characteristics (academic preparedness, family background, financial resources, and external commitments) affect the level of initial commitment to the institution, the goal of graduation, and the likelihood of persistence;
- a student's initial commitment to the goal of graduating from college and to the institution impacts the student's academic and social integration into the institution;
- the greater degree of a student's academic integration, the great the level of ensuing commitment to the goal of graduating;
- the greater the degree of a student's social integration, the greater the level of ensuing commitment to the institution;
- a student's initial level of commitment to the institution impacts the student's ensuing level of institutional commitment;
- a student's initial level of commitment to the goal of graduating from college impacts the student's ensuing level of commitment to this goal;

- the greater the student's ensuing level of commitment to the goal of graduating from college and to the institution, the greater the likelihood the student will persist;
- a high level of commitment to the goal of graduation from college compensates for a low level of commitment to the institution, and vice versa, in influencing student persistence in college; and
- academic integration and social integration are mutually interdependent and reciprocal in their influence on student persistence in college (Tinto, 1993).

These hypotheses underscore the importance of personal commitment and social community to a college student's success. A student's ability to make the successful transition into a new community is dependent upon the student's ability to integrate into both the academic and social systems by becoming a part of the academic and social communities of the college. The phrase highlights the critical importance of student engagement and involvement as students establish new social connections in an academic environment (Tinto, 1993).

In summary, Tinto explained that the main sources of college students' departures result from academic challenges that cannot be overcome, failure to determine scholastic goals and career goals, and inability to remain integrated in the academic and social systems of the college (Tinto, 1993). A student's academic and social integration are viewed as parallel processes that define the student's adjustment and success in college. Academic integration is reflected in the student's ability to maintain a passing grade, abide by the institution's norms and expectations in the classroom and on campus. Social integration is evidenced by student's satisfaction with the institution's values and norms, as well as the student's positive social interactions the student has with peers, faculty, staff, and college personnel (Tinto, 1993). Tinto's work provides a foundational theory for framing the study of student departure in four-year institutions. While it

does not necessarily account for the unique reasons for attrition in the community college student population, his amended theory adds that the degree to which a student has external commitments, such as family and work, does affect the student's initial and ensuing level of commitment to academic goals and commitment to the institution (Tinto, 1993). Tinto's student departure model is shown in Diagram 2.

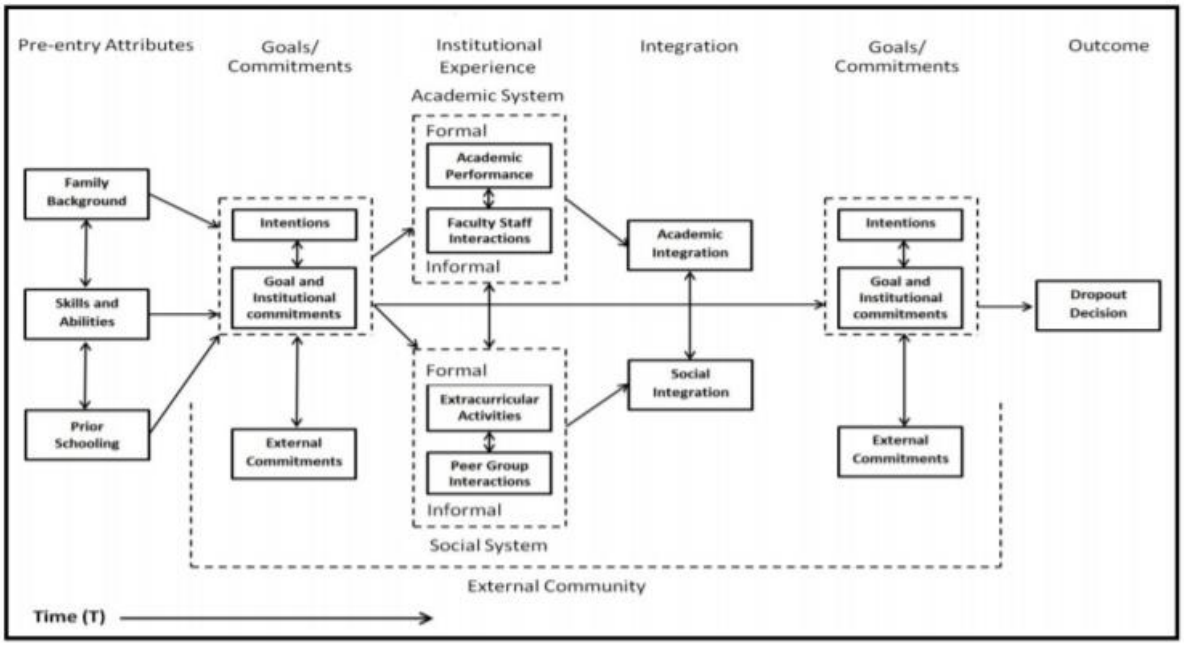

Diagram 2: Institutional Theory of Student Departure (Tinto, 1993).

Nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model.

Bean and Metzner (1985) theorize that the reasons that nontraditional students do not persist is different than the reasons that traditional, college aged students are not retained. They propose that nontraditional students are more affected by external environmental factors than by academic and social integration factors as proposed by Spady (1971) and Tinto (1993). Bean and Metzner (1985) highlight that older, part-time, non-residential college students experience environmental factors that traditional, residential college students do not, such as less

interaction with faculty and peers, less engagement with campus extracurricular activities and use of college services, and much greater involvement with non-collegiate factors.

Bean and Metzner (1985) preface their theory on the following assumptions: (1) nontraditional students will have more family responsibilities, hours of employment, and higher level of absenteeism than younger students, (2) nontraditional students are more likely to be enrolled part-time, (3) nontraditional students are less likely to reside on a college campus, and (4) nontraditional students are less likely to be involved in extra-curricular and class-related activities. Bean and Metzner's research found empirical evidence that that environmental variables should be more important for nontraditional student retention than academic or social variables reporting the following results: (1) when academic and external environmental factors are favorable for retention, students should remain enrolled in college, (2) when academic and environmental factors are unfavorable for retention, students should leave college, (3) when academic variables are favorable for retention, but external environmental factors are unfavorable for retention, students will leave as the positive effects of the academic barriers on persistence will not be evident, and (4) when environmental support is favorable for retention and academic support is unfavorable, students would be expected to remain enrolled as the environmental support will compensate for the poor academic support. Bean and Metzner found that for nontraditional students, environmental support offsets weak academic support, but academic support will not offset weak environmental support (1985). The main difference in the student departure process of traditional students and nontraditional students is the impact social system integration has on the retention of both populations. Being integrated into a college social system has only a minimal effect upon retention for nontraditional students since external environmental factors are more important. Environmental factors, such as family responsibilities

and work commitments play a significant role in the student departure process for nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Bean and Metzner's student departure model is shown in Diagram 3.

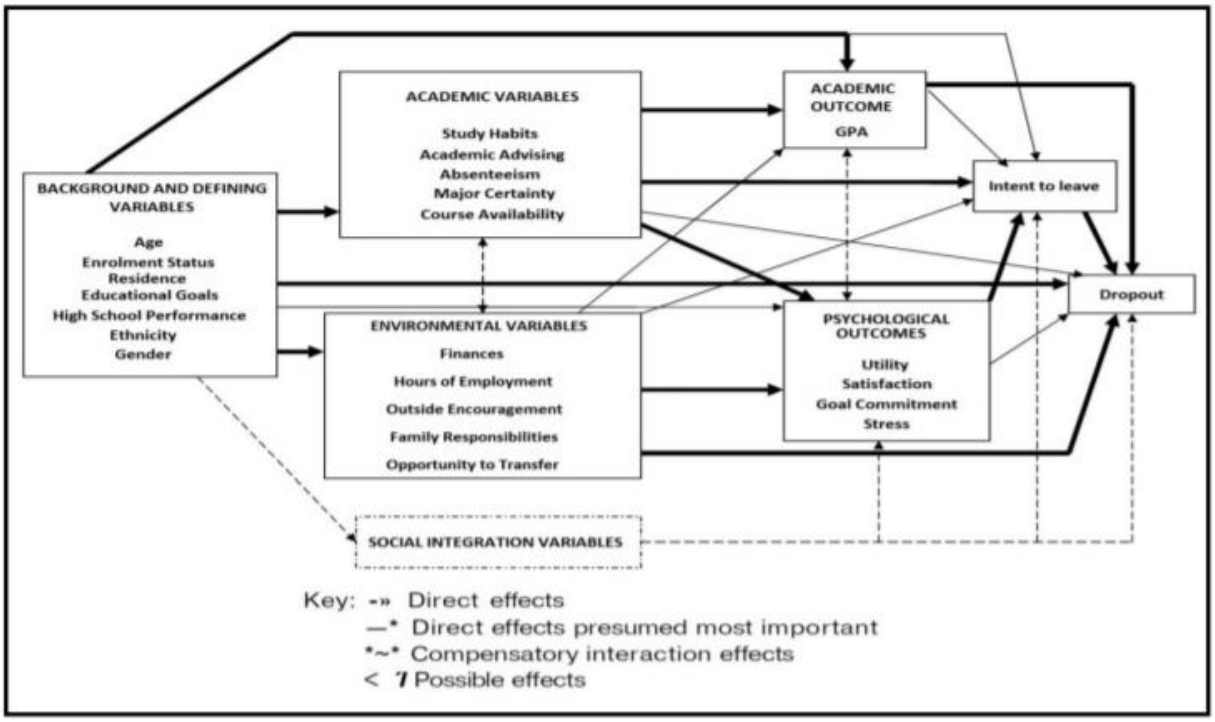

Diagram 3: Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition Model (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Theory of departure in commuter colleges and universities.

Tinto's addendum to his original student departure theory was the consideration of students departing college based upon external factors such as family and work commitments. Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) studied the theory gap and proposed to eliminate the impact of the academic integration on student departure that was proposed by Tinto and focus more on the social integration that influences a student's decision to depart. Braxton et al. (2004) offered 16 propositions that uniquely impact student departure in commuter colleges and provide a foundation for the development of a theory specific to the departure of commuter

college students. The basic elements of the theory assume that the student brings specific characteristics to their academic experience (e.g., motivation, control issues, self-efficacy, empathy, affiliation needs, parental education, and socialization anticipation). These characteristics along with the external environment, the campus environment, and institutional academic communities all influence the student's initial commitment to their goals and the institution, as well as subsequent goal and institution commitment (Braxton et al., 2004). They hold that the nontraditional, commuter student retention is primarily influenced by environmental, external factors like family commitments, finances, working commitments, and other outside factors. Economic reasons contribute to a student staying at an institution. If a student perceives the benefits of attending college outweighs the expense, a student is more likely to stay. If the student perceives the institution to be committed to the welfare of the student, the student is more likely to stay (Braxton et al., 2004). Community college student persistence is of special interest because of the additional obstacles typically facing commuter students, such as employment responsibilities, family obligations, and poor academic preparation.

Braxton, Doyle, Jones, McLendon, Hirschy, and Hartley (2014) set out to revise their original theory of commuter college student departure by revisiting more recent research on the topic. While the authors noted that there are unique economic, organizational, psychological, sociological, and personal elements bolstered by empirical research to account for commuter college student departure decisions, there are two significant elements that have bearing on a commuter college student's institution commitment and persistence. These two factors are the degree to which the student perceives the institutional as being committed to student welfare and exhibits institutional integrity influences the student's level of institutional commitment and

influences the student's academic and intellectual growth. Through their multivariate analysis they found two statistically significant factors shaping a commuter student's commitment to the institution as exhibited by their attendance, those factors are the more the student perceives their college as exhibiting institutional integrity, as defined as the congruence between the institution's espoused mission and goals and administration actions, the greater the student's commitment to the institution and perceives academic and intellectual growth, and secondly, the greater the degree the student perceives the institution as dedicated to the welfare of the student, as defined as exhibiting an abiding concern for the growth and development of its students, the greater the degree the subsequent commitment of the student to the institution and the greater the degree to which the student perceives academic and intellectual growth. The second statistically significant finding is that the greater the degree the academic and intellectual development perceived by the student the greater the degree the student subsequently commits to the commuter college (Braxton, Doyle, Jones, McLendon, Hirschy, & Hartley, 2014). Braxton et al. (2014) student departure model is show in Diagram 4.

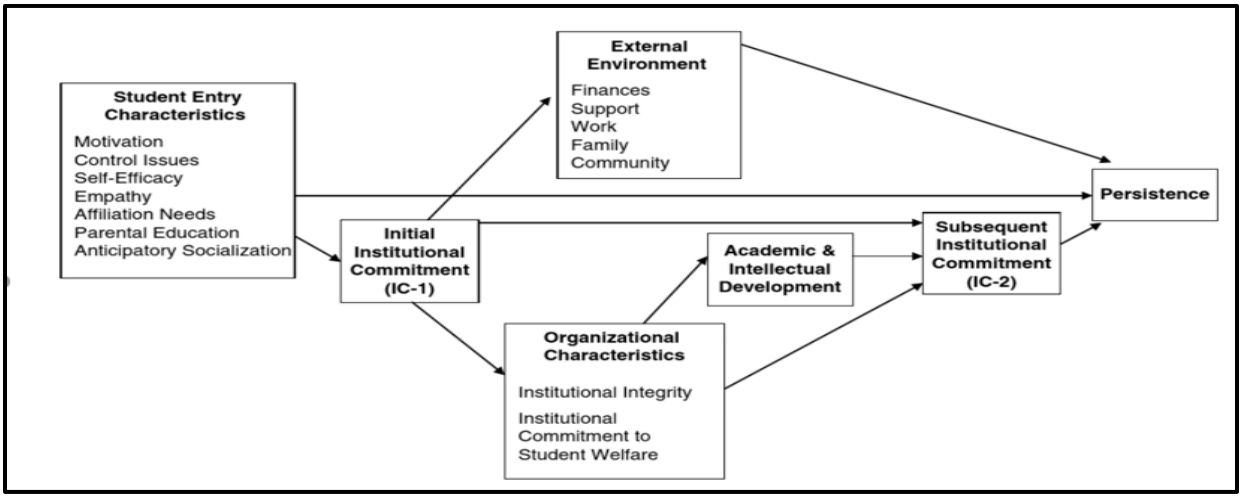

Diagram 4: Theory of student persistence in commuter colleges & universities (Braxton et al., 2014).

Other researchers have examined Tinto's model of student departure in the context of community college education. Karp, Hughes, and O'Gara (2010) found that Tinto's model can be applied to the two-year student population, although it is assumed by some to be applicable only to the four-year population. The main deficiency is the belief that social integration – a foundational concept in Tinto's theory – is not possible in a community college setting because of the characteristics of this population of students. Community college students who do not reside on campus experience time constraints that prevent participation in campus events, have work and family responsibilities, and are more likely to be ill-prepared for the rigorous academic challenge. Karp and colleagues (2010) invited 176 randomly selected students enrolled fall 2005 at two northeastern urban community colleges to examine the ways first-year students engage with their institution and the trials they face. The authors interviewed 46 students who accepted the invitation to participate in the student survey. The students were interviewed during their second semester of college and again six months later to see whether or not the students remained enrolled. The authors discovered that community college students do academically and socially integrate and develop attachments to their institutions. Students' classroom and non-classroom activities lead to both academic and social integration. Seventy percent of the students reported feeling a connection to their college and a sense of belonging. Ninety percent of the students who noted that they felt a sense of belonging to their college persisted to the second year. Sixty-one percent students indicated that they were a part of some form of social network at their institution, meaning that they had social ties that supported their level of comfort in the college culture like knowing people who they could talk to about class selection, professors on campus, support services or student organizations. Students reported that the social networks provided information in a variety of ways that made the campus feel comfortable

and friendly which helps them feel they could overcome the trials or obstacles that could have made them feel alienated (Karp et al., 2010).

A variety of barriers can prevent students from making satisfactory academic progress and contribute to their early departure. Those barriers can be grouped together under three broad categories: academic, economic, and personal. Students may begin their postsecondary education academically underprepared, having underperformed in high school or having not encountered the challenging of secondary school preparation. Or they may begin their postsecondary pathway economically disadvantaged, having to work and attend college at the same time or having to manage a budget on a razor thin margin. Finally, they may wrestle with personal issues – the "life gets in the way" kind of issues that are unpredictable (a mother or father needs their care and attention), or result from poor judgement (substance abuse or relationship issues), or are health related (mental health or a chronic physical health issue, like depression or diabetes).

This study examined student SAP appeals and barriers from the perspective of four different student departure theories to determine which theory provides a compelling explanation for why students do not make satisfactory academic progress. A better understanding of how barriers manifest themselves can be used to develop more effective interventions to assure student persistence among this particular SAP population. Spady posits that departure is best explained by an inability of the student to perform well academically. Tinto extends that theory and suggests that integration is a more complicated process and must take into account the extent to which the student engages successfully in the classroom with his or her peers and instructors. It is a matter of engaging, and thus succeeding, academically. Students who have a positive academic experience are students who come back. Bean and colleagues take a broader approach,

studying the impact of external phenomena that typically impact the non-traditional student, phenomena like commitment to work and family. Finally, Braxton and colleagues examine Tinto's theory to determine which of its components are applicable to the commuter student. Braxton contends that Tinto's theory is not nuanced enough and must be reconsidered in light of the typical two-year student population. Taken together, these theories provide the grounds upon which to examine the significant factors that account for student departure.

Chapter III: Methodology

The purpose of the investigator's study is to examine the reasons for attrition among rural community college students by way of SAP appeals. Investigating what impedes the progress of student academic success is important because of its relationship to local and regional economic development. A well-trained workforce is necessary if the state is to compete nationally and the United States is to compete globally. Community college student attrition directly impacts the development of this workforce. Seminal student departure theories provide a foundation on which to explore community college student attrition through the lens of SAP and student self-reflection. This chapter is dedicated to the description of the specific methodology used, including the research paradigm, theoretical framework of inquiry, data collection, student sampling and selection, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures.

Research Design

Community college students face various obstacles in achieving their educational goals. The investigator analyzed student appeals triggered by failure to make Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) so that the findings can be used to develop strategies and programs to remove these obstacles or mitigate their impact. The investigation included exploring student perceptions and reasons for failing to comply with SAP guidelines as those perceptions and reasons are presented in their written appeals and gleaned from focus group interviews; aligning these perceptions and reasons with causal factors identified in the literature related to student departure theory; and examining how these reasons are impacted by institutional policies and practices and external institutional influences. Findings from the initial analysis and coding of the written appeals were used to inform structured focus group interviews with a representative sample of students who had completed the appeal process.

A mixed methods approach was used by the investigator for this study. The strengths in combining research methods can provide richer data (Rossman & Wilson, 1985) as well as provide elaboration, enhancement, illustration, and clarification of results from one method to the other (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). The specific type of mixed methods approach used is *quantitative dominant* (QUAN+qual research). This mixed research approach relies on a quantitative, postpositivist view of the research process, while simultaneously recognizing that the addition of qualitative data and research are beneficial to deepening the research findings (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007).

This mixed methods study was based on a foundation of grounded theory. Grounded theory is a sociologically-based, exploratory methodology that studies a concept through the lens of data collection and analysis with continual comparison to foundational theories (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Foundational theories were used to explore emerging patterns of data related to students' failure to make satisfactory academic progress. Descriptive data was collected initially from written student SAP appeals. Categorizing was used as a strategy to identify similarities and differences among the descriptive data. Initial categorizing of appeals was broadly "topical" in nature and intended to sort the data for further qualitative inquiry and analysis (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Initial categorizing informed focus group interview questions. Transcripts of the focus group interviews provided an additional, more detailed, set of data for further analysis. Overall, this qualitative research was exploratory in nature and sought "to discover what is going on," building knowledge inductively from observed data (Glaser, 1978, p. 159). This grounded theory research approach does not embark on proving a theory; rather, it offers an area of study, and relevant information is allowed to surface (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The investigator's research proposal was submitted to KCTCS for an Expedited Review based upon the minimal risk for the study participants involved in the SAP data review and SAP student focus groups. The investigator received IRB approval from the President of the institution being studied, the Kentucky Community and Technical College System, and Murray State University to proceed with the proposed research study. With approval granted, the investigator proceeded with research data collection and analysis.

The investigator focused both quantitative and qualitative data categorization by analyzing the written appeals and the focus group transcription in light of the following four research questions:

RQ1: What are the students' perceptions of why they are on SAP?

RQ2: What assumptions do students make on the analysis of their SAP status?

RQ3: What recommendations do students have for their future success?

RQ4: What are the students' perceptions of personal responsibility for their SAP violation?

Quantitative data was collected and reviewed from the institution's 1,171 student SAP appeals completed in the fall, spring, and summer semesters of academic years 2016-2017 and 2017-2018. Qualitative data was collected from three student focus groups comprised of 14 students who were solicited from students whose fall 2019 SAP appeal was approved (n = 195), representing 75.88% of the total SAP appeals filed in fall 2019 (n = 257).

Setting and Sample

This study was conducted at a public community college in rural, western Kentucky, a historically under-educated and low-socio economic region of the state. This institution is one of sixteen postsecondary institutions in a state system. It has a comprehensive mission, offering

associate degree – technical and transfer – diploma, and certificate programs in a broad range of disciplines. Over 46 % of currently enrolled students are adult learners (25 years of age or older) and 43.5% are first generation college students (FGCS). The student population studied was associate degree or diploma seeking students, eligible for Title IV aid, and found to be in violation of meeting SAP federal guidelines (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). At the institution of study, the SAP population makes up a small percentage of the institution's total number of students receiving financial aid (Pell Grant, direct loans, subsidized loans, unsubsidized loans, and PLUS funds). SAP students make up a small percentage of students who are receiving financial aid. In 2016-2017, 16.77% of the 3,446 students receiving aid were on SAP; and in 2017-2018, 17.52% of the 3,384 students receiving financial aid were on SAP (U. S. Department of Education, 2020). Approximately three-fourths of the institution's student population are part-time students, enrolled in 11 credit hours or less, as reflected in 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 institutional data: 70.34% and 74.42% respectively. This part-time rate of enrollment is higher than it is for the state's community college system, which is reflected in the system's part-time enrollment rate of 64.58% in 2016-2017 and 65.87% in 2017-2018 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

Nonprobability sampling was used for quantitative data collection (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Individuals were selected for study who were available and could be studied. This type of sampling was best used when conducting this exploratory study to demonstrate that particular traits existed in the population being studied. It was an advantageous approach when compared to probabilistic sampling because it was both cost-effective and time effective. In contrast with probability sampling, the nonprobability sample was not a product of a randomized selection processes; rather, subjects in the sample were selected on the basis of their

accessibility. The sample population met the criteria relative to the current study and was comprised of 1,171 students from the institution being studied who did not made satisfactory academic progress in fall 2016, spring 2017, fall 2017, or spring 2018 because their cumulative GPA was below 2.0; they did not complete 67% of the coursework attempted in the term; and/or they exceeded the maximum timeframe for completing the credential they are pursuing. This population was made up of traditional-aged (24 years or younger) and nontraditional-aged (25 years or older) college students who were part-time or full-time, and credential seeking (degree, diploma, or certificate). Identifying information was removed from the data, providing only information relative to the study.

Quantitative data collection.

The Financial Aid SAP Appeal Coordinator assisted with data collection by providing access to completed Financial Aid SAP appeal forms. The instrument used to collect SAP student responses was an online form used by all KCTCS institutions which consists of a SAP appeal instruction page (Appendix A), a SAP appeal explanation of the student's SAP status (Appendix B), a SAP appeal request category form (Appendix C), the student's written statement of the circumstances that caused the SAP failure (Appendix D), the student's written statement of changes made to enable student to make satisfactory academic progress (Appendix E), the SAP Student's Acknowledgement of SAP status (Appendix F), and the SAP student's acknowledgement of needing to provide additional documentation (Appendix G). The following information was collected from the online SAP forms: student ID number, full name, academic plan, GPA, cumulative earned credit hours, cumulative attempted credit hours, maximum credit hours allowed for declared credential, selected category of SAP appeal request, description of what caused the student to not meet financial aid eligibility (e.g. GPA, pace progression, and

appropriate time frame for degree completion), and description of remediation and corrective action to assure continued financial aid eligibility (e.g. GPA, pace progression, and appropriate time frame for degree completion). Each field on the form is limited to 300 characters. The online form is a tool used to understand students' perceptions of why they have been unsuccessful in their academic progression toward credential completion. The study was based upon the review and categorization of two SAP appeal written statements per 1,171 students from six consecutive semesters (n: 2,342). The investigator remained open to nuances suggested by the students' wording, stayed close to the data to avoid making unwarranted assumptions, compared data to data when warranted, and kept the categorization process simple, using short code construction (Charmaz, 2006). Data were reviewed thoroughly several times.

Quantitative data analysis.

First, the investigator conducted an initial general read-through of the research materials as a whole collection in order to develop a general understanding of the data, following generally accepted procedures for content analysis applicable to identifying trends and patterns in written documents (Stemler, 2001). Analysis consisted of more than a simple word-frequency count. Each word or phrase used for categorizing was considered in context, and each category consisted of a word or group of words with similar meaning or connotations (Weber, 1990). Categories were mutually exclusive, and the context determined categorization (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1996). Categorizing was a priori; that is, the investigator established the categories prior to analysis based upon foundational theories of student departure (Stemler, 2001).

The second step was to analyze the SAP appeal data line-by-line, categorizing the data given the three categories identified earlier in the literature on student departure, broad categories

that the literature notes as typical: (1) Academic, (2) Economic, and (3) Personal. The investigator focused the categorization of the written appeal statements by analyzing them in light of the following two research questions:

RQ1: What are the students' perceptions of why they are on SAP?

RQ3: What recommendations do students have for their future success?

The third step for the investigator was to conduct a more intensive analysis of the initial three categories (Academic, Economic, and Personal) in terms of their frequency and meaning. Anecdotal evidence provided by financial aid counselors noted that often the SAP category students select – Accident or Illness Student/Family, Death of a Family Member/Close Friend, Divorce, Other, or Work/Employment Change – is not an accurate category given their written justification for appeal. Context determined the categorization of the statement. The codes were categorized and counted, and the reliability of the categorizing was confirmed by the frequency of their occurrence.

A fourth step was the examination of each of the three coded categories separately, examining each category for patterns of explanation and common themes embedded in the students' written justifications for appeal. The validity of this more detailed data analysis was confirmed through focus group findings. Themes that emerged from various patterns of student explanation provided a framework for the development of interview questions for the qualitative research conducted with focus groups. Words, phrases, perspectives, and patterns of speech were used to create thematic categories in light of the following two research questions:

RQ1: What are the students' perceptions of why they are on SAP?

RQ3: What recommendations do students have for their future success?

Qualitative data collection.

The initial quantitative analysis of frequency and meaning of categorized themes provided a foundation for a detailed examination of student justifications for appealing SAP sanctions using qualitative focus group research. Focus groups are a type of group interview, intended to elicit information that provide a portrait of combined student perspectives and thus provide a deeper understanding of student perception and insights into their unsatisfactory academic progress. Ideally, a synergy occurs during the group interviews which produces greater insight because participants are working together to tease out and amplify each other's meaning (Grudens-Schuck, Allen & Larson, 2004). The investigator used purposeful sampling to select focus group participants from those who have experienced the phenomena being studied. The population represented variations in gender, race, level of schooling, age, and declared program. Students in the population were on SAP for one or more of the following reasons: not maintaining an acceptable GPA, exceeding the maximum time frame for completing a credential, and/or not completing 67% of coursework attempted.

The focus group interviews provided students with ample time to listen, reflect, and recall their own experiences. The focus group setting encouraged student conversation; prompted memories when stirred by other group members; enabled the investigator to listen and make note of differing viewpoints among students; and allowed for open-ended responses from the participants that could provide a comprehensive depiction of the phenomena being discussed and the experiences being shared (Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The focus group format was carefully structured and included: (1) a welcome, (2) identification of the investigator, scribe, and video-recorder, (3) identification of the purpose and objective for the discussion, (4) a review of ground rules and incentive for participation, (5) a collection of

completed consent forms authorizing audio taping and recording, and (6) specific open-ended discussion prompts and questions (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

One hundred and ninety-five students were contacted through their KCTCS emails with an invitation to participate in a pizza lunch focus group to discuss their SAP experience. The focus groups were scheduled in a small conference room at the college main campus. Students were given three focus group dates from which to choose (September 24th, September 25th, and September 30th). The email message was comprised of the investigator's overview of the purpose of the study, the information to be collected, the low risk nature of the study, the protected confidentiality of the data collected, the selection of dates to choose from, and the compensation for participating. Students were informed that the focus group discussion would be video recorded to assure accuracy of comments and that personal identities would be anonymous and comments kept confidential. A copy of the Consent Release Form (Appendix H) was attached with a request for confirmation of attendance sent via email by a determined date. The first email solicitation was sent on Friday, September 13, 2019 requesting a response date of September 19, 2019. A second email invitation was sent out on Friday, September 20, 2019 with a Monday, September 24, 2019 response date. The percentage of student who opened the first email solicitation was 23.59% (n = 46); the percentage who opened the second solicitation was 11.79% (n = 23). Twenty-seven students replied with a commitment to one of the focus group dates (13.85%); however, there was only a focus group attendance rate of 7.18% (n = 14) with participation spread out over the three focus group dates.

Each focus group was scheduled from 12:15 p.m. – 1:00 p.m. and started promptly at 12:20 p.m. with a pizza lunch. The atmosphere was relaxed and informal. Focus group interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes. Focus group students were asked the following

questions: (1) When you received the notice of your SAP violation, what was your understanding of what that meant?; (2) What could you have done to have avoided the violation?; (3) What could college faculty or staff have done to help you avoid being on SAP?; (4) In your opinion, what does it take to persevere when life happens, such as personal issues, work conflicts, etc.?; and (5) Reflecting on your own SAP experience, what advice would you give a new college student?

Video recording was used to ensure comments were attributed to the correct student and that there were no errors in the transcription of data. In order to assure a consistent experience for the participants, all focus groups were video recorded by the same IT employee. In addition, the investigator secured a scribe who took notes during the focus group sessions so that the investigator's attention could be solely focused on the student discussion. The investigator assured that the focus group discussions adhered to an open-ended format. The investigator reviewed a transcription of the video discussions immediately following the sessions to ensure accuracy. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect the anonymity of each participant. Focus group data are currently being maintained in the investigator's office in a locked file cabinet when not being analyzed. Since the meaning of the focus group discussions does not present itself complete with interpretation, the transcriptions were coded and categorized, and their meanings examined to yield grounded theory research implications, consistent with the content analysis procedures noted earlier (Stewart, 2006).

It is important that the investigator's experiences as a student and an educator do not influence the interpretation of the data under review. The investigator approached this study cognizant of her own preconceptions and biases about the community college students who complete written SAP appeals and the reasons they give for not successfully completing a

semester. The investigator grew up in an upper middle-class family, with a father who earned an engineering bachelor's degree and mother who was trained as a paralegal and bookkeeper. Education was valued in the family, and attending college was an expectation. There were no expectations to care for family members or to work while in college, unlike many community college students who wrestle with these barriers. Attending college was the investigator's "job." These family expectations and socio-economic advantages must be acknowledged and not be allowed to unduly bias the research findings.

The investigator assembled the SAP committee comprised of two faculty members, a campus coordinator, financial aid specialist, registrar, and two college advisors to review the coded categories, discuss common themes, and assist in developing questions for the focus group interviews. The participation of the SAP committee helped assure inter-rater reliability and validity. The reliability of the interview methodology was strengthened by the investigator's experience. Since fall 2006, the investigator conducted over 10 such focus groups in conjunction with the evaluation of the college's successful First Semester Experience program. Moreover, the investigator was at one time a practicing licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, trained in active listening and open-ended questioning. In this regard, the investigator had the skill set necessary to lead a focus group format.

Qualitative data analysis.

Grounded theory methodology requires theoretical thoughtfulness on the part of the investigator which can come from familiarity with the research literature and insight gleaned from one's own personal knowledge and professional experience (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The investigator must have the ability to ascribe meaning to the data collected, to understand the data collected, and to separate important information from irrelevant information (Strauss & Corbin,

1990). In addition, it is important that the investigator be aware of preconceived ideas brought to the study. Bringing a certain subjectivity to the study is something the investigator must acknowledge beforehand. This subjectivity is due in part to reading student departure literature as well as working with the community college student population over fifteen years.

Bogdan and Bilken (1998) stated that qualitative researchers should not try to suppress or ignore their own biases. Researchers should acknowledge biases at the beginning of the research process, be mindful of their biased thoughts, and make note of them throughout the data collection and analysis process. In this regard, the investigator was expecting to see the following reasons given for student SAP failure: difficulty of coursework, family obligations, illness, and work scheduling conflicts. In an effort to reduce the potential biases in the analysis of collected qualitative data, the investigator used the assistance of SAP Committee members to create questions for the focus groups. Identification of any biases ensured that later differentiation can be made from the student perspectives and the reflections of the investigator.

The investigator's plan for focus group data analysis involved assigning themes and categories which framed the investigator's examination of patterns and contrasts. This process involved data reduction and interpretation of meaning that follows Stringer's (2014) "think stage" of his "action" research process model. The "think stage" involves the exploration, interpretation, and explanation of the collected data. Focus group transcription was coded using a "Perspectives Held by Subjects" schematic outline (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). This categorizing method is oriented toward understanding how all or some subjects perceive and think about a situation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Perspectives are captured in particular terms or phrases. Words, phrases, perspectives, and patterns of speech were used to create categories and themes in light of the following two research questions:

RQ2: What assumptions do students make on the analysis of their SAP status?

RQ4: What are the students' perceptions of personal responsibility for their SAP violation?

Focus group interviews.

The first question provided an opportunity for the students to share their understanding of what SAP means and their reaction to receiving a SAP notification. The second question provided an opportunity for students to reflect on their level of responsibility in the violation of their SAP. The third question provides the opportunity for the students to reflect and share what they think the institution could have done to help prevent their SAP violation. Question four provides the students the chance to share their thoughts on what it takes to persist and continue making academic progress in light of life circumstances which get in the way. The final question provides the students the opportunity to give advice to incoming college students in light of their SAP experience.

There were six focus group questions proposed in all three group discussions:

1. When you received the notice of your SAP violation, what was your understanding of what that meant? What was the reason for your SAP?
2. What could you have done to have avoided the violation?
3. What could college faculty and staff have done to help you avoid being on SAP?
4. What do you consider to be the best college resource or resources aiding in your success as a student?
5. In your opinion, what does it take to persevere when life happens, such as personal issues, work conflicts, etcetera and what does it take to reach set goals?

6. Reflecting on your own SAP experience, what advice would you give a new college student?

Focus groups questions 1, 2, and 3 supported the investigation of RQ2: What assumptions do students make in their analysis of their SAP status? Focus group questions 4, 5, and 6 supported RQ4: In what ways might their perception of personal responsibility have on their analysis of why they are on SAP?

Chapter IV: Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the reasons for attrition among rural community college students by way of SAP appeals. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to investigate four research questions and understand the challenges credited for academic attrition resulting in SAP appeals. Quantitative methods were used to explore students' perceived reasons for being on SAP and their formulated plan to address their SAP violation and progressing academically. Qualitative methods were used to explore students' assumptions regarding their SAP status and perceived level of personal responsibility for the SAP violation. A grounded theory foundation was established for this study by interpreting data through the constructs of four prominent student departure theories: Spady's (1971) Undergraduate Dropout Process Model, Tinto's (1993) Institutional Theory of Student Departure, Bean and Metzner's (1985) Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition Model, and Braxton, Doyle, Jones, McLendon, Hirschy, and Hartley's (2014) Theory of Departure in Commuter Colleges and Universities. These theories informed the investigator's understanding of the academic, economic, and personal challenges facing community college students who are not retained. This chapter presents the findings derived from both the quantitative and qualitative analysis of student data.

Quantitative Sample and Study

The investigator began quantitative analysis of SAP data by examining 1,171 rural, west Kentucky community college students who submitted SAP appeals between the fall 2016 to summer 2018 academic semesters. The investigator removed student demographic information (e.g., student identification number, name, mailing address, email address, and telephone number) to assure students SAP appeal information remained confidential. Table 1 provides the

range, mean, and standard deviation of the population's GPA, cumulative earned credit hours, and cumulative attempted credit hours. This table reflects students who have not been successful in attempting and earning as little as one credit hour to those students who have successfully attempted and earned credit hours toward previous credentials.

Table 1

Academic Record of SAP Quantitative Sample

Academic Record	Mid	Max	*M*	*SD*
Cumulative GPA	0.00	4.00	2.07	1.13
Cumulative Earned Credit Hours	0.00	110.64	55.21	30.47
Cumulative Attempted Credit Hours	1.00	321.90	68.69	45.89

Note: Unduplicated student records (n = 1,171)

As shown in Table 1, the range of cumulative GPA for the quantitative sample is broad, ranging from a zero GPA to a 4.0 GPA, this reflects the diversity of the sample being studied – the diversity of their SAP violation and the diversity of their academic progress. Students with a zero GPA may have attempted classes without successfully completing any of them. Students with a 4.0 GPA may be in their last semester, having been successful in their coursework except they have transferred in additional credit hours or have completed too many credit hours toward a variety of declared majors. The mean cumulative GPA of the sample is 2.07, indicating that the average of the sample size is a "C", which permits a student to continue receiving financial aid, maintain good academic standing, and graduate with a credential. The standard deviation of 1.13 of the cumulative GPA is high, indicating that there is a letter grade above (3.07) and below (1.07) the mean. Since this sample reflects all SAP violation types, students whose SAP violation is exceeding maximum time frame contribute to the range being so high (4.0 GPA).

Reflected in Table 1, the sample's range of cumulative earned credit hours is expansive as well, spanning from no credit hours earned to over 110 credit hours. Again, this range reflects

the diversity in the quantitative sample studied. Students in this sample may have earned no credit hours to 110.64 credit hours at the point of their SAP appeal. This range reflects the different type of SAP violation students making up the sample. Students who have not been successful in earning any credit hours to students who have been successful in completing a previous degree, transferred in credit hours from the military, or transferred in credit hours another institution. The standard deviation of 30.47 from the mean indicates there is a large difference in each occurrence from the mean (55.21).

Table 1 shows the range of cumulative attempted credit hours for the quantitative sample is wide – ranging from one credit hour attempted to over 321 credit hours attempted (321.90). The sample as a whole attempted 34.37% more hours than they earned. An example of this would be a student who attempted 45 credit hours, but only completed 30 credit hours. The sample is composed of students whose SAP violation is based upon a cumulative GPA below 2.0, thus contributing to the lowest range of attempted credit hours (1 credit). The range reflects a large standard deviation of 36.25 credit hours from the mean. The range of credit hours attempted reflects a student who attempted two one-credit hour labs, only to have completed one successfully, to a student who has attempted over 321 credit hours which could reflect multiple credit hours attempted but not successfully completed, indicated by a withdrawal or a failing grade. Table 2 shows the quantitative sample's frequency distribution of SAP violations.

Table 2

Frequency of SAP Violations of Quantitative Sample

Violations	*f*	*%*
GPA	39	3.33
Percentage of Completion	271	23.14
Maximum Time Frame (MTF)	441	37.68
GPA & Percentage of Completion	305	26.04
GPA & MTF	6	.50
Percentage of Completion & MTF	82	7.00
GPA, Percentage of Completion & MTF	27	2.31
Total	1171	100.00

Note: Unduplicated frequency of SAP violations: overall GPA below 2.0, failing 67% of overall attempted credit hours, exceeding the maximum hours allowed for credential completion (150% of required degree credit hours completed) or a combination of one or more violations

Table 2 provides a categorization of SAP violation types for the 1,171 students who submitted an appeal from the fall 2016 to summer 2018 semesters. Students may violate satisfactory academic progress for any one of the following violations or a combination of one or more violations: (1) not maintaining a 2.0 overall grade point average (GPA), (2) failing to complete 67% of overall attempted credit hours (Percentage of Completion), and (3) exceeding the maximum time frame (MTF) allowed for credential completion (150% of required degree credit hours completed).

At 37.68%, the most frequently occurring SAP violation for the quantitative sample is exceeding the maximum time frame for completing a credential. Violating the maximum time frame to degree completion means that the student has exceeded the number of credit hours needed for a degree. A student is allowed to complete the required degree credit hours plus an additional half of the required degree credit hours to complete a credential or 150%. For example, a student working on a 60 credit hours Associate in Arts transfer degree may take up 90 credit hours of coursework to complete the degree. Both withdrawing from a class with a “W”

and failing a class counts against the student's maximum time frame (150% to complete the degree). Common reasons for students violating this SAP category are accumulating elective credit hours as a result of changing majors multiple times or transferring credit hours from one post-secondary institution to another. Students who transfer in additional credit hours have already earned a credential (an associate degree or baccalaureate degree). These extra credit hours will count toward the 150% of classes that can be completed toward the degree and contribute to the Maximum Time Frame allowed to earn a credential. These students do have the minimum GPA required and have completed 67% of the coursework they are attempting, yet their decision to change their major or to pursue an additional credential impacts their academic progression by Federal Financial Aid SAP standards.

The second most frequently occurring SAP violation involved a combination of violations. Over thirty-five percent (35.91%) of the quantitative sample violated a combination of two or more categories (GPA, Percentage of Completion, and MTF). Interestingly, over one-third of the sample studied have failed to meet academic progress criteria in two or more areas, reflecting that students not only wrestle with degree decision making but also completing the degree education goals successfully. Table 2 shows the breakdown of violation combinations.

GPA and Percentage of Completion is the most frequently occurring SAP violation combination, at 26.04%. Students who do not complete a semester successfully because they withdraw from a class or classes or who earn a failing grade in a class or classes are exhibiting behaviors that are likely to be in combination. Students who just stop attending class or who fail to complete assignments often earn a failing grade because they fail to withdraw properly. A failing grade or a "W" for a withdrawal lead to the same result: failure to complete attempted coursework. The high rank of this combination violation is not surprising since these two

violations are closely related. One is contingent upon the other: failure to maintain GPA impacts failure to complete the requisite number of credit hours.

Violating the required percentage of course completion means that the student only completed 33% of the credit hours with a passing grade during the term in which the student was enrolled. For example, if the student was enrolled in 12 credit hours, but only completed six credit hours – withdrawing from a three-credit hour class and failing a three-credit hour class – then the student would have completed only 50% of the hours attempted which does not meet the acceptable SAP percentage of 67% course completion. Less than one quarter of the sample studied (23.14%) failed to complete the required 67% of credit hours attempted. Students who officially withdraw from courses will not harm their GPA, but the decision to do so will impact their completion of the majority of courses in which they are enrolled.

When looking at the three main SAP violation categories – GPA, Percentage of Completion, and MTF – violating the required 2.0 cumulative GPA is the least frequently occurring one. Only 3.33% of the sample studied violated the minimum 2.0 GPA. GPA alone is accounting for a smaller percentage of SAP violations. The least frequently occurring combination of violations is GPA and MTF at .50%. It suggests that students who have an excessive number of credit hours earned are less likely to have earned a minimum required GPA. For a student to earn excessive credit hours, they would likely be an average or above average student to continue with college, changing majors or transferring in credit hours. Two other infrequently occurring combination of violations are the combination of all three violations, GPA, Percentage of Completion, and MTF (2.31%), and the combination of Percentage of Completion and MTF (7.00%). These violations comprise less than 10% of the overall violations, a dramatic drop in frequency. This is more indication that a combination of MTF

with a combination of any of the other two SAP violations is rare. It appears that the sample can be broken down into a MTF population and a GPA/Percentage of Completion population. Students who complete excess credit hours are "completers" – completers of classes and perhaps credentials. Students who have a GPA violation often have a Percentage of Completion violation. As mentioned earlier, those two violations go hand in hand. The quantitative study reviewed all SAP submissions including those that were denied or pending. Table 3 shows the frequency distribution of SAP approval for the quantitative sample.

Table 3

SAP Approval Status of Quantitative Sample

SAP Approval Status	*f*	*%*
Approved	1062	90.69
Denied	48	4.10
Pending	60	5.12
Total	1171	100.00

Table 3 shows the percentage of the SAP sample studied whose appeal was approved, denied, and pending. An approved appeal means that the SAP Committee reviewed the student's extenuating circumstance that led to the SAP violation, as well as the student's remediation plan and found them to meet the institution's SAP approval guidelines. Over ninety percent (90.69%) of the quantitative sample SAP appeals were approved. The approved appellants are granted a probation semester of financial aid in which they can take positive steps to improve the extenuating circumstance that led to their violation or violations. A denied appeal means the student failed to meet the acceptable criteria for extenuating circumstances, failed to provide an adequate plan of action to rectify the conditions leading to SAP, continued to not meet GPA or completion rate requirements, and/or did not provide appropriate documentation. The percentage of SAP appeals that were denied are minimal (4.10%) compared to those SAP

appeals approved. There is no limit to the number of times a student may appeal for additional financial aid. Interestingly, Table 3 shows the number of pending SAP appeals is higher than those denied (5.12%). A pending appeal means that the semester began with the student still needing to provide documentation to complete their SAP request. For example, a student may not have been able to provide an eviction notice which supports the claim that the loss of housing led to failing to complete their spring 2019 classes. Pending SAP appeals may or may not be resolved with a late award of aid, depending upon whether the student can and does provide appropriate documentation and satisfactory information for the SAP committee's review.

Research Question 1: Perceived Circumstances for SAP Violation

Students who received a SAP violation notification were required to complete an online form in order to appeal reinstatement of financial aid for the next semester. The online form asks the student to provide a short explanation of circumstances that caused the SAP violation and a short explanation of changes the student plans to make to maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress by the next evaluation at the end of the term. Research question one (RQ1) – "What are the students' *perceptions* of why they are on SAP?" – examines the student's response to the first step in the SAP appeal process.

Students in the sample identified the extraordinary circumstance that led to a SAP violation as defined by the federal financial aid regulations. The students chose one category from a drop-down menu of five options: Accident/Illness of Student or Family, Death of Family Member or Someone Close, Divorce, Other, or Work/Employment Changes. Students' selected "Other" if their extraordinary circumstance did not fit into any one of the four specific categories.

Table 4 shows the frequency of each SAP Request Category occurring in the quantitative sample.

Table 4

Frequency of SAP Request Categories

SAP category	Total n = 1171		F 2016 n = 253		Sp 2017 n = 264		S 2017 n = 61		F 2017 n = 298		Sp 2018 n = 251		S 2018 n = 44	
	f	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*	*F*	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*
Accident	173	14.7	34	13.4	42	15.9	8	13.1	41	13.8	40	15.9	8	18.2
Death	91	7.7	22	8.7	17	6.4	3	5.0	26	8.7	19	7.6	4	9.1
Divorce	53	4.5	13	5.1	8	3.0	3	5.0	13	4.7	13	5.2	3	6.8
Other	588	50.2	125	49.4	131	49.6	34	55.7	149	50.0	128	51	21	47.7
Work	265	22.6	59	23.3	66	25	13	21.3	69	23.2	51	20.3	8	18.2

Note: Unduplicated frequency of SAP Request Category contributing to SAP violation

Fifty percent of the sample selected the "Other" request category as their extenuating circumstances did not fall into any of the specific categories noted in Table 4. The "Other" category accounts for various types of personal circumstances such as immaturity, lack of motivation, pregnancy, child care issues, mental health issues, relationship issues; economic circumstances such as lack of transportation, computer and internet access, and homelessness; academic issues such as difficulty with online coursework and failure to keep up with academic requirements; not understanding why they are on SAP. These other categories were determined by identifying common themes and reoccurring words and phrases elaborated upon by the students in their responses to their SAP violation. The second frequently occurring category (22.63%) is "Work/Employment Change". This category includes change in work schedule, overtime hours, loss of employment, addition of a second job, and failure to work enough hours. "Accident/Illness of Student or Family" was the third frequently occurring category and included accidents, as well as short-term and long-term illnesses of the student, the student's immediate

family members (spouse, child, parent, sibling) and the student's extended family members (grandparent, great-grandparent, cousin, aunt, uncle, niece, and nephew). There is a notable gap between the third frequently occurring category and the remaining two categories: "Death of Family Member or Someone Close" at 7.77% and "Divorce" at 4.53%.

The students' perceived circumstances fell into three broad challenge categories: academic, economic, and personal or a combination of two or more of these challenge categories. Students listed multiple circumstances for their SAP violations that spanned the three categories of challenge (academic, economic, and personal). These categories were prompted by the grounded theory design of the study. The four student departure theories presented in the literature review provided a framework to interpret student responses. Students provided a statement explaining what circumstance occurred that caused them to fail to meet financial aid satisfactory academic progress. Spady (1971) emphasized academic performance as critical to student retention. Tinto (1993) augmented student academic performance with the importance of social networking and a personal sense of belonging. Bean and Metzner (1985) focused on external factors, including economic and environmental factors. Braxton, et al., (2014) provided a nuanced reading of the relationship between the student and the institution; theorizing that the institution's behavior and commitment to the student is just as important as the student's behavior and commitment to their own education. Student response data generally aligned with three overall reoccurring themes: academic challenges, economic challenges, and personal challenges. Table 5 shows the frequency of challenges based upon the above-mentioned issues.

Table 5

Reoccurring Challenge Themes

	f	*%*
Academic Challenges	323	26.58
Economic Challenges	52	4.44
Personal Challenges	176	15.04
Academic & Economic Challenges	95	8.11
Academic & Personal Challenges	326	28.84
Economic & Personal Challenges	99	8.45
Academic, Economic, & Personal Challenges	100	8.54
Total	1,171	100.00

Note: Unduplicated frequency of reoccurring challenge themes contributing to SAP

Students' statements about the circumstances leading to their SAP violation reflected either one challenge or a combination of challenges. Singular themed circumstances are the least cited, with 27.58% or respondents noting academic only, 15.04% respondents reporting personal only, and 4.44% of respondents reporting economic only. Close to fifty-three percent (52.96%) of the quantitative sample studied have a combination of two or more challenges. Over half of the students perceive that they face multiple obstacles is maintaining satisfactory academic progress. Over seventy percent (72.07%) of the SAP students' extenuating circumstances could be categorized as having an academic component. Ranked second at 59.87% are students categorizing their extenuating circumstance as having a personal component. Some combination of economic with another category makes up for a smaller percentage of the unduplicated responses (29.54%).

The most frequently occurring category of challenges is a combination of academic and personal (28.84%), followed closely by academic challenges alone (26.58%). These data indicate that academic preparedness is an issue, one that is corroborated by ACT test placement scores. College readiness data, provided by the American College Testing (ACT), reveal

Kentucky college student readiness benchmark scores are lower than the national benchmark scores. Kentucky high school graduates consistently lag behind the nation in college readiness benchmark scores (ACT, 2016; ACT, 2017; ACT, 2018; ACT, 2019).

Personal challenges alone comprise 15.04% of the students' identified extenuating circumstances; however, personal challenges combined with one or two of the additional challenges makes up for close to sixty percent of unduplicated responses (59.87%). Close in percentage are extenuating circumstances that comprise a combination of economic challenges and one or more other challenge. Economic challenges are not as prevalent as personal and academic. Student descriptions of economic challenges tended to emphasize work scheduling rather than lack of income necessary to attend school. Over eight percent (8.54%) of students reported extenuating circumstances interpreted as academic, economic, and personal challenges; 8.45% of students reported extenuating circumstances that involved economic and personal challenges; and 8.11% of the students extenuating circumstances reflected academic and economic challenges. Circumstances that were economic only accounted for the lowest percentage of challenges at 4.44%.

Students' statements regarding specific circumstances that led to their SAP violation were coded based upon frequently occurring themes. Statements included multiple academic, economic, and personal themed challenges. Table 6 provides a detailed examination of the types of academic challenges students described in their SAP responses.

Table 6

Academic Challenge Themes

	f	*%*
Not Academically Prepared	60	7.11
Difficulty of Online Classes	71	8.41
Rigor of Coursework	67	7.94
Poor Attendance	210	53.31
Dropped Class/Classes	318	24.88
Failed Class/Classes	367	43.48
Working on Additional Degree	116	13.74
Changed Major	170	20.14
Too Many Credit Hours Earned/Attempted	414	49.05
Doesn't Understand Why on SAP	21	2.49

Note: Duplicated frequency of academic challenge themes contributing to SAP (n=844)

There are ten challenges identified in the investigator's categorization of academic challenges. The first three types (Not Academically Prepared, Difficulty of Online Classes, and Rigor of Coursework) share a common theme: students found themselves ill-prepared for the rigors of college level coursework. Students felt high school preparation was inadequate, college courses too difficult, or the online environment too challenging. In short, they perceived themselves as not ready for college – whatever the cause. Similarly, the next three types (Poor Attendance, Dropped Class/Classes, and Failed Class/Classes) are interrelated and highlight the relationship between attendance and academic performance. Poor attendance can trigger withdrawal from class or contribute to a failing grade. The next three types (Working on an Additional Degree, Change Major, Too Many Credit Hours Earned/Attempted) highlight a common characteristic: indecision. Working on an additional degree or changing a declared major several times contributes to earning excessive credit hours. Changing majors and pursuing additional degrees indicate that students often misjudge either their aptitude for or interest in a career path, affecting the viability of the career path chosen. The final type of academic

challenge is surprising (Doesn't Understand Why on SAP). There were students who did not understand why they were placed on SAP, in spite of receiving multiple notifications of their financial aid status and reasons why. The two most frequently mentioned academic challenges were poor attendance (53.31%) and accumulating too many credit hours (49.05%). Table 7 provides a more detailed examination of the type of specific economic challenges students described in their SAP responses.

Table 7

Economic Challenge Themes

	f	*%*
Lost Job	25	7.25
Job Change	28	8.12
Work Schedule Conflict	142	41.16
Full-time Employment (32-40 hours week)	275	79.10
Required Overtime	54	15.65
Second Job Required	37	10.72
No Transportation	29	8.41
No Shelter/Homelessness	19	5.51
No Internet Access	30	8.70

Note: Duplicated frequency of economic challenge themes contributing to SAP (n = 345)

There are nine types of challenges identified in the investigator's categorization of economic challenges. The first three types (Lost Job, Job Change, Work Schedule Conflict) arise because of the disruption of scheduling related to unanticipated change in work requirements. Typically, these changes are unpredictable and disrupt academic scheduling. For example, it is difficult, if not impossible, to adjust class schedules during the semester if the employer requires a change in job assignment or work schedule, or if the employer releases the student from employment. Work requirements can also have a financial impact. The next three types (Full-time Employment, Required Overtime, Second Job Required) reflect the students' increased weekly commitment to employment demands and improved earnings. Students work

full-time, look for opportunities to work overtime, or seek a second job to supplement their income while in school. At 79.10%, full-time employment was cited as the most frequently occurring economic challenge. The challenge of having to work full-time could be related to academic challenges identified in Table 6 – poor attendance, dropped classes, and failed classes, which were the three highest ranked academic issues mentioned in the sample studied. Finally, the last three economic challenges (No Transportation, No Shelter/Homelessness, No Internet Access) is worth noting as these are basic needs for a community college student. When combined, these three types of challenges make up for almost one-fourth of the quantitative sample studied (22.62%). Students who do not have transportation or a home likely do not have access to reliable internet. Although each of these three economic challenges individually is below 10% and the data reflect duplicated student responses, the absence of these essentials is a challenging barrier to overcome. Economic stressors can contribute to the personal stress students face. Table 8 provides a more detailed examination of the specific types of personal challenges students described in their SAP responses.

Table 8

Personal Challenges Themes

	f	*%*
ADD/ADHD	120	17.14
Anxiety Disorder	90	12.86
Depression	100	14.29
Immaturity/Unmotivated	220	31.43
Childbirth and/or Childcare	196	28.00
Personal Accident/Illness	107	15.29
*Personal Relationship Issues	110	15.71
**Family Issues	197	28.14
**Family Accident/Illness	176	25.14
**Family Death	89	12.71

Note: Duplicated frequency of personal challenge themes contributing to SAP (n = 700)
*Relationship issues defined as emotional or physical abuse, separation, divorce, break-ups, adjustment to new relationships
**Family defined as immediate (e.g., spouse, child, parent, sibling) and extended (grandparent, great-grandparent, cousin, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew)

There are ten types of challenges identified in the investigator's categorization of personal challenges. Three of personal challenges specific to the student as an individual (Childbirth/Childcare, Personal Accident/Illness, Personal Relationship Issues) account for the second largest percentage of issues identified by the quantitative sample at 59%. Students reported external personal life events has having an impact on their ability to make satisfactory academic progress. Pregnancy, childbirth, lack of childcare, accident, illness, and dealing with unstable romantic relationships were all mentioned as stressors to college performance.

Three mental health related challenges (Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit with Hyperactivity Disorder, Anxiety, Depression) round out the third most prevalent personal challenges identified by students, comprising 44.29% of the responses. Distinctions of the type of mental health issues were made by the students resulting in the breakout into three distinct types: ADD/ ADHD (17.14%), Anxiety (12.86%), and Depression (14.29%). Students reported

undiagnosed mental health issues, adjustment to medications, and the paralyzing nature of their diagnoses as barriers to meeting the Financial Aid requirements for satisfactory academic progress.

A seventh personal challenge - immaturity or the lack of motivation is ranked fourth in frequently occurring personal challenge themes at 31.43%. Over thirty percent of students stated that their immaturity and lack of focus and motivation contributed to their SAP violation. Being too young to attend college with a clear understanding of the academic performance requirements was identified in student explanations of being "too immature". Motivation and focus can be the result of immaturity or be impacted by the strain of assisting with immediate and extended family issues. It is difficult to stay motivated when the needs of others distract you from your goal.

Over sixty-five percent (65.99%) of the sample studied noted their family as a contributing factor in lack of academic performance. The eighth, ninth and tenth personal challenges are immediate and extended family-centric. Family Issues, Family Accident/Illness, and Family Death make up the largest percentage of personal challenges encountered by the student sample. Issues related to one's immediate or extended family are the third most frequently cited personal challenge. These issues may include caring for an ailing elderly parent or sick child, taking in the children of a sibling who is incarcerated, or dealing with issue related to the chronic illness or sudden death of a relative. Asking family members for emotional support in the achievement of educational goals can place additional burdens on family relations both immediate and extended. Students often find that no assistance, whether it be childcare or emotional support, is available which impacts attendance and subsequently academic performance and success.

Research Question 3: Recommendations for Future Success

Students reported their plans to regain satisfactory academic progress status on the SAP appeal form. Students made multiple recommendations that spanned the three categories of challenges (academic, economic, and personal). This portion of the appeal form informs Research question three (RQ3) – "What recommendations do students have for their future success?" Those recommendations were sorted into the same three categories identified when analyzing the sample's perceived challenges leading to SAP – academic, economic, and personal. As shown in Table 10, students' recommended solutions were categorized by academic changes, economic changes, personal changes, or a combination of two or more areas of change.

Table 10

Recommended Changes for Future Success

	f	*%*
Academic Changes	266	22.72
Economic Changes	112	9.56
Personal Changes	345	29.46
Academic & Economic Changes	20	1.71
Academic & Personal Changes	155	13.24
Economic & Personal Changes	232	19.81
Academic, Economic, & Personal Changes	41	3.50
Total	1,171	100.00

Note: Unduplicated frequency of reoccurring recommendation themes for addressing SAP

Over 29% of students in the sample planned to make a personal change to ensure future success and satisfactory SAP status. Personal changes were dominant and include addressing mental health and physical health issues; stabilizing personal and family situations such as child care; resolving relationship issues; and addressing attitude and motivation issues. The changes mentioned have to do with stabilizing personal and family issues in one's personal life. For

example, if a student can secure child care for two children under the age of 2 years old and separate from an abusive spouse, then the student is in a better position to attend campus classes and dedicate time to studying. Academic changes account for the second most frequently cited area to change. The behaviors listed in this category account for 22.72% of the students' suggested changes and include dedicating more time to studying, attending classes, seeking tutoring, and managing study time.

Economic changes alone are not the perceived fix for their SAP violation; only 9.56% of violators chose that category. While academic and economic changes combined account for less than 2% of suggested change, a combination of economic and personal changes accounts for the third most frequently mentioned category of changes. Over 19% of students listed a combination of addressing personal issues with adjusting to their economic situation that would result in future success and over 13% provided specific academic and personal changes they would make to assure their performance rebound. A combination of changes in all three domains – academic, economic, and personal – is small, but should be noted, pointing to the fact that there is a percentage of the sample studied who anticipate making changes in all areas of their lives in order to address their SAP violation status.

Students elaborated on the specific changes they would make to rectify their SAP violation. Specific recommendations were categorized by repeating themes mentioned in the student statements that aligned with each of the three broad categories of recommendations: academic, economic, and personal. As shown in Table 11, students identified the following specific actions they would take that would result in improved academic success and remediate their SAP financial aid standing.

Table 11

Recommended Academic Changes

	f	*%*
Enroll in Online Classes Only	19	3.97
Enroll in On-Campus Classes Only	48	9.41
Enroll in Less Credit Hours	18	3.77
Attend Class/es	66	13.81
Communicate More with Instructor/College	11	2.30
Dedicate Time to Study	181	37.87
Keep Up with Assignments	193	40.38
Secure Tutoring	68	14.23
I Don't Know What to Fix Academically	282	59.00

Note: Duplicated frequency of academic recommendations to resolve SAP (n = 478)

Suggested types of academic changes that would lead to improved academic performance were mentioned by 478 students (40.82%) of the sample study (n = 1,171). The number is notable because 27.58% (n = 323) of the students cited academic challenges as the reason for their SAP violation, and a larger percentage, 44.29% (n = 521) cited a combination of academic with one or more other challenges (economic and/or personal) as reasons for their SAP violation, reflected in Table 5. Of the 72.07% of students who cited academic challenges, a considerably smaller percentage of those students identified academic remedies for their SAP situation. The most significant finding is that 59% of students (n = 282) who noted they would make an academic change to address their SAP situation stated that they "did not know how to fix" their situation because they were on SAP violation because of MTF. There were no future actions they could take to improve their SAP status since they were not on SAP for GPA or percentage of course completion. Transferring military or other postsecondary institution credit hours into the institution, working on an additional degree, or multiply changing ones declared major led to an accumulation of excess credit hours for the quantitative sample. These issues are difficult to address because they reflect previous education and career decision making that cannot be

redressed. The second and third most frequently mentioned solutions offered by students to address their SAP status were to keep up with assignments (40.38%) and dedicate time to studying (37.87%). Committing time and attention to completing assignments is integral to succeeding academically. Securing tutoring (14.23%) and attending classes (13.81%) ranked fourth and fifth in frequency. Although these are recommendations to note, they do not account for the "most important" academic changes students' perceived.

One of the least cited suggestions for academic change is enrolling in only online classes (3.97%). Students do not see online coursework as a solution to improved academic performance. Enrolling exclusively on-campus in face-to-face classes was over three times as frequent. Over nine percent (9.41%) of the students stated that their enrollment in on-campus, face-to-face classes would improve their academic success by providing an opportunity to interact with faculty and to build relationships with other students in class. Few students said they needed to enroll in less credit hours (3.70%). They do not recognize the problems associated with course overload. Another low frequency recommendation was the practice of communicating more with instructors and the college (2.30%). Student perceptions that the institution could *not* be of assistance in addressing their academic issues bears further investigation.

Table 12

Recommended Economic Changes

	f	*%*
Adjust Work Shift Schedule	150	37.13
Work Less Hours per Week	141	34.90
Work More Hours per Week	12	2.97
Quit Job	52	12.87
Secure Additional Job	3	.74
Change Jobs	34	8.42
Secure Money from Family/Friends	60	14.85
Secure Internet Service/ Computer	47	11.63
Resolve Homelessness	29	7.18
Secure Transportation	50	13.38

Note: Duplicated frequency of economic recommendations to resolve SAP (n = 404)

As presented previously in Table 10, making economic changes *exclusively* is the least frequently noted change when compared to academic and personal changes. Students do not perceive that making *only* economic changes (9.56%) or a making an economic change in combination with one or more of the other two change categories (academic and personal) will result in their improved college performance. Respectively only 1.71% of the sample made recommendations that they would make both economic *and* academic changes, 3.50% of the sample recommended making economic, academic *and* personal changes, and close to twenty-percent (19.81%) recommended making economic *and* personal changes.

Table 12 identifies specific economic changes students reported in their narratives. Students who planned to adjust their work-shift schedule was the most frequent solution listed. A change in a student's work-shift schedule can wreak havoc on the student's college performance (Perna, 2010). For example, moving from a first shift schedule (7 a.m. – 3 p.m.) to a third shift schedule (11:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m.) can impact even the performance of even the most conscientious of online students. Rotating shift work schedules unquestionably cause

disruption in a student's rhythm of juggling the rigors of college work and employment. Shift schedules impact classroom attendance, access to tutoring services, and down time for rest and sleep. The second most frequent suggestion is to work less hours per week (34.90%). Only 2.97% offered increasing work hours as a solution. Further, only .74% noted additional employment as a solution. While reducing the number of work hours may assist a student with having more time to focus on schoolwork, this solution may create an economic strain on the student. Often students rely on the help of others when financial aid does not meet all of their living expenses and related financial needs. Over 14% offered resolving their economic issues by receiving monetary help from their family and friends. Economic changes such as securing transportation (13.38%), securing internet services/computer access (11.63%), and resolving homelessness (7.18%) account for smaller percentages of change than other economic resolutions.

Table 13

Recommended Personal Changes

	f	*%*
Mature/Practice Responsibility	278	37.12
Practice Time Management	159	21.23
Practice Focus/Motivation/Self-Discipline	387	51.67
Manage and Receive Support for Mental Health Issues *	150	20.16
Stabilize Personal Issues	673	89.85
Resolve Personal Health Issues	213	28.44
Resolve Family Issues/Health Issues **	507	72.43

Note: Duplicated frequency of personal recommendations to resolve SAP (n = 749)
*Mental Health Issues defined as grief, addiction, anxiety, ADD, ADHD, attempted suicide, bi-polar disorder, borderline personality disorder, depression, grief, schizophrenia
**Family defined as immediate (e.g., spouse, child, parent, sibling) and extended (grandparent, great-grandparent, cousin, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew)

Table 13 provides the most insight into students' perceptions of solutions that would have a positive impact on their academic success. Just under 90% (89.85%) of students noted stabilizing their personal lives would have a positive impact. Living a life that is in a state of flux, for whatever reason or reasons, can contributes to academic performance and economic challenges. The most prevalently listed examples of stabilizing personal issues were having a successful pregnancy and delivery, securing childcare for under school-age children, ending an abusive relationship, beginning a new supportive relationship, grieving the death of a family member or close friend. The second most frequently cited personal challenge solution mentioned – almost three quarters of the student sample examined – involved resolving immediate and extended family members' personal and health issues (72.43%). Students mentioned assisting family members with surgeries, doctor appointments, physical therapist appointments, home care, housing, childcare, court appearances, relationship support, etc.

At 51.67%, the third most frequently themed recommendation to address personal challenges that resulted in violating SAP is the student's need to focus, stay motivated, and practice self-discipline. Over half of the students were willing to acknowledge that focus and motivation negatively impacted academic progress. Mature behavior and accepting responsibility are closely linked to focus, motivation and self-discipline, and ranked fourth in frequency at 37.12%. These students acknowledge that maturity, motivation, and focus contribute to identifying and prioritizing realistic career and educational goals. Resolving personal health issues (28.44%) and managing personal mental health issues (20.16%) – issues that are significant and require professional medical support to manage – rank fifth and sixth.

Qualitative Sample and Study

The investigator followed up the quantitative analysis of SAP data with the qualitative study of 14 rural, west Kentucky community college students who submitted SAP appeals in the fall 2019 semester. Students in the qualitative study were selected from the same institution noted earlier in this chapter. Two hundred-fifty-seven students completed SAP appeals for the fall 2019 semester; only 195 of those appeals were approved. The investigator secured the list of 195 approved SAP appeal students, dismissing those that were denied or in pending status. The list of students was scrubbed of student identification numbers and full names. The investigator sent an email to the students' college email address soliciting their participation in one of three lunch-time focus groups. The email invitation provided a detailed explanation of the investigator's research topic and interest in their perspective. A Participant Consent Form was attached for their review and completion. Students were asked to respond to the invitation via email. Of the 195 students emailed, a total of 27 (13.84%) students accepted the email invitation from the investigator to participate in one of the focus groups. Fourteen students (8.71%) agreed to participate in the focus group discussions.

Before conducting the three focus group sessions, the investigator conducted a data analysis of the type of SAP violations represented in the focus group sample size (n = 14) used for the qualitative study. This analysis was compared to the larger sample size studied in the quantitative study (n = 1,171). The comparison used simple descriptive measures, rather than a Mann-Whitney test for unpaired groups, because of the small sample size for fall 2019. Table 14 presents the results and a side-by-side comparison of both the quantitative and qualitative groups studied.

Table 14

Frequency of SAP Violations of Quantitative and Qualitative Sample Studied

Violations	Fall 2016 – Summer 2018		Fall 2019	
	f	%	*f*	%
GPA	39	3.33		
Percentage of Completion	271	23.14	3	21.43
Maximum Time Frame (MTF)	441	37.68	4	28.57
GPA & Percentage of Completion	305	26.04	6	42.86
GPA & MTF	6	.50		
Percentage of Completion & MTF	82	7.00	1	7.14
GPA, Percentage of Completion & MTF	27	2.31		
	1,171	100.00	14	100.00

Note: Unduplicated frequency of SAP violations (GPA below 2.0, failing to complete 67% of attempted hours, exceeding the maximum hours allowed (150% of degree hours required) to complete credential

The distribution of violations for the 14 students who participated in the qualitative focus group study were comparable to the much larger sample size of the quantitative study (n = 1,171). The top SAP violations for both groups are Percentage of Completion, MTF, and GPA, and Percentage of Completion. The most frequently occurring SAP violation for the quantitative sample is MTF at 37.68%. That category ranks second in the qualitative sample (28.57%). The second most frequent SAP violation for the quantitative sample is GPA and Percentage of Completion. That combination of factors ranks as the most frequent for the qualitative sample (42.86%). Percentage of Completion alone is the third most frequently occurring SAP violation for both groups: 23.10% for the quantitative sample and 21.43% for qualitative group. All focus group sample SAP appeals were approved for the fall 2019 term.

A brief profile of the focus group students is provided in Table 15 below. Student identities have been protected by assigning first name pseudonyms for each student. Focus group students were enrolled during the fall 2019 semester. They were on SAP appeal due to one or more SAP violations occurring at the close of the spring 2019 semester. The focus group

students consisted of a similar cross section of the student body represented in the quantitative study presented earlier. They vary in age, degree plan, GPA, credit hours earned, and credit hours attempted. Table 15 provides a brief description of each participant.

Table 15

Description of Focus Group Sample

"Name"	Age	Degree Plan	SAP Violation	Student's Explanation for Violation
"Anna"	28	Transfer	Percentage	Teenager, immature, did not care
"Beth"	22	Transfer	Percentage & MTF	Changing major several times, earned extra credit hours, did not complete classes
"Carrie"	39	Nursing	GPA & Percentage	Teenager, immature, poor performance
"Dawn"	35	Nursing	MTF	Previously earned associate degree
"Elizabeth"	20	Nursing	GPA & Percentage	Teenager, miscarriage, depression
"Faith"	31	Nursing	Percentage	Teenager, worked too many hours
"Greg"	33	Welding	GPA & Percentage	Mental illness, hospitalized
"Heather"	42	Nursing	MTF	Previously earned bachelor's degree
"Isabel"	24	Nursing	GPA & Percentage	Teenager, immature, did not care
"Jennifer"	31	Human Services	Percentage	Single mom, 4 disabled children, could not keep up
"Kimberly"	48	Business	MTF	Previously earned two associate degrees
"Lauren"	28	Transfer	MTF	Transferred in military credit hours
"Mary"	57	Early Childhood Education	GPA & Percentage	Disabling panic and anxiety
"Nicole"	30	Business	GPA & Percentage	Teenager, pregnant, stopped attending

The investigator conducted a qualitative assessment to examine research question two (RQ2) – "What assumptions do students make on the analysis of their SAP status?", and research questions four (RQ4) – "What are the students' perceptions of personal responsibility for their SAP violation?" The investigator used the quantitative analysis of SAP appeal forms to inform six focus group questions for the qualitative portion of the study. The first three focus group questions (Questions 1, 2, and 3) reference RQ2 which examines the qualitative sample's responses related their assumptions and analysis of their SAP violation. Focus group questions 1-3 are listed below:

FGQ1 - When you received your SAP violation notice, what was your understanding of what that meant?

FGQ2 - What could you have done to avoid the violation?

FGQ3 - What could the college faculty and staff have done to help you avoid being on SAP?

Focus group questions 4, 5, and 6 reference RQ4 which examines the qualitative sample's perceptions of their personal responsibility for their SAP violations. Focus group questions 4 -6 are listed below:

FGQ4 - What do you consider to be the best college resource or resources to aid student success?

FGQ5 - In your opinion, what does it take to persevere when life gets in the way, such as personal issues, work conflicts, etcetera, and what it takes to reach set goals?

FGQ6 - Reflecting on your own SAP experience, what advice would you give a new college student?

Research Question 2: Assumptions Made in Analysis of SAP Status

Students received email notifications from the financial aid office regarding their SAP violation. The email contained the specific SAP violation the student made resulting in the suspension of their financial aid for the next semester pending their filing a SAP appeal.

Students' assumptions about SAP violation.

The examination of the qualitative sample's assumptions in their analysis of their SAP violation is important in assessing the students' sense of culpability. Student were asked to explain whether they understood, upon notification, *why* they received notice of their SAP violation. The investigator asked the students FGQ1 – "When you received your SAP violation notice, what was your understanding of what that meant?" Over ninety percent (92.86%) felt they understood the reason specific to their situation: their GPA was below the required 2.0 cumulative GPA, they had not completed 67% of what they were enrolled in, and/or they had exceeded the number of hours allowed to complete a credential. One student, Lauren, indicated that she did not understand. She did not know that military transfer credits would count toward hours accumulated, which resulted in her violation of the maximum time frame limitation.

Over forty percent (42.8%) of the sample understood the reason for their violation was failure to maintain a 2.0 GPA and/or failed to complete 67% of the credit hours they had attempted. Just under thirty percent (28.5%) identified exceeding the 150% of degree hours required for degree completion (MTF). Focus group participants shared that they were either working on another degree, had changed majors too many times, or had transferred in too many credit hours. Three students (21.4%) failed to complete 67% of attempted hours. Only one student, Beth, failed MTF *and* percentage of course completion, noting, "My situation was a perfect storm, I changed my major a number of times, after taking a lot of classes for each [one].

Then I did not complete some of the ones I was enrolled in." Similarly, Dawn reported, "I knew I was probably going to have to do a SAP appeal because I am a non-traditional student, and I have college experience from somewhere else. That is what got me." Isabel added, "I didn't care about college when I was in my late teens. I started running with a bad crowd and didn't withdraw. I just stopped coming. I didn't think about how this would impact me later." Thirteen of the fourteen students knew prior to receiving their notification that they might be in jeopardy of not meeting SAP standards. The one student who did not expect to be in violation of SAP did not realize that military transfer credit hours earned counted toward total hours accumulated.

Students' perception of what they could have done differently.

The investigator examined the qualitative sample's thoughts on what they could have done to have avoided the SAP violations, by asking FGQ2 – "What could you have done to avoid the violation? The purpose of the question was to solicit students' perceptions of their own responsibility for financial aid suspension. There were a variety of answers, worded differently, but all of which pointed to their own sense of responsibility for not being a successful student. Five students (35.71%) reported that they were just too young to understand the focus and time commitment required to be successful in college and lacked motivation to apply themselves at the time. Three of the five students further stated it was difficult to select a major because of immaturity. Nicole noted, "I should not have applied for college until I was ready and knew what I wanted to do." Anna added, "You can't make someone want to do well in school if they don't care." Fifty percent of the qualitative sample (Beth, Dawn, Greg, Heather, Lauren, Kimberly, and Mary) said that they could not have done anything differently. With the exception of Greg and Mary, four students reported that earlier decisions about prospective

careers and degree pathways were made to the best of their ability at the time, knowing what they knew. Greg stated he could not have behaved differently due to an emotional/mental breakdown that precipitated his SAP violation, adding that mental illness is inherited and difficult to manage: "I spent a lot of time in the mental ward, and it's really going one day along at a time for me." Mary shared that her mental health issues prevented her from making academic progress, but she could not help it: "If I'd had the proper treatment plan for my disabling panic and anxiety, then I would have been able to separate my private life from school and not break down."

The remaining fifty percent of the sample (Anna, Carrie, Elizabeth, Faith, Isabel, Jennifer, and Nicole) shared examples of what they could have done differently to have avoided their SAP violations. Six out of the seven (Anna, Carrie, Elizabeth, Faith, Isabel, and Nicole) all reported that they were young, immature, and did not care. Anna stated that she should have waited to go to school when she was ready. Faith stated that she could have not worked as many hours and made college a priority, rather than work:

> I was young and wanted the money so that I could live on my own. My priorities were not in the right order. Maybe having a job on campus would have made it easier for me to focus. Not having to run back and forth to work might have made the difference.

Elizabeth and Nicole both had specific personal issues that got in the way. Elizabeth miscarried, and Nicole said that she had to take care of her brother with Downs Syndrome who was "very, very sick." Both shared that these were major distractions which negatively impacted their performance. Jennifer was the only student who stated, as a non-traditional student with childcare responsibilities, that she bit off more than she could chew: "Being a single mom with four disabled kids, I did not know how much time school would take because I was working full

time too." Depending upon the reasons for the SAP violations, overall students believed if they had it to do over again, they would have made different choices. The students who were returning for an additional degree or who were now managing their mental illnesses felt that there was nothing they could have one differently at the time. Those who had completed prior credentials, they believed they selected those majors with the sincere intention of entering their identified career field, but for various reasons made the decision to return to school for an additional or different credential. Heather shared that she regretted not knowing she did not like education until it was too late:

> I was doing my student teaching of elementary school kids and I hated it. I came back to school to get a degree in the health care field. At first it was respiratory care, but now it is nursing. It has taken a lot of time and a lot of hours to finally find my fit.

Students' perception of what the institution could have done differently.

To further examine the qualitative sample's analysis and assumptions of their SAP violation, the investigator asked FGQ3 – "What could the college faculty and staff have done to help you avoid being on SAP?" Exploring the students' thoughts on the institution's contribution to their SAP violation was a way to solicit the students' perceptions of their own responsibility for their SAP violation and financial aid suspension, as well as the students' sense of connection and support from the institution.

Over seventy-one percent (71.43%) of the sample shared that there was nothing the institution's faculty and staff could have done to have helped them avoid the circumstances leading to their SAP violation. Nicole stated, "Mine was 100% my fault, so I'm not going to say that anybody could have done anything any different." Dawn reported that her advisor contacted her frequently by phone and email:

> He called me one day to ask why I wasn't in his classes. He said, "What are you doing? You have only a few weeks left." I said, "I'm not coming back. I have too much going on." And he said, "What can I help you with? You can't quit now!" I told him there was nothing anyone could do. I just did not do my part.

Four students (28.57%) at first stated that there was not anything the college could have done, but went on to share various thoughts on the "extra" steps that could have been taken. Anna shared that she wished someone had reached out to her when she stopped coming to classes to mentor her: "Maybe if someone, an instructor or advisor, had told me this is what is going to keep you from failing, per se, it would have helped me." Faith note, "I know you can withdraw but it would have been good to have known how withdrawing would have torn up my financial aid." Jennifer added that most students would not mind a teacher reaching out more to a struggling student: "I was young when I went to college the first time. I didn't know what to expect. Maybe someone could have told me, 'this is what is going to keep you from failure.'" Carrie added that she wished she had known about support services like TRiO/Student Support Services: "I am in TRiO now, but it would have helped me to know that support was available when I first enrolled in classes." Faith said she felt like sometimes it may be the responsible thing to withdraw from classes rather than fail: "It is like the college doesn't want to encourage students to drop classes at the beginning, but that is something every [student] needs to understand." While students initially believed the institution did not play a major role in preventing them from violating SAP, three students (Anna, Dawn, and Nicole) offered the following list of helpful institutional student interventions. The institution could inform students about campus resources like tutoring, inform students about the impact of withdrawing from

classes on one's financial aid status, and contact students frequently to ensure they are managing their workload satisfactorily.

Research Question 4: Perception of Personal Responsibility for SAP Violation

Three focus group questions were used to examine the qualitative sample's sense of personal responsibility for their SAP violation. The investigator wanted to explore the students' assessment of college resources that were available to assist them with the challenges leading to their SAP violation, the students' self-perceptions of their own determination in doing things differently, as well as, advise to new students based upon reflections of their own SAP experience. Asking the students to identify institutional and intrapersonal resources assisted in fleshing out the students' sense of accountability and understanding of their culpability in their SAP violation state.

Students' perception of supportive institutional resources.

The investigator asked the qualitative sample FGQ4 – "What do you consider to be the best college resource or resources to aid student success?" – in order to explore the students' perception of available resources that could have contributed to preventing their SAP violation during the fall 2019 semester. Students identified caring instructors, advisors, and staff; availability of tutoring services in The Learning Space and TRiO/Student Support Services program; and securing a campus Work Study job or obtaining employment through the Ready-to-Work grant program. Students stated that connecting to academic and human college resources were making a difference in turning their SAP situations around.

Isabel noted, "My anatomy teacher takes extra time with me when I am needing help. All of the institution's teachers have been dedicated to me being a good student." Students mentioned that "friendly and helpful college people" were available throughout the institution,

and many stated that that *one* person made a special difference for them. Anna said, "My TRiO advisor is my go-to person. She told me to stop in and see her anytime because she wanted to know how things are going, so I do that now." A noteworthy experience shared by Nicole was the following email exchange she had with her advisor:

> I emailed my advisor about the difficulty of going to school and managing a part-time job and my twins at home. I told her I was done, that I couldn't do it. She said, "You are disheartened, not defeated." That resonated with me. I was not defeated, only frustrated and tired. I printed off that email quote and have it taped to my laptop.

Students mentioned the difference that grant-funded support programs made in their academic success. TRiO/Student Support Services (SSS) was mentioned in each focus group session. Tutoring services provided by SSS were noted as important for academic success. Greg reported that The Learning Space had been helpful in providing him tutoring support for his writing classes:

> English is not my thing. I cannot write and my grammar ain't good. See? But this time is different, I can walk into the Learning Space when they are open and it's very relaxed. Usually when I go I am panicked over something, and once they explain it, it's really nothing and I can do it"

Working part-time through a federal aid work/study program or the Ready-to-Work program was helpful to being more successful. Elizabeth noted, "If it weren't for the college work-study job, I would not have come back to school. Running from campus to a work site and back to campus for a class is hard to do. Working on campus where my classes are makes things so much easier than the last time I was here." The job placement provided by the Ready-to-Work program was viewed with similar value. Carrie noted, "My RTW [case manager] is

hands-down my biggest resource at the college and her help in placing me in a job in the field I eventually want to have as a career is the best thing. I need her help to do this." Students perceived the institution as having resources available to assist them in being more successful, but inferred in their answers that they had to be the ones who recognized they needed help and reached out for assistance. "The students' effort in accessing help supports the examination of the students' perception of their culpability in their SAP violations."

Students' perceptions of what it takes to persevere and succeed.

The purpose of the investigator asking the focus group students' FGQ5 – "In your opinion, what does it take to persevere when life gets in the way, such as personal issues, work conflicts, etcetera, and what it takes to reach set goals?" – was to examine the students' beliefs about what it takes to persevere when life gets in the way and what it takes to reach educational goals.

A key concept in all their answers was personal motivation. Identifying something or someone in their lives that motivated them was paramount. Several students mentioned maturity – considered as a "willingness to persevere" – made a difference. "Learning that you have to keep moving forward [is important], because life is going to happen regardless of me being in school," said Anna. For some, personal growth and motivation came from having children. "My will to persevere has come from wanting to ingrain in my children that a college education is necessary for bettering our lives," stated Jennifer, a mother of four. "I am doing this for my kids. You just have too," said Heather, a single mother of a daughter. Greg and Mary both mentioned pushing through their mental health issues. Greg stated that he had to keep fighting for his position at work and staying in school, and that he "could not let his mental stuff get in the way

of it." Mary shared, "every day is hard because I have so much whirling in my head, but I get up and will myself to take the next step of what I have to do, like go to class and do the work."

Several of the students mentioned that they persisted because they wanted to make an immediate family member proud. Self-pride was also a motivator. Beth, who is pregnant, noted: "It's embarrassing to admit that I have a crappy job and I am receiving government assistance and food stamps. People look down on me. I am more than that. I owe it to my three babies and the one [here]." Carrie agreed: "People judge you. Not realizing that some people take this just to get over their hump. We hate to even go to [government assistance], we hate to get to that point where we have to receive food stamps and things like that."

SAP students' advice for new students.

Asking the qualitative sample to reflect on their own SAP experience provided an opportunity for them to offer advice to new students on how to not get on SAP, helped highlight their understanding of their personal responsibility in their SAP status. Asking the students' FGQ6 – "Reflecting on your own SAP experience, what advice would you give a new college student?" - provided a final way to examine students' beliefs about their own level of responsibility for SAP violations.

"If I knew then, what I know now" is an adage appropriate for many of life's situations, no less so for students who are rebuilding their academic careers and working toward a goal with a SAP plan. Focus group students offered a number of recommendations to new students.

The first piece of advice was not to be afraid to ask for help when struggling in a class or having personal problems. Jennifer said, "When you are struggling in a class or with an assignment, just look for someone you can talk to and ask them for guidance on what you need to do." A second suggestion from Lauren was to spend time in self-reflection: "When you are

brand new in college, you're not exactly *only* thinking about college; you're thinking about your friends, your family, and your job. You need to think about the direction you want your life to go." Kimberly offered a third piece of advice for new students: be practical in the schedule you build for yourself. She shared, "You know what is on your plate. If it takes you longer to get your degree, so be it. Don't overload yourself." Nine of the 14 students said new students must attend class regularly. Isabel summarized by saying, "I know that when I missed classes, I didn't want to go back because I was behind and I was embarrassed. Then it snowballed. Going to class is *the* most important thing a new student needs to do."

The fourth recommendation addresses the issue of "timing." This could be construed as a "maturity" issue, an issue identified previously by focus group participants: new students should go to college when they are *ready* for college. Anna, Carrie, Elizabeth, and Mary were emphatic about students making sure they were ready for the challenge. Elizabeth stated, "Don't go just because everybody says you have to go right after high school. Because it doesn't work that way." Appropriate motivation was noted as a fifth suggestion, particularly as it relates to career choice. Heather said, "College is something you have to want for yourself. You have to find something you care about, that you want to be." The sixth recommendation offered by Beth was practical: new students must go to a new student orientation:

> I registered late. My first semester there was not an orientation available. I felt like I didn't get the information I needed to know how to be a good student, what is on campus, and who is around you to help you.

Finally, Isabel summarized her overall advice for new students:

> I would tell them, keep your head up, stay focused, see the light at the end of the tunnel. It may seem like a long tunnel, but there's a bright light – achieving your goal at the end.

> Getting where you want to go in life is hard. You just have to push through obstacles, jump through hoops, take everything seriously, and get there. It will be worth it when you reach your goal

Each of these pieces of advice underscore the importance of taking personal responsibility and can be summarized in the following way:

- Ask for help when struggling
- Take time to self-reflect
- Make practical decisions
- Attend class regularly
- Enroll in college when ready
- Attend new student orientation
- Be persistent when life gets in the way, focusing on the end goal

Quantitative Data Summary

The quantitative analysis of SAP appeal data raised questions regarding patterns of student behavior. The most interesting of these questions related to the GPA violation. When the frequency of SAP violations was examined for over 1,171 students who appealed their status during the period of fall 2016 to summer 2018, failure to maintain a 2.0 GPA accounted for *only* 3.3% (39) of the total number of appellants. Such a low percentage invites further examination given assumptions a typical instructor or academic advisor might make regarding why students fail to make satisfactory academic progress. For example, when students perform poorly in class, it is not uncommon to hear instructors comment anecdotally on their lack of college preparedness or cognitive abilities. These anecdotal observations, coupled with an awareness

among instructors that the average ACT score for first-time community college students hovers around 17, lead instructors to assume SAP students either don't have the requisite cognitive abilities to succeed at the college level or lack the motivation to succeed (CCCSE, 2016). From the instructors' point of view, a low GPA simply confirms their assumptions. Quantitative analysis of SAP violations, however, suggests otherwise. Students who end up completing courses typically do so with a satisfactory GPA. Other violations – exceeding the maximum time frame and not completing two thirds or more of hours attempted in a semester – are much more frequently occurring.

The low frequency of GPA-only violations could be a by-product of timely withdrawal. A student who is not performing well in class may choose to withdraw *before* receiving a poor grade, thus avoiding the possibility of lowering his or her overall GPA for the semester. For example, in contrast to the GPA violation, the most frequently occurring SAP violation was exceeding the maximum time frame (MTF) for obtaining a credential. MTF violators have accumulated too many college credit hours; it follows, then, that they are successful learners who have demonstrated the ability to complete college coursework. Maintaining a 2.0 GPA or better does not come into play for such students. Unless they maintained an acceptable GPA over time, they could not have accumulated more than 150% of the hours necessary for a credential. Other circumstances not related to academic achievement must be impacting their academic progress.

Qualitative Data Summary

The distribution of SAP violations for the focus group participants parallel that of the 1,171 students examined for the quantitative analysis. The most frequently occurring violation for focus group participants in the qualitative study was the combination of GPA plus percentage of credit hours completed; that same combination of GPA plus percentage of credit hours

completed ranked second for the quantitative study. The second most frequently occurring violation was maximum time frame; that violation ranked first for the quantitative study. For focus group participants, GPA alone accounted for zero violations. This mirrors the low percentage of GPA violations for the quantitative study. For both groups, GPA mattered most only when that violation was combined with a second violation, the percentage of credit hours completed. Achieving a C or better course grade for focus group participants was not an issue. Accumulating too many credit hours was an issue, which mirrored the results from the much larger sample size of the quantitative study group.

Focus group participants – without exception – assumed that they had the cognitive abilities and intellectual capacity to be academically successful, although two attributed their lack of performance to mental health issues. Moreover, none of the participants noted that the college could have provided additional academic support. To the contrary, over 70% of the participants believed that there was nothing the college could have done for them academically. In addition, most of the focus group participants were willing to take responsibility for their lack of academic progress and not blame the institution for providing too little, untimely, or inadequate academic support. Over 25%, however, believed that instructors could have encouraged them by pointing out more explicitly the impact SAP violations would have on achieving their educational goals. In this regard, focus group participants drew a distinction between confidence in their ability to perform academically and a lack of understanding of the consequences of violations related to academic progress. That is, they believed they could perform in the classroom if only they had a better understanding of the "maximum time frame" and "percentage of credit hours completed" SAP criteria.

Focus group participants also believed they were ready for the challenge of college-level education. They assumed that wanting to take on a challenge to improve the quality of their lives was enough to ensure academic success. Furthermore, they appeared to equate willingness to take on a challenge with the capacity or commitment to persevere. That is, they assumed initial motivation – a willingness to take on a challenge borne of dissatisfaction with the current condition of their lives – was enough, and that this would translate into postsecondary success. They appeared to base this assumption upon their high school experiences. If they did not perform well in high school, they tended to attribute that to boredom with, or disinterest in, the high school curriculum, or to paying too much attention to extra-curricular activities associated with friends and life outside of the classroom. They assumed college would be structured like high school, and if they only applied themselves this second time around in college, they would be successful and underestimated the role personal responsibility played in postsecondary academic success. Nonetheless, they were willing to take responsibility for this misunderstanding and noted that they, not the institution, were responsible for their SAP violations.

Chapter V: Conclusions

Key Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the reasons for attrition among rural community college students by way of SAP. The chapter includes prevailing themes derived from the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the two distinct SAP student samples. Practical implications based on those themes, limitations to the study, suggestions for future research, and a conclusion are offered in this final chapter. Ultimately, the themes and recommendations were created to improve the success and retention of students placed on academic probation for failure to make satisfactory academic progress.

Academic and personal challenges contribute to SAP violations.

The key findings reflect the ownership of SAP students regarding their culpability for SAP violations. Both quantitative and qualitative research analysis revealed students underestimated the commitment of time necessary to be a successful student, yet took responsibility for their unsatisfactory academic progress. The analysis also reveals that students identify academic and personal external challenges as contributing factors to SAP violations, with personal challenges being the primary contributors. SAP students are not just poor academic performers. Over thirty percent (37.68%) of the quantitative sample and close to thirty percent (28.57%) of the qualitative sample are students who have accumulated excessive credit hours, indicating that they could in fact complete coursework successfully while maintaining an above average GPA. The stereotype that SAP violation students are poor academic performers, who do not take responsibility for their education, was partially disproven. Personally, the investigator assumed SAP students struggle to learn. The findings contradict these assumptions.

The investigator's findings do not align well with Spady's (1971) Undergraduate Dropout Process Model of student departure. Spady's study was completed using a student sample comprised of 683 students who entered the University of Chicago as freshman in fall 1965, consisting of 62% men and 38% women. These entering freshmen represented every region of the United States and several foreign countries. Spady found that student retention was primarily dependent upon two important factors: intellectual development, and social integration and support. The investigator's research challenges Spady's finding: students submitting SAP appeals were more likely to identify external factors unrelated to social integration and intellectual ability at the community college as the reason for inability to make satisfactory academic progress. Spady contends that a student's ability to develop socially and integrate effectively in a new academic environment and culture must be considered. It is the student's ability to meet the academic challenges and expectations of college coursework that have the most significant impact upon retention. The investigator found that while 25.5% of students reported academic challenges that led to their SAP violation, over 28.8% of students reported both academic *and* personal challenges led to their violation. Personal challenges *alone* were the third highest reported circumstance leading to SAP violations at 15.0%. The investigator's findings reveal that students on SAP were performing at an academically acceptable level. They violated SAP because they accumulated an excess of credit hours due to prior educational experiences. Academic challenges do impact a student's continued enrollment, but external factors such as personal and economic challenges also contribute to early departure.

Like Spady, Tinto (1993) acknowledges the importance of academic performance relative to persistence, but also the transition from one social environment (the structure of secondary schooling and family support) to another (postsecondary schooling and personal independence)

is impactful to persistence. For Tinto, integrating successfully in the classroom should be a point of focus in any successful retention program. Faculty have the first opportunity to create a welcoming and supportive environment for students in transition. Faculty regularly connect with students and are best positioned to assist students in navigating coursework and a postsecondary environment. Moreover, successful classroom performance is the first opportunity students have to demonstrate that they belong. In this regard, it is incumbent upon faculty to provide the academic *and* social support necessary to nurture academic success and a sense of belonging. Students who succeed in class are more likely to transition smoothly into the overall postsecondary environment and return the next semester. Given Tinto's emphasis on academic performance *and* social integration, the students' first semester takes on special significance.

The investigator's research provides for a more nuanced understanding of the impact of external factors on academic performance and social integration. The quantitative data analysis and qualitative focus group findings indicated that students did not identify social integration as a significant factor in their failure to make progress. Students found the institution to be welcoming and instructors to be supportive. As shown in Table 6, academic performance was an issue, but *only* as it was reflected in the GPA and/or percentage of attempted credit hours completed. Poor attendance or failure to submit assignments on time were noted as reasons for poor academic performance by 53.31% of the student sample. These reasons relate more to motivation and determination than to innate intellectual ability. For example, they did not cite an inability to comprehend ideas, concepts, formulas, theories, or difficult course content as an explanation for poor performance. Moreover, as reflected in Table 5, 70.4% of students associated external personal circumstances (personal and economic) to academic circumstances in order to explain their failure to meet the academic progress criteria for SAP, specifically the

GPA and attempted credit hours completed criterion. Low GPA and low percentage of credit hours completed indicate students struggle to complete classes successfully, but not necessarily because they were unable to complete assignments or failed to understand course content. For example, failure to maintain an acceptable GPA accounted for only 3.3% of the SAP sample. Students more often cited personal challenges that prevented them from completing assignments in a satisfactory or timely manner. Personal issues, such as individual psychological and physical health issues, and external issues, such as family emergencies, financial problems, and work conflict, accounted for most SAP violation rationale. Focus group findings corroborated the quantitative analysis, indicating that students felt they were able to complete classwork provided they could eliminate personal and external factors.

Research conducted by Bean and Metzner (1985) focuses on the non-traditional student and the impact of external environment on academic success and attrition. The investigator's findings support Bean and Metzner's work, indicating that students' personal motivation does have an impact on making academic progress, but no more so than external environmental factors that impact or redirect motivation. The motivation to help an ailing grandparent and thus set aside school work is not a bad thing, but a matter of priorities. Bean and Metzner propose that a non-traditional students' success and persistence are more often influenced by external environmental factors, such as family and work-related responsibilities, rather than their ability to integrate successfully within the classroom and a new postsecondary academic community. In this regard, making satisfactory progress is less about their performance within the academic social constructs of the college than it is about their ability to deal with the external social constructs of their personal lives. An unduplicated frequency of reoccurring challenges in the quantitative sample show that external factors, coded as "personal" and "economic" challenges,

contribute equally to students' failure to meet SAP academic progress. Challenges that include "personal" and "economic" challenges account for 27.5% of the challenges noted by students in their SAP appeal statements: "economic" challenges alone account for 4.4%; "economic" plus "personal" challenges for 8.45%; "economic" plus "academic" challenges for 8.11%; and "economic" plus "personal," and "academic" for 8.54%. Taken together, the personal and economic categories are equally impactful when compared to the "academic" category which accounts for 26.58%.

The investigator's findings underscore the relevance of Braxton and associates (2014) research addressing student attrition and persistence in commuter colleges and universities. Issues related to personal responsibility and institutional responsibility surfaced in both the quantitative and qualitative components of the findings. Braxton and colleagues introduce two new factors that contribute to persistence: (1) the degree to which students perceive the institution is committed to their welfare and (2) the degree to which the institution's goals and values are congruent with the institution's actions. The second factor is a matter of institutional integrity. The greater the degree to which the institution "practices what it preaches," the greater the likelihood students will commit to the institution and complete a credential.

The investigator's findings indicate that the community college under study was indeed practicing the institutional policies and values that it espoused. For example, when asked to explain in their written appeal "what has changed that would allow them to make satisfactory progress," students indicated that they would do their part the next time and seek help when needed. They planned to utilize the variety of support services provided by the institution (e.g. tutoring and related academic support services, advising and career counseling, food pantry and emergency fund support). In addition, they planned to follow through on the practical advice

provided by instructors and advisors (e.g. attend class regularly and keep up with assignments, communicate regularly with your instructor and advisor, read-email, seek additional academic support when struggling in class). Moreover, the investigator's quantitative findings indicated that students felt the institution was committed to their welfare. They were willing, however, to be self-critical and acknowledged that they must do their part. That is not surprising given the format of the written appeal process. Students are asked to explain "what will change." The qualitative focus group findings corroborated earlier findings and offered further understanding. Focus group participants were not critical of a shortage of support services, nor were they critical of the institution's willingness to help. Rather, participants indicated that they had not done their part. They felt the institution was committed to their academic and personal welfare and acknowledged their responsibility for making satisfactory progress. Students felt the institution delivered on its promise to provide a quality educational experience, but acknowledged they weren't ready – or in a position due to external circumstances – to take advantage of it, for whatever reasons.

Students on SAP are not simply poor academic performers.

The investigator began this study having made generalized assumptions about the SAP population of the institution under study. The assumptions were that students who had to complete a SAP appeal were academically poor performers as defined by a low GPA (below at 2.0 cumulative GPA) and low course completion (not completing 67% of courses attempted). The expectation was that these students were not committed to their coursework evidenced by a low GPA, the inability to complete courses enrolled in, or a combination of both. Little consideration was given that the population SAP students had a solid GPA and have accumulated too many credit hours due to changing declared majors several times and completing prior

credentials. As shown in Table 14, both the quantitative and qualitative research revealed that GPA alone makes up for only a small proportion of the SAP violations: 3.30% of the quantitative sample had *only* GPA violations, and 0% of the qualitative had *only* GPA violations. Academic performance as measured by GPA *only* was not the most critical factor for students at the institution studied. Maximum Time Frame and GPA in combination with Percentage of Course Completion make up the largest percentage of SAP violations for both groups. For the quantitative sample, maximum time frame was the most prevalent SAP violation at 37.68%. Maximum time frame was the second most prevalent violation for the qualitative sample at 28.57%. GPA *in combination with* percentage of course completion was the most prevalent SAP violation at 42.86% for the qualitative sample; it was the second most prevalent violation for the quantitative sample at 26.04%. The third most frequently occurring SAP violation for both samples was Percentage of Completion *only,* with 23.14% frequency in occurrence in the quantitative sample and 21.43% frequency of occurrence in the qualitative sample. As shown in Table 14, the quantitative and qualitative SAP data were divided between three primary groups: students who had met academic performance criteria but who had maxed out their allowed number of credit hours to complete a credential (quantitative 37.68%; qualitative 28.57%); students who were poor academic performers as noted by their combined low GPAs and failure to complete the required 67% of coursework (quantitative 26.04%; qualitative 42.86%); and students who had met GPA requirements but only completed 33% of attempted credit hours (quantitative 23.14%; qualitative 21.43%).

Personal challenges are the primary contributors to SAP violations.

As shown in Table 10, 62.51% of the challenges facing SAP students are either personal in nature or a combination of personal with academic or economic extenuating circumstances. It

is not exclusively a lack of academic preparation or ability that led to their SAP violation. The quantitative study revealed that students identified a wide range of personal issues as contributing to their SAP violation, any one of which – apart from lack of motivation and immaturity – are typically factors that are difficult to manage: students' emotional & mental health disorders, like attention deficit disorder, depression or social anxiety, and/or physical illness, like cancer diagnosis, miscarriage or childbirth. External factors that are simply impossible to anticipate or avoid, like the lack of childcare, immediate/external family illness and death, and unstable personal and family relationships are also factors that can distract a student from being focused on their academic goals, all of which are evidenced in Table 8. Institutional resources are limited when it comes to helping students address personal issues. Although immaturity or lack of motivation can be legitimate explanations for failing to make progress, from an institutional perspective, these are issues that an institution is expected to address. For example, staff and faculty can orient students more effectively. They can diminish postsecondary naivete' by doing a better job of aligning student expectations with those of the institution. Another example includes faculty presenting material in the classroom to generate enthusiasm for the subject matter to increase the motivation to learn. Instructional best practice research shows that student-centered, active-learning classroom methodologies can engage and motivate students when applied effectively (Deslauriers, McCarty, Miller, Callaghan, & Kestin, 2019; Stavich & Zimbardo, 2012).

Students underestimate the time involved in going to college.

Analysis suggests that SAP violators underestimate the difficulty associated with balancing work and school. Students struggle with this balance for many reasons. For example, students can be too easily coaxed into taking on an unrealistic course load by well-intentioned

advisors because the advisors themselves are influenced by contradictory priorities. Advisors want students to prepare themselves for the workforce in a timely, yet realistic manner. That often means advising a student to take less than a full load so the student can balance academic and personal responsibilities. On the other hand, the administration places a high priority on increasing the number of student credit hours generated. An increase in student credit hours leads to an increase in tuition revenue. Tuition revenue balances a budget which fiscally supports educational programs. The conflicting priorities result in students taking a course load they cannot handle.

Another problematic example is the way community college recruitment strategies tout the "convenience" of flexible class scheduling – weekdays, evenings, weekends – as well as the "anywhere-anytime" availability of online classes. Such a strategy promotes access and downplays – if it mentions it at all – the effort and discipline necessary to complete coursework successfully when scheduled around family and work. As discussed in Chapter 4, the qualitative sample of students shared their difficulty in keeping up with assignments, finding time to complete readings, and staying on task because of personal and external factors. Regardless of course accessibility and convenience, availability was not the biggest issue. In fact, students assumed they would be successful in spite of working full-time, raising children, and tending to other family commitments. In light of this finding, a critical component of orienting new traditional-aged college students, as well as returning adult college students, is to address the expectations and rigor of college coursework as well as the investment and management of time. Failure to provide this information in an orientation inadequately prepares students for the demands of postsecondary education. Students fail to have a realistic self-assessment of what they can accomplish in a 24-hour day that includes work, family obligations, and school.

Identifying why students are convinced they are not over-reaching their capacity to balance work, family, and school deserves further investigation.

The investigator's research aligns with The Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) 2016 and 2017 surveys. The CCCSE found that 86% of entering freshmen community college students believe they are prepared for the academic rigor of college and 76% believe they will complete their credentials on time (CCCSE, 2017a). However, 68% of entering freshman place into one or more developmental course and 61% will not complete any type of credential within six years of starting (CCCSE, 2016). Students' perceptions of their academic preparation and commitment to credential completion prior to the start of college do not align with their performance once enrolled. The investigator's SAP findings corroborate CCSSE findings. Students often misjudge the time commitment and personal discipline required to be a successful college student. When students were prompted to identify circumstances leading to their lack of academic success in their SAP application, they offered multiple circumstances as justification for their poor SAP standing. Students appeared to blame external variables for their inability to meet SAP criteria. The listing of external variables out of the student's control ranged from the unanticipated homework expectations of courses (academic challenges), as shown in Table 6, to the unanticipated costs associated with being a student (economic challenges), as shown in Table 7, to the unforeseen mental health issues and family demands (personal challenges) as shown in Table 8. The quantitative sample of SAP students provided written statements describing reasons for their SAP violation status that reflected an overall sense of having no control over the circumstances. Perhaps to reinforce the direness of their circumstances to the SAP appeal reviewers, they were heavy handed in casting blame on external circumstances, outside of their realm of influence, for being an unsuccessful student.

Rotter (1966) would refer to this as a person operating out of an "external locus of control," one who believes that success or failure is a result of factors outside their control or influence.

Students take responsibility for unsatisfactory academic progress.

The investigator began the study with the perception that students with SAP violations would tend to blame external factors for their lack of academic success (e.g. the instructor's poor teaching or communication skills, the amount of homework, employer demands, family commitments). Students would, in essence, operate out of an "external locus of control" (Rotter, 1966) by associating failure with external factors beyond one's control, such as bias, circumstances, and fate. Students who believe their success or failure is within their control, and is a result of their effort and dedication to work, is an example of operating out of an "internal locus of control" mindset (Rotter, 1966).

The investigator found that the quantitative sample identified numerous "external" factors – economic and/or personal external challenges – as contributing circumstances leading to their SAP violation. Students identified the behavioral changes they intended to make: managing time more effectively, receiving support and addressing mental health issues, stabilizing personal family situations, and so on as detailed in Table 13. The quantitative sample underscored the role personal responsibility played in their SAP violations, as shown in Table 11, where appellants identified changes they needed to make, such as keeping up with assignments, dedicating time to study, securing tutors, and communicating with instructors and the institution. Table 12 identifies recommended economic changes SAP appellants would make to be more successful in the future, such as work less hours per week, adjust work schedule, and secure money from family or friends. As shown in Table 13, students from the quantitative sample recommended the following personal changes for their improved academic performance, such as

stabilizing their personal life and resolving their health issues, settling family issues/health issues, managing mental health issues, and practicing focus, motivation, self-discipline, and time management. The investigator found similar results in the responses of the focus group participants – that they viewed themselves as culpable for their SAP status. To the investigator's surprise, the students in the qualitative sample offered statements indicating a sense of personal responsibility for their SAP status. The answers varied from admitting to being too immature and unmotivated, to not understanding what college requires, and to acknowledging that the decision to juggle raising a family and working full-time was not the best choice. Each student understood their failure to be successful in college was within their control, and had they made more informed choices and taken advantage of support services available to them, they likely would have succeeded. The focus group students were operating out of an "internal locus of control." They took ownership of their role, admitting openly that there was no one to blame, in the end, for their success or failure but themselves. Ironically, there is research to suggest that those who operate out of an internal locus of control tend to be more success oriented (Gifford, Briceño-Perriott, & Mianzo, 2006). If that were the case, future research is warranted, specifically to track the academic progress of SAP students who received probationary status.

Practical Implications

The investigator's research findings provide insight into the changes the community college under study can make to support the persistence of future students. Changes in the information shared in advising appointments and orientation sessions can lead to students' deeper understanding of the rigor and expectations of college work, the importance of selecting a suitable major and following a specific educational path, and the level of personal responsibility involved in being successful academically, as defined by financial aid: maintaining a 2.0

cumulative GPA, not exceeding the maximum time frame in completing a credential, and completing 67% of the credit hours completed.

Importance of advisor training.

The relationship formed between the student and advisor is an important one. An academic advisor is a resource for campus academic and personal support, career exploration, and assistance with navigating the policies, procedures, and expectations of an institution. At the community college under study, full-time instructors serve a dual role. They teach and advise. Students make important connections to the college through interactions with instructors. An instructor's advice is primarily about course and program requirements. The role of the truly effective advisor in a student's college journey is twofold: to focus upon the correct classes the student should enroll to complete a credential and assist advisees in making connections to the institution. For example, a connection to career exploration opportunities through skills and aptitude evaluations, academic success resources like the library, tutoring, and other student support services, and campus social support resources like student clubs and organizations, and campus life events. The advisor's role is most significant when it is viewed as a teaching process rather than an event related to course registration (Frost, 1991).

A practical application of the investigator's research is to develop a multi-focused advisor training which encompasses meeting a broad spectrum of student competencies needed to be academically successful. An effective advisor needs to be aware of the challenges facing community college students and external factors that can impede a student from making progress academically, as shown in Tables 6, 7, and 8. Academic challenges like poor attendance, rigor of coursework, and changing academic majors too often (Table 6); economic challenges like working too many hours, work schedule conflicts, and transportation and/or internet problems

(Table 7); and personal challenges like mental and physical health issues, unstable relationships, and immediate/extended family issues (Table 8) can be barriers to success. Advisors aware of these challenges can assist students in identifying the potential problem and recommend actions to address the difficulties before they risk failing a class. Tables 11, 12, and 13 show possible solutions advisors can assist students in identifying: academic changes such as communicating regularly with instructors, dedicating time to study, or obtaining secure tutoring (Table 11); economic changes such as adjusting work schedules, working less hours, and obtaining financial support from family or friends (Table 12); and personal changes such as resolving personal health issues, managing and receiving support for mental health issues, or practicing time management (Table 13).

A multi-layered advisor training program can assist advisors in obtaining the tools needed to help students self-assess possible challenges and solutions. Training prepares the advisor to provide guidance to the student on important information such as correctly identifying the course and graduation requirements for the student's declared academic plan, registering the student for classes, and ensuring that students are aware of campus academic resources and academic calendar dates. The advisor should also assist students with setting goals, exploring career paths that align with their educational goal and aptitudes, and understanding the employment opportunities of a declared major. An advisor plays an essential role in the student's development. The advisor's role is to assist the student in becoming more knowledgeable and independent. Early on, the advisor plays the lead role in mapping the conditions that will contribute to the student's success, training the student to become more independent and making smart decisions that will enable them to complete their academic journey.

Adopting this kind of holistic approach to advisor training is critical if the institution wants to decrease student attrition. Advisors should design and implement an effective curriculum for educating students to act independently and responsibly. Students should be trained to become their own best advisor, and be equipped to identify problems and take action to resolve them.

Training should include hands-on methods for interacting with the student during one on one advising sessions. Keller (1988) offers the circular process of inquiry. The process suggests a series of questions an advisor uses to help the student explore their goals, aspirations, aptitude, skills, in order to offer a realistic approach to their academic pursuits. Advisors should be trained to follow a three-phase protocol of inquiry and education. The inquiry portion of an advisor's tool kit is built around the four phases of the circular process of inquiry where assessment, goal-setting, decision-making, and evaluation questions are used as an interactive activity with the student (Keller, 1988). In the assessment phase of inquiry, the advisor asks the students a series of questions: What do you like to do? What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses? What are your values? What are your concerns? In the second phase, the goal-setting phase of inquiry, the advisor asks the students three questions: Where are you going? What skill do you want to develop? Who and what do you want to become? In the third phase – the critical decision-making phase – the advisor assists the student in identifying the steps needed to reach the identified goal. In the fourth and final phase, evaluation, the advisor periodically monitors the student's progress, asking ask how the student is doing and addressing concerns or problems. Should troubling issues arise, the advisor modifies the student's educational plan by circling back through the first three phases.

Mandatory faculty and staff advisor training should be conducted in early September prior to the start of early spring term registration, and in early February prior to the start of early summer/fall term registration. Students deserve their advisor to be up-to-date on placement, policies, programs, and campus academic support resources that can help them succeed. Advisor training can be delivered internally by using those faculty and staff advisors who have demonstrated excellence and commitment to the advising process. Attendance at the national or regional, NACADA (National Academic Advising Association) annual conference should be part of their on-going professional development as advisors. Dedicating institutional resources to send advisors each year to the training will eventually elevate the entire advising community's competence. Given the size of the at-risk population in a typical community college, effective advising must be an institutional priority.

Motivation-infused student orientation programming.

New student orientation is a vehicle to deliver important information to new college students. It is necessary to prepare them for a successful launch into a new postsecondary organizational culture and learning environment, likely to be distinctly different than they have encountered before. Students need to be apprised of college policies, procedures, and student support structures, but more importantly, they need to be introduced to a new level of academic expectations and personal responsibilities. New students have chosen to enroll. They have made that initial commitment. Now their motivation to enroll needs to be explored and taken to a different level. Sustaining the motivation and grounding it in reality becomes the long-term goal of orientation. The short-term goal, however, is to examine student expectations to ensure that expectations align, generally, with what students will encounter in their academic program. For example, new students often underestimate the rigor associated with an online course. Likewise,

they often underestimate the self-discipline required to manage their time effectively in order to complete assignments between classes. The new level of academic expectations is a formidable challenge. As shown in Table 6, six frequent academic challenges out of ten identified in the quantitative research related to the unexpected challenges and expectations of college coursework. The challenges were not being academically prepared, difficulty of online classes, rigor of coursework, poor attendance, dropping a class/classes, or failing a class/classes up with assignments. The qualitative data collected reflect students' being distracted by external circumstances, and not being mature enough to focus and maintain motivation to be successful, as noted by the following by focus group participants: "I was young when I went to school the first time. I didn't know what to expect" (Jennifer); I didn't care about college when I was in my late teens, I just stopped coming" (Isabel); and "I know that when I missed classes, I didn't want to go back because I was behind and embarrassed." (Elizabeth).

Moreover, advisors cannot assume all students enter college with similar external support structures and personal distractions. Time must be spent on exploring the students' goals and motivations for attending college. An obvious example would be young, single mothers. They wrestle with different issues – clearly – than recently displaced, middle-aged workers. Aligning expectations and abilities with the kind of educational program in which they are most likely to succeed is critical. An effective new student orientation should include an active learning component that requires students to examine – hands-on with their peers and advisors in a collaborative, relationship building manner – their motivation to pursue postsecondary education and honestly examine the educational goal that best aligns with their desires and capabilities. Tinto (1993) and Braxton et al. (2014) both identified that students who set goals and invest in the institution are actively engaged in their classroom learning experiences and more likely to

complete a credential. Starting college with an intentional focus and identification of motivators, obstacles, and goals can assist students in staying on the academic path to success.

Reliance on academic guided pathways.

New students with a clearly articulated academic program pathway will reduce the SAP violation occurrences associated with the maximum time frame criterion. Thirty-seven percent of student appeals in the sample were submitted because appellants exceeded the maximum time frame. Students interviewed through one of the focus groups expressed frustration with the criterion as well. A streamlined, academic program pathway that structures a particular sequence of courses, semester by semester, until completion of the credential, eliminates the opportunity for a student to waste credit hours in pursuit of the credential. Pathways should be detailed and specific, eliminating the "guesswork" on the part of the student. The pathways should also align with the semester class schedule for the college. The pathway should embed certificates, and advisors should encourage a student to accumulate these "stackable" credentials as academic progress is made. The embedded certificates document marketable skills and serve as positive reinforcement, marking significant milestones along the student's pathway to a degree. They reward success and document progress.

Flexible delivery of coursework/program.

Creative curriculum delivery is an important consideration in meeting the needs of students who are working and/or raising a family while attending college. Program pathways are only effective if a student can build a class schedule that addresses the external factors that influence their academic success. Students need scheduling options. Bi-term classes enable students to complete two courses in one term. Hybrid online courses, wherein students are required to attend a face-to-face class only once a week while completing the second class

remotely via online learning, allows more flexible scheduling with their employer. One hundred percent online courses offer the most scheduling flexibility, but online courses present other challenges. Orientation and advising activities for new students should manage the students' online expectations. Studies show that students underestimate the rigor and faculty expectations associated with an online class and the self-discipline required to meet deadlines and keep pace (Bork & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2013). Awarding experiential learning credit for prior learning is an option to accelerate progress toward the completion of a credential and will reduce the number of credit hours a student attempts, possibly helping them award violating this SAP criterion. Assembling a prior learning portfolio for which the institution can award credit is itself a challenge.

Required tutoring for SAP students.

Students who have violated the GPA and/or the Percentage of Course Completion SAP criteria should be required to attend tutoring during the next semester they are granted a successful SAP appeal. The investigator's analysis revealed students were willing to take responsibility for their poor performance. A mandate of tutoring and tracking interventions through an early alert system is a reasonable next step. A policy and complementing procedure should be required and supported by the SAP Appeal Committee and Dean of Students, who likely oversees the college's retention efforts. The academic support provided by tutoring – in person or remotely online – would benefit students who have difficulty navigating the challenges of their first semester of college. The director of the college's tutoring center would be responsible for tracking student participation and reporting to the Dean of Students.

SAP support and accountability.

Establishing a formal student "contract" for SAP students on probation is an accountability measure which clarifies the expectation that class attendance, completing assignments on time, and obtaining tutorial support are essential for renewed motivation. There are non-academic, external challenges facing this population such as personal health, financial, and/or family and employer-related issues. Students on SAP probation could meet at the beginning of the semester, and after that, the Dean of Students – working with a cadre of experienced advisors – would develop a process for maintaining and executing weekly contact with the SAP students making sure they are making progress and utilizing available student support resources. Moreover, the Dean could periodically review SAP appeal forms to identify recurring themes related to student challenges, since these could change over time.

SAP students who take advantage of institutional support programs are likely to be more academically successful. Academically successful SAP students get their financial aid reinstated and likely complete their goal of graduating and soon entering the workforce trained in their chosen career field. In addition to the academic support the institution can provide SAP students, P-20 community agencies and businesses can look for ways to support students in addressing the economic and personal challenges students face. These community stakeholders are invested in the success of the institution's students, as they will be hiring and training the graduates to meet their workforce staffing needs and company objectives. The support and accountability of SAP students could be enriched by including a collaboration component between the institution and area community agencies and businesses. For example, a community bank officer could support SAP students by providing a financial literacy workshop and one-on-one financial coaching which could help address the economic challenges SAP students may

face. A local mental health counseling agency could provide SAP students a certain number of free counseling sessions to assist the students in successfully manage and deal with the personal challenges that serve as obstacles to their academic success. The responsibility for supporting SAP students in truth lies beyond the institution and extends to community stakeholders who have a vested interest in the success of college completers.

Limitations of the Study

Readers should be aware of several limitations as they consider the investigator's findings. A limitation to the quantitative study was that specific demographic data (age, gender, ethnicity, and declared major) of the sample (n = 1,171) were not available in the financial aid SAP queries pulled for review and categorizing. The only identifying information provided in the queries were student names and identification numbers. These two identifiers were scrubbed before the queries were analyzed. The inclusion and examination of additional demographic information (age, gender, ethnicity) along with the students' declared majors would have deepened the exploration of reasons for attrition. Equally insightful would have been the emergent themes of student recommendations for academic, economic, and personal changes to ensure future academic success. Additional analysis and comparison between demographic groups could provide challenges and recommendations for improvement unique for each group.

Another limitation of the quantitative study was the SAP form itself. A students' first step in the SAP appeal process is identifying and selecting a circumstance that impacted their ability to successfully complete the semester. The circumstance options of the form were limited to a list of five life circumstance categories (Death of a Family Member/Close Friend, Accident or Illness Student/Family, Divorce, Work/Employment Change, or Other). The categories are a mix of narrowly defining criteria (e.g. Death, Divorce) to broadly defining criteria

(Work/Employment Change) to unlimited defining criteria (Other). Students were prompted to select one category of the five, although the selected category may not best describe the circumstances contributing to the students' current unsatisfactory academic progress status. This was evidenced by the narrative students provided in their explanation of the circumstances that cause their SAP violation. For example, one student selected the "Divorce" category as the circumstance impacting her ability to successfully complete a semester, but offered the additional circumstances or challenges as leading to her SAP failure: child care issues, transportation issues, illness of a relative, and getting behind in assignments. For students choosing the category of "Other," their explanations included a range of issues, including death, divorce, illness and employment changes. This lack of consistency in student response muddies the clarity of responses. The SAP Appeals Committee should periodically review the form and alter the categories according to the responses.

The small number of students who participated in the qualitative sample studied by way of focus groups limited the research and findings. Seven percent (n = 14) of the students with approved SAP for the fall 2019 semester (n = 195) participated in focus group interviews. Attendance in each of the three focus groups was small, with four students participating in the first and third focus group sessions, and six students participating in the second focus group session. According to Krueger and Casey (2000), the ideal size of a focus group is six to eight participants, which allows for shared responsibility and distribution of dialogue among participants. Increasing the number of participants for each focus group with a more diverse cross-section of declared majors would provide a more robust sampling of the SAP population.

The qualitative portion of the study was heavily populated by nursing students. Nursing students made up 43% of the focus group participants, which is appears to be a disproportionate

representation of the sample. Nursing students made up 50% of the first focus group of four students, and made up 67% of the second focus group of six students. It appears that the focus group participants are not a true sampling of declared majors represented in the total qualitative sample solicited; however, that cannot be determined since the students' declared degree was not demographic data available in the financial aid query used for securing the approved SAP fall 2019 sample. Increasing the number of participants for each focus group with a more diverse cross-section of declared majors would, again, provide a more robust sampling of the SAP population.

Future Research

The investigator's original research provided insight into the challenges facing students enrolled at a rural community college whose financial aid eligibility jeopardized due to failure to meet one or more of the three financial aid SAP success criteria: maintaining a 2.0 cumulative GPA, completing 67% of coursework attempted, or not exceeding the maximum time frame (credit hours) for a degree or diploma completion. The SAP population studied in both the quantitative and qualitative data made up a relatively significant percentage of the institution's overall population receiving financial aid – over 15%. In 2016-2017, 16.77% (n = 578) of the 3,446 students receiving financial aid in the fall, spring, and summer terms were on SAP, and in 2017-2018, 17.52% (n = 593) of 3,384 students receiving financial aid in the fall, spring, and summer terms were on SAP. This population represents a sampling of the student body who encounter similar challenges that are categorized broadly as academic, economic, and personal. Further study of the sample would be beneficial in order to equip these students to make a more prudent declaration of program major, to underscore the value of receiving supplemental

academic support early on, and to instill a realistic view of the expectations and commitment associated with attending college.

Research on the population could be furthered by focusing on specific demographic sub-populations within the overall group. Research could be segregated by age, gender, ethnicity, degree plan, generation college attendance, and income status, as well as various combinations of these attributes. A more focused study would shed light on the particular challenges faced by each sub-group. Qualitative research using a larger sample size and more focus group interviews would be particularly useful in that it would provide a deeper study. Additional research could generate recommendations for the development of suitable support programs that would address the specific needs of each group. For example, gender differences could be examined in a multi-layer quantitative analysis of associated demographic characteristics. Female vs. male demographic information could be added to the broader categories of academic, economic, and personal explanations for failure to progress. Are women or men more likely to encounter personal challenges? If the answer is women, what kinds of personal challenges are more likely to occur? Within which age range are they most likely to occur? Do challenges vary by declared major? Do black women encounter a greater percentage of personal challenges than white? Further quantitative analysis of the original study group into the kinds of SAP violations that occur based upon a combination of gender, age-range, ethnicity, and income status might prove helpful in developing specialized outreach strategies, advisor training content, and academic support and intervention programs specific to the demographic category. Institutions do not have unlimited resources to individualize delivery of services for each student; they can, however, increase awareness among faculty and staff that there can be important demographic differences between groups that should inform their interaction with advisees. Orienting and advising

students is not a “one size fits all” enterprise. College students enter their first semester declaring a major, but that declaration may be based upon the careers with which they are most familiar, not necessarily one that aligns with their interests and aptitudes. They might choose a career their family members have pursued or a career they have been introduced to via the media because it is being touted as a “can’t miss” money-maker.

The institution could conduct a modest mixed methods pilot study to assess the impact of intrusive career exploration advising techniques. A random selection of students would undergo an orientation model that included a career exploration element (i.e., self-assessment of interests, aptitude, and skills; career exploration survey to identify career clusters, interview a professional in the identified desired degree/career path); a second random selection of students would undergo the more traditional orientation. Only students receiving aid would be tracked. Students not receiving financial aid would be removed from the sample. Both student populations would be tracked each semester to completion of a credential or withdrawal from the institution. At the end of four semesters, a comparative analysis would be completed to determine if there was a difference in the frequency and types of SAP violations between the two student populations. Choosing a major with more self-understanding and confidence and having a better understanding of the rigor associated with postsecondary education (both the nature of the program content and the manner in which it is delivered, (i.e., face-to-face, online, hybrid-online) should prove beneficial. The challenge for the institution is to temper student expectations using intrusive, yet engaging, advising techniques in order to assist students in *not* making those misguided early education choices that impact their financial aid eligibility.

Finally, further research could be conducted examining the orientation and advising experience from the advisor’s point of view. This kind of study lends itself to qualitative, focus

group research and analysis. The investigator's original SAP appellant focus group discussions revealed a surprising finding: students acknowledged their culpability for not making satisfactory progress. They did not blame advisors, instructors, or institutional support services. It would be productive to study the extent to which advisors believe they are responsible for establishing the conditions for student success and evaluate what they believe to be the most commonly occurring challenges for them in the orientation and advising process. Data collected from a qualitative study of faculty advisor insights would inform development of a more sophisticated advisor training model. Focus group prompts would include the advisor's perception of their responsibility for students maintaining satisfactory academic progress and their perception of the student's role in maintain satisfactory academic progress. Focus group prompts would include the following:

- Q1 – What is your understanding of the financial aid SAP financial aid appeal process?
- Q2 – What role do you believe you should play in your advisee's academic success.
- Q3 – What might you have done differently to help your advisees be more successful?
- Q4 – What is the institution doing or could have done to help students avoid SAP violations?
- Q5 – To what extent should a faculty member or advisor assume responsibility for a student's success?
- Q6 – To what extent should a faculty member or advisor assume responsibility for *motivating* a student to succeed?
- Q7 – To what extent have you been trained to be an effective advisor?

Qualitative data collected from the focus group sessions would be coded for frequently occurring themes and categorized into broad headings. Findings could be used to develop a more well-rounded faculty advisor training model so that advisors can assist their advisees in college

readiness self-evaluation, assist them in connecting to campus academic resources early on, and assist them in establishing realistic expectations of themselves as students while they juggle the external circumstances that challenge their ability to succeed academically and persist to completion of a credential.

Summary

The mixed methods study on the reasons for academic attrition among rural community college students by way of SAP appeal yielded findings that can be used to enhance orientation and advising practices to improve student success and reduce student attrition for at risk students. The investigator conducted a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the SAP appeal process. The mixed methods research began with the examination of 1,171 student appeals submitted during from fall semester 2016 through spring semester 2018. The quantitative analysis began with an examination of the frequency with which SAP appellants violated one or more of the following SAP criteria: maintaining a 2.0 cumulative GPA, completing 67% of coursework attempted, and not exceeding the maximum time frame of credit hours in completing a degree (not exceeding 150% of allowable credit hours for degree completion). The investigator then coded the students' written appeals to identify the students' explanations for failure to make satisfactory progress. Coded analysis yielded three broad categories of challenge that impacted the students' ability to make satisfactory progress: academic challenges, economic challenges, and personal challenges. The broad categories were quantified to identify frequency of occurrence as shown in Table 5. Often students cited a combination of challenges. The investigator noted these combined categories and quantified their frequency of occurrence as well, as shown in Tables 6, 7, and 8. The investigator completed the study by conducting qualitative focus group interviews to explore in more detail the students' justifications for, and

attitudes regarding the SAP process. The most frequently occurring SAP violations for the quantitative *and* qualitative studies were "maximum time frame" and "GPA in combination with percentage of completion." These findings suggest two different types of SAP students: (1) those who are good students and have taken too many classes, perhaps because they changed majors or worked on an additional degree; and (2) those students who did not perform well academically as reflected by their GPA and their failure to complete 67% of the courses they have attempted.

As noted earlier, the quantitative analysis of challenges identified by SAP appellants could be sorted into three over-arching categories: academic challenges, economic challenges, and personal challenges. A combination of academic challenges *and* personal challenges were the most frequently occurring categories cited, making up 28.84% of the population as shown in Table 5. The second most frequently cited challenge was academic *only*, at 26.58% frequency. Notably, when students were asked to recommend changes that they could make to assure their satisfactory academic progress in the future, they primarily cited personal changes *only*, at 29.46% (Table 10). The second most frequently occurring recommended change offered by the quantitative sample was academic *only*, at 22.72% (Table 10). While the frequency of occurrence does not align perfectly between challenges and the changes students claimed they would make, it is noteworthy that the top two challenges and recommended changes reported were academic *only*, personal *only*, and a combination of academic *and* personal.

The quantitative analysis pointed to the students' belief that making changes to their personal lives would make a difference in their being able to address the academic challenges, as shown in Table 13. If they could only stabilize their personal lives, they would be more successful. The qualitative analysis corroborated this quantitative finding. Focus group

participants were willing to take responsibility for their SAP violations, reporting that they let their personal challenges get in the way of their academic success. In addition, they reported that their lack of maturity, their indecision about choosing a major, their mental and physical health, and their family commitments all contributed to their lack of academic success. The qualitative analysis mirrored the quantitative analysis. Focus group participants understood why they were on SAP. They knew what they had done to contribute to their SAP status and offered details on what they could have done differently to make satisfactory academic progress.

From the institution's point of view, GPA and course completion are academic areas that can be addressed by providing effective tutoring, monitoring class attendance, coaching time management and study skills, and scheduling classes that best suit the student's learning style and external commitments. This last intervention – delivering instruction, be it face-to-face, online, or hybrid-online – is best addressed during the students' initial orientation and advising sessions. The maximum time frame violation, however, is not a SAP violation that can easily be addressed because it is contingent upon choices the student made previously, such as taking numerous classes while trying to decide on a major or transferring in credit hours from another institution. That is a time-limited, credit-hour violation that cannot be corrected retroactively. The maximum time frame criterion is best addressed by providing more effective advising that includes honest career exploration based upon aptitude assessment. Aligning students' educational goals as closely as possible with their interests and skill sets is critical. It needs to take place at the beginning – or as close to the beginning as possible – of a postsecondary education.

In summary, the investigator found that the reasons for attrition of rural community college students by way of review of SAP appeals aligns with student retention models that

identify external circumstances as being the most impactful in the ability for a student to maintain progress toward educational goals. Community college students do encounter external circumstances – academic, economic, and personal – that impede them from reaching their academic goals. However, the investigator found they are willing to take responsibility for their behavior and address these external circumstances. The most revealing takeaway from this study was the following focus group finding: students accepted responsibility for their lack of progress and noted that, had they an opportunity to do it all over again, they would take better advantage of the advice and support the institution had to offer. Perhaps they are simply mature enough to admit their shortcomings while acknowledging the impact of external factors that were indeed beyond their control. Blaming external factors is one thing; acknowledging their impact but taking responsibility for managing those external factors more responsibly is another.

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Appendix A: SAP Appeal Instructions

Satisfactory Academic Progress Appeal (SAP Appeal)

SATISFACTORY ACADEMIC PROGRESS (SAP) APPEAL REQUEST INSTRUCTIONS - Please read

Below we explain how the SAP Appeal Request form works and what you should expect when filing your appeal request. You have access to this page because you have failed to meet Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) or you may fail SAP at the end of the current semester. If you fail SAP, your financial aid is suspended and you cannot receive financial aid.

You may submit a SAP Appeal Request asking your college to reconsider your financial aid eligibility. To submit a request, use this online SAP Appeal Request form. It should take approximately 15 minutes for you to complete.

Please carefully read each step below before you continue:

1. Confirm your current mailing address, phone number, college where you attend, and major
2. Determine the category of your extenuating circumstance
3. Type an explanation describing the extenuating circumstance that caused you to fail SAP
4. Type an explanation describing what has changed, since the extenuating circumstance occurred, that will now allow you to meet satisfactory academic process
5. Read and acknowledge the facts that you need to know about financial aid
6. Get instructions on what to do if your college requires additional supporting documentation
7. Review your Student SAP Appeal Confirmation, Receipt and Status page
8. Return to the SAP Appeal Confirmation, Receipt and Status page to check the status of your request

Cancel Continue

Appendix B: SAP Appeal Explanation of SAP Status

Satisfactory Academic Progress Appeal (SAP Appeal)

Your current Financial Aid SAP status is below.

Cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA) 2.297

The number shown above is your cumulative GPA for all terms you have attended college. If the number is 2.000 or higher, it will not affect your SAP status or financial aid eligibility. If the number is 1.999 or less, it was a factor in your failure to meet SAP.

Quantitative Percentage Status (QPS) 70.21

The number shown above is your Quantitative Percentage Status (QPS) for all terms you have attended college. QPS is used to determine if you are moving forward in your Program Plan to completion and graduation.

If the number is 67% or higher, it will not affect your SAP status.

If the number is 66.99 or less, it could mean that you failed, dropped-out or quit one, or more, classes out of every three classes you have enrolled in at our college. If the number is 66.99% or less, it was a factor in your failure to meet SAP.

Maximum Time Frame (MTF):

Maximum units in your Program Plan 60.00

(multipled by 150%) = 90.00

Total units you have attempted toward your Program Plan completion 47.000

The numbers shown above are MTF values for all hours you have attended in your Program Plan.

Additional Information: Maximum Time Frame
Students are expected to complete their degree/diploma/certificate credentials within a Maximum Time Frame (MTF) of 150% of the required number of credit hours to graduate from their enrolled program of study.

MTF includes all classes required for the credential plus 50%.

Transferred hours, repeated classes, bankrupted hours, incompletes, withdrawals, failed in graded courses, failed in Pass/Fail courses and audit (changed from credit to audit after the last day to add a class) count toward maximum time frame.

Grades of 'E', 'F','W','WF','WP','MP','U', or 'I' will not be considered as credit hours earned but will be considered as hours attempted for the semester.

Cancel Back Continue

Appendix C: SAP Appeal Request Category Form

Satisfactory Academic Progress Appeal (SAP Appeal)

Student Acknowledgement

You are no longer eligible for financial aid because you failed to make Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP). You may ask your college to reconsider by completing this form.

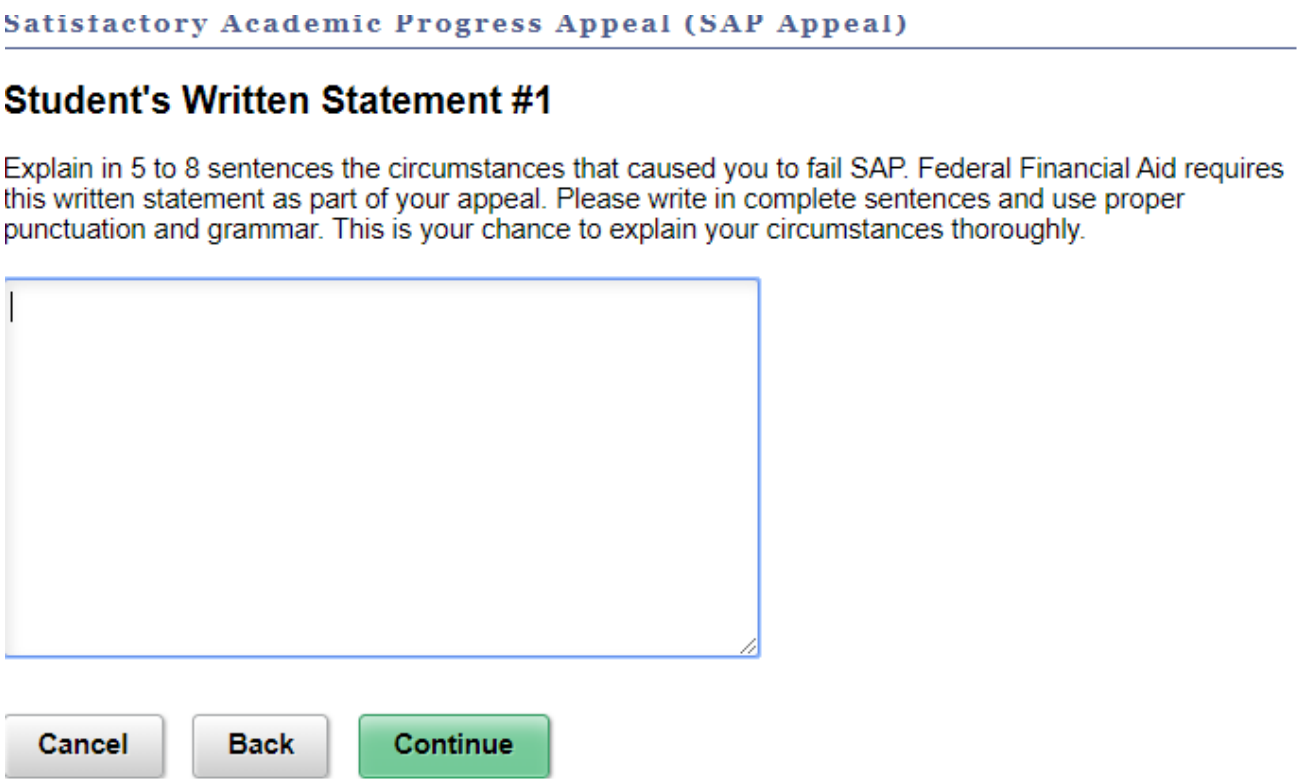
Did any of the following impact your ability to successfully complete this semester?

- ○ **Death of a family member/close**
- ○ **Accident or Illness Stdnt/Fmly**
- ○ **Divorce**
- ○ **Work/Employment Change**
- ○ **Other**

If you have circumstances not listed above, select "Other" and type a brief statement describing your situation.

Cancel Back

Appendix D: SAP Appeal Student's Written Statement #1



Appendix E: SAP Appeal Student's Written Statement # 2

Satisfactory Academic Progress Appeal (SAP Appeal)

Student's Written Statement #2

Explain in 5 to 8 short sentences what has changed that will now allow you to make Satisfactory Academic Progress by the next evaluation. Federal Financial Aid requires this written statement as part of your appeal. Please write in complete sentences and use proper punctuation and grammar.

Cancel Back Continue

Appendix F: SAP Appeal Student Acknowledgement Statement

Satisfactory Academic Progress Appeal (SAP Appeal)

Student Acknowledgement

Students whose financial aid has been suspended because of a GPA lower than 2.000, a completion rate less than 67%, and/or having reached Maximum Time Frame may appeal the suspension if there are extenuating circumstances.

Read the information below and acknowledge that you understand by selecting yes on the slider button.

I understand having an extenuating circumstance is no guarantee that my appeal will be approved.

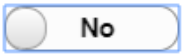
I understand I can receive financial aid for remedial course work for a maximum of 30 attempted hours.

I understand changing my major can affect my eligibility for financial aid as I may not be able maintain pace progression and complete my credential within my maximum time frame.

I understand transfer credit hours count in the attempted/completed SAP hours as recorded by Admissions and Records.

I understand that I am responsible for ensuring the completion of all other components of my financial aid file.

I understand I will be able to track the progress of my SAP Appeal once it is submitted by returning to my Student Self-Service center and clicking on the SAP Appeal Confirmation link and that additional communication may be sent via email.



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Appendix G: SAP Appeal Additional Documentation Information

Satisfactory Academic Progress Appeal (SAP Appeal)

ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION INFORMATION

You may be required to provide additional documentation to support your claim of extenuating circumstances. Check your Student Self Service TO-DO List for specific requirements.

The dates and information contained on the next page (Student SAP Appeal Confirmation, Receipt and Status page) will help you determine when to start checking your TO-DO list for possible additional documentation requirements.

Once you press this Submit button you will not be able to make changes to this appeal or submit another appeal for this same extenuating circumstance.

Choose Yes if you have updated your home campus, program plan, or other personal information as part of this process or within the last 48 hours, if you have not then leave the slider button set to No.

No

Cancel Back Submit

Appendix H: Research Informed Consent Form

MURRAY STATE UNIVERSITY
Doctorate of Education in P-20 and Community Leadership Program
Dissertation Project – fall 2019

Research Study: Explore Reasons for Academic Attrition Among Rural Community College Students, by way of Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) Appeals
Principal Investigator/Researcher: Cathy A. Vaughan

INFORMED CONSENT

You are invited to participate in a study to explore the reasons for lack of academic success (academic attrition) among rural community college students by way of Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) Appeals. The study is for adults, age 18 years or older and will involve participation in a focus group discussion. There are no risks or discomforts expected as a result of your participation, nor are there any direct benefits to you for participating. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in the focus group is *voluntary* – you do not have to take part if you do not want to.
If you do not take part, there is no consequence.
If any questions make you feel uncomfortable, you do not have to answer them.
You may leave the group at any time for any reason.

Costs
There are no costs to you as a participant of the focus group.

Risks
There are no risks involved in taking part in this study.

Benefits
There are no individual benefits for taking part in this research. The College hopes to learn, through your participation, ways to improve student academic success.

Privacy
- The discussion will be kept *strictly confidential*.
- Your name will not be used in any report that is published.
- Your responses will be coded, leaving you participation anonymous, and any publication or presentation with the results of the research will include only information about group performance.

- The other students in the focus group will be asked to keep what is discussed in the focus group private, but this cannot be assured.

Recording Permission

A video/audio recording will be used to assist the researcher in capturing details that are relevant to the study. All research data will be stored in a locked file cabinet. The recordings and data will be destroyed after five years from the date original data was collected.

I agree to be video recorded _____Yes _____No

Questions

You are encouraged to ask any questions that you might have about this study whether before, during, or after your participation. However, answers that could influence the outcome of the study will be deferred to the end of the focus group. Questions can be addressed to Cathy Vaughan (270)-584-3909 or (270)-824-1705.

I have been given the opportunity to ask any question I wish regarding this study
____Yes ____No

Please write your name below and check yes or no. If you want to take part please print your name below and sign your name at the bottom

PRINT YOUR NAME: _____

____ Yes, I am 18 years old or older and I would like to participate in the focus group.

_____ No, I would not like to participate in the focus group OR No, I am not 18 years old.

_____ I have been offered a copy of this consent form.

SIGNATURE: _____
DATE:_____