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## TRENDS IN STUDENT ATTRITION AT AN URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN THE SOUTHEAST REGION

Shirley Hardy

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**TRENDS IN STUDENT ATTRITION AT AN URBAN COMMUNITY  
COLLEGE IN THE SOUTHEAST REGION**

by

Shirley A. Hardy

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The College of Education and Human Services

Department of Educational Studies, Leadership, and Counseling

at Murray State University

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

P-20 & Community Leadership

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empathic words of understanding when needed. I will forever be grateful to Dr. Littlepage for staying the course and walking alongside me on this dissertation journey.

I hope my transparency will encourage someone to stay the course in their dissertation journey.

## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the understudied reasons for attrition among urban community college students by way of Satisfactory Academic Program (SAP) appeals. The researcher used a qualitative methodology to understand the challenges associated with the mitigating circumstances attributed to academic attrition resulting in SAP appeals. The foundation for this study was laid by two renowned student departure theories: the conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition and the theory of student persistence in commuter colleges and universities (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton et al., 2014). The researcher sought to gain further knowledge to identify environmental factors that cause nontraditional students to leave college before earning a degree or receiving a credential. Three broad categories of “challenges” emerged from coding the quantitative sample of 538 students receiving financial aid from fall 2016 through summer 2017. Academic, economic, personal, or a combination of two or more challenges significantly impacted students’ academic performance. A combination of personal and academic challenges contributed to the majority of SAP violations. The results of this study provide a better understanding of the support services and policies that are needed to increase retention rates and college completion for nontraditional community college students. In conclusion, the researcher found that the reasons for attrition in urban community college students, by way of SAP appeals, align with student retention models that identify external factors influencing the student’s ability to subsequently persist.

*Keywords:* academic challenges, attrition, 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

Institutions of higher education are under political and public scrutiny to provide a pathway to social mobility for a diverse student population by increasing their enrollment and degree completion rates. A demand on the higher education arena to increase retention has been heightened, and administrators at universities and colleges remain challenged with finding a sustainable mechanism to boost student retention. Over the years, there have been various researchers who have looked at different policies and practices at institutions of higher education to improve student retention. For over three decades, practitioners and scholars have theorized on how financial aid increases the odds of students completing their degrees (Hossler et al., 2009). The relationship of financial aid availability and student retention is well researched. However, limited research is available on why students lose financial aid and how the loss impacts retention at an urban community college.

Student financial stability is an important concern at community colleges around the country. Community college administrators are seeking to identify financial solutions that provide support for their student population. Over 11.8 million U.S. college students attend community colleges. U.S. college students are diverse compared to traditional 4-year students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020). Only a few states have responded to college students' growing need for financial support by providing tuition waivers and scholarships (Johnstone, 2017). State policies that address this growing concern oftentimes exclude the nontraditional student population. According to Pingel (2016), current policies are attuned to the financial challenges faced by high school students. However, policies may disenfranchise the nontraditional student population. Examples of policies that exclude non-traditional students include:

- eligibility is restricted by age – commonly barring student who are 26 years old or older from participating
- 24 of the policies define a specific cohort of students by limiting eligibility by high school graduation year
- Using eligibility criteria that impose standardized test scores and high school grade point average (GPA) thresholds

Nontraditional students seeking to begin or complete a postsecondary credential would inevitably be eliminated to participate in the program if any of the previously stated requirements existed in a proposed policy. Therefore, it is critical for research to be conducted that focuses on the efficacy of SAP policies. The identification and creation of institutional best practices that can be used to increase the persistence rates for students whose financial aid eligibility is suspended.

### **Background of the Problem**

The public education system is the mechanism the U.S. society uses to provide students from all social economic backgrounds with the opportunity for fulfilling the American dream (Kromydas, 2017). Community colleges have historically provided an open-door policy and have maintained their pledge to provide accessible education and employment opportunities to a diverse population of students. The community college has been and continues to be a powerful change agent that has created academic success for students who were considered “noncollege material.” On average, community college students are usually older, from lower socioeconomic households, attend part-time, hold a full or part-time job, and are more likely to be a first-generation college student (Ma & Baum, 2016).

Government, community, and business leaders all know how important it is for students to graduate, due to the positive impact it has on the economy. Former U.S. President Barack Obama recognized that community colleges provide a pathway to American's economic prosperity and educational opportunities. The Obama administration acknowledged the community college as being the solution for the United States in achieving its goal of producing the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020 (Heller, 2014).

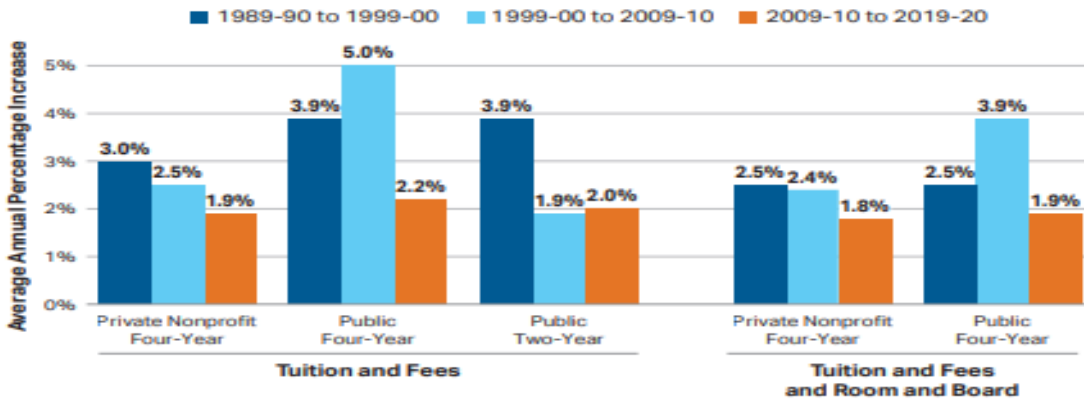
Fischer (2009), stated in his study "it's a truism of social policy that the best anti-poverty program is a job" (p. 1). Because more jobs require skilled laborers to have a 2-year or 4-year degree, it is important that people receive training and education beyond high school graduation. Today, three quarters of the fastest growing occupations require education and training beyond a high school diploma (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Fischer (2009) said, "Higher education is no longer a luxury for the privileged in the 21st century, it's a necessity for all individual's economic opportunity and America's competitiveness in the global economy" (p. 1).

### **Statement of Problem**

College students and their families are challenged with the dilemma of how they will pay tuition and other expenses that accompany enrollment at an institution of higher education. Figure 1 describes the in-state tuition and fees at public 2-year institutions increased at an average rate of 2.0% per year beyond inflation between 2009-10 and 2019-20 (College Board, 2019).

**Figure 1**

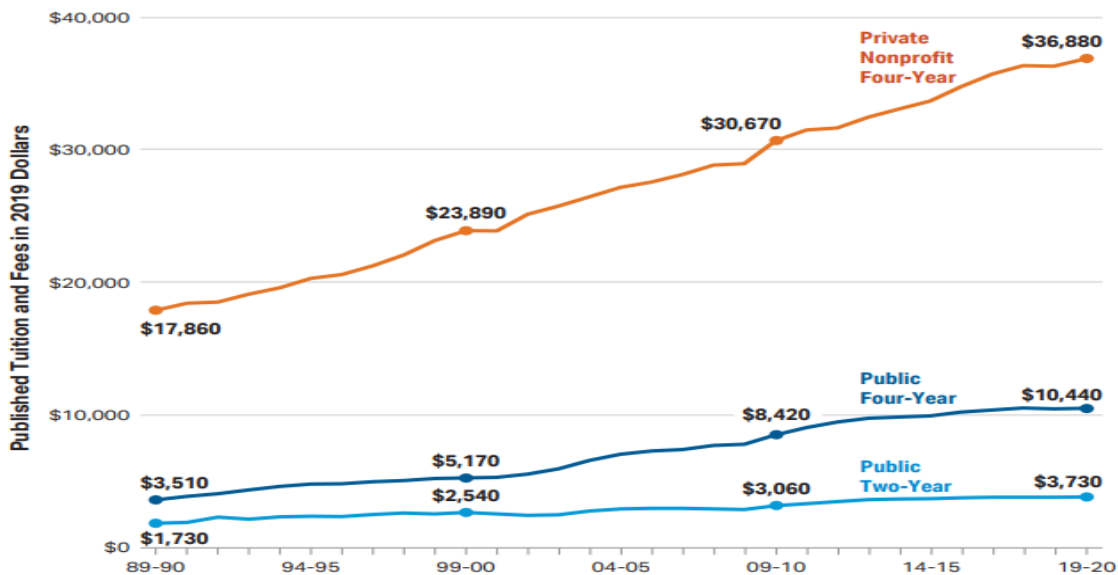
*Average Annual Percentage Increase in Inflation-Adjusted Published Prices by Decade, 1989-90 to 2019-20*



*Note.* Reprinted from *Trends in Student Aid* [Annual Report], by College Board, 2019, (<https://research.collegeboard.org/pdf/trends-student-aid-2019-full-report.pdf>). In the public domain.

**Figure 2**

*Average Published and Net Prices in 2019 Dollars, Full-Time In-State Undergraduate Students at Public and Private Institutions, 1999-00 to 2019-20*



*Note.* Reprinted from *Trends in Student Aid* [Annual Report], by College Board, 2019, (<https://research.collegeboard.org/pdf/trends-student-aid-2019-full-report.pdf>). In the public domain.

Figure 2 illustrates the average published tuition and fees between 2009-10 and 2019-20, rose by \$670 at public 2-year institutions. Students and families who would have been able to finance college education out of savings and current income 40 or 50 years ago are relying more on financial aid to pay tuition and fees (Baum, 2018). Affordability, access, and quality at public 2-year and 4-year colleges, have been threatened by long-term cuts to per-student higher education funding. Administrators at institutions of higher education are concerned about the financial health of their students and they are aware of the impact that it has on attrition (Mitchell et al., 2019).

Societal gains and personal benefits are achieved when students earn a college degree, despite the overarching challenge of paying tuition and other expenses that accompany enrollment at institutions of higher education (Mitchell et al., 2019). Community colleges have the highest proportion of undergraduate students of any institution type. Community colleges enroll 41% of all undergraduates in the United States, according to the American Association of Community Colleges (2020). However, of the 78.6% of the incoming community college students who express a desire to complete a degree or transfer to a 4-year university (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016), only 19.5% earn a certificate or an associate degree from the same institution in 150% of the normal time (Ma & Baum, 2016).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore reasons for early student departure at urban community colleges. The researcher explored reasons for student departure at an urban 2-year



institution in the southeast region by broadening the understanding for retention-related issues in an urban community college setting. By analyzing self-reported student data obtained through the satisfactory academic appeal process, this study helped identify circumstances that can lead to student departure.

The results of this study could be significant for providing administrators and state policy-makers with information that can enable them to enhance student services and create new policies that support the community college student population. The researcher believes new programs and initiatives can be created to potentially improve student success through the unique approach of analyzing self-reported student data obtained through the satisfactory appeals process. The information obtained from this study can provide a better understanding of student issues that contribute to early departure. Analyzing self-reported student data obtained from the satisfactory academic appeals process provides the basis for this study to contribute to the current body of literature.

### **Societal Value of a Postsecondary Education Credential**

The acquisition of a college degree provides opportunities what otherwise would not be available to individuals without a degree (Ma et al., 2016). Employers are only interested in holders of specific degrees and certifications. According to Ma & Baum (2016), higher levels of education correspond with increased access for health care and retirement plans; educated people engage in healthier behaviors, they tend to be actively engaged citizens, and are positioned to provide their children with better opportunities. A college degree makes our economy efficient, improves people's lives, and it contributes to an equitable society by providing individuals with means to rise above the socioeconomic status of their parents and the lower economic rungs in

which they were born. The acquisition of a college degree produces intangible benefits in addition to earning a higher salary. The degree fosters:

- career malleability and job retention,
- active, meaningful citizens with successful lives, and
- educates citizens on how to make informed choices for themselves and their families.

Nationally, public community college enrollment in 2017 was slightly higher than it was in 2007—before the impact of the recession (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2018). The trends for all 50 states revealed community college enrollment rates in seven states were lower in fall 2017 than reported in 2007. Kentucky was one of the states that saw a decline in enrollment (26% decrease) from 2007 to 2017. According to the NCES (2019), enrollment decreased by 23% at 2-year institutions (from 7.7 million to 5.9 million students) and increased by 4% at 4-year institutions (from 10.4 million to 10.8 million students) between 2010 and 2017. The shift in enrollment patterns for 2-year and 4-year institutions between 2010 and 2017 was affected by 2-year institutions' starting to offer 4-year programs, which caused their classification to change. Some 617,000 undergraduate students were enrolled in 4-year institutions that were classified as 2-year institutions in 2010 and 2017. Between 2017 and 2028, enrollment in 2-year institutions is projected to increase by 3% (from 5.9 million to 6.1 million students), and undergraduate enrollment in 4-year institutions is projected to increase by 2% (from 10.8 to 11.1 million students).

Despite the national push for increased college enrollment, the number of students enrolling in community college has seen a decline, forcing practitioners and scholars to explore the reasons for early departure (Juszkiewicz, 2014; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). Like other institutions of higher education, community colleges also struggle to

engage faculty and administrators in building a campus culture of retention efforts and best practices (Spittle, 2013). Therefore, numerous studies, projects and organizations are being launched by the College Completion Agenda to explore the reasons why students enrolled in community colleges are retained until completion (Braxton et al., 2015; O'Banion, 2010; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Perna, 2016; Smith & Bowyer, 2016; Welch, 2015). Students are continuing to drop out of college, despite having the widespread knowledge of understanding the importance of obtaining a college degree or certification (Nakajima et al., 2012). Nearly half of U.S. university and college students drop out before obtaining a degree, and a common obstacle for many students is inadequate finances (Waldron, 2012).

Establishing educational pathways for potential college students that come from low-income minority households will increase their postsecondary participation rate (Bourke et al., 2019). Society benefits from the education that U.S. community colleges provide through the income students create and by the savings that is generated from their improved lifestyles (Economic Modeling Specialists Intl., 2014). Obtaining a college degree increases the likelihood that adults will move up the socioeconomic ladder and it reduces the chance that adults will rely on public assistance (Ma et al., 2016). The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017) reported that individuals who obtain some college, but do not complete a degree, have median weekly earnings of \$756 with a 4.4% unemployment rate. Meanwhile, the completion of an associate degree increases weekly earnings to \$819 with a 3.6% unemployment rate.

The surge of society's dependence on technological innovation has drastically changed over the past few decades, causing the demand for a skilled labor force to increase. Less money is being invested in higher education by state government, while the U.S. economy is increasing their demands for highly educated, technical, and skilled workers. The United States is

experiencing a significant gap in skilled workers due to baby-boomers retiring and leaving the workforce. Therefore, it is imperative that funding and student services are available to support students until graduation. Establishing and maintaining sustainable services and funding will be vital for developing and growing a pool of educated individuals that can enter the labor force and replace retiring baby boomers. The decrease in skilled workers has placed an enormous obligation on institutions of higher education to produce graduates that are workforce ready. Obtaining and maintaining financial aid is essential for community college students because it has the potential to help them persist in fulfilling the goal of college completion.

### **Challenges Community College Students Encounter**

According to Goldrick-Rab (2010), students who enroll in a community college typically do not persist for longer than a semester, complete a program, or attain a credential. Fewer than 40% of community college students earn a certificate or degree in six years of enrollment (Bailey et al., 2015). The community college continues to adhere to the mission of having an open-door admission policy, which predominately benefits nontraditional-aged students. Nontraditional-aged students continue to face the dilemma of how they will fund their educational endeavors until completion.

Community college students are impacted by a plethora of challenges. These challenges range from balancing work, family, and school to obtaining academic support services and sustaining financial assistance. In the Fall 2017 and Fall 2018, Porter and Umbach (2019) conducted a Revealing Institutional Strengths and Challenges (RISC) Survey at 10 community colleges. They surveyed 50,097 community college students with an average institutional response rate of 19%. The RISC study asked the students about the challenges they faced during the surveyed semesters. The five broad areas included:

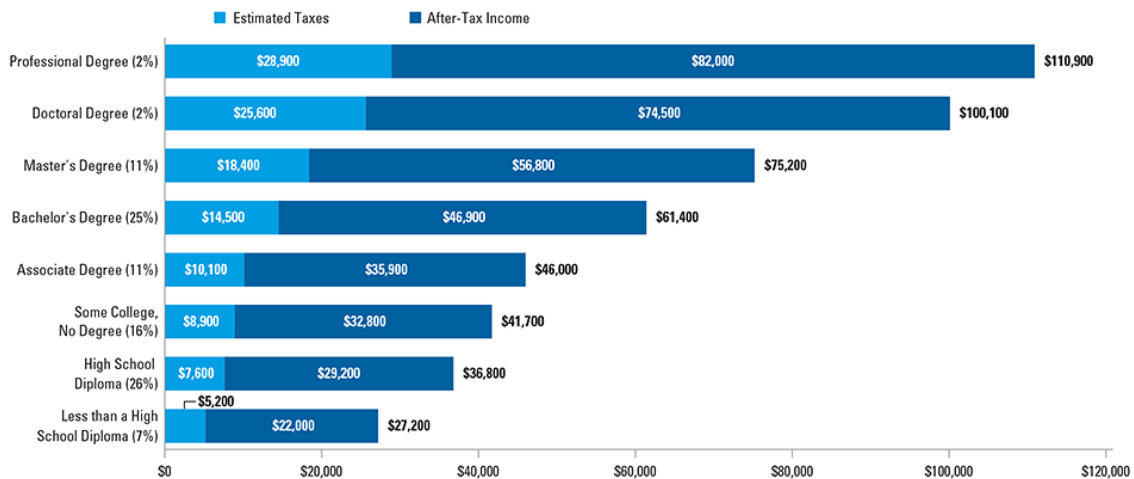
1. Academic support services
2. Campus environment
3. Finances and financial aid
4. Succeeding in their courses
5. Work and personal issues

Over 70% of the students reported that paying living expenses was an obstacle to their success, 55% reported they had trouble paying tuition and fees, 58% reported they had difficulty covering the cost of books, software, and other school supplies. Three quarters of those surveyed reported difficulty balancing the demands of family and school, and approximately one third reported they struggled with the health demands of family and friends. Over 15% of the students surveyed reported that in addition to juggling work and family, health and disabilities also created obstacles to their student success. Half (59%) of those students indicated they were challenged by an emotional or mental health issue, and more than half (54%) reported they had a physical health issues that impacted their success in college.

Administrators at community colleges are faced with the challenge of how to educate students who have competing demands for their time and financial resources. Therefore, it is imperative that legislators and community college administrators create programs and policies that will assist students who's funding to remain in college is detrimentally impacted by the loss or interruption of their financial aid. According to research conducted by the College Board (2016), individuals who earned an associate degree had higher salary earnings and paid more in taxes in comparison to those individuals who only had a high school education (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

*Median Earnings and Tax Payments of Full-Time Year-Round Workers Age 25 and Older, by Education Level, 2015*



*Note.* Reprinted from *Trends in Student Aid* [Annual Report], by College Board, 2019, (<https://research.collegeboard.org/pdf/trends-student-aid-2019-full-report.pdf>). In the public domain.

### Research Question

The current study used a qualitative methodology, specifically a phenomenological design to analyze written SAP appeals in order to answer the following research question:

What circumstances contribute to attrition among students at an urban community college?

### Definitions of Terms

The following definitions apply to this research:

**Associate Degree.** An undergraduate academic degree granted after completion of two years of study. Community colleges and career colleges generally award associate degrees.

**Attrition.** Attrition is the departure of a student from an institution of higher education before completion of a degree, diploma, or certificate (Johnson, 2012).

**Community College.** An institution of higher education that is regionally accredited and awards the associate degree as the highest educational credential (Vaughan, 2000).

**Expected Family Contribution (EFC).** The EFC is calculated by a formula mandated by the U.S. Congress that takes into consideration the family's size, number of college students in the household, taxed and untaxed household income, other assets, and government benefits. The EFC is used to determine a student's cost of college attendance, eligibility for financial assistance programs, and the amount of Federal Pell Grant money a student may receive per academic year (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

**Federal Pell Grant.** Pell Grants are usually awarded only to undergraduate students who display exceptional financial need and have not earned a bachelor's, graduate, or professional degree (Dortch, 2018).

**Financial Aid Award.** A financial aid award refers to an offer of financial or in-kind assistance to a student attending a postsecondary institution (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The financial aid award may include the yearly amount a student will receive from the Federal Pell Grant, FSEOG, FWS, federal loans, state grants, institutional scholarships, and any outside third-party awards.

**Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).** FAFSA is a form required by the U.S. Department of Education to determine the student's EFC to be considered for any federal education aid. Many colleges also use the information results from the FAFSA to determine the awarding of other grants or scholarships to students. New versions of FAFSA are available

annually on January 1 on the federal government website: <http://www.fafsa.gov> (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

**Financial Aid Office.** The office at a college or career school that is responsible for preparing and communicating information on financial aid. This office helps students apply for and receive student loans, grants, scholarships, and other types of financial aid.

**Maximum Time Frame (MTF).** 150% of required hours for program completion. Students are expected to complete their degree/diploma/certificate credentials within MTF of 150% of the required number of credit hours to graduate from their enrolled program of study (U. S. Department of Education, n.d.).

**Need-based Financial Aid.** Need-based financial aid is a type of assistance offered to students in the form of grants or loans based solely on the student's need as determined by the FAFSA and is not exceed the amount of the financial need (U. S. Department of Education, n.d.).

**Nontraditional Student.** Students meeting at least one of the following conditions are considered to be nontraditional: older than 24 years, commuter, or enrolled part time (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

**Persistence:** Persistence refers to the continuous enrollment from on academic year to the next without interruption (Cuseo, 2014).

**Retention.** Retention is a measure of the rate at which student persist in an educational program at an institution, expressed in a percentage. Although the number can be derived from any cohort, it typically applies to first-time, full-time traditional day students. According to the Integrated Postsecondary Education System (IPEDS), which is the primary source of retention information for the nation, community college retention can be defined as the percentage of first-time students who either reenroll in a degree program after the previous fall semester or



successfully complete a program by the current fall semester (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

**Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP).** Students need to make satisfactory academic progress to continue receiving federal student aid. Students must make good grades, and complete enough classes (e.g., credits, hours), to keep moving toward successfully completing their degree or certificate in a time period that is acceptable to their school. Each school has a satisfactory academic progress policy for financial aid purposes (U. S. Department of Education, n.d.).

**Title IV Funding.** Federal student aid funds administered through the U.S. Department of Education. The funding is obtained through the completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. These funds are paid to the students through Pell grants, Federal Supplemental Education Opportunity Grants (SEOG), work study, and federal student loans. The student and the institution both must meet and the guidelines to be eligible for the funding (Deming et al., 2012).

**Unmet Need.** The difference between the cost of attending a particular institution and the total financial resources available to the student (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

## **Summary**

The accessibility of financial aid has a significant influence on the decision students will make to enroll and persist in higher education. Additional research is needed to support and create government policies and institutional programs that increase the persistence rates among students whose eligibility is lost after failing to maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress. Therefore, the study is significant because the findings offer a framework for college administrators, government, community, and business leaders to rewrite financial aid policies

and procedures for the community college population that will support student retention to program completion.

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the problem and the study. The chapter also outlined factors that contribute to student retention at an urban community college. Chapter 2 reviews research studies on the topic of student retention/persistence at the community college level by specifically looking at Title IV funding by way of Satisfactory Academic Progress. Chapter 3 outlines the overall methodology employed in the current study. Chapter 4 includes the analysis of results and data collected. In Chapter 5, the implications of the results concerning policy and practice along with suggestions for further research are discussed.

## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

Over 19 million U.S. residents enrolled in college in 2018, and more than half of the undergraduate students choose community colleges over 4-year universities (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). Although community college tuition rates are low in comparison to 4-year intuitions, the number of students completing a degree is still low, which suggests there are a host of factors that continue to hinder degree completion (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2015; Norwood, 2016; Swanson et al., 2016; Vaysberg & Fagan, 2015; Williams, 2017). Despite the efforts made to reduce attrition, it largely remains an unsolved problem for community colleges. Low cost institutions of higher education such as community colleges, typically attract disadvantaged students who are not prepared academically, socially, and financially (McKinney et al., 2015). Therefore, the primary strategy for reducing attrition at community colleges is the early identification of students at risk of early departure and the development of interventions and support services.

As previously noted, additional research is needed to better address the retention efforts at community colleges. In this literature review, a brief overview of community colleges will be provided, and the economic benefits of obtaining a 2-year degree are stated. The overview also includes the conceptual framework for the study.

### **Economic and Social Benefits of the Community College Education**

Community colleges have played a vital role in our society because they serve a diverse student population with diverse goals and environmental circumstances. The community college serves as a pathway to 4-year institutions and provides skilled workers for a wide range of business and industry sectors (Economic Modeling Specialists Intl., 2014). A growing urgency

exists among state and federal policymakers, business and civic leaders, and national philanthropic organizations for U.S. residents to obtain postsecondary credentials (Price et al., 2014). Persons who obtain training certifications or a degree, outperform their peers who only have a high school diploma or less in career opportunities, job satisfaction, personal earnings, and full-time employment. Acquiring professional certifications and licenses has become important for promoting employment pipelines in occupations such as healthcare, law and project management (AACCC, 2018).

In response to the impending gap in the U.S. workforce, more than half of the states have adopted goals to increase postsecondary completion rates (Pingel et al., 2016). The Lumina Foundation has responded by calling for 60% of U.S. residents to hold a college credential by the year 2025 (Lumina Foundation, 2018). The need to fulfill an educated workforce that is required for the 21st century economy will not be fulfilled by traditionally aged high school and college students alone. To produce the additional postsecondary credentials, states must enroll and retain students that are 25 or older. It is vital that students who attend community college persist because the benefits far outweigh the personal achievement of graduation; it also creates economic wealth in the community. The stakes are higher for community colleges to identify and ameliorate attrition for their students, “the choice is not between the community college and a senior residential institution; it is between the community college and nothing” (Cohen & Brawer, 2008, p. 58).

### **Community College Mission**

The mission of the community college is to provide a diverse population of students open access to a postsecondary institution committed to the transfer of credits to a 4-year institution or workforce placement. Therefore, through open access, community colleges continue to afford

students educational opportunities without discrimination based on academic preparedness, race, sex, or socioeconomic status. Although community colleges have faced challenges, it has experienced enormous growth and taken on its own unique and significant role in becoming an essential component of the U.S. higher education system (AACC, 2013; Schneider & Yin, 2011; Townsend & Bragg, 2006).

Community colleges in the U.S. are charged with serving a diverse population of students. Colleges are tasked with helping students achieve their individual potential through developing the skills they need to obtain a prosperous career by providing an environment that improves self-confidence and promotes mental health (Economic Modeling Specialists Intl., 2014). These social and employment-related skills have a positive impact on the well-being and health of these students by providing support services that lead to educational and socioeconomic attainment. An open admission policy, low tuition, and convenient location has made community colleges a practical pathway to postsecondary education for first-generation students and adults returning to school to obtain credentials or additional training (Ma & Baum, 2016). Community colleges will have to increase the cost of tuition to successfully maintain their mission of fulfilling the diverse needs of employers, the community and students. Increasing tuition will impact the number of students who depend on financial aid to pay their college tuition. Financial aid continues to be a vital resource that provides students with the funding to pay for their education at U.S. community colleges.

Community colleges serve as the entry point to higher education and offer the only opportunity for a college education for many students. In 2017, about 5.6 million students were enrolled in community colleges across the United States (Juskiewicz, 2017). Community colleges have expanded their mission over the years to include short-term training programs

designed to serve the interests of local business, courses to enhance the skills of adults, programs to allow high school dropouts to obtain a high school equivalency degree (a GED), and programs intended for recent high school graduates interested in gaining skills for a job or preparing for further education (Clotfelter et al., 2013). College administrators need to identify support services that are necessary to address the correlation between financial aid and student retention to ensure students persist and graduate. College administrators need to work with government officials to create policies and programs that provide community college students with the financial aid they need to succeed.

### **Community College History**

The community college in the United States, originally called junior colleges or 2-year colleges, have roots that date back to the Morrill Act of 1862 (the Land Grant Act), which essentially expanded access into public higher education (Drury, 2003). The second Morrill Act (1890) withheld funding from colleges that refused to admit students based on race, unless the state provided separate institutions for minorities. The Morrill Act of 1862 and the second Morrill Act of 1890 provided the foundational base on which later federal aid to higher education would rest. These moves in the nineteenth century by the federal government were the most important acts in the field of higher education (Vaughan, 1985).

In 1901, the first junior college was founded in the United States. Stanley Brown and William Rainey Harper, president of the University of Chicago, were the major force behind its creation (Drury, 2003). In 1892 Harper divided the University of Chicago into a “junior college” and a “senior college,” and introduced the associate degree for graduates of the junior division. The design of this degree program was a means used to prevent, all but the truly gifted from entering the senior division, relegating the lower division to junior colleges (Cohen & Brawer,

2008). Today's community college is quite different from the junior college as envisioned by Harper; thus, he is still viewed by many as the "spiritual father" of the movement (Vaughan, 1985).

California passed legislation in 1907, known as the Caminetti Bill, to authorize the network of local junior colleges, and in 1921, they passed legislation that provided junior colleges with their own boards, budgets, and operating procedures (Vaughan, 1985). Many states later developed their legislation after the California legislative model. The American Association of Junior Colleges (AAJC) was formed in 1920 from a meeting that was called by the U.S. commissioner of education that was coordinated by George F. Zook, specialist in higher education for the U.S. Bureau of Education. The association's name was changed to the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges in 1972 to reflect its membership more accurately.

The junior college was defined as an academic organization in 1922, "offering two years of instruction of a strictly collegiate grade" (Beach, 2011, p. 48). Three years later, the term junior college was redefined to include "the larger and ever changing civic, social, religious, and vocational needs of the entire community" (p. 47). As junior colleges were developed, educational leaders began to unite with the junior college movement. Beach (2011) describes these leaders as political and educational reformist who believed in a "White Anglo-Saxon middle class meritocracy that reinforced the capitalist system" (p. 47). During this period, funding was commonly structured like high schools, whereas some states used their oil revenue and reallocated it to the junior college (Deegan & Tillery, 1985).

Junior colleges began to move away from high school programs to become their own recognized constituency (Beach, 2011). Junior college began to form governing boards that were

elected by local citizens with some appointments being made by local and state government officials. These boards were later referred to as the Board of Trustees. The trustees were tasked with moving the junior college forward, and they had the authority to hire and terminate faculty and staff, accept and deny programs, and establish policies that governed the junior college. The junior colleges began to see an increase in enrollment, and a decrease in state funding.

During the Great Depression and World War II, junior colleges responded to economy change by being able to quickly produce first-rate skilled workers (Beach 2011; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Deegan & Tillery, 1985; Townsend & Bragg, 2006). The demand for first-rate skilled workers in the job force continued to increase and it led to the creation of vocational training programs that created employment opportunities. The Servicemen Readjustment Act was created to provide financial assistance for veterans to resume or acquire their education (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). This was the first financial aid package that reimbursed people for their tuition and living expenses while attending college. This GI Bill of Rights passed Congress in 1944 and it had a tremendous impact on society. The GI Bill broke the social and economic barriers by providing the basis for a later commitment on the part of the federal government that no one should be denied access to higher education because of financial need (Vaughan, 1985).

The Higher Education Commission was appointed by President Harry Truman and led by George F. Zook in 1947, and it provided further support for the community college movement. The Commission members were tasked with examining “the function of higher education in our democracy” (Hutcheson, 2007, p. 107). Three key areas of improvement were identified: (a) improved college access and equity, (b) affordability, and (c) expansion of the role of the community college (Hutcheson, 2007). The Commission “realized that the cost of college, even in 1947, was a barrier to many students” (Gilbert & Heller, 2010, p. 1). Therefore, the



commission's actions were driven by their belief that "it was time for the federal government to play a more prominent role in higher education and provide a large amount of the financial assistance to help level the playing field for access" (Gilbert & Heller, 2010, p. 1).

During the years of 1950 and 1970, a great deal of attention was focused on the progression of the community college due to a lack of understanding about its conversion from the junior college (Deegan & Tillery, 1985). The community college had its own uniqueness that included a diverse population (i.e., leaders, students, and faculty), and governing priorities that differed from the junior college. It was during this period the community college separated itself from the public-school system and became known as a recognizable institution in the higher education system.

Bogue known as the Postwar Spokesman for the community college comes on the scene (Vaughan, 1985). Bogue was the former president of Green Mountain Junior College in Vermont, and he served as the executive secretary of the AAJC from 1946 to 1958. In 1950, Bogue published the *Community College*, and it was viewed as a noteworthy statement on the beginning of the modern community college. Jesse Bogue was responsible for validating the transfer and vocational mission of what he termed the community junior college. Bogue added a third function of continuing education to offer students an opportunity to obtain a part-time education (Townsend & Bragg, 2006). Bogue went on to extend the comprehensive mission of the community college to include continuing education and community services along with remedial and development education. During the 1960s, the community college started its grown period, and the community college had a firm understanding of its mission and the role it played in higher education (Vaughan, 1985). Bogue's leadership was a key factor in the development of the community college during the postwar years.

The Carnegie Commission for Higher Education that highlighted the importance of the community college in the higher education system. In 1970, the commission advocated for the continued development and growth of the community college by way of enhanced federal assistance, to ensure community colleges had the necessary resources to provide open access to all individual regardless of social class (Deegan & Tillery, 1985; Townsend & Bragg, 2006). The Commission made open access was an obligation. The community college was transformed by their mission to recruit, enroll, and retain every possible student in its community (Roueche et al., 1971). The outcome of this mission cleared an entry into higher education for “new students” who came from the lower quartile of their high school graduating class, and from the lower socioeconomic segments of society (Vaughan, 1985). Access through this “open door” became the hallmark of the community college, and among the new students were members of minority groups and women. The work with these students is one of the most significant contributions of the community college. The federal government made a commitment to make higher education accessible for persons in the lower socioeconomic groups through the Higher Education Act of 1965 and continuing with the Higher Education Amendments of 1972. The community college experienced steady growth in numbers and size.

### **Retention Among Community College Students**

The annual persistence rate at 2-year public institutions for students who started college in the fall 2016 was 62.2%, which is down 0.5% from the prior year (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). The persistence rate for students who entered a 2-year college in the fall 2016 on a full-time basis was 70.6%, compared to 55.6% for those who entered college on a part-time basis. During the Fall 2016 semester, 48.9% of students who started college at a 2-year public institution returned to the same institution in the fall 2017

semester. Among students who entered a 2-year public institution during the fall 2016 semester, Asians has the highest 1-year persistence rate at 74.1%, White students at 67.6%, Hispanic students at 62.7% and Black students having the lowest rate at 56.0%. The data reflects the fact that during the Fall 2016 semester White students had the highest rate (17.4%) of transferring to a 4-year institution by their second fall term, Asian students at 16.8%, Black students at 13.9%, whereas Hispanic students had the lowest rate of 9.7% for transferring to a 4-year institution.

According to the NCES (2016), nontraditional students or adult learners, are the new majority in any sector of higher education. These students face different issues in comparison to their traditional counterparts and hold the responsibility of balancing families and jobs (MacDonald, 2018). Nontraditional students report they experience low self-esteem, have various anxieties related to attending classes with younger students, and endure guilt over missing family events. A significant issue for the nontraditional student is time management as they struggle to find a balance between maintaining family and financial obligations while still performing well in school.

### **Financial Aid**

Every year, families seeking federal aid for college, complete a detailed questionnaire on their finances, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FASFA). Completion of the FASFA is required for all federal grants and loans. Demographics (e.g., name, social security number, citizenship, date of birth) and detailed information about the student's and parents' income, assets, and expenditures are collected by the FASFA. The FASFA is then submitted to the U.S. Department of Education, and that information is used to compute the expected family contribution (EFC), an estimate of how much the family can afford to contribute toward college expenses. The determination of "need" is then calculated. Need is determined by the difference

between the cost of attendance (i.e., tuition, fees, books, and living expenses) and the EFC. Institutions of higher education use the EFC information to personalize a financial aid packet (i.e., grants and loans) for each student. Need-based financial aid was created to offset the challenges faced by low-income students by alleviating financial constraints and reducing socioeconomic gaps in college outcomes (Schudde & Scott-Clayton, 2016).

**Table 1**

*Number of Recipients in Federal Aid Program With Average Aid Received, 2018-2019*

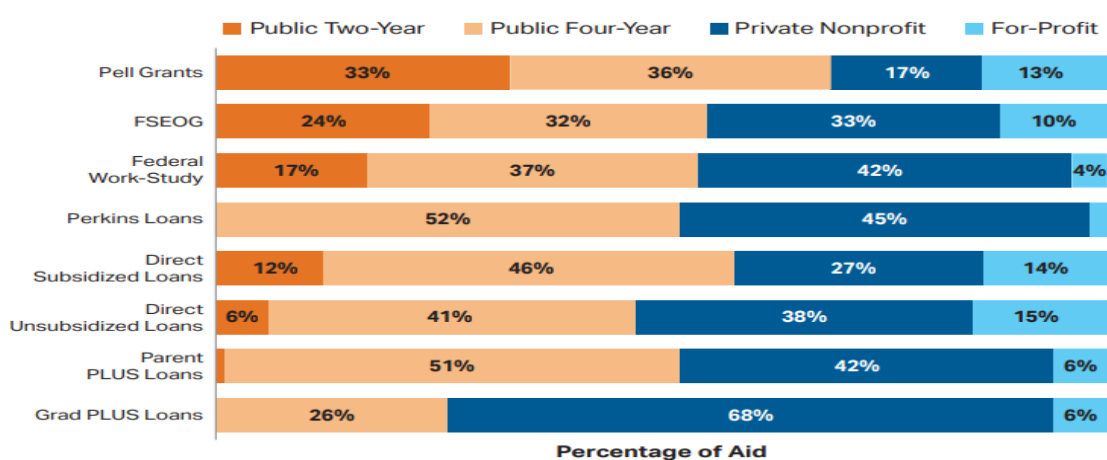
Federal aid program	Average aid per recipient	Number of recipients in millions
Federal Education Tax Benefits	\$1,520	10.7
Federal Pell Grant	\$4,160	6.8
Direct Subsidized Loans	\$3,910	5.2
Direct Unsubsidized Loans	\$7,490	6.5
Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (FSEOG)	\$500	1.5
Federal Work Study	\$1,650	613,000
Post/9-11 GI Bill Veterans Benefits	\$15,990	699,000

Student financial aid awards consist of grants, student loans, scholarship, and work-study (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The basic eligibility requirements for students to receive financial aid requires the student to demonstration a financial need, be a U.S. citizen or an eligible noncitizen, have a valid social security number, be enrolled or accepted for enrollment as

a regular student in an eligible degree or certificate program, be enrolled at least half-time, maintain satisfactory academic progress in college or career school, and sign the certification statement on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FASFA) stating that you meet defined qualifications. Table 1 provides a detailed description of the number recipients and the amount of financial aid awarded for 2018-19. College students at public 2-year institutions made up 32% of the full-time equivalent (FTE) undergraduate enrollment, and received 33% of Pell Grant fund in 2017-18, see Figure 4.

**Figure 4**

*Percentage Distribution of Federal Aid Funds by Sector, 2017-18*



*Note.* Reprinted from *Trends in Student Aid* [Annual Report], by College Board, 2019, (<https://research.collegeboard.org/pdf/trends-student-aid-2019-full-report.pdf>). In the public domain.

### **Impact of Financial Aid on Retention**

College success is defined as persisting in an academic program of study and obtaining a credential at an institution of higher education which is vital in competing in the 21st century job market (AACC, 2016). Yet obtaining a degree or certification seems unattainable for many U.S. residents due to financial need and the increasing cost of higher education (Chaplot et al., 2015).

A major obstacle to degree attainment for many students is insufficient finances, almost half of U.S. college and university students drop out before receiving a degree (Waldron, 2012). The cost of not retaining students is significant. When students are not retained in programs, it is typical for their seats to remain empty for the duration of the program, which ultimately decreases the number of graduating professionals entering the workforce (Gillis, 2007). Thus, the economy is negatively affected by students who do not graduate. Financial aid is an essential component that enables students to achieve their educational goal of receiving a college degree or credential. In comparison to other studies on retention, there has been a limited amount of research conducted that investigates how the loss of financial aid impacts the nontraditional student's ability to maintain their enrollment in college.

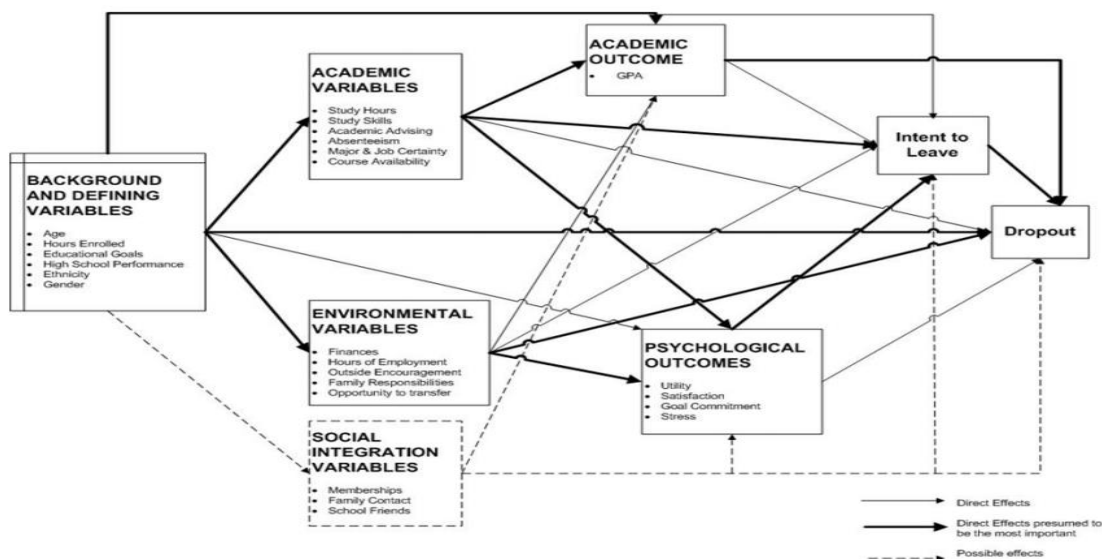
### **Conceptual Framework**

Historically, higher education research has been focused on the traditional student (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Drawing from various theoretical perspectives, researchers have developed multiple theoretical models to explain or predict student retention (Yu, 2017). Because early student departure at community colleges continues to garner increased attention in higher education, this literature review serves as a basis to determine what factors contribute to early departure for community college students. Therefore, the researcher will introduce student success theories associated with commuter and community college students as well as circumstances impacting the retention of this student population.

There have been various conceptual frameworks developed to examine attrition and retention in higher education. Several of these frameworks address attrition and retention as it relates to the faculty and campus involvement in the institution. Investigating why students lose their financial aid for failure to meet the SAP guidelines is important to understand, due to the

proportion of students who are eligible to use financial aid programs. There is still a great deal to learn about how environmental variables impact attrition rates. A better understanding may reveal valuable information that will guide administrators and policymakers in meeting the needs of the student population that attend community colleges.

The notion of external environmental variables outlined in Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition is one of the frameworks undergirding this study (see Figure 5). The external environmental variables are finances, hours of employment, outside encouragement, family responsibility and opportunity to transfer. Of major importance to this study is Bean and Metzner's (1985) notion of finances being one of the environmental variables that impacts nontraditional students continued enrollment in college. Bean and Metzner (1985) suggested that nontraditional students are more affected by the external environment than by the social integration variables affecting traditional student attrition. Studies have shown when academic and environmental variables are both good, students should remain in school; and when environmental support is good and academic support is poor, students would be expected to remain enrolled due to the environmental support compensating for low scores on the academic variables. According to this conceptual framework, maintaining the presence of environmental support is necessary for nontraditional students' persistence to graduation.

**Figure 5***Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition*

*Note.* Reprinted from “A Conceptual Mode Of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition,” by J. P. Bean, & B. S. Metzner, 1985, *Review of Educational Research*, 55(4), 485–540 (<https://doi.org/10.2307/1170245>).

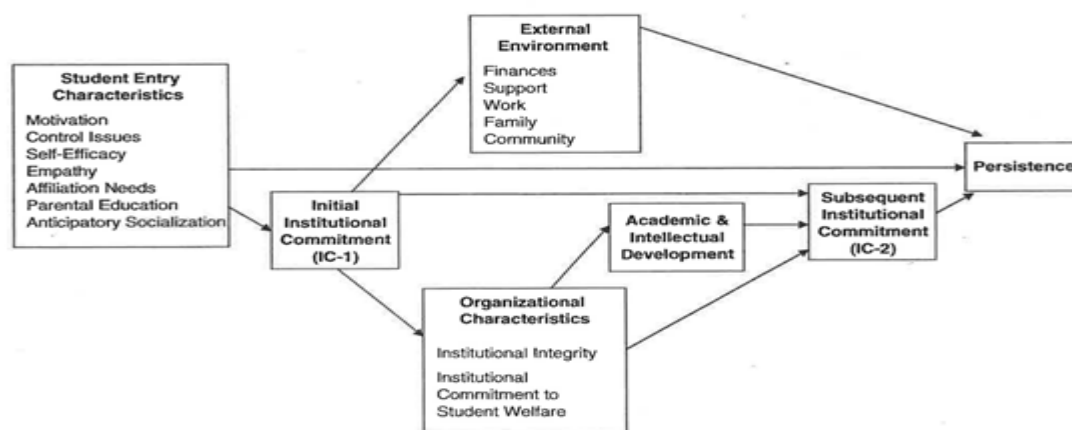
The second framework undergirding this study is the theory of student persistence in commuter colleges and universities constructed by Braxton et al. (2014). Their revised theory on student departure in commuter colleges includes student entry characteristics, the external environment, student academic and intellectual development, subsequent institutional commitment, and student persistent in the college or university (see Figure 6). The external environment includes finances, support, work, family, and community. According to Braxton et al. (2014) commuter students frequently have additional obligations outside of attending college and the conflicts between the commitment of attending college and work may negatively impact the family. Thus, students who are aware of the negative effects their college attendance has on



their family may depart college. When the financial cost of attending college is decreased, the negative effects on families due to work while attending college is diminished. When the financial cost to attend college is minimized, support and encouragement from significant others rises and the likelihood of the student's persistence increases. This conceptual framework also supports the presence of environment support increases persistence to graduation.

**Figure 6**

*Theory of Student Persistence in Commuter Colleges and Universities`*



*Note.* Reprinted from *Rethinking College Student Retention*, by J. M. Braxton, W. R. Doyle, H. V. Hartley III, A. S. Hirschy, W. A. Jones, & M. K. McLendon, 2014, John Wiley & Sons.

### **Major Student Attrition and Retention Models and Theories**

Over the past 4 decades, the key concern for educators and administrators in higher education has been the retention of college and university students (Kerby, 2015). Theoretical models designed to predict whether students will persist or not have been valuable tools for retention efforts relative to the creation of student services, academic and student affairs.

Student persistence is another term used interchangeably. However, it is generally used to define a students' continued enrollment from Year 2 until graduation. It is important to understand student success at community colleges deserves focused attention as these students

are known to have high drop-out rates (Bailey et al., 2015) and the dominant attrition theories and models were not developed with this population in mind (Hirschy et al., 2011).

One of the primary differences between the attrition process of traditional and nontraditional students is that nontraditional students are more affected by the external environment than by the social integration variable affecting traditional student attrition (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Although we know a good deal about the impact of financial aid on persistence, we know relatively little about the impact of aid on graduation (Hossler et al., 2009). The primary interest of policymakers is to understand the impact of financial aid on the probabilities that aspiring students, regardless of income, will matriculate and graduate from a postsecondary educational institution.

Although a good deal is known about the impact of financial aid on persistence, relatively little is known about the impact of aid on graduation (Hossler et al., 2009). The primary interest of policymakers is to understand the impact of financial aid on the probabilities that aspiring students, regardless of income, will matriculate and graduate from a postsecondary educational institution. Trying to determine the high rates of attrition has been ongoing for several decades; early research by Clark (1960) found that more than 40% of community college freshmen did not complete their educational objectives or did not return their second year. The student attrition phenomenon was often explained in terms of the students' attributes, personal traits, and deficiencies (Aljohani, 2016; Berger et al., 2012; Habley et al., 2012; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1993, 2006).

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

Tinto (1975) used a synthesis of research at four-year institutions to develop a theoretical model to describe the reasons students fail to complete their college degree. Tinto (1988) then

began to look at the longitudinal view of the interactive processes that lead to a student's voluntary departure before obtaining a degree. Tinto's theory of institutional departure was developed in the sociological/interactional framework (Chen & DesJardins, 2010; Fike & Fike, 2008; Karp et al., 2010; Kuh et al., 2006; Tinto, 1975). The theory links both student and institutional characteristics to the voluntary decision to leave an institution. According to Tinto (1988), students who integrate academically and socially at an institution are more committed to remaining enrolled until they graduate. Tinto goes on to look at the student's characteristics and their experiences before attending college.

In 1993, Tinto developed a new model based on his prior theory, the student integration model. In this theory, Tinto looked at the background of the student's family, their academic skills, and the student's success in prior schooling to predict the student's intentions and motivation. Tinto believed the student's motivation, intentions and background informs what a student brings with them to the college experience. Tinto suggested these preexisting motivations and intentions are either reinforced or weakened by the student's formal academic and informal social experiences in the college setting. Tinto's theory supported the idea that persistence to graduation was improved when students had a connection to their peers, and faculty in and outside of the classroom, and a commitment to the university. Tinto further stated in this theory that students voluntarily chose to leave an institution based on three primary reasons: (a) academic underperformance, (b) a disconnect between the student's educational and occupational goals, and (c) a lack of integration into the academic and social life of the institution. Tinto (1975) stated in his theory that there is a link between the reason why students who underachieve academically are often the same students that fail to integrate intellectually or

socially in the college, and it leads to the student voluntarily choosing to leave or the student is unable to remain due to academic failure.

Community colleges typically do not have on campus housing and their students are commuters (Cohen et al., 2014). Oftentimes, community college students work, have a family, and other outside commitments that prohibit them from engaging in on-campus activities, social events and clubs (Karp et al., 2010). Therefore, the application of Tinto's (1993) student integration model in relation to the community college student can be a challenge due to their environment lacking many of the social aspects that 4-year institutions provide. Although Tinto's student integration model works well for students at 4-year institutions, 58% of community college students attend part-time for multiple reasons including financial restraints (Juszkiewicz, 2014). Tinto's (1975) original model of student persistence has been significant in influencing research on this topic although it does not mention finances or financial aid (Hossler et al., 2009). Although Tinto's model remains the foundation for student retention studies, it has limitations because it does not consider outside influences, such as family obligations and external peer groups (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011).

### **Bean's Student Attrition Model**

In a study involving first-year persistence, Bean (1979) developed a causal model that synthesized research findings on turnover in work organizations and student attrition. The purpose of the study was the following: (a) to apply a causal path model of employee turnover to student attrition in higher education, (b) to test the predictive power of this model on student attrition, and (c) to rank the variables by the extent to which they explain variations in student attrition.

Bean's student attrition model (1980, 1982) argues that none of the previous models are testable with a direct correlation, and it strives to create a direct path of causality so administrators can point to specific variables that indicate why students drop out. In 1985, Bean expanded the model to exceed in merely defining variables that significantly connected to student attrition (Bean & Metzner, 1985). The aim of the model was to explain how the significant variables affect student attrition, or the dropout syndrome (Kerby, 2015).

The criterion variable in Bean's model was dropout syndrome. According to Bean and Metzner (1985), the dropout syndrome is an openly discussed plan to leave a university meshed with actual attrition. Here are variables associated with attrition:

- 1) After statistically controlling for intent to leave, other variables generally do not contribute to the explained variance in retention.
- 2) Both intents to leave and discussion of leaving have reciprocal, direct effects on persistence; variables that apply to intent to leave also apply to discussion of leaving.
- 3) Students who leave due to health problems or family crisis are not representative of failure on the part of the student or the university. The attrition of these students can be adequately explained but not predicted.
- 4) The model outlined by Bean shares a great deal of commonality with Tinto's
- 5) model. There are, however, four distinct differences in Bean's models: (a) family
- 6) background and individual difference are expected to manifest themselves in the
- 7) social-psychological variable, (b) initial goals are expected to manifest them-
- 8) selves in later institutional and goal commitments, (c) grade performance and
- 9) intellectual development leading to academic integration have a direct influence
- 10) on dropout syndrome, and (d) goal commitment and institutional commitment

- 11) are expected to directly affect dropout
- 12) The model outlined by Bean shares a great deal of commonality with Tinto's
- 13) model. There are, however, four distinct differences in Bean's models: (a) family
- 14) background and individual difference are expected to manifest themselves in the
- 15) social-psychological variable, (b) initial goals are expected to manifest them-
- 16) selves in later institutional and goal commitments, (c) grade performance and
- 17) intellectual development leading to academic integration have a direct influence
- 18) on dropout syndrome, and (d) goal commitment and institutional commitment
- 19) are expected to directly affect dropout

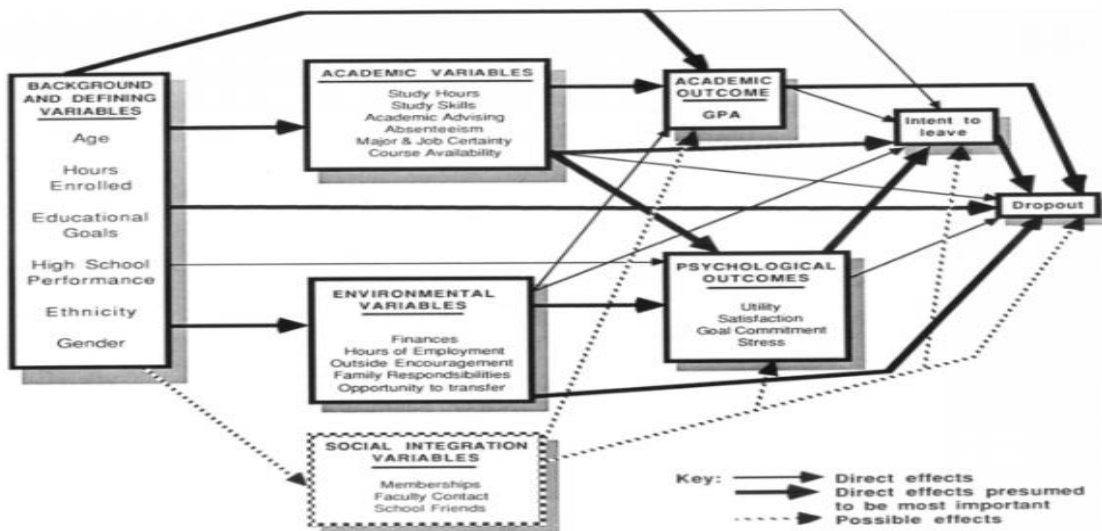
From the review of student attrition models, Bean (1982) categorized the variables into four main categories, (a) background, (b) organizational, (c) environmental, and (d) attitudinal.

Metzner and Bean (1987) revised their conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition. This model slightly differs from their earlier model. This model is also based on four sets of variables that guide the nontraditional student's decisions to dropout:

- 1) Students with poor academic performance are predicted to drop out at higher rates than students who perform well academically.
- 2) Intent to leave, which should be influenced primarily by the psychological outcomes but also by the academic variables.
- 3) High school performance and educational goals.
- 4) The environmental variables are predicted to have substantial direct effects on dropout decisions (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7**

*Metzner and Bean's Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition (1987)*



*Note.* Reprinted from “The Estimation of a Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition,” by B. S. Metzner & J. P. Bean, 1987, *Research in Higher Education*, 27(1), 15–38 (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40195801>).

### **Spady's Conceptual Model of Attrition Theory**

Spady (1970) raised the concern that research involving the withdrawal process in higher education lacked theoretical and empirical coherence. Spady acknowledged the need for an “analytical-explanatory” method for the study of attrition. Suicide theory was first introduced into the study of student attrition by Spady (1971) as the foundation of his pioneer work “*Dropouts from Higher Education: Toward an Empirical Model.*” Spady’s (1971) conceptual model was based on Durkheim’s theory on the social nature of suicide. Durkheim proposed in his theory, that the desire to sever ties to a social system developed from the absence of social integration between the individual and the larger society.

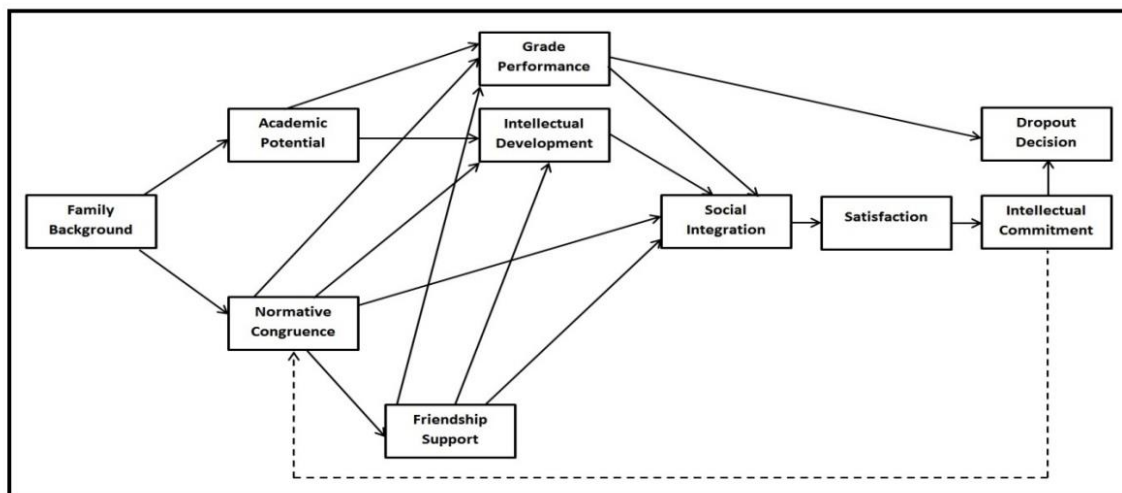
Spady's (1971) model emphasized the connection between individual student attributes and key aspects of the campus environment. This model was designed to be a conceptual framework for developing a more coherent understanding of the student departure process. Spady's work was noted for attempting to integrate existing empirical work into an interrelated conceptual framework, and it served as a precursor to Tinto's model. Spady's (1971) definition of "normative congruence" contained five major clusters of variables that included: (a) a student's high school contacts, (b) personality dispositions, (c) moral values, (d) attitudes toward the target population, and (e) measures of campus subcultural orientations. Spady proposed that the same process could be at work in a decision to leave an institution of higher education.

In Spady's model, normative congruence (the way that the student's goals, interests, and personality dispositions interact with the subsystems of the college) affects other independent variables: grade performance, intellectual development, and friendship support. These interact with each other and in turn impact the degree to which a student becomes socially integrated into the college (Spady, 1970). In a later study, Spady (1971) tested his previous assumptions in a longitudinal study on a student sample of 683 new students entering the University of Chicago in 1965. The outcome of the study resulted in a modification of his initial theoretical model, and Spady updated his undergraduate dropout process model (see Figure 8).



**Figure 8**

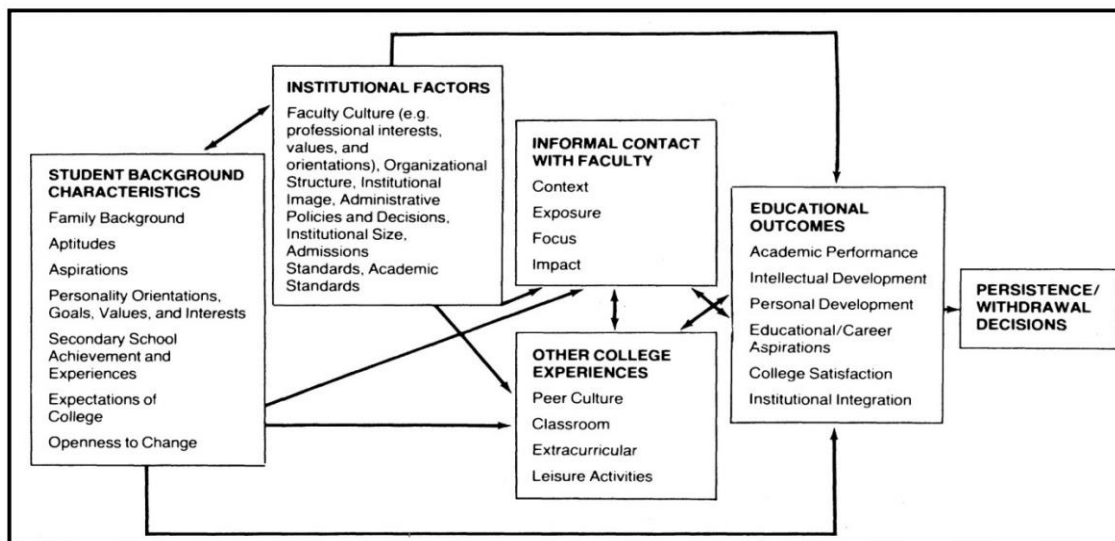
*Spady's Undergraduate Dropout Process Model 1971*



*Note.* Reprinted from “Dropouts from Higher Education: Toward an Empirical Model,” by W. Spady, 1971, *Interchange*, 2(3), 38–62 (<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02282469>).

### **Pascarella's Model**

Pascarella (1980) proposed a model that built upon the work of both Spady (1970, 1971) and Tinto (1975). It highlighted the importance of informal interaction with faculty that was found during his work with Terenzini (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977). Pascarella believed the student's informal interaction with faculty members could improve the level of their institutional commitment and minimize the chance of withdrawal. However, Pascarella (1980) expressed his belief that there is not much evidence from previous studies to validate the direct effect of student-faculty informal contact on student persistence. Building on this argument, Pascarella (1980) constructed his student-faculty informal contact model (see Figure 9).

**Figure 9***Pascarella's Student-Faculty Informal Contact Model*

*Note.* Reprinted from “Student-Faculty Informal Contact and College Outcomes,” by E. T. Pascarella, 1980, *Review of Educational Research*, 50(4), 545–595 (<https://doi.org/10.2307/1170295>).

According to Pascarella (1980), institutional characteristics and student characteristics influence each other and three independent variables. The three independent variables in the model include: (a) the level of informal contact with faculty, (b) other college experiences, and (c) educational outcomes (Pascarella, 1980). Furthermore, Pascarella (1980) discussed what he called the “philosophical stance which emphasized the importance of college impacts beyond the transmission of facts and knowledge” (p. 545). Although Pascarella’s study examined the influence of student-faculty informal contact on the various outcomes of college, student attrition was the emphasis of the model.

## **Astin's Theory**

Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement explains how desirable outcome for institutions of higher education are viewed in relation to how students change and develop as result to being involved in cocurricular activities. The concepts of the theory are composed of three elements, (a) A student's "inputs" such as their demographics, their background, and any previous experiences, (b) The student's "environment," which accounts for all of the experiences a student would have during college, and (c) "outcomes" which cover a student's characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and values that exist after a student has graduated college.

The theory of student involvement has its roots in a longitudinal study of college dropouts (Astin, 1975). The negative effects of attending a community college are identified even after the variables of entering student characteristics, lack of residence, and work are considered. Astin's (1984) theory, "refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience" (p. 307). Astin proposed that the amount of students' involvement in college is related to the amount of their learning and personal development. Student involvement theory is an educational theory and it focuses on enriching the student development and learning environment in higher education. First, it was partially derived from Astin's (1975) study of college dropouts. Second, according to Astin (1984), student retention is the other face of student involvement, whereby the greater the students' involvement in their academic institutions, the greater is the rate of their persistence. Astin also argued that most of the reasons given by students for dropping out of college indicate a lack of involvement, which provides support for his theory.

## Summary

The basis for the previous theories noted in this chapter, focused on how students saw themselves in an educational setting. There was a shift in the research that focused on having a better knowledge on what degree economic and social factors affect a student's decision to stay or leave college. Thus, the research on retention shifted to investigate more diverse perspectives on student retention that includes sociological, interactional, psychological, economics, and organizational factors. According to Braxton and Hirschy (2005), crucial factors to consider when understanding retention from the sociological perspective peer-groups include: family background, economic status, type of college, race/ethnicity, and the support from significant others. Braxton et al. (2015) expounded on Durkheim's suicide theory by emphasizing the student's value and belief system. Accordingly, students become a prime candidate to drop out when their values and beliefs do not align with the institution, or when the student feels alone, or without support from other members of the campus community. Student entry characteristics were the basic elements of the model developed by Braxton and Hirschy (2005) which include academic integration and the external and internal environments to the campus. All these components can influence a student's commitment to the institution and their decision to persist. The student entry characteristics include family background, academic ability and preparation, gender, race, and parental education. Other traits that can influence a student's commitment to institution include motivation, self-efficacy, and affiliation needs. Bean (1982) in a critique of this model cautioned against the assumption that improving a variable that has had a statistically significant relationship to retention, such as social integration, will work in all cases.

Community colleges offer widely accessible and flexible postsecondary education, and they are a gateway to 4-year colleges for millions of students (Goolsbee et al., 2019). Despite

their promise and potential, community colleges are still under intense pressures to increase their retention rates. Nontraditional students face environmental factors that impact their persistence unlike traditional students. A need to create and enhance support services and federal and state policies that increase community college retention rates still exist. Studies dedicated to creating theoretical models that predict student retention have existed for the past 4 decades, and research specifically devoted to predicting nontraditional retention at community colleges is still needed.

Chapter 3 summarizes the methodology used to obtain the data for this study. The researcher performed the focus group and interviews at an urban community college in the southeast region. The data obtained from the focus groups and interviews provided the information needed to answer the research questions.

### **Chapter III: Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to examine the circumstances for student attrition by way of SAP appeals at a 2-year urban community college located in the southeastern region of the United States. Community colleges have an open-door policy, and they provide education for a diverse body of students. Community colleges are viewed as the cornerstone of U.S. higher education because they have been tasked with workforce development, technical and vocational training, local and regional development, and human capital formation. Therefore, it was important to understand how SAP has impacted student attrition at urban community colleges. This chapter outlines the methodological approach that was used for this study to identify the extenuating circumstances that caused students to file an SAP appeal. The data analysis, research design, population, and data collection process are provided in this chapter.

#### **Research Design**

Students who attend community college are faced with mitigating circumstances that distinguish them from traditional students. Their life circumstances, economic status, and competing commitments require different forms of support services (Prins et al., 2015). Obtaining and maintaining Title IV funding is a crucial component for access to higher education for qualifying students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017), 76% of students who attend 2-year public institutions received and depend on Title IV funds to attain their educational endeavors (Baime & Mullin, 2010). In addition to Title IV guidelines which define financial aid eligibility, students are also

required to meet SAP standards for continuous eligibility. Therefore, the researcher analyzed the circumstances students reported that caused them to file an SAP appeal. The findings from the study can be used to identify barriers that impede graduation, to develop programs and services, and improve SAP probation conditions that are supportive and increase student success.

A qualitative, phenomenological design was used (Creswell, 2002). Qualitative designs allow for a more in-depth analysis (Greene et al., 1989). The strength of using a phenomenological design allows the study to advance more effectively as it addresses significant research requirements and objectives as they naturally occur and also adding to the level of trustworthiness of the conclusions drawn from the data (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

The investigator's research proposal was submitted to IRB at an urban community college in the southeast region for review. The investigator received IRB approval from the institution to proceed with the proposed research study. Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered and examined from 538 completed SAP appeals collected from an urban community college in the southeast region during the Fall 2016 ( $n = 223$ ), Spring 2017 ( $n = 245$ ), and Summer 2017 ( $n = 70$ ) semesters of academic years 2016-17. The Federal Financial Aid program requires students to provide two statements as part of their appeal. Two statement fields are included in the online SAP form. The fields are labeled Student's Written Statement #1 (Stmt #1) and Student's Written Statement #2 (Stmt #2). The following information is requested as part of the student's appeal that explains the following:

- Statement #1 – Students are required to explain in five to eight sentences the mitigating circumstances that caused them to fail to meet the SAP standards.

- Statement #2 – Students are required to explain in five to eight sentences what has changed that will allow them to meet the SAP guidelines by the next evaluation.

Due to there being limited space in the fields, students used the space in the Stmt #1 and Stmt #2 fields to completely explain their mitigating circumstance. To ensure that the student's complete appeal statement was captured, the unstructured text in Stmt #1 and Stmt #2 was combined into one category and renamed "Student Appeal Statement." The unstructured text from the Student Appeal Statement of the completed SAP appeals in the Fall 2016, Spring 2017, and Summer 2017 was retrieved and reviewed for the qualitative data used in this study.

### **Research Setting and Sample**

This study took place at a 2-year urban community college in the southeast region of the United States. As an open access urban community college, admission is not limited by academic qualifications beyond an earned high school diploma or passing the General Education Requirement (GED). First time college students are required to either submit ACT/SAT, COMPASS, KYOTE or take the placement exam administered by the institution. Transfer students or students who have not completed 12 college-level credit hours from a regionally accredited institution, including English or math are also required to take the placement exam administered by the institution. Enrolled students may be degree-seeking and are able to earn an Associate in Science or an Associate in Arts degree. Nondegree seeking students can earn a technical certification in various high demand fields such as engineering, occupational/technical studies, or the healthcare industry. All applicants that meet the appropriate academic requirements and technical standards for enrollment shall be considered equally for admission to any program regardless of race, color, religion, gender, marital status, national origin, age, sexual orientation, or disability.



The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2019) indicated the total enrollment for the university in this study for Fall 2018 semester was 11,699. The student attendance status was 29% full-time and 71% part-time enrollment and the student gender consisted of 42.85% men and 57.2% women. The total number of students who received a Pell grant was 4,658 students for a total amount of \$16,121,913. The total number of students receiving financial aid (grants, loans, or scholarship aid) during the 2018-19 school years was 9,269, for a total amount of \$30,460,831. Therefore, 79.23% of the total student enrollment receives some type of financial assistance. This study sought to broaden the understanding of retention-related issues in an urban community college setting.

The student sample (Unit of Analysis) in this study was provided by the Financial Aid Office. All identifying information was redacted from the sample. The sample was then given to the Institutional Research Department (IR) at the institution for final review. Upon review and approval by IR, the information was downloaded to a Microsoft Excel data file and emailed to the researcher. The dataset was taken from a population of students who failed to meet the federal guidelines for Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP). The Unit of Analysis came from the student population for the year of the study 2016-17; this was 4.52% ( $N = 538$ ) of students required to file an SAP appeal request.

### **Data Collection**

The researcher requested a meeting with the administrators at a large urban 2-year institution in the Southeast region to discuss the research proposal. The researcher met with the vice president for student affairs, the director of financial aid, and an institutional effectiveness specialist from the institutional research department at the institution. The institution expressed their interest and belief that this type of study would be beneficial for the college, and it would

broaden their understanding of retention-related issues in their institution. the institutional effectiveness specialist and financial aid coordinator assisted with the data collection by providing the researcher with access to 538 completed SAP appeals. The electronic SAP Appeal Request Form is the instrument used to collect the student responses.

The identifying information (i.e., student ID number, full name, and academic plan) was redacted to protect the student's identity. The study's qualitative analysis was built on the categorization of data from 538 student's self-reported mitigating circumstances in the Student Appeal Statement of the SAP appeal form for 3 consecutive semesters. The current study focused on the qualitative and quantitative data categorization by analyzing the written SAP appeals considering the following research question:

What circumstances contribute to the attrition of students at an urban community college?

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

The researcher used several steps in the coding process of the unstructured text in the Student Appeal Statements of the 538 SAP appeals. Initially the researcher read through the unstructured text in the Student Appeal Statements to gain a clear understanding of the data. The phrases and words were color coded, and categorization was considered in context, and each category consisted of a word or group of words with comparable meaning or associations (Weber, 1990). The researcher examined the circumstances by identifying common themes in the mitigating circumstances that were reported in the student's written justification for appeal. The researcher categorized the data based on the conceptual frameworks on student departure in chapter 3 by reading the appeal data line-by-line and three broad categories were identified: 1) Academic, 2) Economic, and 3) Personal.

The unstructured text was then uploaded to NVivo software program that is used for qualitative and mixed methods research. NVivo software has an inter-coder reliability and use of cluster analysis to examine text or coding similarities. NVivo uses several analysis approaches to analyze the unstructured text such as grounded theory and qualitative content analysis, by using the paraphrasing tool for inductive classifications. The Matrix Coding queries in NVivo was used to ask a wide range of questions about patterns in the data to gain access to the content that shows those patterns. Thirty themes were identified from NVivo's Thematic Content Analysis.

The information obtained from this study provides insight from the students' perspective on mitigating circumstances that lead to students not being able to persist at community colleges. This information can help community college administrators understand issues that lead to the development of support services that address attrition.

## **Chapter IV: Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore the understudied reasons for attrition at urban community colleges. The researcher used a qualitative methodology to understand the challenges associated with the mitigating circumstances attributed to academic attrition resulting in SAP appeals. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), qualitative methods studies provide a greater degree of understanding to be formulated than if a single approach was adopted for a specific study. The researcher was able to establish a grounded theory for this study by interpreting data through two renowned theories: conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition (Bean & Metzner, 1985) and theory of student persistence in commuter colleges and universities (Braxton et al., 2014). The researcher used these theories to understand the academic, economic, and personal mitigating challenges that student's face at an urban community college. Findings derived from both the qualitative and quantitative analysis will be presented in this chapter by analyzing the written SAP appeals considering the following research question:

What circumstances contribute to the attrition of students at an urban community college?

### **Sample**

The quantitative analysis began with the researcher examining SAP appeals from an urban community college in the southeast region. The data included 538 appeals that

were submitted Fall 2016, Spring 2017, and Summer 2017 terms. The institution removed the demographic information (i.e., name, student identification number, mailing address, email address, and telephone number) from the data to protect the student's identity and to ensure the SAP appeal information remained confidential. The analysis for this study was conducted in two steps. In Step 1, the researcher conducted a descriptive analysis to summarize the data in a meaningful way. Abu-Bader (2006) said, "Descriptive statistics describe, characterize, or classify data by summarizing it into understandable terms without losing or distorting the information" (p. 9). The descriptive analysis helped identify characteristics of the dataset related to frequency of distribution, central tendency (i.e., mean, median, and mode), and measures of variability.

In Step 2, the sample was also thoroughly examined to answer the research question, specifically their Student Appeal Statements. The researcher identified common themes associated with the mitigating circumstances reported in the student's written justification for appeal. The student's written justifications were then uploaded to NVivo software program. NVivo uses several analysis approaches to analyze the unstructured text such as grounded theory and qualitative content analysis, by using the paraphrasing tool for inductive classifications. The grounded theory approach was used to analyze the data for this study. The following information are the findings from the descriptive analysis.

A student who violates SAP guidelines can elect to appeal the violation. An online appeal form is available for students who elect to appeal the suspension of aid. Students must share the mitigating circumstances that resulted in the SAP violation(s) and provide an explanation for how the circumstances attributed to the SAP violation. Table 2 shows the sample's frequency distribution of SAP request categories by semester.

**Table 2***Frequency of SAP Request Categories by Semester*

SAP request categories (% within semester)	Fall 2016		Spring 2017		Summer 2017		Total	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Accident or illness	40	17.9	57	23.3	16	22.9	113	21
Death family / someone close	29	13	27	11	9	12.9	65	12.1
Divorce	4	1.8	2	0.8	2	2.9	8	1.5
Other	90	40.4	101	41.2	26	37.1	217	40.3
Work/employment change	60	26.9	58	23.7	17	24.3	135	25.1
Total	223	100	245	100	70	100	538	100

According to Table 2, 40% of the quantitative sample selected the *Other* request category to explain their mitigating circumstance over the 3 semesters. Students selected the *Other* category when their mitigating circumstance did not fall into any of the other specified SAP request categories. It was important to analyze the *Other* category using thematic content analysis given the proportion of appellants who perceived the four other categories did not adequately represent their plight. The *Other* category accounts for various types of reported personal and academic issues that included: (a) being a single parent, (b) homelessness, (c) childcare issues, (d) relationship or domestic violence issues, (e) student or family illness, (f) academic issues such as stopped attending or missed classes, (g) need for tutoring services, (h)

technology issues, (i) failed courses, (j) should have taken the courses in person, and (k) not being aware of SAP guidelines.

The *Work/Employment Change* request category was selected 25.1% over 3 semesters. This category included responses like new job, working multiple jobs, loss of employment, decrease in work hours, required to work too many overtime hours during the week, and having a nonflexible employer/work schedule. Twenty-one percent of the students selected *Accident/Illness*, and responses for this category included student physical and mental health issues, and long and short-term care of family members (e.g., mother, father, spouse, child, grandmother, grandfather, aunt, uncle, siblings). The remaining two categories: *Death of a Family Member or Someone Close* was selected 12.1 % and *Divorce* was selected 1.5% of over 3 semesters.

The SAP appeals submitted were further analyzed in Table 3 to provide a breakdown of the approval status based on the request category. The *Other* request category had the highest number ( $n = 217$ ) of SAP appeals, and 79% of those appeals were approved. The *Employment Change* request category had the second highest number ( $n = 105$ ) of SAP appeals, and 77.8% of those appeals were approved. The *Accident or Illness* request category had the third highest number ( $n = 113$ ) of SAP appeals, and 75% of those appeals were approved. There was one pending appeal in the *Other* category. Students who did not complete their SAP documentation at the beginning of the semester receive a pending status. These appeals can be resolved if the student submits the required documentation before the SAP committee meets to review the appeals.

**Table 3**

*Approval Status by SAP Request Categories for 2016-2017 Academic Year*

SAP approval status	Accident or illness		Death of family/ someone close		Divorce		Other		Work and employment change	
	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
	Approved	85	75.2	56	86.2	5	62.5	171	79.0	105
Denied	28	24.8	9	13.8	3	37.5	45	20.8	30	22.2
Pending	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	.2	0	0.0
Total*	113	100.0	65	100.0	8	100.0	217	100.0	135	100.0

*Note.* \*Approved ( $n = 442/78.4\%$ ), denied ( $n = 115/21.4\%$ ), and pending ( $n = 1/.2\%$ ).

Table 4 shows the percentage of SAP appeals that were approved, denied, and pending by semester. The SAP Committee reviews appeals. The members of the committee are comprised of staff who work in the Financial Aid Office. SAP appeals are approved when the student's remediation plan meets the institutions approval guidelines. Seventy-eight percent (78.4%) of the SAP appeals were approved, 21.4% of the appeals were denied, and there was one pending appeal. Students who received an SAP appeal approval are granted a probation semester of financial aid and must meet all the SAP guidelines to maintain their aid in the following semester.



**Table 4***SAP Approval Status by Semester*

Approval status (% within semester)	Fall 2016		Spring 2017		Summer 2017		Total	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Approved	175	32.5	196	36.4	51	9.5	422	78.4
Denied	47	8.7	49	9.1	19	3.5	115	21.4
Pending	1	0.2	0	0	0	0	1	0.2

Students are only allowed to submit one appeal per semester. Students that receive a denied appeal can submit another appeal providing additional and/or requested documentation the following semester. Students receive an SAP denial when the following conditions are not met: (a) the mitigating circumstance does meet the acceptable criteria, (b) submission of an acceptable action plan that resolves the situation that led to a SAP violation, and (c) the GPA or completion rate requirements are not met, and/or failure to submit appropriate documentation. The SAP appeal denial rate is minimal (21.4%) in comparison to the appeals that were approved. As shown in Table 4, the Spring 2017 semester had the highest percentage of denied SAP appeals. A minimal difference existed between denied appeals for the Fall 2016 and Spring 2017 semesters. The Summer 2017 semester had the lowest number of SAP appeal denials.

Table 5 is a categorization of SAP violation types for the 538 students who submitted an appeal during the Fall 2016, Spring 2017, and Summer 2017 semesters. A SAP violation can occur when a student commits a combination of one or more of the following violations: (a) when a 2.0 overall grade point average (GPA) is not maintained, (b) failure to complete 67% of the overall attempted credit hours (Cumulative Earned Percentage), and (c) exceeding the

Maximum Time Frame (MTF) permitted for degree/certification completion (150% of required hours for program completion).

**Table 5**

*Frequency of SAP Violations by Semester*

SAP violations by categories (% within semester)	Fall 2016		Spring 2017		Summer 2017		Total	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Grade point average (GPA; only)	133	59.6	151	61.6	41	58.5	325	59.9
Cumulative earned percentage (CEP; only)	223	100	245	100	70	100	538	100.0
Maximum time frame (MTF; only)	43	19.2	80	32.6	22	31.4	145	27.7

*Note.* Duplicated frequency of SAP violations by semester.

During the Fall 2016, Spring 2017, and Summer 2017 semesters, there were 223 (100%) students during Fall 2016, 245 (100%) students during Spring 2017, and 70 (100%) students during Summer 2017 that did not successfully complete the Cumulative Earned Percentage, which is 67% of all cumulative credit hours attempted during the specified semesters. The analysis revealed all students (100%,  $N = 538$ ) in the sample either failed and/or withdrew from more courses than they passed.

Students violate the Maximum Time Frame requirements when they exceed the number of credit hours needed for a degree or certificate by 150%. For example, a student working on a 60-credit hour Associate in Science transfer degree may enroll up to 90 credit hours of coursework to complete the degree. There were 43 students during the Fall 2016 semester, 80

students during the Spring 2017 semester, and 22 students during the Summer 2017 semester in this quantitative sample who failed to meet the Maximum Time Frame requirement. This means these students could have transferred hours, repeated courses, changed majors, had incompletes, withdrawals, or failed courses. More than 29% of the students in this study reported two mitigating circumstances in their SAP narratives. The Grade Point Average (GPA) and Cumulative Earned Percentage (CEP) was the most frequently occurring SAP violation combination. Students that withdraw or fail their courses could violate SAP if they are unable to meet the required 67% completion rate of attempted hours. This would impact the students' GPA when they fail to pass their courses. There is a correlation between these two violations due to course failure and withdrawal has a direct effect on the student's GPA.

As shown in Table 6, the cumulative GPA span for the sample shows a GPA range from zero to a 4.0. The Mean cumulative GPA for the Fall 2016 semester was 1.39, the mean cumulative GPA for the Spring 2017 semester was 1.40, and the mean cumulative GPA for the Summer 2017 was 1.43. This indicates the average grade of the sample size is a "D," which does not permit a student to remain in good academic standing, continue receiving financial aid, and graduate.

**Table 6***Descriptive Statistics for GPAs of 3 Semesters*

Semester	<i>f</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Fall 2016	223	1.39	4	1.39	1.12
Spring 2017	245	1.4	4	1.4	1.13
Summer 2017	70	1.39	4	1.43	1.05

*Note.* *N* = 538.

Table 7 shows the frequency of the GPA for the sample. There were only 41 (7.6%) students in the sample that had between a 3.0 and 4.0 GPA, 172 (32%) students who had a GPA between 2.0 and 2.9, and 325 (60%) who had less than a 2.0 GPA. This means 60% of the students in the sample were placed on a financial aid warning and were unable to raise their GPA by the end of the preceding semester to avoid having to file a SAP appeal.

**Table 7***GPA by Frequency*

GPA	<i>f</i>	%
3.0 to 4.0	41	7.6
2.0 to 2.9	172	32
Less than 2.0 GPA	325	60.4
Total	538	100

**Research Question**

The researcher's goal in this study was to collect data (e.g., phrases, words) from SAP appeals to understand student behaviors that attribute to student attrition. Therefore, the

researcher's goal for using a qualitative method, specifically content analysis, is important to further understand the research question: what circumstances contribute to attrition among students at an urban community college?

The researcher used two student departure theories in the literature review to analyze the mitigating circumstances reported by the students in their SAP appeal statements. A grounded theory foundation was used for this study by interpreting data through two prominent theories: conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition (Bean & Metzner, 1985) and theory of student persistence in commuter colleges and universities (Braxton et al., 2014). The focus of Bean and Metzner's (1985) study focused on academic and environmental variables (see Figure 7). Braxton et al. (2014) theory emphasized the importance of the institution having organizational characteristics that support the student's academic and intellectual development. The students' responses in their SAP statements frequently aligned with the three reoccurring themes: (a) academic, (b) economic, and (c) personal or a combination of two or more of these categories. Thirty percent ( $n = 164$ ) of the students reported two mitigating circumstances in their SAP appeal statement.

Students who failed to meet SAP guidelines are required to share in their appeal statements the mitigating circumstance(s) that caused their inability to meet the Satisfactory Academic Progress standards. The institution refers to mitigating circumstance(s) as situations beyond the student's control that have created an undue hardship. The researcher read through the text line-by-line to gain a clear understanding of the data and analyze the student SAP Appeal statements. The phrases and words used in the statements were associated by comparable meaning or associations (Weber, 1990). Larger contextual associations or codes were noted by the researcher in a corresponding document.

The unstructured text was then uploaded to NVivo software program that is used for qualitative and mixed methods research. NVivo software has an inter-coder reliability and use of cluster analysis to examine text or coding similarities. NVivo uses several analysis approaches to analyze the unstructured text such as grounded theory and qualitative content analysis, by using the paraphrasing tool for inductive classifications. The grounded theory approach was used to analyze the data for this study. The Matrix Coding queries in NVivo was used to ask a wide range of questions about patterns in the data to gain access to the content that shows those patterns. Thirty-one codes were identified from NVivo's Thematic Content Analysis. The codes derived from NVivo were used to verify the codes found by the researcher. Table 8 shows the frequency of the mitigating circumstances identified through the analysis.

**Table 8**

*Mitigating Circumstances by Frequency*

Mitigating circumstances	<i>f</i>	%
Issues related to employment	209	15
Personal problems	165	11.84
Student illness/mental health	163	11.7
Dropped classes	109	7.82
Death of a family member/friend	95	6.82
Family illness	94	6.75
Failed courses	79	5.67
Single parent	76	5.46
Poor study habits/ time mgmt.	64	4.6

Mitigating circumstances	<i>f</i>	%
Stopped attending/ missed classes	64	4.6
Need tutoring/accessibility services	40	2.87
Loss Job/ hours cut/ quit job	32	2.3
Transportation	22	1.58
Homelessness	20	1.44
Childcare issues	20	1.44
Maximum timeframe credit hours.	20	1.44
Domestic violence/bad relationship	20	1.44
Divorce	13	0.93
Should have taken courses in-person	13	0.93
Did not meet the completion rate	11	0.79
Unaware of SAP/did not meet SAP requirements	11	0.79
Changed majors	9	0.65
First generation student	8	0.57
Learn to speak English as a second language	7	0.5
Internet access	7	0.5
Military	5	0.36
Incarcerated	5	0.36
Should have taken online courses	5	0.36
Professor was not helpful/ professor did not respond to emails	3	0.21

Mitigating circumstances	<i>f</i>	%
Multiple SAP appeals	2	0.14
Returned to school more mature and focused	2	0.14
Total	1,393	100

*Note.* Duplicated mitigating circumstances by frequency ( $n = 1,393$ ).

Table 9 shows the breakdown of the number of mitigating circumstances that each student reported in their SAP appeal statement. There were 164 (30.48%) students who reported two mitigating circumstances in their SAP appeal statement and 159 (29.55%) students who reported three mitigating circumstances that impacted their failure to meet the SAP guidelines. There were 80% ( $n = 432$ ) of the students in the sample that reported two or more mitigating circumstances in their statement that caused them not to meet financial aid satisfactory academic progress.

**Table 9**

*Mitigating Circumstance by Frequency per SAP Appeal*

	Number of mitigating circumstances reported per SAP appeal	<i>f</i>	%
0		10	1.86
1		96	17.84
2		164	30.48
3		159	29.55
4		85	15.8
5		16	2.97



	Number of mitigating circumstances reported per SAP appeal	<i>f</i>	%
6		6	1.12
7		2	0.37
Total		538	100

### Academic

The researcher identified 11 circumstances in the category of academic challenges. Table 10 provides the breakdown of the *academic* challenges taken from the 1,393 mitigating circumstances listed in Table 8. The most frequently reported academic challenges were Dropped Classes ( $n = 109$ ), Failed Courses ( $n = 79$ ), Poor Study Habits or Time Management ( $n = 64$ ), and Stopped Attending or Missed Courses ( $n = 64$ ). All four of these mitigating circumstances are interrelated to academic performance and attendance. Nearly 3% ( $n = 40$ ) of the students reported they needed tutoring and accessibility services offered through ARC (Access\*Ability Resource Center) to successfully complete their degree or certification. The need for tutoring and accessibility services is interrelated and highlights the relationship between support services and academics.

Students can become anxious when they email their professor and do not hear back from them. This can lead to a student dropping a course. A student may miss class when they have reached out to their professor for help before an exam and do not receive a response. The fear of failing the exam may cause the student to not show up for class on the day of the exam, or completely stop attending the course.

Students may not fully understand the importance and benefits of academic advising. Having an advisor check in with the student each semester helps shape the student's experience and engagement. It creates the partnership that is extremely important to student success. It aids in identifying red flags that can be addressed to ensure students stay on track until graduation. Academic advising is a critical service that advocates and supports students' academic, personal, and professional goal attainment at the community colleges level.

**Table 10***Academic Mitigating Circumstances*

Circumstance	<i>f</i>	%
Dropped course/courses	109	7.95%
Failed course/courses	79	5.76%
Poor study habits or time management	64	4.67%
Stopped attending or missed classes	64	4.67%
Tutoring or accessibility services	40	2.92%
Should have taken courses in-person	13	0.95%
Changed majors	9	0.66%
Technology	7	0.51%
Should have taken online courses	5	0.36%
Professor was not helpful/ professor did not respond to emails	3	0.22%
Multiple SAP appeals	2	0.15%

*Note.* Duplicated frequency of Academic Mitigating Circumstance's contributing to SAP ( $n = 395$ ).

***Dropped Courses***

The students self-reported various reasons why they had to drop a course or multiple courses. A student shared, "I dropped some of the classes I was enrolled in, thinking that dropping class would be better than failing them." Research has shown that dropping courses is prevalent among community college students (Conklin, 1997; Michalski, 2014). Although students may feel that dropping a course or courses is their only option at the time, there are ramifications that accompany course(s) being dropped, such as it extends the time to degree

completion, and the total cost of obtaining a degree is increased which adds to the student's overall debt (Boldt et al., 2015). Another student shared:

The reason why I failed to make SAP was because I had started a new job and they were on mandatory overtime. With the extra hours I was working I fell behind in class. I tried so hard to catch up but the more I tried the further I got behind in my college algebra. I wasn't failing the class I was completing the work, I just simply could not keep up and got behind. So the best decision for me at the time was to withdraw out of the class so it would not affect my GPA.

Courses are the building blocks for completing a college degree. According to McKinney et al. (2019), community college students drop courses due to a variety of reasons that include the following: (a) to prevent earning an "F" in the course, (b) being unprepared for the course, (c) taking a course through the wrong modality (face-to-face or online), (d) poor study habits, (e) being overwhelmed by employment and coursework (f) insufficient transportation, (g) financial responsibilities, (h) unanticipated life events such as personal, family, or financial emergencies that require the student to drop a course after the drop/add period, (i) student becoming dissatisfied with the course or the instructor, and (j) student having a mental or physical health challenge. Course dropping not only affects the student, but the college too. The college, which served as the study site, is also impacted because the advising staff must meet with students before they are permitted to drop the course by way of institutional policy. High rates of course dropping can also create additional financial costs for colleges.

### ***Failed Courses***

Community college students fail courses for a host of different reasons. These reasons are in alignment with why students drop courses. A student shared, "The reason I failed in class

because I worked while in school I have less time to study and focus on my homework assignment, and I work full time I got home so late.” The researcher found course failures were attributed to inadequate study habits, poor attendance, poor time management skills, personal problems, and employment that interfere with attending class or hindering time to study.

Analysis also revealed that students stop attending and failed their courses when intervention from faculty, campus support services, and support from family, friends, and employers were nonexistent. Another student shared, “I suffer from PTSD and I was struggling to maintain myself in a healthy environment. I worked with therapist and am taking medication. This is not something that I am happy about sharing but it affected my academics.” Students in this study reported a wide range of mitigating circumstances that contributed to them failing a course.

Students stated in their appeal statements that when faced with competing demands, their priority was primarily placed nonacademic issues such as family, work, finances, etc.

### ***Poor Study Habits or Time Management***

The freedom and flexibility of the college environment can adversely affect students who have not mastered time management skills or have poor study habits. A student shared, “I was young and just had poor study habits and horrible time management skills. I did not realize the consequences of not taking school serious or even try to get the help and guidance I needed.” Harper and Quaye (2015) observed that college students report they struggle during their first year of college due to (a) being unfamiliar with the requirements of college, (b) lack of study and time management skills, (c) being unaware of academic support services, and (d) lacking the necessary skills to find a supportive social network. Another student shared, “The reason I failed to meet SAP requirements, was because I didn’t have good time management. I allow my job and family to come before my education. I didn’t push myself, and instead of taking the blame I

blamed everyone.” The students recognized that they have not taken their education seriously by making it a priority to put forth the necessary time to study. There was another student who shared, “I got hired on full time at [said employer] which made my hours change. I would have to work 10 to 12-hour days and struggled with time management and completing schoolwork.”

### ***Tutoring or Accessibility Services***

Students stated in their SAP narratives that they were struggling and should have sought the aid of a tutor to help them pass their course. The researcher identified through reading the SAP narratives that the students had noted several barriers as to why they had not initially sought a tutor’s aid with their course. There were some students who simply were not aware of tutoring services. A student shared:

The reason I fail the Math Class in the summer of 20XX is because I needed help with the math class. I stay up late trying to figure out problem but could not figure them out. I didn’t know about the tutor until a week after the class had started. I was already behind on some assignment.

Whereas other students were unable to use tutoring services due to family and work obligations. Some students stated they avoided going using tutoring services thinking they could recover and pass the course without help by studying harder. A student shared:

I failed to meet SAP after dropping a class or failing a class repeatedly. I failed my Math class twice both semesters and felt I could do it on my own but I really needed some assistance. Once I found out I wasn’t going to pass that class again I went to my advisor and explained to her that I would like to take this class again but I would need a tutor this time for assurance of passing.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2013), 19% of all undergraduate students have a condition that qualifies them as disabled. The median percentage across all institutions of undergraduate students formally registered as having a disability was only 6% in 2017 (Jones & Mitchell, 2019). A student shared, “I am going to speak with someone to see if there is any way that I can get accommodations for my learning disability that I have.” The low account for students not registering for disability accommodations could be attributed to students not being aware that their condition qualifies them to use accessibility services. Another student shared:

This time I struggled with testing and one class that just totally overwhelmed me. The sociology class had too much too fast and I wasn't prepared for as hard and overwhelming as it was. I plan to retake it next fall. I did learn more about my disability and the way I learn that can help me. I learned that I need to have test questions read to me out loud. I also plan to visit accessibility office to see about a way that the test questions can be read to me.

### **Economic**

The researcher identified five mitigating circumstances in the category of economic challenges. The economic challenges included Issues Related to Employment ( $n = 209$ ), Loss job/Hours cut/Quit job ( $n = 32$ ), Transportation ( $n = 22$ ), Homelessness ( $n = 20$ ), and Internet ( $n = 7$ ). Students shared in their appeal narratives that they were impacted economically by various work-related issues. These reported economic issues subsequently affected students academically and resulted in them not successfully demonstrating SAP progress.

**Table 11***Economic Mitigating Circumstances*

Circumstance	<i>f</i>	%
Issues related to employment	209	15.24
Loss job/ hours cut/ quit job	32	2.33
Transportation	22	1.58
Homelessness	20	1.46
Internet Access	7	0.50

*Note.* Duplicated frequency of economic mitigating circumstances contributing to SAP ( $n = 290$ ).

*Issues Related to Employment*

Community college students are considered nontraditional in terms of their age at time of enrollment, employment status, and household dynamics (MacDonald, 2018). They are often referred to as adult learners who have higher levels of responsibilities outside their academic demands. A student said, “Last semester I picked up a full-time job where I had to because times were getting rough.” These responsibilities cause them to juggle full-time employment, children, and financial barriers that impeded their retention and persistence (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2015). Another student said, “I had to drop out of my courses at that time because I had to get a job.” The impact of working long hours with no flexibility in scheduling can negatively impact student’s attendance, study time, and access to campus supportive services that may be needed for student success. Another student said, “The new job was demanding, I worked long hours and the manager wasn’t accommodating to my school schedule.”

Students shared in their SAP narratives that their employer required them to work long hours with no flexibility for their educational pursuits. The students talked about having to pick



up additional hours to help their parents with household expenses. Students talked about cutting back on work hours so they could focus on their education, whereas other students talked about eliminating their second job to allow time for studying and completing homework. In reading the narratives, students who selected *Issues Related Employment* as their primary reasons for not meeting SAP requirement also mentioned other issues that compounded their circumstances, which lead to their academic failure.

At 15.4%, issues related to employment were the most frequently occurring economic challenge students reported in their SAP appeal narratives. The information shared in the student's narratives revealed that work related issues negatively impacted their ability to devote time to studying and attending class. These issues are related to the academic challenges identified in Table 10 (i.e., dropped courses, failed courses, poor study habits/time management, stopped attending/missed classes, and need tutoring/accessibility services).

### ***Loss Job/Hours Cut/Quit Job***

Students shared in their SAP narratives multiple reasons why they loss their job, cut back on their work hours or quit their job while attending college. A student said, "I quit my full time job as a result of pursuing this degree as it does not allow the time for full time work." Students shared in their narratives that losing a job or having their hours cut or making the decision to quit their job created stress. Students emphasized the difficulties they faced having to figure out how to replace lost income that was used to support their family. Another student shared, "Reasons as to why I failed to make/meet SAP, was greatly due to job lose. I lost my job and in return lost my home." Although some students quit a job to make their academic pursuits a priority, other students talked about the hardships they encountered from losing a job or having their hours cut. The fluctuations in employment status had a direct impact on the students' academic success.

### ***Transportation***

Community college students are typically commuters and transportation is a logistical college expense that should always be factored in the basic need package for student success. The American Association of Community Colleges (2016) estimated that the average full-time community college student spends \$1,760 per year on transportation, which exceeds students' transportation costs at a 4-year and private institutions. Affordable and reliable transportation should not be underestimated because it significantly affects a students' academic success. Students shared in their SAP narratives that when they encountered a transportation barrier it impeded their ability to meet SAP guidelines. A student said, "Without reliable transportation, I couldn't further my education. I was catching the city bus as much as I could, but sometimes I wouldn't make it in time or I couldn't make it at all." Students do not always have the funds to cover transportation expenses such as parking fees/permits, public transportation, car repairs, and alternative modes of transportation (e.g., Uber, Lyft, taxi). Students may be late or miss class due to their reliance on public transportation. Another student shared, "Throughout my last semester, I was trying to maintain working and going to school and to be honest it clearly was not working for me. It had put on a lot stress on me as far getting."

### ***Homelessness***

There were various reasons students shared in their SAP narratives that caused them to be homeless and fail to meet SAP guidelines. There were students who had to help their family with financial support. A student shared, "My mother depending on me for a while, along with a lack of real income lead to me being evicted and homeless for a short time. Now that I am stable and capable of doing for myself it hurts me that a lack of money kept me from my education."

Students talked about relationships issues with their partners that caused them to be homeless.

Another student stated:

At the start of the semester I was trying to get out of a very violent relationship. When I finally decided to take a stand not only for me but for my child we than found ourselves homeless. At that time, I was not in the right mindset to complete my scheduled classes as well as making sure my son was in a safe environment and taken care of when he was not with me. Bouncing around from different places and different shelters made it impossible for me see to find proper child care. Thus being the second reason that I could not jump back in my education. Being homeless with a 4-year-old makes trying to reach your goals almost impossible.

There were other students who had personal problems that caused them to be homeless, and it impacted their ability to meet SAP guidelines. A student shared, “I was homeless for a short while and lost my focus on school while trying to find stable housing.” Students that are homeless face multiple challenges such as constantly worrying about finding a safe sleeping environment, where they will shower, cook their food, store their belongings, and social stigmas. These challenges can often cause students to deprioritize their academic commitment to study and attend class. Both housing insecure and homeless students are a significant population at community colleges; therefore, it is important that appropriate resources are identified for their student success (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017).

### ***Internet Access***

Adequate and affordable access to the internet known as the “digital divide” is a reality for community college students. Community college students lose their internet access due to loss of employment, health challenges, homelessness, and other issues that impact the student’s

ability to afford internet services. A student said, “I did my best to finish my classes. Passed one and failed the other one. And with these classes beginning online, it messed me up when I did move to an apartment and couldn’t afford internet.” Students who lose their internet access are disconnected from the institution’s communication with them. Whether the instructional modality is face-to-face, hybrid, or distance learning, the loss of internet access can impede the student’s ability to complete and submit their assignments as well as adhere to important administrative deadlines. Information on advising, academic and financial notifications, safety warnings and alerts, professor’s communication with students on assignments, grades, class cancellation, etc., and other pertinent information is distributed to students via their student email account. Loss of internet access disconnects the student from all web based communication with their institution of higher education.

### **Personal**

The researcher identified 12 mitigating circumstances categorized as personal challenges. Students reported external, personal life events that affected their ability to make satisfactory academic progress. Three of the mitigating circumstances identified by the researcher is directly related to the student as an individual, which were *Personal Problems, Student Illness/Mental Health, and Single Parent*. These circumstances account for the largest categorical percentage of reported issues at 29.47%. A student shared, “As for my mental health, I started going to a therapist and my medications have settled. My medication has been the same for a couple months and I can definitely tell the difference.” There were other students that shared in their SAP narrative that juggling the responsibility of being a single parent while attending college negatively affected their academic success. A single parent shared:

At the time that I was enrolled in school, I was a single parent. I was trying to juggle school and work at the same time for my kids, but didn't have a strong support system. Financially I had to pick up more hours at work to meet the needs of taking care of my babies on my own. When I picked up more hours at work, it became harder to focus on my classes and grades which lead me to decline in school. Taking care of my children was my number one priority at the time though, I had to make sure they had a roof over their head and food in their mouths.

Personal issues related to the student's family member or close friend, which were *Death of Family Member* and *Friend and Family Illness*, accounted for 13.79% of the reported mitigating challenges. Another student shared:

During my last semester I had to move back home and help take care of my grandfather after he became terminally ill. I had to put school on the back burner in order to help make ends meet all the way up until he passed away in [said month]. I took an extra year off to get my life back on track and now can focus on school fully with no distractions.

Students reported in their SAP appeal narratives that external personal life events such as childcare issues, domestic violence, divorce, being a first generation student, English as second language, and being in the military were all stressors that negatively affected their college performance. A student who stated in their SAP narrative that divorce negatively impacted their academic progress shared the following, "I was going thru a divorce and an ugly custody battle. I didn't have the time to put towards my school."

**Table 12***Personal Mitigating Circumstances*

Circumstance	<i>f</i>	%
Personal problems	165	12.04
Student illness/mental health	163	11.89
Death of a family member/friend	95	6.93
Family illness	94	6.86
Single parent	76	5.54
Childcare issues	20	1.46
Domestic violence/bad relationship	20	1.46
Divorce	13	0.95
First generation student	8	0.58
Learn to speak English as a second language	7	0.51
Military	5	0.36
Incarcerated	5	0.36

*Note.* Duplicated frequency of personal mitigating circumstances contributing to SAP ( $n = 671$ ).

***Domestic Violence or Bad Relationships***

Relationship violence threatens a student's emotional and physical well-being and their academic success. The researcher found that students, who experienced problematic relationships, struggled to attend class, and concentrate on assignments and exams. The mental stress and prevailing distraction associated with the situation impacted their academic success. A student said, "Unfortunately I was not able to comply with financial aid guidelines due to being involved in domestic violence incident with my child's father that left me homeless." The

researcher observed that any student can be impacted by relationship violence, including men and those in LGBTQ relationships. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021), 1 in 4 women and nearly 1 in 10 men have experienced sexual or physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner during their lifetime. Relationship violence may even cause students to lose their scholarships or financial aid.

### ***Student Illness or Mental Health***

Students disclosed in their SAP narratives that they suffered from various health-related challenges that negatively affected their academic success such as complications associated with being pregnant, mental health challenges, injuries sustained from being in a car accident, and newly diagnosed health conditions. A student who had compounded mitigating circumstances that negatively impacted her academic success shared the following:

At the beginning of the Spring 2016 semester, I found out that I was pregnant with my second child. Because of my unexpected pregnancy I had to discontinue taking medications that helped me with PTSD, depression, anxiety, and focus. I also suffered from severe morning sickness and the medicine prescribed caused extreme exhaustion.

Studies have shown a high number of students enter community college with mental health conditions (Eisenberg et al., 2016). A student said, “Around February 2016, I had to withdraw from classes last year due to a battle with a mental health issue that unfortunately caused me to not be dedicate adequate to my studies.” The researcher observed students experienced other risk factors associated with mental health concerns, such as housing and food insecurity.

### ***Death of a Family Member or Friend***

There is never an opportune time to for a college student to process grief because they are already overwhelmed with schoolwork, and oftentimes juggling work and providing for their

family (e.g., rent, food, transportation, childcare). Students commented that dealing with the loss of a family member or friend while in college was stressful and a devastating event in their lives.

A student said:

I lost my father due to a rare form of lung cancer in 2015. And it has changed my life all together. I've been trying to keep my head up and stay focused on school but it's really hard. My mom has also had medical issues after my father's passing and it slowed me down from school even more.

Students implied that coping with death was compounded by the other challenges that exist in their daily lives such as providing financial stability for a family, holding a full or part-time job, and attending and studying for class. Death of a loved one can precipitate depressive symptomatology, resulting in feelings of distress, negative behaviors, self-harm, substance use, and eating disorders (Walker & Shaffer, 2007). Students who are dealing with the loss of a loved one may experience a feeling of loneliness and isolation as if no one understands how they are feeling, and this may cause them to stop attending class or even drop out of college (Cox et al., 2015). One student said, "The pressures of school, work, and the untimely death of my grandmother lead not only to a lack of production in the advancement of my career but a depression that took me a while to recover from."

### ***Single Parent***

Student parents likely receive federal tuition assistance in the form of a Pell Grant and scholarships. Despite the federal aid, students expressed their financial needs are still unmet. The responsibilities of being a single parent can elicit stress and lead the student to withdraw from class or drop out. Earning a college degree or certification is important for a single parents' economic upward mobility. Single parents balance a host of responsibilities while satisfying the



demands of attending college. The researcher observed students, who self-identified as single parents, were employed with at least one job, while attending college. The inflexible schedules of work and family made it difficult to attend class. A student said:

I am a single parent. I have a son I take to daycare during the week while I attend school and work. The daycare closed. I had to find him a new daycare and it costed more than the one I had him in before. The only way I could make more money to pay for his new daycare was to take an extra shift on Monday mornings the same time I had class. This caused me to get behind in class and fail.

Single parents expressed the obligation of meeting the family's financial needs along with caring for their child or children while attending college made it difficult for them to meet SAP guidelines.

### **Summary**

The results presented in Chapter 4 discussed the findings from the research question. The research question examined:

What circumstances influence attrition among urban community college students?

The data included 538 appeals that were submitted during the Fall 2016, Spring 2017, and Summer 2017 terms. The researcher used a qualitative methodology to understand the challenges associated with the mitigating circumstances attributed to academic attrition resulting in SAP appeals. The quantitative analysis of the sample revealed that only 29 (5.4%) students in the sample had between a 3.0 and 4.0 GPA, 161 (30%) students had a GPA between 2.0 and 2.9, and 348 (64.6%) had less than a 2.0 GPA. Thus, over 60% of the students in the sample failed to meet SAP guidelines due their grade point average being below the required 2.0 qualitative standard. The high frequency of students' GPAs being below 2.0 warrants further investigation

of academic advising services to further support student success efforts. When the frequency of the SAP Request Categories was examined, *Work Employment Change* was the most frequently selected reason ( $n = 135$ ) that impacted students failing to meet SAP guidelines.

It was interesting that the study revealed 40% of the quantitative sample selected the *Other* request category to explain their mitigating circumstance over the 3 semesters. Thus, students selected the *Other* category when their mitigating circumstance did not fall into any of the other specified SAP request categories. Students in this study had compounded issues that contributed to them not meeting SAP guidelines. It is critical to highlight that 30.48% ( $n = 164$ ) of the student in the sample reported two or more mitigating circumstances and 29.55% ( $n = 155$ ) reported had three or more mitigating circumstances that contributed to them not meeting SAP guidelines. Findings from this study revealed a need to fill in the gaps for wraparound services that are not provided at urban community colleges. Establishing collaborative efforts with community based organizations to provide wraparound services for students deserves further investigation. To strengthen student services at the community college level and help mitigate nonacademic challenges students face, it is imperative that these partnerships are established to provide assistance with nonacademic needs such as, childcare, flexible employment, counseling, housing, and transportation services that improves students' persistence to graduation.

## **Chapter IV: Discussion**

Public higher education has traditionally been the pedagogy that U.S. society has used for providing students from all socioeconomic backgrounds with the opportunity to achieve the American dream of obtaining a college degree (Kromydas, 2017). Thus, community colleges and 4-year institutions are being held accountable to create pathways of social mobility for diverse student populations by increasing their degree completion rates. This creates a challenge for institutions of higher education to identify and sustain viable ways to raise student retention rates. Therefore, university administrators and policy makers must have a better understanding of how the Satisfactory Academic Progress Appeal (SAP) policy under Title IV funding influences retention.

Scholars and practitioners have asked for decades, how the loss of financial aid affects retention at the community college level. This study sought to provide further insight into the question by examining the causes of attrition among urban community college students by way of satisfactory academic progress. Predominant themes resulting from the analysis of the SAP appeal narratives are included in this chapter. These themes support the researcher's recommendations to improve retention and student success efforts that target Title IV eligible students at an urban community college. Significant implications based on those themes, limitations to the study, and recommendations for future research are discussed in this chapter.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The key findings in this study revealed that compounding, mitigating circumstances were a primary factor in the students' failure to make satisfactory academic progress. More than half of the students in this study failed to meet the SAP guidelines for maintaining a 2.0 or higher GPA. As shown in Table 7, 60.4% of the students had less than a 2.0 GPA, and only 7.6% ( $n =$

41) of the students had between a 3.0 to 4.0 GPA. The quantitative results further revealed that all of the students in this sample failed to meet the Cumulative Earned Percentage requirement for SAP. This information is critical because it exposes the students' failure to withdrawal from one or more of the courses they attempted for the semester. Support services in the institution such as academic advising, career coaching, and financial aid updates would be beneficial in ensuring students stay on track to graduation. The establishment of early academic warnings could have been beneficial in alerting the advisor of the students' struggle and it would have served as a prompt for immediate intervention.

The qualitative analysis of the SAP appeal narratives suggests the mitigating circumstances affected students' GPA. There were 80% ( $n = 432$ ) of the students in the sample reported two or more mitigating circumstances in their SAP statement. The qualitative analysis revealed the mitigating circumstances impacted the students' ability to attend class, study, and caused them to withdraw and/or fail courses. The qualitative analysis further revealed that compounding circumstances hurt the students' overall academic success. The analysis in Table 5 revealed 10.4% ( $n = 56$ ) of the students in the study sample had all three SAP violations.

The analysis of the study revealed 40% of the sample selected the *Other* request category to explain their mitigating circumstance over 3 semesters. It is important to highlight the fact that the categories on the SAP Appeal form did not adequately represent the appellants' mitigating circumstances which caused them to select the *Other* category. Thirty percent ( $n = 164$ ) of the students reported two mitigating circumstances and 159 (29.55%) students reported three mitigating circumstances in their SAP appeal statement. The students' responses in their SAP statements frequently aligned with three literature-based categories: (a) academic, (b) economic, and (c) personal or a combination of two or more categories.

### **Mitigating Circumstances That Contributed to SAP Violations**

The key findings from this study revealed students disclosed in their SAP narratives that academic, economic, and personal mitigating circumstances contributed to their failure to meet SAP guidelines. The qualitative analysis revealed 11 mitigating circumstances in the category of academic, five in the category of economic, and 12 in the category of personal challenges. The analysis from this study further revealed students took accountability for their failure to meet SAP guidelines. Students admitted to having poor study habits, failure to use tutoring and disability services, or not being aware of the institution's support services. The students expressed their need to be diligent in using the campus resources, such as the Access Ability Center and meeting with their advisor.

#### **Academic**

The key findings revealed the most frequently reported academic challenges were *Dropped Classes* ( $n = 109$ ), *Failed Courses* ( $n = 79$ ), *Poor Study Habits or Time Management* ( $n = 64$ ), and *Stopped Attending or Missed Courses* ( $n = 64$ ). These four mitigating circumstances are interrelated to academic performance and attendance. The students were transparent in their SAP narratives by disclosing they often had difficulty managing nonacademic barriers and academic commitments at the same time. There were 159 (29.55%) students who reported they were dealing with three concurring challenging situations in their SAP narrative. The students stated the multiplicity of challenges occurring at the same time impacted their decision to drop classes, affected their available time to study, and created barriers that made it difficult for them to attend class. The institution could offer wraparound services and provide information on community resources that assist students in dealing with nonacademic barriers.

## Economic

As shown in Table 11, the most frequently reported economic challenges were Issues Related to *Employment* ( $n = 209$ ), *Loss Job/Hours Cut/Quit Job* ( $n = 32$ ), and *Transportation* ( $n = 22$ ). These reported economic issues affected students academically and resulted in their failure to successfully meet SAP guidelines. Students shared in their appeal narratives that they were impacted economically by various work-related issues. Students disclosed their employers were not flexible in allowing them to attend classes and they often had to work mandatory overtime which made it difficult for them to complete their assignments and study for exams. Other students divulged they were from low-income households and oftentimes had to work a part-time job to help their parent(s) provide support for the family. Students disclosed they were single parents and had to work full and part-time jobs to provide support for their families. This led to the student not having enough time to study, missing class, course failure, and withdrawing from courses. Students highlighted the importance of maintaining their financial aid due to it being a supplemental source of income that was needed to cover their monthly household expenses (e.g., shelter, food, transportation, and childcare). The qualitative analysis of the SAP narratives revealed students' *Transportation* ( $n = 22$ ), *Homelessness* ( $n = 20$ ), and *Internet Access* ( $n = 7$ ) were also negatively impacted by economic hardships. This study revealed the student's academic failure in the classroom and meeting SAP guidelines are directly correlated to the economic barriers. Therefore, the quantitative analysis in Table 4 revealed 115 (21.4%) students' persistence in graduation was impeded by their SAP appeals being denied. According to Mabel (2016), financial aid is necessary for students dependent on aid to persist to graduation.

## Personal

The analysis from Table 12 revealed 48.94% of the reported mitigating circumstances were personal. These were external, unforeseen personal life events that impacted the student's ability to make satisfactory academic progress. The top three reported personal mitigating circumstances are, (a) *Personal Problems* (12.04%), (b) *Student Illness/Mental Health* (11.89%), and (c) *Death of a Family Member/Friend* (6.92%). Students disclosed they experienced personal issues that adversely influenced their study time and class attendance which led to course withdrawal and failure. Students expressed being overwhelmed due to juggling their academic commitments in addition to their personal and family health challenges. Aggregate themes such as pregnancy, mental health, medication adjustments, recovery from auto accidents, and hospitalizations are some of the health challenges that emerged as students' personal mitigating challenges. The responsibility of serving as a caregiver for parents and other family members was also revealed from the qualitative analysis. Students struggling with anxiety and depression due to grieving the death of loved ones and friends were revealed in the analysis. The need for grief counseling and support during the healing process was expressed by the students. Other students shared in their SAP narrative that juggling the responsibility of being a single parent while attending college negatively affected their academic success. As shown in Table 12, external circumstances are impossible to predict and elude such as childcare issues, domestic abuse, and divorce; these factors can deter a student from concentrating on their academic commitments and goals. Mabel (2016) acknowledged there are other factors he calls "unanticipated shocks" (p. A-4), which may be mitigating factors that lead to students dropping out before graduation.

The researcher used two theoretical frameworks to interpret the data analysis. The first framework undergirding this study is the notion of external environmental variables outlined in Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition (see Figure 5).

The model is based on four sets of variables: (a) background and defining, (b) academic variables, (c) environmental, and (d) social integration. The environmental variables are expected to have substantial direct effects on dropout decisions. These variables include: (a) finances, (b) hours of employment, (c) outside encouragement, (d) family responsibilities, and (e) opportunity to transfer. Findings from this study directly correlated with two of the variables identified in the model, "academic" and "environmental." The conceptual model suggests that the environmental variables are more important for nontraditional students than the academic variables. The academic variables identified in the model are: (a) study habits, (b) academic advising, (c) absenteeism, (d) major certainty, and (e) course availability.

The results from Bean and Metzner's (1985) study suggested that when academic and environmental variables are both good (e.g., favorable for persistence), students should remain in school, and when both are poor, students should leave school. When academic variables are good but environmental variables are poor, students should leave school, and the positive effects of the academic variables on retention will not be seen. The model further stated that when environmental support is good and academic support is poor, students would be expected to remain enrolled, the environmental support compensates for low scores on the academic variables. The following example was provided in the study, if students cannot make adequate childcare arrangements, or adjust their work schedules, or pay for college, they will not continue in school regardless of good academic support.



The researchers' findings revealed that students in this study did not have sufficient environmental support systems to assist them with childcare, employment, family issues, financial challenges, homelessness, medical challenges, and transportation. Table 8 provides a list of mitigating circumstances by frequency, and *Issues Related to Employment* was the highest reported mitigating circumstance ( $n = 209$ ). This finding has a direct association with the environmental variable "Hours of Employment." Twenty-one percent of the students in this study did not have access to financial resources to cover the cost of their basic needs (e.g., food, clothing, housing, transportation). The qualitative analysis revealed these community college students worked long hours and had mandatory overtime commitments that prohibited them from meeting with their advisors, studying, and attending class. Twenty-nine percent of the student in this study stated they experienced academic barriers. These barriers directly correlate to the Academic variables (e.g., study habits, academic advising, absenteeism). Fifty percent of the students in this study reported they experienced personal barriers. Personal Problems ( $n = 165$ ), and Student Illness/Mental Health ( $n = 163$ ) has a direct relationship with the "Family Responsibilities" environmental variable.

The second conceptual model undergirding this study is the theory of student persistence in commuter colleges and universities constructed by Braxton et al. (2014). The researcher's findings from the dissertation study underscore the significance of Braxton et al. research that addresses student persistence and attrition in commuter colleges and universities. There were both qualitative and quantitative findings from this study that highlighted issues related to the delineation of factors that influence the commitment of the institution to student welfare, personal responsibility, and academic development. Braxton et al. introduced two new factors that directly correlated to persistence: (a) students' perception of the magnitude of institutional

support that is dedicated to their persistence and (b) the institution's guiding mission and principles that concur with shaping their community and actions. Put differently, the more students perceive that the actions of their college or university coincide with its goals and mission, the greater their level of social integration.

Moreover, Braxton et al. (2014) found in their study that academic advising, faculty interest in students, and first-year student orientation are all adequate preparation forces that positively shape students' perception of their institution. The findings from this study revealed that students had difficulty communicating with their faculty and were unaware of advising, disability, and tutoring services. Hence, students' awareness of these services would have informed them about alternative withdrawal processes and on-campus support services that would have increased student persistence and success. Rather than withdrawing from courses or taking an incomplete, the students in this study stopped attending class, and the lack of knowledge negatively impacted their ability to meet SAP guidelines. Students in this study would have benefited from obtaining information on alternative withdrawal and course completion options during mandatory academic advising appointments, mandatory Orientation sessions, and engagement with faculty.

According to Braxton et al. (2014), the existence of mandatory advising signifies to the student that their college places a high value on them as individuals and on their growth and development. Their findings further suggest that students' perception of the college's commitment to their welfare is favorably increased when faculty communicate with them regularly. The following policies and practices are suggested by Braxton et al. to positively shape student's perception of the college or institution's commitment to their welfare: (a) offering classes at times convenient to students, (b) having university offices that serve students open at a

time convenient for students who work (e.g., financial aid, counseling, registrar), (c) having “drop-in” childcare services, (d) having physical facilities for student to study, type papers, and make copies of course materials, (e) having physical space open on weekends, (f) having the university library open during the weekend, (g) having eating facilities open during times convenient for commuting students, (h) making commuting to and from campus as convenient as possible, (i) having ample parking on campus for commuting students, and (j) having parking convenient to student classes. Additional suggestions for institutional practices by Braxton et al. were providing mentoring programs, offering on-campus employment opportunities for students, having access to computers and internet service, and providing clear communication on policies, student activities, and opportunities.

Subsequently, the students in this study took accountability for their failure to meet SAP guidelines. The students directly attributed their failure to meet SAP requirements to the mitigating challenges they encountered. Thus, it was revealed in the qualitative analysis that students were unaware of the institution’s support services or how to access them. Thus, this lack of information could lead students to question the institutions’ integrity in providing services that support student persistence and success.

### **Student Success Recommendations**

Policymakers are holding community colleges accountable for creating clear coherent pathways that produce student success. Thus, this places an unprecedented urgency on 2-year institutions to educate a diverse population of students that graduate, engage as citizens, and participate in building strong communities that are essential to sustaining the U.S. economy. Therefore, community colleges are tasked with a clarion call to ensure students persist, attain certificates and degrees, and transfer to 4-year institutions. The information contained in this

section will introduce ways to integrate an engaging student experience and sustain persistence by providing student-centered resources that are supportive and produce student success to completion.

Community college students face an array of nonacademic and academic barriers that negatively impede their persistence and student success in completion. These issues will have to be addressed if community colleges want to substantially increase their completion rates. On average, community college students are usually older, from lower socioeconomic households, attend part-time, hold a full or part-time job, and are more likely to be first-generation college students (Ma & Baum, 2016). Research has shown that the many choices and options community college students face as they endeavor to navigate through the institutions' systems can create unnecessary confusion and inhibit students' success. (Bohonos, 2013; Velasco et al., 2020). Studies have confirmed that community college students struggle with non-academic barriers that affect retention and hinder student success (Forbus et al., 2011; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2015). According to the Institute for College Access and Success (2016), nonacademic barriers can significantly affect the student's ability to persist and succeed academically in their college career. The community college students in this study faced difficulties persisting due to the lack of resources outside the classroom. Students in this study identified in their narratives that compounded personal barriers that caused them to file an SAP appeal. Those barriers included employment issues, homelessness, relationship issues, family and personal problems, death, health challenges, and transportation obstacles that negatively affected their academic success.

## **Recommendations for Academic Advising**

Students attend community college for various reasons. Their reasons range from wanting to obtain a trade or complete a credential, to transferring academic credits to a 4-year institution or improving their skill-set for a career change or advancement. According to Crisp (2016), community college students have varying experiences with academic advising. The students in this study could have benefited from academic guidance on obtaining an incomplete or taking fewer credit hours per their unique circumstances, instead of withdrawing or discontinuing attending a course. This would have enabled the student to meet SAP's *Cumulative Earned Percentage* for the semester. It could have also provided the student with additional time to complete the coursework versus receiving a failing grade for the course.

Academic advising is a field where professional and administrative staff, faculty, and peer advisors work together and provide a critical educational service that plays a significant role in supporting the students' academic success (Chiteng Kot, 2014; Young-Jones et al., 2013). A thorough examination of multiple institutional components such as, but not limited to, the institution's mission, student needs and demographics, and Title IV funding should be considered when deciding to adopt a specific institutional advising model (Barron & Powell, 2014).

Academic advising is a huge part of student success because it involves student engagement with the institution. According to Tinto (2012), he stated, "Knowing the roadmap to success, the rules, regulations, and requirement for degree completion, is central to student's ability to successfully navigate the path to timely degree completion" (p. 10). Tinto also noted that when a student fails to get academic advice that is essential for them to succeed in their major, it leads them to moving between majors, without settling on one that fits their interest,

and they often leave the institution without graduating. Students that decide to switch majors multiple times throughout their academic career, or leave the institution without graduating, could affect the institution's student retention rate (Hatch & Garcia, 2017).

Students in this study stated they oftentimes did not know whom to contact for academic guidance and support. Therefore, it is imperative for the novice college student that is unacquainted with their new academic environment quickly becomes linked to an advisor who can unlock this unfamiliar environment. Thus, working with an academic advisor should never be an option; it should always be a mandatory step in the college experience. The findings from this study suggest students would have benefited from engagement with an academic advisor. Academic advisors that use one of the following advising models such as developmental, intrusive, or prescriptive are trained to provide support for their specific needs. The qualitative analysis revealed that some of the students in this study needed a holistic style of advising.

Developmental advising considers the whole person. Advising in this model is approached as a growth experience for both the advisor and student (McGill, 2016). This style of advising has been referred to as teaching through advising. According to research conducted by Braun and Zolfagharian (2016), their study revealed developmental advising "has been conceptualized as a form of teaching primarily concerned with student participation and growth" (p. 971). Their findings propose student involvement in their advising process serving as an assistant in evaluating what is needed for them to succeed in college.

Intrusive advising requires the advisor to periodically initiate contact with the student to ensure the student makes successful academic progress. Advisors use this method of advising to avoid waiting for the student to contact the advisor at a point where they are already undergoing academic or personal difficulty. Research conducted by He and Hutson (2016) revealed that

intrusive advising is “an intervention-based advising approach that allows advisors to intervene and prevent academic challenges by offering support to targeted student groups, especially those that are perceived at risk” (p. 215). Community colleges that have implemented the intrusive model of advising also use an early alert warning system to notify faculty and other college staff members of the identity of students demonstrating behaviors that may hinder their abilities to persist (Sanders & Killion, 2017). These alerts can be set to notify the advisor when students fail to submit assignments or stop attending a course. Early alerts signal response and prompt intervention. The advisor and student are notified when there is a reason for concern. The findings in this study reveal students would have benefited from an early alert system activated by a decline in their academic performance. The intrusive model prompts the advisor to contact the student when they have received an alert or a referral from another member of the college to help a student with a concern or address an academic issue. The intrusive advising model is effective for students who are at risk of leaving college and in need of a trained advisor (D’Alessio & Banerjee, 2016). Research supports gains in student success as a result of an intrusive advising model (Crocker et al., 2014).

The prescriptive style of advising approach is an authoritarian, task-oriented advising relationship according to Lynch and Lungrin (2018). Prescriptive advising requires the student’s performance to follow prescribed curriculum requirements, rules, and regulations. Prescriptive advising uses college program maps and materials that lead students to degree completion (Crocker et al., 2014). Advisors that serve students with this style of advising hold the power and control. In fact, “the advisor is directive and informs the student about course selection, degree requirements, and registration” (D’Alessio & Banerjee, 2016, p. 112). This model intentionally uses pathways to distinguish specific course needs, milestones, and program learning outcomes

that enable students to stay on track and graduate on time (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2018). The qualitative analysis revealed students oftentimes did not seek an advisor's advice before deciding to withdraw from their course(s) or even after completing the withdrawal process. Prescriptive advising would have been beneficial for those students who reported feeling overwhelmed by their compounded mitigating circumstances, thus leaving them little or no time to make course-related decisions. Hatch and Garcia (2017) examined in their study how different kinds of advising impacted community college students during their first weeks in community college and whether the advising they obtained affected their return to college. Their research found that "Different kinds of advising may have different effects for different students" (Hatch & Garcia, 2017, p. 378), and that prescriptive advising could support students who are overwhelmed by all the decisions that must be made during their first year in community college.

Community colleges have begun using a guided pathway model of advising. The overall purpose of advising involves providing "guidance about degree planning, course selection, and academic requirements in addition to considering students' future career objectives" (Pasquini & Eaton, 2019, p. 101). Academic advising also involves assisting students to clarify their goals, assisting them in becoming acclimated to their new academic environment and culture, and guiding them toward appropriate academic and nonacademic resources (Suvedi et al., 2015).

### **Training for Academic Advisors**

This study revealed community college students have academic deficiencies and external mitigating circumstances which demand effective advising that can significantly increase their chances of success at the community college and transferability to a 4-year institution. Therefore, training for those serving in the role of an academic advisor is critical. Academic advisors must



be able to effectively teach students how to make logical choices and inform them about available resources that equip students to be successful. Quality training helps advisors understand the needs of students. Case studies, role plays, an advising paradigm, and a list of probing questions are a few components of an advisor training that would benefit advisors seeking to better understand students' needs. Institutions are encouraged to assemble an advising team, which consists of faculty and staff, who can frame and articulate an advising model that coalesces with the unique culture of a community college. The incorporation of student service personnel in the advising and topics related to student success, such as career and financial support, A quality training helps advisors understand the needs of students. Case studies, role plays, an advising paradigm, and a list of probing questions are a few components of an advisor training that would benefit advisors seeking to better understand students' needs. Institutions are encouraged to assemble an advising team, which consists of faculty and staff, who can frame and articulate an advising model that coalesces with the unique culture of a community college. The incorporation of student service personnel in the advisor training and topics related to student success, such as career and financial aid support, creates "a learning-centered, student-focused activity that engages the student and advisor in the co-creation of clear and intentional educational plans that lead to completion of goals and future success" (Darling, 2015, p. 87).

### **Recommendations for Basic Needs Insecurities**

The findings from this study revealed that the students in this study experienced childcare, food, and housing insecurities, unmet physical and mental health needs, and transportation insecurities. Research conducted by Broton and Goldrick-Rab (2017) found that community college students who work can experience basic needs insecurities. Community colleges in comparison to 4-year universities are less likely to offer resources such as counseling

centers, campus health services, childcare centers, access to public transit, food pantries, campus crisis/care managers, student advocates, and like services (Au & Hyatt, 2017). Community colleges can assist students who have basic needs challenges by first increasing their understanding and awareness of their students' basic needs and insecurities. This can be done by conducting student surveys, putting information on the syllabus, and using academic advisors.

In response to providing support services to meet students' basic needs, community colleges are taking proactive innovative actions to support their students. A Basic Needs program was created by the Long Beach City College (LBCC), a public community college in Long Beach, California. In November 2021, LBCC started an initiative known as the Safe Parking Pilot Program to assist any currently enrolled student who is homeless. The service will allow any currently enrolled homeless student to sleep in the campus Pacific Coast Parking Structure seven days a week from 10 p.m. to 7 a.m. PT. LBCC has entered into a contract with an independent security contractor until June 2022 to secure the structure throughout the night. The college also offers a Child Development Center and Learning Lab. It serves the children of students, faculty, staff, and the community.

### **Recommendations for Childcare**

Community college students must navigate a considerable number of demands such as academic, economic, and personal responsibilities. The students in this study reported in their SAP appeal narratives that childcare issues resulted in missed classes, difficulty studying for exams, and difficulty completing homework assignments. Community colleges are supporting their students by confronting childcare needs by responding in various ways, such as forming a partnership with the Career Pathways Initiative (CPI) and using federal money available for Temporary Assistant for Needy Families (TANF) recipients. Community colleges in Arkansas

are assisting their student with accessing CPI funds that pay or subsidizes the cost of childcare from external providers (St. Rose & Hill, 2013). These services are free for students with children (Chen, 2017). The Office of Family Assistance (OFA) administers TANF, which is a federal grant program that helps low-income families with children become self-sufficient by achieving economic security. The Federal government provides grants for each State to run the TANF program.

According to a study conducted by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (2014), 4.8 million undergraduate students are also parents, and this creates a unique challenge for institutions of higher education. Because of the childcare demands, community colleges have begun providing on-site daycare services to help student parents. Community colleges can take advantage of the U.S. Department of Education's childcare grants through its Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program. The funds can be used to support or establish campus-based childcare programs primarily serving the needs of low-income students enrolled in institutions of higher education. Students can use the subsidies as before and after-school childcare services.

### **Recommendations for Mental Health**

The students in this study stated they suffered from mental health challenges. Community college students continue to have limited access to on-campus mental health support services in comparison to their 4-year counterparts (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2017). Research has shown that approximately one third of college students meet the criteria for a mental health diagnosis (Eisenberg et al., 2016; Fortney et al., 2016). Therefore, community college administrators can no longer focus their sole attention on retention efforts that address academic threats to student success. A commitment to address nonacademic threats such as mental health

needs must also be included in community college retention efforts (Daniel & Davison, 2014). Studies have shown community college students are more prone to experience mental health conditions that may predispose them to mental health issues, and they are often less likely to be aware of how to handle these issues (Dobmeier et al., 2013; Katz & Davison, 2014). Factors that correlate with compromised mental health, such as lower socioeconomic status, employment, first-generation student status, and single parenthood are also directly correlated with community college attendance (Arbona & Jimenez, 2014; Chamberlin, 2012; Epstein, 2015; Katz & Davison, 2014; McFadden, 2016; Shenoy et al., 2016; Smedley et al., 1993; Turner & Quinn, 1999).

Community college administrators must be intentional and creative about offering a variety of resources that provide mental health support for their students. To address student mental health needs, community colleges can employ faculty, staff, and students to partake in online learning simulations like Kognito that focus on substance abuse, sexual misconduct, and suicide prevention. Kognito's practice-based approach places learners in real-life situations, providing responsive coaching as users navigate their personalized experience. When faculty, staff, and students complete the learning simulations, they possess a greater awareness of mental health issues. Trainings are also available to help faculty and staff intervene with supportive measures that help students who are experiencing mental health stressors. Community colleges can contract services with community mental health providers or form partnerships with counseling centers at neighboring 4-year institutions to meet their students' mental health needs.

A CARE (Coordination, Assessment, Response, and Education) Team could be formed to address issues that could potentially disrupt a student's academic, social, and mental wellbeing. Community colleges can provide an extracurricular course that students are required to take

during their 1st year that focuses on mental health literacy. The course would provide an overview of common mental health issues that students encounter. Information on campus and community resources would be provided and discussed during the course. Training on suicide prevention such as QPR (Question, Persuade and Refer) could be offered during the course. Similar to CPR, QPR is an emergency mental health intervention that identifies persons who are suicidal, interrupts the crisis, and directs the person to the proper care.

Community college counseling centers have begun offering group counseling sessions. Connecticut College offers group counseling that involves between five and eight students who work together with a counselor to address areas of need, receive feedback and encouragement from other students, and learn skills that will help them achieve their mental health goals. San Diego City College uses a different approach to group counseling. They primarily provide opportunities for skill-building and informal learning. Rather than focusing on small groups for mentally ill students, they focus on issues like stress reduction and improving relationships for larger groups of students. When community colleges make mental health a priority by providing diverse counseling, and psychological services, students are inclined to persist and complete their education (Broderick, 2003; Dobmeier et al., 2013; Dykes-Anderson, 2013).

### **Recommendations for Transportation**

Transportation can present a barrier for urban community college students. The students in this study reported they suffered from a loss of transportation for various economic and personal reasons. The lack of transportation caused them to miss classes and it impacted their academic success. Community colleges are thinking outside the box, and through collaborative efforts are forming community partnerships with local van services and local nonprofit agencies such as the United Way to provide shuttle services to support students (Smith & Bowyer, 2016).

Community colleges that have a local public transportation system should consider partnering with that operating agency to negotiate free or discount bus passes for students (Waters-Bailey et al., 2019). The partnership could be expounded to include a representative from the college serving as a member of the transportation board. With representation on the board, the college would have an opportunity to ensure the transportation agency is considering student needs when changes to routes and times are discussed. Colleges that acquire information about the public transit schedule could accommodate students in the coming semesters by aligning class start and end times with the public transit schedule. The college may even want to consider purchasing emergency transit passes for students who find themselves without transportation to get to and from school. These passes could even be used to support students who are in a crisis.

The college could support students with transportation barriers by providing a bulletin in a highly used student area where students can post rideshare opportunities. This could also be facilitated through an online social media platform. The college could partner with a local automotive repair center to offer low or subsidized repair costs to students that need automotive services. Some community colleges such as Harford Community College in Maryland, have even adopted an emergency scholarship system that provides emergency scholarship awards to students with transportation needs (Butler, 2019).

### **Recommendations for Wraparound Services**

The community college student population differs from the student population at a 4-year institution in terms of motivation, preparation for college courses, and financial resources (Hawley & Chiang, 2017). The qualitative findings from this study revealed the students faced academic, economic, and personal compounded mitigating challenges. These challenges

impacted the students' ability to successfully meet SAP guidelines. Students stated they faced childcare, counseling, housing, and transportation barriers that impacted their ability to successfully study and attend class. Students stated they were not aware of advising, tutoring, and counseling services that could have provided support. A strategy to offer support in the areas students mentioned needing help could be addressed by using wraparound services. Wraparound services provide a higher level of support that helps students succeed academically, and personally. Wraparound services can include anything from clothing assistance, childcare assistance, crisis care, and outreach, financial assistance, food assistance, housing assistance, health, and mental health services, transportation, and tutoring services.

Wraparound services such as tutoring, counseling, childcare, housing, transportation, and other nonacademic related services would provide support and foster student success. Findings from a study conducted by Dynarski (2016) suggested students' persistence at community college may be improved by providing wraparound services to assist students in addressing academic and nonacademic barriers. Community colleges can be supportive by implementing wraparound services that use advisors to help students plan their coursework around their other commitments. South Central College in Minnesota has adopted a model that provides all these services in a Wrap Around Student Service/Community Resource Center. The Center is staffed with a social worker and counselors that provide career and academic counseling; it houses the campus food cupboard and clothes closet. Students can obtain information and be connected to off-campus community resources for childcare, financial assistance, food assistance, housing insecurities, health and mental health assistance, and transportation assistance.

Access to wraparound services on campus further responds to and promotes student success. In an effort to provide on-site wraparound services, institutions such as Bunker Hill

Community College and Miami Dade College have initiated the Single Stop program on their campuses (Dynarski & Oster, 2016). Single Stop U.S.A.'s Community College Initiative is a program that was intentionally developed to improve the well-being of low-income communities by linking students to public benefits and other institutional and community resources to address nonacademic barriers. Single Stop offices located on community college campuses provide an array of free services that include screenings and applications for public benefit programs, tax services, financial counseling, legal services, and case management. Services provided by the Single Stop program are unique and it differs from other programs due to its accessibility to all students in an institution. Single Stop's primary focus on nonacademic support and its strategic focus on facilitating access to public benefits make it radically different from traditional resources and services that are offered at community colleges.

There is a critical need for community colleges to duplicate or adopt Single Stop programs and Wrap Around Service Centers to enhance resources that support student success. These services would provide a higher level of support for students who are saddled with family, health, and/or economic challenges by creating pathways that lead to academic and personal success.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

Federal, state, and institutional policies ultimately affect institutions of higher education administrators and the students they serve. Administrators at institutions of higher education are involved in the implementation of the SAP guidelines, and they work with students that are impacted by these guidelines. Furthermore, administrators are critical stakeholders that have access to data that enables them to advocate for policy changes that support student success. Along with researchers, administrators must use their professional privilege to leverage



policymakers on behalf of the students they serve to improve detrimental policies, encourage unintentional consequences, or counteract proposed student success outcomes. Whereas federal policies are slow to change, state and institutional policies can work to mitigate negative effects as well.

Removing the SAP policy and performance-based standards from Title IV funding is unlikely to occur in the near future. However, modifying components of the policy could enable broader benefits for students who are impacted by the policy. Institutions have flexibility in how they operationalize warning periods and appeals. Warning periods for aid appeals should be standardized for all institutions. Mandatory meetings should be required for students who are placed on warning. These students should be required to meet with both their academic advisor and financial aid counselor. Meeting with their financial aid counselor will ensure students have a clear understanding of how their aid could potentially be impacted if they have to file an SAP appeal. Requiring students to have a mandatory meeting with their academic advisor will enable them to be apprised of pertinent information and ensure they are connected to the appropriate campus and community resources. During the advising meeting, discussions about the associated implications would occur to create a proactive strategy that supports the student's continued success.

The student population at community college differs in many ways from the student population at a 4-year institution. Community college students are typically older than students who attend 4-year institutions; they disproportionately come from low-income families and are more likely to be first-generation college students (Ma & Baum, 2016). Students that attend community college typically have family responsibilities and work a full or part-time job in addition to school attendance. Unfortunately, SAP guidelines can have a detrimental impact on

students who do not meet them and those students can find themselves having to file an appeal or be cut off from aid in the same academic year. This study provided insight into the mitigating challenges urban community college students face that impact their ability to meet SAP guidelines. Therefore, creating policies and practices that specifically support the needs of this student population's persistence to graduation is critical.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations in the study are recognized. To achieve transferability, the study would have to include several similar institutions for comparison, and this study only focused on one institution. The study used one urban community college in the Southeast. Another limitation of this study was due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. The researcher was not allowed to conduct the on-site focus group sessions as originally planned. Conducting focus groups would have provided the researcher with a means to ask questions, resulting in further exploration of the phenomenon. Holding the focus groups would have enabled the researcher to uncover nuanced findings, thus providing voices and stories to contextualize the student's personal experiences. No research is entirely without bias. Researcher bias can occur when the data is subjectively interpreted. The researcher brought to the study her own experiences working at an institution of higher education for over 36 years. The researcher for this study utilized several steps in the coding process of the unstructured SAP narratives to minimize it. The final limitation was due to the dataset not including demographic information (i.e., gender, age, ethnicity, student ID #, and declared major) in the sample.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings from this study aligned with the existing literature and provide a further understanding of barriers to urban community college students' experience. This study addressed

a gap in the literature, and it sought to examine reasons for student departure at urban 2-year institutions by broadening the understanding of retention-related issues in urban community college settings. Studies related to this issue are sparse and more research in this area is necessary to understand and address the impact SAP policies have on community college students. Nevertheless, further research in this area is an important endeavor given the findings from this study demonstrated how the SAP policy impacted students that experienced mitigating circumstances that were outside their control. More research needs to be conducted on a larger scale to produce generalizable findings. Therefore, it is imperative that rigorous research efforts on student attrition by way of SAP appeal are gathered to strengthen empirical evidence, so policymakers are equipped to make informed changes and address unintended harmful consequences that impede student success.

The findings from this study provided further insight into the challenges urban community college students face whose financial aid eligibility is compromised due to failure to meet Title IV SAP guidelines. Further disaggregation of data focusing on student demographics could be conducted at other urban community colleges. Adding variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, enrollment status (full- or part-time), income status, and employment status, could be examined to investigate and identify particular challenges each subgroup might encounter. Examination of this group could uncover details about different types of supportive programs that are needed to support community college students. It is critical that rigorous research is continued to further uncover how the SAP guidelines could be altered to create equitable policies that sustain financial resources for community college students. Armed with rigorous empirical evidence, policymakers can make informed changes that support student retention and persistence at urban community colleges. Federal, state, and local governments can also make

intentional policy changes to ensure financial aid is sustainable for students who attend 2-year intuitions of higher education that encounter mitigating challenges.

### **P-20 Implications**

This study on trends in student attrition at an urban community college in the southeast region has implications that are relatable to the concepts and student learning outcomes in the P-20 and Community Leadership Doctoral Program at Murray State University. The student learning outcomes for the program include: innovation, diversity, implementation, and leadership. The researcher identified diverse advising services that were inclusive for supporting all students. The collaborative efforts of leadership, faculty, staff, and students is needed to address the compounded environmental issues students reported they encountered by working together to identify solutions that address the complex problems. The researcher using tenants of the P-20 model recommended a relevant continuum of innovative wraparound services that could be utilized to support student success to graduation.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to critically examine how attrition is impacted by SAP at community colleges. The researcher identified reasons for attrition at urban community colleges by reviewing SAP appeals. The findings from this study can be used to reduce student attrition and strengthen student success efforts. This study examined 538 SAP appeals that were submitted during the 2016-17 academic year. The dataset contained appeals submitted during Fall 2016, Spring 2017, and Summer 2017 semesters. The students in this study had compounded mitigating circumstances that caused them to violate multiple SAP guidelines. All the students (100%) in this study failed to meet the Cumulative Earned Percentage guideline.

The researcher found that reasons for attrition in urban community college students align with existing student retention frameworks that identify circumstances that negatively impact the students' ability to maintain progress toward their educational goals. The analysis from this study revealed community college students encounter, (a) economic and (b) personal circumstances that impede them from obtaining their academic goals. However, the most significant discovery from this study was the students identifying the compounding mitigating personal circumstances that caused them not to meet satisfactory academic progress.

In summary, there are no easy answers to combating the urban community college retention dilemma. The findings from this study warrant further discussions among administrators, faculty, staff, and students to uncover and evaluate promising practices that address student attrition issues at community colleges. A commitment by policymakers, college administrators, and practitioners in pledging to continue conducting honest unflinching research is critical to identifying innovative best practices that support coherent educational pathways that sustain student success efforts that lead to graduation.

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