Cumulative Integration of Academically Advanced Honors College Students

Scott Adair

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Cumulative Integration of Academically Advanced Honors College Students

by

Scott Adair

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
Specialization: Post-Secondary Education

Under the supervision of Steve Cox/Landon Clark/Randal Wilson/Ben Littlepage

Murray, KY
October 2017
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Abstract

The study sought to understand what caused, or is causing, Murray State University Honors College students to become successful in post-secondary education. The researcher chose to extend the findings of previous research beyond the freshmen year and focus exclusively on what influences persistence until graduation for second, third, or fourth-year students. While research that influences graduation is not a new idea, emphasis on influential factors that affect upper-level college students remains relatively unexplored. The whole student - consisting of domains that consider social integration, academic integration, intrinsic motivation, and key interactions that intermingle throughout the collegiate journey - was taken into consideration to discover what has prepared these students for cumulative integration to occur. The study provided a qualitative view of how Honors College students at MSU perceive that they have cumulatively integrated into their environment using observations, a focus group, and individual interviews as primary data collection methodologies. The results were transcribed and coded to reveal three dominant domains: community, preparatory experiences, and self-discovery. Findings help to advance research in the area of student success by viewing the whole student and the cumulative integration beyond the freshmen level.
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Chapter I: Introduction

The continual establishment of honors programs exists across the United States. Students are generally required to obtain an American College Testing (ACT) score of 26 or above or a comparable score on another entrance exam such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) to be admitted into an honors college. They must also have a grade point average (GPA) of a 3.5 or above, based on the 4.0 scale, or be within the acceptable top percentage of their high school graduating class (e.g., 10%) (National Collegiate Honors Council [NCHS], 2015). Students are expected to have performed at a high-level academically leading up to their entrance into the honors college as well as display continuance of past success in future performance. Honor students do not accomplished this level of performance alone; the support of teachers, administrators, and parents play an important role.

When considering influence on student performance from the institution perspective, faculty and administrators must work together to form a synergistic relationship where the student feels support. Honors faculty members are often among the best teachers and scholars at the university. The honors faculty also has a genuine interest in developing students through advising, mentoring, and project work (National Collegiate Honors Council [NCHS], 2015). Voorhees (1990) found that academic advising addresses many of the personal, intellectual, social, vocational, and psychological needs of students. As such, the honors college makes great efforts to meet with students more often, discuss current steps, and maintain a focus on future careers so that students continue to progress toward personal goals, a particular job field, or graduate school. The faculty and administration of the honors college can do much to create relationships and help students integrate into the college environment.
The chief purpose of the honors college is not to create a more difficult undergraduate education, but to immerse similar students together in an environment that is marked by higher levels of ideas, discussions, creativity, and excitement. Honors colleges have become a more personalized form of education that is available to a highly responsive group of students. Class sizes, by generally being smaller, support personalization. Honors colleges have on average eighteen students per class; however, some colleges reported larger classes depending on the faculty-to-student ratio (National Collegiate Honors Council [NCHS], 2015). A faculty member’s genuine interest and frequent interactions with students, along with a student’s higher thirst for learning help to nurture relationships and establish an intrinsic sense of curiosity in honors college students.

Context

The focus of universities remains on first-year college students in order to foster a propensity in new students to be as successful as possible. Twenty-eight percent of first-year students enrolled in four-year universities depart at the end of their first year (American College Testing Program, 2012), costing taxpayers an estimated nine billion dollars from 2003-2008 (American Institutes for Research, 2010). The costs to taxpayers are associated with grant money provided to these students, loss of funding that the university would have otherwise received, and high recruiting expenses that did not yield revenue through tuition (Siekpe, & Barksdale, 2013).

Students feel the pressure of many challenges during their years of college. The implementation of strategies such as freshmen orientation and transitions courses are useful to better integrate first-year college students into their new environment. These strategies are much-needed steps that position students to be successful by way of introduction and
navigational tips for the new environment. The underlying intent of the first-year orientation program is to prepare students for academic and social success at their institution (Braxton et al., 2014). The process of preparing the student for success will inherently involve setting straight or confirming notions of what college is or is not, as most students arrive at a university with certain expectations and perceptions. Hellend, Stallings, and Braxton (2002) add that the accuracy of the notions that students hold to be true helps to determine how the student views the institution, either positively or negatively. Braxton et al. (2014) informs the reader that “the greater the student’s initial level of commitment to their college or university, the greater their level of subsequent commitment” (p. 165). Therefore, establishing commitment early in the students’ career is critically important. As such, new students receive ample support so that they will be more likely to continue on their educational journey. Continuance of the educational journey cannot be the only goal since some students may require a focus on efforts that keep them from dropping out, while other students may never drop out, but need a supportive environment to develop their full potential.

First-year students are “retained” if they return in the fall of the next year (B. Stinnett, personal communication, September 22, 2015). The institution’s hope is that the level of commitment established in the student’s first year is enough to develop subsequent commitment in later years. However, support for each year of college changes as one continues the collegiate journey. As freshmen finish their first year, the new incoming freshmen then gain the institution’s supportive efforts provided by events such as freshman orientation, transition, and first-year experiences courses. The now second-year class receives less attention, which can pose problems for some students. Establishing early commitment for college students continues to be a movement in the correct direction and should continue. However, there is more that
institutions can do during the second, third, fourth, and years beyond that - if additional time is required to maintain persistence until graduation.

Colleges should be supportive of students beyond the first year and take proactive steps in supporting student success in every year of the college experience. Literature by Noel, Levitz, and Saluri, 1985; Rosenberg and Czepiel, 1983; and Tinto, 1975 reveals that the cost of retaining an already enrolled student versus recruiting a new one is three to five times more cost-effective, (as cited in Cuseo, 2010). Astin (1975) states that “in four-year institutions, any change that deters students from dropping out can affect three classes of students at once…” (p. 2). As a result, it is more cost-effective to retain students and realize that efforts made for one class, (e.g., second-year students) may affect third and fourth-year students as well. Moreover, retention and success efforts represent a service to the student that will continually increase the student’s level of commitment to the institution.

One of the earliest programs to focus on students beyond the first year was the 1990 *Initiative Program* at Beloit College. The *Initiative Program* focuses on the first four semesters of college, and its purpose is to help students design their own educational path so that they realize the value. A call for additional support throughout the college experience is not a new call for action (Powers, 2008). Tinto (2012) and other authors (Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson, 2009; Gardner and Van der Veer, 1998; Hunter et al., 2010; Schreiner and Pattengale, 2000; Tobolowsky and Cox, 2007) support this notion. These authors suggest taking into consideration the whole student from “entry to completion” (Tinto, 2012, p. 99). Supporting the whole student from entry to completion is difficult. Difficulty increases when considering that all students who have reached the next year of classification, second, third, or fourth-year,
may not actually be at the next level from a maturation, developmental, status, or social standpoint.

Not all students who reach the next year of school may have the ability to continue due to lack of preparation or performance in earlier courses. Students may also experience a phenomenon called the sophomore slump. The sophomore slump is a period that encompasses developmental changes students make as they mature, the need to choose a major that ultimately determines their career, and increased academic demands (Freedman, 1956; Gahagan and Hunter, 2006; Graunke and Woosley, 2005; Lemons and Richmond, 1987; Richmond and Lemons, 1985; and Schaller, 2005). The sophomore slump does not necessarily affect all students, but it is happening to traditional college students (Tinto, 2012). Students who acknowledge challenges in a proactive manner may learn ways to cope with future stresses of the experience in a positive way. The students who are able to cope are then likely to experience personal growth through a sense of resilience (Frasier, 2009).

**Purpose of Study**

The new norm for graduating college on time with a baccalaureate degree is six years. When accounting for first-time, full-time students, 63.6% of students who began seeking a bachelor’s degree at a four-year institution in 2009 graduated from that institution in 2015 (Shapiro, Dundar, Wakhungu, Yuan, Nathan, & Hwang, 2015). The “four-year” degree is taking longer due to increased requirements for remedial courses and additional time consumed by courses that students do not successfully complete. The additional courses that students fail, repeat, or withdraw from average an extra 20.3 credit hours (Douglas-Gabriel, 2014). Because the new norm for graduation is six years, research has begun adjusting retention and dropout figures accordingly. According to the Education Advisory Board (2015), 47.7% of students who
drop out of college will come from first-year attrition. When a baccalaureate degree is earned over a six-year period, the other 52.3% of attrition occurs in the preceding years as follows: 17.9% - second year, 10% - third year, 8.8% - fourth year, 6.3% fifth year, and 9.4% sixth year.

Completion rates are typically low in honors programs since it is easier for students to gain a regular baccalaureate degree and opt out of two requirements for graduating with honors: studying abroad and the senior thesis. Twenty to thirty percent of honors students do not complete the last two requirements. Still, when solely considering Murray State University (MSU) Honors College students, the College touts a 29.2% graduation rate in 2016, five-year completion of the 2011 cohort. The 2016 graduation rate marks a 13.4% increase in graduation rates over the last five years (Edminster, 2016). During an interview with the administration of the Honors College, the researcher learned that 92-93% of students who drop out of the Honors College still complete their degree at MSU (W. Edminster, personal communication, May 8, 2016). The dropout/completion rate is consistent with Cosgrove’s (2004) findings: 82% of honors college dropouts still completed college. When considering that the national graduation rate for students who start and finish at the same institution is 63.6% over six years rather than five, these percentages give a reason for further consideration (Shapiro, et al., 2015).

The Honors College at MSU admits students who are academically advanced. Honors College students are not the only successful students at MSU. However, studying students in the MSU Honors College will allow the researcher to focus on particular characteristics of a certain population in order to answer the research questions. The researcher sought to understand how the academically advanced upperclassmen of MSU perceive that they cumulatively integrate into their environment. Using observations, a focus group, and individual interviews, the whole student, consisting of domains that consider social integration, academic integration, intrinsic
motivation, and key interactions that intermingle throughout the collegiate journey, were taken into consideration to discover what has prepared these students for cumulative integration to occur.

Institutions are in need of this research to observe the fruition of efforts made by the student and for the student. A better understanding of the cumulatively integrative process, as it pertains to the academically advanced honors college student, could result in the need for institutions to mimic the successful environment in other areas. A duplication of the honors college environment may cause the non-honors student population to be the primary beneficiary while organically confirming the effects of the honors college environment. Residual effects from this research may also engender a mentoring, nurturing mindset in the general faculty and staff not yet seen before. Beyond the effects that student success has on the college, this study gains importance when considering how an increase in student success may produce a larger group of intellectually inclined, productive citizens with a zeal for community post-graduation.

**Perspective Guiding Research**

A number of things happen differently within the honors college environment as compared to the non-honors student population: smaller class sizes, active learning, and increased attention from faculty and staff all have a positive effect on student outcomes. This general observation is supported by what is gleaned from research and definitions provided in this study on social and academic integration (Durkheim, 1951; Tinto, 1975; Collins-Gross, 2001, Braxton and Lein, 2000). Students feel valued when provided with the opportunity to participate in decisions that are pertinent to them (Braxton et al., 2014). Recognizing this need, the MSU Honors College established the Honors Student Council to meet each week and discuss, implement, and plan activities and items that are primarily specific to its group (W.
Edminster, personal communication, May 8, 2016). Honors college classes also use a high degree of active learning or “instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing” all the while being within the context of higher-order thinking tasks such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bonwell and Eison, 1991, p. 5). Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000) found that active learning includes the type of questions that faculty ask the class during verbal discussions and on examinations, role-playing, cooperative learning, and debates.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to discover how the academically advanced upperclassmen of MSU perceive that they cumulatively integrate into their environment. The definition of the academically advanced student is a second, third, or fourth-year college student who maintains the status of enrollment in the honors college and is deemed advanced based on educational measurement. Measurements typically include grade point average (on a 4.0 scale), class rank, and standardized tests such as the ACT (Capuana, 1993). The findings in this research are necessary to assist institutions with the development of programs that will help colleges generate student success beyond the freshmen year of college. The researcher approached this study from a qualitative perspective and sought to answer the following research questions in order to formalize a viable conclusion:

**Question 1.** How do the academically advanced upperclassmen use interactions to socially integrate (e.g., daily life, personal needs, campus facilities, clubs, organizations, personal experiences, and student acquaintances)?

**Question 2.** How do the academically advanced upperclassmen use interactions to academically integrate (e.g., faculty, advisors, courses, and libraries)?
Question 3. How are the academically advanced upperclassmen intrinsically motivated to establish and meet their goals?

Scope and Bounds

The primary focus of this study is to discover what is happening or has happened in the lives of academically advanced honors college students to make them successful at the collegiate level. Findings in this study begin to help form an educational experience that can be applied to the non-honors student population yet resemble the benefits of the honors college environment. Findings also support a structure that meets the needs of students who are second, third, or fourth-year students, even though needs continually change from class to class and year to year. Understanding will advance within the administration of institutions that provide structure for the continual improvement of supportive efforts for the student throughout their time of learning.

Significance of the Study

A number of studies (Astin, 1984, 1993; Braxton, 2014; Tinto, 2012; Noldon & Sedlacek, 1998; and Seidman, 1991) on honors and non-honors college students focus on success as it relates to participation, retention, student satisfaction, and gender-related success. Some of the studies reviewed such as Noldon and Sedlacek (1998), Collins-Gross (2001), and Capuana (1993) make comparisons between two or three groups: honors, non-honors, and students who had honors ability, but chose a non-honors route. While studies mentioned have helped research on retention, persistence, and completion arrive at the current level of understanding, the answer to what influences student success defies a single solution. The collegiate environment must look at the cumulative effect of factors that correlate with social and academic integration, and intrinsic motivation, coupled with key interactions that intermingle throughout the collegiate journey. The researcher maintained a comprehensive view of honor students exclusively at MSU
who are at the second, third, or fourth-year of their collegiate journey. The researcher’s observation of the whole student, as it applies to social and academic integration and intrinsic motivation, coupled with key interactions that intermingle throughout the student’s curricular and co-curricular environment, allows efforts to work toward filling this gap in research by identifying a path to success that can be useful to any student.

**List of Definitions**

*Academically Advanced* – second, third, or fourth-year college student who maintains the status of enrollment in the Honors College and is deemed advanced based on educational measurement. These types of measurements typically include grade point average (on a 4.0 scale), class rank, and standardized tests such as the ACT (Capuana, 1993).

*Academic Integration* – a student’s perception of how well their attitudes and values align with those of the formal academic communities of the institution (e.g., faculty, staff, classrooms, and libraries) and a feeling that they are not intellectually secluded from other students (Braxton & Lein, 2000; Collins-Gross, 2001).

*Commitment to College or University* – a student’s level of motivation to persist at a particular college as a result of feeling supported and an alignment of perceptions and expectations about what college is or should be (Braxton, et al., 2014; Hellend, et al., 2002).

*Culture in Higher Education* – the collective, mutually shaping patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups in an institute of higher education and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions on and off campus (Kuh & Whitt, 1988).

*Cumulative Integration* – the degree to which the whole student learns by perceiving and experiencing the influential advantages that arise from the combination of social and academic
integration and intrinsic motivation, coupled with key interactions that intermingle throughout the collegiate journey.

**Honors College Student** - students enrolled in the Honors College at Murray State University. These students must have a 28 ACT, or 3.8 GPA, or be in the top 10% of their graduating high school class (Murray State University, 2015).

**Honors Program or College** – a planned set of arrangements to serve the needs of talented students more adequately than if the matter were left entirely to the initiative of interested individuals (Austin, 1986).

**Institutional Integrity** – congruency between the mission and goals of a college or university and the actions, decisions, and communications of administrators, faculty, and staff (Braxton & Hirschy, 2004; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Braxton et al., 2014).

**Intrinsic Motivation** – discretionary efforts that drive students to engage in the pursuit of academic or social-related behaviors which support student success (Le, Casillas, Robbins, & Langley, 2005, p. 502)

**Satisfaction** – the student’s opinion of how well they fit into the environment of their college based on a set of internal parameters and the reaffirmation of their choice to attend (Collins-Gross, 2001).

**Social Integration** – a student’s perception of their degree of social affiliation with others and their degree of congruency with the attitudes, beliefs, norms and values of the informal social communities of peers at a college or university (e.g., daily life, personal needs, campus facilities, clubs, organizations, personal experiences, and student acquaintances) (Braxton et al., 2014; Durkheim, 1951; Tinto, 1975; Collins-Gross, 2001).
Student Success - the internal synthesis of information gained during a student’s time spent at college and the application of that information in subsequent courses and to the outside world. The immediate end goal is a college student’s perpetuation toward and final completion of a bachelor’s degree.

Whole Student – factors that affect students and are implemented by the institution as they relate to the most prevalent themes found in the literature review: social integration, academic integration, and intrinsic motivation.

Summary

College is a pivotal time in the lives of those who attend, and each year of college presents dynamic challenges. The importance of supporting student success does not pass when students move beyond the first year; rather, each step along the way is significant. Efforts made to build the right foundation for new students are important and should continue; however, support should continue in levels beyond the first year. The observable fruition of efforts made in the lives of a group of highly successful students allowed the researcher to gather strategies that could assist in the proper growth and development of all students despite their needs or academic level.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

Astin (1984) found that “honors program students who participate in honors programs gain substantially in interpersonal self-esteem, intellectual self-esteem, and artistic interests. They are more likely than other students to persist in college and to aspire to graduate and earn professional degrees” (p. 525). While the self-interests identified by Astin (1984) may be influential for honors students as a result of participating in honors programs, areas mentioned tell only part of this phenomenon. The researcher sought to understand what influenced, or is influencing, honors college students to become successful in post-secondary education.

Success in this study is defined as the internal synthetization of information gained during a student’s time spent at college and the application of that information in subsequent courses and to the outside world. The immediate end goal is a college student’s perpetuation toward and final completion of a bachelor’s degree.

There are multiple items that influence success throughout one’s experience in post-secondary education at both an external, institutional level and a personal, individualistic level. Tinto (2012) outlines that if a college or university displays four conditions, high expectations, academic and social support, frequent assessment and feedback about performance, and encouraging active involvement with other students on campus, then students are more likely to succeed. Graunke and Woosley (2005) view success from a connections standpoint and suggest that students at each subsequent year of college may need something similar, but somewhat different to be successful. First-year students need the connections and involvement of first-year programs. Second-year students need to pick an academic major and have satisfaction with faculty interactions to feel connected. Third and fourth-year students have organic connections that occur as a result of participation in their academic major and assuming greater leadership
roles in student activities (Tinto, 2012; Freedman, 1956; Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Lemons & Richmond, 1987; Richmond & Lemons, 1985; Schaller, 2005).

The individualized theory of Chickering and Associates (1981) assumes that no single approach to subject matter, teaching, or resource allocation will work for all students and maintains that curricular content and instructional methods must meet the needs of the individual student. The research questions under investigation are concerned with the combination of influencers that cause integration for students identified as academically advanced at Murray State University. A greater understanding of the process experienced by the academically advanced student helps to identify key areas that produce cumulative integration. The identification of key areas that produce better integration may then be applicable to the non-honors student population in order to produce a similarly integrative environment. The literature review will acquaint the reader with research that specifically focuses on the integration of college students both socially and academically, the weightiness of influential relationships, and intrinsic drive.

**Social and Academic Integration**

The importance of appropriately integrating students into the collegiate environment on both the social and academic fronts has long been studied and proven to be essential for success. When reading the definitions of social and academic integration used in this research, one cannot help but notice that a key difference in the definitions are the words “informal” (social) and “formal” (academic). The academic integration of a student makes use of formal resources to solve formal issues, such as being academically successful, because students enroll in the institution to earn a formal degree. However, the underlying informal social ability of the student determines how well they will be able to navigate the use of formal resources such as
faculty, staff, and libraries. The uses of both social and academic abilities are vitally important and tend to gain influence through student involvement (Astin, 1984; Braxton et al. 2014; Braxton & Lein, 2000; Durkheim, 1951; Tinto, 1975; Collins-Gross, 2001).

Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement suggests that the more involved a student is with their educational program (socially and academically) the higher likelihood of student learning and personal development. The theory later explains that this is only true to a certain point: too much involvement socially or academically can lead to isolation. Braxton et al. (2014) suggests that failing classes is rarely the sole reason why students depart from college. The students’ level of engagement on campus prevails as a determining factor. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) concluded, that based on their review of 20 years of research, “one of the most inescapable and unequivocal conclusions we can make is that the impact of college is largely determined by the individual’s quality of effort and level of involvement in both academic and non-academic activities” (p. 610). Therefore, examining educationally-based student involvement that can be applied inside and outside of the classroom is a viable place to allocate scarce resources when determining desired effects on student success during college.

Social Integration

Braxton et al. (2014) identify social integration as “the student’s perception of their degree of social affiliation with others and their degree of congruency with the attitudes, beliefs, norms, and values of the social communities of a college or university” (p. 139-149). Collins-Gross (2001) identify social integration as “the degree to which the student interacts and utilizes the informal system of the university that focuses on the daily life and personal needs of students, including campus facilities, clubs, organizations, personal experiences, and student acquaintance’s” (p. ix). The definition adopted for this study is a blending of both.
Social integration is the student’s perception of their degree of social affiliation with others and the degree of congruency with the attitudes, beliefs, norms, and values of the informal social communities of a college or university (e.g., daily life, personal needs, campus facilities, clubs, organizations, personal experiences, and student acquaintances). This definition of social integration is not only a perception of how well the student fits into the social environment, but also of how well they feel supported by the institution. Braxton et al. (2014) suggests that the greater a student’s perception of institutional commitment to the welfare of its students, the greater the student’s level of social integration.

Perceptions then begin to take on the characteristics of a symbiotic relationship between the student and institution. Although the student could learn information anywhere, the structures of the institution draw the student to the type of place they perceive a college to be, both physically and mentally. Study habits that make use of an aesthetically pleasing library because it makes the student feel as though they are in college is an example of the perception. The presence of scholarly students and academic communities, so that the college looks and feels like a college, remain a need of the institution and are just as important as the needs of the student. Without the presence of students, a college campus would only be buildings.

Heaney and Fisher (2011) inform the reader that “the more positive students are about their social experience, the more likely they are to stay; however, no single measure of specific participation in sports, Greek organizations, clubs, or other organizations emerged as a significant predictive factor” (p. 73). As suggested by Heaney and Fisher, measuring single factors for significance is not the answer; the entire experience must remain the focus of consideration. Measuring social integration as a factor of how involved students are in Greek life, sports, clubs, causes efforts to miss the point and the allocation of scarce college resources
to be incorrectly applied. These findings give institutions a viable place to start and support the researcher’s mindset of viewing the whole student.

**Socially Influential Perceptions**

Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) present thirteen propositions from Tinto’s (1975) interactional theory, of which three appear to be influential as they relate to social integration: psychosocial engagement, commitment of the institution to student welfare, and institutional integrity. Psychosocial engagement occurs at the level of the individual student and the environment of the university. Psychosocial engagement characteristics that may affect student departure include academic aptitude and skills, motivational states, personality traits, and student development theories. Commitment of the institution to student welfare is the student’s feeling that the institution is committed to his or her best interests; if this is true, the student displays a greater level of social integration. Likewise - with institutional integrity - if the student perceives that the actions of the university coincide with its goals and missions, the student displays a greater level of social integration. The three factors serve as antecedents of social integration and positively influence the line of demarcation. The line of demarcation represents the point at which students in residential colleges and universities tip positively toward integration and subsequent institutional commitment. Taking a closer look at these factors and their underlying causes, the study by Braxton et al. (2014) garners additional strength and reveals actions that ultimately act as influencers on social integration.

**Psychosocial engagement.** Braxton et al. (2014) operationalized psychosocial engagement by stating that it is “the amount of psychological energy students invest in interactions with peers and in participation in extracurricular activities during the fall semester of their first year in college” (p. 168). However, Braxton et al. (2014) do not indicate that
psychosocial engagement was only an experience in the first year. For the purposes of this study, the definition extends to include all other years of college as well. Significant sources of influence on psychosocial engagement are found to be communal potential, cultural capital, and three dimensions of a sense of community in residence halls (e.g., identity, interaction, and solidarity) (Braxton et al., 2014).

**Commitment of the institution to student welfare.** Components that have a positive effect on the student’s view that commitment of the institution to student welfare exists are as follows: faculty interest in students, organizational behavior and fairness, and student reports of good teaching by faculty members (Braxton et al., 2014). An explanation of faculty interest in students, organizational behavior and fairness, and student reports of good teaching by faculty members is presented later in the literature review.

Parental education levels also have an influence on the student’s perception of commitment to the institution and student welfare. Specifically, as a student’s parental education level increases, the students are more likely to hold the view that commitment of their institution to the welfare of students exists (Braxton et al., 2014). The reason that the student’s perception is influenced is due to the parent’s perception of “having been there before” and being able to explain nuances that a parent who has not attended college could not explain. Parents who were non-traditional students will provide a different perception than parents who were traditional college students.

**Institutional integrity.** The definition of institutional integrity that this study uses, as it applies to both social and academic integration is, congruency between the mission and goals of a college or university and the actions, decisions, and communications of administrators, faculty, and staff (Braxton & Hirschy, 2004; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Braxton et al.,
Elements that positively affect the students’ view of institutional integrity are faculty interest in students, satisfying expectations for college, and student’s perception of the lack of prejudice and racial discrimination (Braxton et al., 2014). While there is a level of collinearity between elements that positively influence commitment of the institution to student welfare and institutional integrity, a student’s report of good teaching by faculty members helps to differentiate. An explanation of faculty interest in students is presented later in the literature review.

Organizational behavior is an important factor when considering both institutional integrity and commitment of the institution to student welfare. Berger (2001-2002) defines organizational behavior as the actions of all institutional employees within the view of the student. Institutional employees usually involve faculty, administrators, and staff. Students who view that the proper communication of rules and requirements, the fair administration of rules and requirements, and the opportunity to participate in decisions that are important to students, will hold the view that students are being treated fairly. As such, when this notion increases, so does the impression on the student that the commitment of the institution to student welfare exists (Braxton et al., 2014).

Satisfying expectations for college. Students organically develop expectations and feelings about institutions, particularly their institution of choice, through various information-gathering activities. According to Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999), these information-gathering activities consist of campus visits, talking with admissions counselors, and speaking with college alumni. Depending on the accuracy or confirmation of these expectations, students assert either that the institution displays integrity or does not (Braxton et al., 2014).
**Student perception of prejudice and racial discrimination.** Braxton et al. (2014) found that the greater the level a student perceives that prejudices and discrimination exists at their institution, the more negative the students’ view of the institution. A student who perceives that their university is a prejudice and racially discriminatory environment will then be blind to other efforts made by the institution that positively affects the student. A summary of themes and sources of influence found in the literature review and associated with social integration are located in Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sources of Influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Integration</td>
<td>Psychosocial Engagement</td>
<td>Communal Potential, Cultural Capital, and three dimensions of a Sense of Community in Residence Halls (identity, interaction, and solidarity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commitment of the Institution to Student Welfare</td>
<td>Faculty Interest in Students, Organizational Behavior and Fairness, and Student Reports of Good Teaching by Faculty Members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Institutional Integrity</td>
<td>Faculty Interest in Students, Satisfying Expectations for College, and Student’s Perception of the Lack of Prejudice and Racial Discrimination</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Academic Integration**

Braxton and Lein (2000) identify academic integration as the student’s perception of how well their attitudes and values align with those of the academic communities of the institution and a perception that they do not feel academically secluded. Collins-Gross (2001) identify academic integration as “the degree to which a student interacts with and utilizes the formal academic system of the university, including faculty, staff, classrooms, and libraries” (p. ix). The definition adopted for this study is a blending of both and is defined as a student’s perception of how well their attitudes and values align with those of the formal academic
communities (e.g., faculty, staff, classrooms, and libraries) of the institution and a feeling that they are not intellectually secluded. This definition of academic integration displays a perception of not only how well the student fits into the academic constructs, but also how well they feel supported by the institution.

When the perception of the student increases regarding institutional commitment toward the welfare of its students (a social integration factor), the student’s level of social integration increases. However, this also seems to fit well with academic integration, revealing interdependency. Academic development, intellectual development, and institutional integrity, reveal similar influencers and are important factors here as well (Braxton et al., 2014). The relationship is complete if the need and curiosity of the student to learn works congruently with the willingness of the faculty, staff, and other supporting areas of the institution to provide information.

Braxton et al. (2014) identifies three influential perceptions that tend to coincide with those expressed in the explanation of social integration: academic and intellectual development, commitment of the institution to student welfare, and institutional integrity. Research by (Tinto and Cullen (1973); Hanson and Taylor, (1970); Spady, (1971); Crosnoe, Cavanagh, and Elder (2003)) alludes to a great degree of interchangeability and interdependency when it comes to the importance of social and academic integration. Since influential perceptions coincide between social and academic integration in commuter colleges or residential colleges and universities, the current researcher has applied the academic integration findings of Braxton et al. (2014) to this study. To add strength to this postulation, Braxton and Lien (2000) inform the reader that multi-institutional tests concerning the subsequent commitment of academically integrated students show strong empirical affirmation of the relationship. “Multi-institutional” encompasses
residential institutions, commuter universities, two-year colleges, and unspecified types of four-year colleges and universities in their study.

**Academic and intellectual development.** Antecedents that tend to have a positive effect on the students’ estimation of academic and intellectual development were found to be academic advising, faculty interest in students, faculty teaching skills, the use of active learning practices, and student participation in a learning community (Braxton et al., 2014).

Astin (1993) informs the reader that the amount of time spent studying and doing homework show a positive correlation to academic outcomes such as retention, graduating with honors, enrollment in graduate school, standardized test scores, and self-reported increases in cognitive and affective skills. The strongest effects of time spent studying are on academic development and preparation for graduate school. Other positive correlations included scholarship, social activism, promotion of racial understanding, cleaning up the environment, making a theoretical contribution to science, engineering, and teaching college.

Astin (1993) also mentions other areas of academic involvement that are beneficial to student learning in a general sense: taking honors classes, studying abroad, securing college internships, adapting through racial/cultural awareness workshops, participating in independent research projects, making class presentations, and taking exams that make use of essays. Beyond assisting the student in being academically successful, these added benefits help to strengthen chances that the institution will produce productive, active citizens with a civic mindset.

**Commitment of the institution to student welfare.** Characteristics that have a positive effect on the student’s view of commitment of the institution to student welfare are academic advising, faculty interest in students, and faculty teaching skills (Braxton et al., 2014). While
factors for this antecedent are very similar to those that influence social integration, the similarities prove that the factors are very weighty and should represent a point of focus.

**Institutional integrity.** Possible sources of influence on institutional integrity from an academic standpoint differ somewhat from those mentioned earlier as influences on social integration. Braxton et al. (2014) mentions faculty interest in students, academic advising, and the possession of two faculty teaching skills, organization/preparation, and instructional clarity, as all being possible sources of influence on student’s perceptions of institutional integrity. A summary of themes and sources of influence found in the literature review and associated with academic integration are located in Table 2.

Table 2

*Summary of Themes and Antecedents in Literature Review of Academic Integration*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sources of Influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Integration</td>
<td>Academic and Intellectual Development</td>
<td>Academic Advising, Faculty Interest in Students, Faculty Teaching Skills and Use of Active Learning Practices, and Student Participation in a Learning Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commitment of the Institution to Student Welfare</td>
<td>Academic Advising, Faculty Interest in Students, Faculty Teaching Skills, and Institutional Policies and Practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Institutional Integrity</td>
<td>Faculty Interest in Students, Academic advising, and the Possession of Two Faculty Teaching Skills – Organization/Preparation, and Instructional Clarity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interactions**

One of the themes that has emerged as an underlying feature around both social and academic integration is how important relationships are to student success. Peer groups and faculty interaction are extremely important. Astin (1993) found that faculty represent one of the most significant parts of undergraduate growth and change next to peer groups. Moreover, Astin (1984) found that “if an institution commits itself to achieving maximum student involvement,
counselors and other student personnel workers will probably occupy a more important role in institutional operations” (p. 526). The significance of relationships does not stop with people-to-people interactions, they also include course interaction.

**Course interaction.** The organization and logical placement of courses are vital to student success. Tinto (2012) reveals the importance of course interaction in the preparation of students for future levels of the same subject and/or skills learned that will be used in later unrelated courses. English 101 prepares students for English 102, but also has an influence on other courses that will use skills learned in English 101 and 102. Each course that a student progresses through should prepare them for success in future courses. Likewise, blocks of courses taken together should not only be linked to and support each other, but in the same progressive fashion, should prepare the student for the next semester. A process is then set in place that if uninterrupted, should stay in motion. The result should be that students find coherent pathways that they can follow to completion of their degree or program in an acceptable length of time (Tinto, 2012).

**Peer group interactions.** The most influential interactions in the college environment are peer group interactions (Astin, 1993). Since peer group interactions carry so much importance and the definition of psychosocial engagement is how much energy a person is willing to spend on interactions, special attention should be given to the interplay between peer group interactions and factors that affect psychosocial engagement; specifically learning communities. Psychosocial engagement will then influence how much interaction takes place in those communities.

Tinto (1997, 1998, and 2000) indicates that learning communities involve the same students participating in the same courses at the same time. Participation in learning
communities generates contributions toward a student’s academic and intellectual development in a positive way (Braxton et al., 2014). Participation in learning communities results in peer group interactions that will likely occur during in-classroom interactions and in residence halls.

Community in residence halls is broken down into two dimensions that influence psychosocial engagement: identity and interaction. Expanding on the meaning of those dimensions, identity is the level at which the student views themselves as a member of a community in their residence hall (Braxton et al., 2014), and interaction involves the frequency and intensity of face-to-face interactions among members of that group (Berger, 1997). Identity and interactions influence psychosocial engagement given the student assigns greater degrees of personal identity and importance to the community in their residence halls. Likewise, the more students interact and the higher the quality of those face-to-face interactions, the greater the degree of psychosocial engagement (Braxton et al., 2014).

Braxton, Hirschy, Yorke, and Longden (2004) and Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) looked deeper into the importance of communities and found communal potential. The definition of communal potential is a student’s belief that subgroups exist within the various communities of their institution who hold similar values and beliefs. Because of the mutual situations students experience with their peers in residence halls (Berger, 1997), the classroom (Tinto, 1997, 2000), and student peer groups (Astin, 1993), communal potential is built and acts as an antecedent of psychosocial engagement. Therefore, as a student’s awareness of the existence of these groups grows, their willingness to expend psychological energy on extracurricular activities and social events increases as well (Braxton et al., 2014).

Braxton et al. (2014) also found that a greater level of cultural capital, stemming from a greater level of communal potential, causes students to expend higher levels of psychosocial
energy than those students with lower levels of cultural capital. Bourdieu and Boltanski (1981) refer to cultural activities, one aspect that influences cultural capital, as reading books, attending concerts, plays, and museums. The possession of cultural capital then equips the student with needed knowledge of the social culture that supports assumptions of what to expect in the social environment and builds self-esteem, confidence, and comfort in the social setting. The high level of cultural capital then influences participation in a wide range of extracurricular activities and social events (Braxton et al., 2014).

**Cultural capital and peer group influence.** Tinto (1975) asserts that the environment thrust upon the student, family background, individual attributes, and pre-college schooling experiences, greatly influences the student as they enter college. The environment that the student has exposure to influences the student’s level of persistence as well as initial commitments to the institution. The student’s initial commitment to the institution then helps to set the stage for future achievements, such as the goal of graduation, and influences the level of integration into the social and academic environments of the institution. Braxton et al. (2014) state:

Students who enroll with a positive affinity for the college or university are more likely to stay enrolled. A student who has a strong commitment to the institution upon enrolling is more likely to perceive that the college or university is committed to the welfare of its students and that the institution acts with integrity (pp. 47-48).

A strong factor that influences a students’ ability to establish desired levels of commitment to the institution is determined by the level of cultural capital that a student has.
French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s work (as cited in Braxton, et al., 2014) in social reproduction helped advance the concept of cultural capital. Bourdieu sought to explain the unequal social opportunities and educational outcomes of children from different social classes and to describe the reproduction of existing social class structure. Bourdieu found that children inherit attitudes, preferences, and mannerisms, that tend to differentiate one class of people in society from another, from their parents. Inherent items are viewed as forms of cultural and social capital which assist in social gain. The efficiency of integration will likely depend on the environment from which one came compared to the environment into which one wishes to integrate.

Berger (2000) extends Bourdieu’s (1977) cultural capital to departure from college. He explains that college students who hold higher levels of cultural capital are more likely to maintain the determination required to continue their educational journey across all types of institutions than students with less access to cultural capital. Students with higher levels of cultural capital also have fewer problems integrating into the social environments of institutions if those institutions had correspondingly high levels of organizational cultural capital. The most likely reasoning is that these students tend to expend greater levels of psychosocial energy participating in cultural capital activities, reading books, attending concerts, and visiting museums, which helps to further develop and reinforce an appreciation for similar preferences as those of their parents. Higher levels of cultural capital in students will also produce advanced levels of self-esteem, social confidence, and the willingness to participate in extracurricular activities and interactions with other students. These students are comfortably able to navigate new terrain and are adept in social knowledge, mannerisms, and attitudes (Braxton et al, 2014).
The cultural capital instilled by parents can influence more than their children, it may also influence the student’s peers. Astin (1993) informs the reader that the peer group is the most powerful influence on an undergraduate’s academic and personal development. The peer group’s strongest positive effects include leadership and academic development, problem-solving skills, critical thinking, and exposure to different kinds of culture which creates cultural awareness. Peer groups also had a positive effect on cultural capital activities such as attending recitals or concerts.

Student-to-student interaction also helps to lower feelings of being depressed, that individuals cannot change society, and that the chief end of college it to make more money. Astin (1993) goes on to tell the reader that the values, attitudes, self-concept, and socioeconomic status of the peer group are far more important in determining how individual students will develop than are the peer group’s abilities, religious orientation, or racial composition. Should parents start by instilling deep-rooted values that create an environment at home which has a positive, intellectual view of growth of self, college, and the greater good of all people, then the correct foundation can be built, and the propensity for peers to positively influence a fellow student will increase.

External influences obviously influence student success, even contributing success to the company that students keep. Crosnoe, et al. (2003) found that students who have friends who are academically oriented or enjoy school have fewer academic problems and can be a source of social capital. Gerrity, Lawrence, and Sedlacek (1993) also mention that living and learning environments where high achieving students can have social interactions with other high achieving students may offer the best of both worlds. This finding is parallel, at a very general level, to “the Laws of Thermodynamics, in that given enough time, a body will assume the
temperature of its surroundings and, therefore, radiate away as much energy as it receives” (Ross, 1991, p. 32). Not only will students become more balanced with the company they keep in terms of motivation, likes and dislikes; good or bad, they will also start to emit the same energy they receive from their surroundings.

**Faculty interactions.** Frequent faculty/student interactions are some of the most influential factors in determining college satisfaction. Next to peer groups, faculty have the most significant impact on student's undergraduate development (Astin, 1993). Benefits of interactions appear to increase with frequency and do not reveal a negative return beyond any arbitrary number of meetings; no maximum limit. According to Komarraju, Musulkin, and Bhattacharya (2010), interactions seem to be beneficial to both student and faculty who place value on the opportunity to know each other better.

Seemingly as important as frequency and types of interactions are the aspects of interactions. Approachability, respect, interaction outside the classroom, and career development are the most influential concerning self-confidence, motivation, and achievement (Komarraju et al., 2010). Students who interact frequently are more likely to express satisfaction with their institutional experience in the areas of friendships, course variety, intellectual environment, and management of the institution (Astin, 1984). Astin (1993) also presented four areas where faculty-student interaction has an impact on student success: academic attainment outcome, intellectual and personal growth, behavioral outcomes, and career outcomes. The findings by Astin (1993) and Komarraju et al. (2010) compliment the findings in each study and indicate the importance of faculty interactions with students.

Astin (1993) went on to note the benefits and drawbacks found in the four areas where faculty-student interaction has an impact on student success.
• Academic attainment: college GPA, degree attainment, graduating with honors, and enrollment in graduate or professional schools.

• Every self-reported area of intellectual and professional growth, as well as three life goals: promoting racial understanding, participating in cleaning up the environment, and making a theoretical contribution to science.
  
  o Negative effects mentioned were on the belief that the defining reason for college was to increase one’s earning power.

• Behavioral outcomes: tutoring other students, election to student office, attending recitals or concerts, and participating in campus demonstrations. Significant positive effects were mentioned on the perceptual outcomes of diversity orientation and social change orientation.

• Career outcomes: choosing a career in college teaching, career choices, and major field choices. These interactions did not assist in career choices that included fields in engineering and had negative effects on careers or majors in business (Student-Faculty Interaction, para. 2-5).

Evidence supports the notion that students who engage with full-time, tenure-track professors tend to experience more success in college (Ehrenberg & Zhang, 2005). A study by the Department of Education (1984) revealed that more frequent interactions relate more strongly to satisfaction in college with courses, the intellectual and social environments, and the college’s administration, than any other type of involvement. Spady (1971) found that social integration and intellectual development both increase as interactions between students and faculty increase. Gamson (1966) and Vreeland and Bidwell (1966) argue that student interaction with faculty is even more important in the student’s major area due to the potential impact on future
occupational opportunities (as cited in Tinto & Cullen, 1973). Finding ways to increase faculty-student interaction may be advantageous for most colleges and universities (Astin, 1984).

**Student perceptions of faculty.** Braxton et al. (2014) identifies faculty interest in students as an important factor that supports the student’s view of the commitment of the institution to student welfare. This particular antecedent is a factor in two different perceptions that influence academic integration and as a component that influences social integration. Braxton, Bray, and Berger (2000) also identify faculty teaching skills as being an element that positively influences as well. Faculty teaching skills have an influence on two different perceptions for academic integration and allude to an effect on social integration through student reports of good teaching by faculty members. A student’s report of good teaching is a result of good teaching by faculty and a continuous concern for student growth and development by placing a high value on the students themselves. Students develop a reciprocal perspective of the faculty member and institutional sincerity when they take courses taught by the faculty member (Braxton et al., 2014), so these perspectives from each side of the relationship cause perpetuation.

An additional teaching skill that has proven beneficial, as revealed by the literature, is the use of active learning practices and their positive influence on student perceptions. As mentioned earlier, active learning defined by Bonwell and Eison (1991) is “instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing” all the while being within the context of higher-order thinking—tasks such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (p. 5). Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000) found that active learning includes the type of questions faculty ask the class during verbal discussions and on examinations, role-playing, cooperative learning, and debates. However, the internal orientation of faculty may
determine whether they are more research or student-focused and as a result, influence the use of active learning.

The orientation of faculty significantly influences interactions and impressions and thus perceptions of students. Astin (1993) reviewed two types of faculty: research-oriented and student-oriented. Research-oriented faculty tend to focus on publication rates, time spent conducting research, and personal commitment to research and scholarship. Student-oriented faculty are most concerned with student development. Faculty who are research-oriented have a negative effect on student satisfaction, quality of instruction, leadership development, growth of interpersonal skills, college GPA, and completion of the bachelor’s degree. Faculty who are student-oriented have a positive effect on students earning a bachelor’s degree, intellectual self-esteem, academic development, and leadership. The study goes on to note that faculty orientation seems to stem from the university’s focus; those who hire mainly research-oriented faculty will pay little attention to effective undergraduate teaching strategies and vice versa.

The greater the student senses that faculty members have a real, genuine interest in students, the greater the view the student has that commitment of the institution to student welfare exists (Braxton et al., 2014). Simply showing a continuous concern for student growth and development and placing a high value on the students themselves were two key aspects of the commitment of the institution to student welfare (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). Therefore, it is an uninformed idea to believe that the student-teacher relationship is not an important factor in influencing student perceptions positively or negatively. Because the student-teacher relationship is so important, recruitment and hiring of good faculty members is crucial. The overall result is that faculty can have the greatest impact on students’ perceptions if faculty are organized, prepared, teach with instructional skill and clarity, and teach from a
student-oriented mindset. With such great influence, faculty and other institutional personnel who are in contact with students should constantly prepare for interactions in order to make the most of those moments.

**Faculty preparation for class.** Braxton, Bray, and Berger (2000) found that two measures of students’ impressions of faculty carried some of the most influence on social integration and subsequent institutional commitment: organization, preparation and instructional skill and clarity. Interestingly enough, the findings on faculty’s influence reveal that the presence of these in-classroom feelings, organization and preparation and instructional skill and clarity, influences the students’ desire to persist at an institution. The greater the level of a student’s perception that organization, preparation, and instructional skill and clarity exist, the greater the likelihood that students will become socially and academically integrated, committed to the institution, and return the following semester or year.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) also expressed that organization, preparation, and instructional clarity play an important role when enhancing student clarity in learning. The use of activities that involve the student’s mind on the subject matter while using avenues outside of the normal routine also enhances student learning. The reported level of academic and intellectual development increases once the student realizes the characteristics of organization, preparation, and instructional clarity are present. Moreover, students who experience these basic teaching skills need to spend less time and energy trying to understand in-class instruction. As a result, psychosocial engagement increases because they have more time to do so. Developmental opportunities for faculty who are weak in instructional skill are available so that weak skills can become stronger and new skills can develop.
Continual faculty preparation is of pivotal importance when influencing student success. Professors should not simply deliver information to students by means of pontification, but should use instructional methods that employ active, participative learning to engage the student. An enhanced level of preparation is available for faculty who choose to make use of the Office for Teaching and Learning. One of the functions of an Office for Teaching and Learning is to enhance the teaching skills among faculty. Methods for enhancing teaching skills may be the use of meetings, seminars, on-campus conferences, mentoring programs, individual consultations, and targeted grants (Tinto, 2012). Faculty learning through the channels mentioned is very much like student learning with their peers.

One promising method is learning communities for faculty. Very similar to learning communities for students, faculty members work together and hold active conversations over a period of time in order to become more effective. Also, very similar to the integration of students is an institution’s on-boarding process for new professors and their continual development. The on-boarding process usually involves a certain number of elements that one must complete in the first three months, or even the first year of employment, to orientate the new faculty member. On-boarding processes for new faculty may include being required to take in-person or on-line developmental courses, being involved in a cohort style learning community, or attending weekend retreats (Tinto, 2012). While methods vary from institution to institution, an effective on-boarding process should exist to help faculty become successful. Similar to student support in later years of college, faculty development and support should be continual.

The impact of faculty preparation has facilitated widespread investment in faculty and staff development. Studies also suggest that faculty preparation will increase faculty’s
engagement with other faculty on campus. Cohort or learning community models that require ongoing faculty interaction for a prolonged period add additional strength. Faculty and students benefit in much the same way when learning together. However, there are few studies that connect faculty development to student outcomes. The few studies that do make these connections (Braxton Bray, and Berger, 2000; McShannon 2002; Bothell and Henderson, 2004) mention a number of ways to make impacts. The authors mention that through influencing the teaching practices of faculty, student behaviors and learning satisfaction with the classroom experience is impacted (Tinto, 2012).

Advisor interactions. Another form of interaction that is beneficial for student success is student-advisor interaction. Historically, advising consisted of faculty telling students what courses to take in order to graduate and included very little else. Advising now takes on a different form and is viewed as much more important to academics, and ultimately, career planning. Academic advising is a student’s communication opportunity with an advisor, where “students realize their maximum educational potential” and make decisions on their education (Grites, 1979, p. 1). Opportunities to communicate with the student about their collegiate journey directly influences the student’s academic and intellectual development. The service of academic advising reveals to the student that the institution places a high value on the development and growth of the individuals attending that institution (Braxton et al., 2014). Effective advising for all students is essential and must align with the advising coming from the student’s program of study.

Ineffective advising can be detrimental. According to Tinto (2012), between 50 – 60% of students change their major at least once, some of those more than once. A review of students who dropped out of college reveals that even though some of these were third and fourth-year
students, they did not have enough credit hours to graduate because they had changed majors more than once. When students find themselves in these situations, ineffective advising is often the case. Lewallen (1993) found that the ability to receive good advice is critically important for all students, but especially for those who are changing majors or are undecided in regards to their major. When advice is unavailable, it essentially undermines the process of successfully completing a college degree, lowers motivation, increases the likelihood of departure, and lengthens the time to complete a degree for those who may change majors (Tinto, 2012). A series of “red flags” must be available to keep students out of dangerous situations that may impede graduation. Methods of keeping students out of dangerous situations are represented by the close relationships of faculty and advisor, peer and advisor, and advisor to advisor.

A study by Seidman (1991) of community college students found that three advisement sessions during the first semester which covered topics such as scheduling and social and academic involvement caused students to persist at a rate 20% higher than those students who only participated in the college orientation program. Metzner (1989) also revealed that advising improves the attainment of full-time students and was especially influential for those students who entered with academic deficiencies. Additionally, a study by Bahr (2008) at a public university, found that student’s satisfaction with the quality of advice received is positively associated with higher GPAs during the first year. Since these findings remain consistent across community and public universities, there is no reason to believe that this information is not viable despite this study’s primary focus on four-year comprehensive universities.

The frequency of advising will vary student to student and campus to campus. Consequently, skilled advising professionals who possess abilities not typically found in faculty are required. Indeed, certain at-risk groups, first-generation college students and students with
academic deficiencies, will require more advice than others (Tinto, 2012). Faculty can do much to influence the whole student, but advisors still play an important role. Overall, students need a map for success and cannot effectively navigate alone having not been through all the steps of a college education before. A summary of themes and sources of influence found in the literature review and associated with interactions are located in Table 3.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sources of Influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactions</td>
<td>Course</td>
<td>Course should build on each other and prepare the student for the next step.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peer Group</td>
<td>Learning Communities, Cultural Capital, and Peer Group Influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>Frequency and Types of Meetings with Students and Approachability of Faculty as Viewed by the Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advisor</td>
<td>Meeting with Advisor in Addition to Meeting with Faculty, Satisfaction in Quality of Advice, Alignment with Advice coming from Faculty and Staff in Academic Program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Intrinsic Drive**

An additional, albeit less prevalent theme in the literature, revealed that when the root of a person’s drive to succeed comes from an intrinsic drive to persist, there will be few external factors that can preclude them from meeting their goals. Le, Casillas, Robbins, and Langley (2005) found that after controlling for traditional predictors of performance, high school GPA, ACT, and SAT, three psychosocial constructs remain valid: academic self-efficacy, achievement motivation, and academic goals. Self-efficacy helps effectively explain this internal motivation and is suitable for this research.
Self-efficacy is a person’s belief in their ability to accomplish a specific task and exert control over motivation and behavior (Bandura, 1997). The intrinsic belief that one can obtain a specific goal does not likely appear instantaneously nor purely from one’s own volition, but by relationships built with mentoring faculty, encouragement from parents, friends, and other peers, and a focus on long-term future goals. DeFreitas and Bravo Jr. (2012) found that relationships and encouragement in this context boost one’s self-efficacy as the source is derived from “vicarious learning or modeling and verbal persuasion” (p. 2). Once a student experiences success, the student’s confidence level (self-efficacy) should increase and continuation of success remain more probable. There is a direct link between higher self-efficacy and higher grades for college students, even when previous performance and the student’s abilities were controlled (Choi, 2005; Elias & MacDonald, 2007; Kitsantas, Winsler & Huie, 2009).

One of the external factors of self-efficacy, being told you are smart, has been studied by several authors, most notably Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) and Rosenthal (1994) and deemed the Pygmalion Effect. The Pygmalion Effect is a person’s tendency to live up to the expectations placed on them. During their study, Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) told teachers that they should expect dramatic intellectual growth from certain students. As a result, teachers held those students to higher expectations and those students made greater gains on intelligence tests than other children (Hackman, & Johnson, 2013). Scott (1962) is noted in the study to have found a caveat; he found that there are critical periods where students are more malleable for such influences; fifth grade students may not show the same effects after one year of application as first and second graders do (as cited in Rosenthal, & Jacobson, 1968).

The Pygmalion Effect, or the strength of the effect in early years may not be as present in college students, but the effects of a culture built on high expectations set by parents and
teachers, along with enrollment in advanced placement classes, has nonetheless had an effect in a cumulative fashion. McCoach and Siegle (2003) found that even underachieving gifted students who had the label of “gifted” held themselves to higher academic self-perceptions which served to protect the student’s feeling of self-worth whether those students performed at levels of their ability or not. A summary of themes and sources of influence found in the literature review and associated with intrinsic drive are located in Table 4.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sources of Influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic Drive</td>
<td>Academic Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>Relationships, Encouragement, and Advising Faculty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Summary**

Integration of college students defies a single solution and therefore must take a broader approach when seeking to understand the process individuals experience when integrating into the collegiate environment. The predominant themes found in the literature review give reason to believe that key interactions between courses, faculty, peers, and advisors influence social and academic integration and intrinsic motivation. Specifically considering social and academic integration, the ability to integrate reduces to the common factors of relationships in one’s social life and to curiosity, and motivation in academics. A better understanding of the cumulative process could result in a greater number of students achieving success in college because they are nurtured in a way that fosters greater integration.

Beyond the realization of the common factors, student success is determinable by what one does with their relationships, curiosity, and motivation. Student success is not simply associated with graduating and gaining a degree, although a tendency remains to aspire to that
goal. Student success is attaining the goal of graduation, but also gaining skills and developing strengths that will improve abilities in post-baccalaureate endeavors, engender a productive citizen, and create a value-adding employee in the work environment. The ultimate determination of student success is then a cumulative effect of experiences of the individual in any given situation.

There are certain advanced student populations who have a better accumulation of experiences than the general population, but there may be ways to instill those traits in other groups. Examining Honors College students at MSU allowed the researcher to study the key factors of social and academic integration and intrinsic motivation, coupled with key interactions that intermingle throughout the collegiate journey and are common within this successful population of students. A focus on these three areas has helped further understanding on how academically advanced second, third, or fourth-year college students use social and academic interactions and intrinsic motivation to cumulatively integrate.
Chapter III: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to understand the process of cumulative integration for academically advanced students at the collegiate level. The definition of an academically advanced student is the second, third, or fourth-year college student who maintains the status of being a member of the MSU Honors College social and academic culture. The research questions seek to determine the causes of success as they relate to the whole student. The literature review reveals themes that seem to be most common when considering successful integration: social and academic integration, and intrinsic motivation, coupled with key interactions that intermingle throughout the collegiate journey. The cumulative effect is, therefore, a complex phenomenon that requires a broad perspective. Ritchotte, Suhr, Alfurayh, and Graefe (2016) suggest that:

IQ scores only explain 25% to 36% of the variance in grade point average (GPA).

This leaves well above half of the variance that must be accounted for by other factors. Reis and McCoach (2000) posited that this additional variance may be explained by factors that are psychosocial in nature. Assessing these additional factors can help educators see the “whole child…” (pp. 25-26).

As a result, the need to observe the whole student takes on greater importance as findings reveal that single factors cannot attribute to consistent student success. Understanding the “whole student” entails any factor that effects social and academic integration, and intrinsic motivation, coupled with key interactions that intermingle throughout the collegiate journey. Factors weighing on students cannot be turned on and off at will; everything in a student’s life could affect their collegiate career. Researchers can no longer only measure items that are highly influential factors such as IQ scores or particular motivational factors. The researcher posits that
a viable place to start is identifying a combination of factors that are most prevalent in order to identify common themes among successful students. The following three research questions guide the research:

Question 1. How do the academically advanced upperclassmen use interactions to social integrate (e.g., daily life, personal needs, campus facilities, clubs, organizations, personal experiences, and student acquaintances)?

Question 2. How do the academically advanced upperclassmen use interactions to academically integrate (e.g., faculty, advisors, courses, and libraries)?

Question 3. How are the academically advanced upperclassmen intrinsically motivated to establish and meet their goals?

All analytic approaches used in this study are well-known qualitative research techniques. Qualitative research focuses on social inquiry in an effort to gain clarity on how people perceive the world around them (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). A qualitative approach was chosen due to the broad perspective of determining factors that affect the whole student. Data gathering made use of observations, a semi-structured focus group meeting, and individual interviews to triangulate and cause data to reach saturation. The researcher was especially interested in second, third, or fourth-year students. Methods took a phenomenological approach, coupled with partial participant observation of the group. Framework analytics served as a viable means for analysis of data. Validation methods followed four criteria used to judge the soundness of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Colleges and students at most institutions will benefit from the findings in this study, with the exception of strictly online institutions. Online institutions could benefit through a synthesized version of the findings; however, that is not within the scope of this research.
Research Design

Everything in research is data, the source of the data does not matter (observations, interviews, or documents) what matters is what is being told, how it is being told, the condition it is being told in, and the data surrounding what is being told (Glaser, 2001). Researchers should always include informal data gathering techniques, hanging out, casual conversations, and incidental observations as data. The recording of less formal data should appear as memos or in field journals and treated as any other data in regards to interpretation and validity threats (Maxwell, 2013). Convenience sampling of a portion of the second, third, or fourth-year Honors College population at MSU was required in order to observe student success as it applies to this context.

The researcher chose to use a phenomenological perspective in this qualitative study. According to Van Manen (1997), an engaged phenomenological perspective is one that allows more light to be shed on the understanding of the significance of everyday experiences because they engage with their own lived experiences in their professional fields. An individual must be in the same environment as those interviewed, holding the same label, second or third-year, president, treasurer, successful, unsuccessful, and enduring the same struggles to gain a true perspective of the phenomenon. The researcher became a part of the culture enough to realize somewhat of a lived experience view of this phenomenon since the researcher attended MSU as an undergraduate and was a current doctorate student at the same institution. The researcher was unable to witness a true opinion from an engaged phenomenological perspective due to not holding all the same prerequisites such as: age, member of the MSU Honors College, or being an undergraduate. As such, partial participant observation was the primary method for gathering data during observations. The word “partial” appears when describing the use of participant
observation because the researcher was unable to fully integrate into the environment as an actual MSU Honors Student. Strict participant observation would require acceptance of the researcher as part of the culture to ensure a true, unaltered observation of the natural phenomenon (Trochim, 2006). However, using this method in the capacity available did allow for a greater understanding and significance of common, everyday experiences.

**Setting and Background**

The setting for this study was the Honors College at MSU. The Honors College began as the Honors Program in 2008 with 88 students enrolling. The Honors Program has grown six out of eight years since inception pertaining to incoming enrollment; however, total enrollment has continued to increase each year with 405 total students in 2015. In fall of 2015, the Honors Program became the Honors College, which allowed for an increase in staff and resources. The Honors College now serves 5% of the undergraduate student population at MSU.

There are certain characteristics of honors colleges that tend to help foster increased support. Honors colleges have on average 18 students per class; however, some colleges reported larger classes depending on the faculty to student ratio (National Collegiate Honors Council [NCHS], 2015). Active learning is also an integral part of the honors college. Bonwell and Eison (1991) define active learning as “instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing” all the while being within the context of higher-order thinking tasks such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (p. 5). Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000) found that active learning includes the type of questions faculty ask the class during verbal discussions and on examinations, role-playing, cooperative learning, and debates. Finally, honors faculty are often among the best teachers and scholars at the university and maintain a genuine interest in developing students through advising, mentoring, and project work.
The administrators of honors colleges make great efforts to meet with students more often and discuss current steps with future careers in mind, as compared to the general population. Using this method, relationships prosper and students integrate into the environment more effectively. Faculty’s genuine interest in students, frequent faculty interaction, and a higher thirst for learning, are all contributing factors that nurture the intrinsic sense of curiosity that honors college students hold.

**Population and Sample**

The researcher collected data from Honors College students at MSU. Students accepted into the Honors College at MSU have certain requirements placed on them that are not required of the non-honors student population. Admittance into an honors college typically requires students to have a high ACT score (26 or above) or a comparable score on another entrance exam (SAT), and a GPA that is 3.5 or above (based on the 4.0 scale) or be within the acceptable top percentage of their high school graduating class (e.g., 10%) (National Collegiate Honors Council [NCHS], 2015). The chief purpose of the honors college is to immerse similar students together in an environment that is marked by higher levels of ideas, discussions, creativity, and excitement. Honors colleges have become a more personalized form of education that is available to a highly responsive group of students. Class sizes support personalization by generally being smaller. Honors College students are not the only successful students at MSU; however, studying students in the MSU Honors College allowed the researcher to focus on particular characteristics of a certain population in order to answer the research questions.

Participants in the focus group and individual interviews were with second, third, or fourth-year students who were currently enrolled in the Honors College at MSU. Students were classified as a second, third, or fourth-year based on years spent in college or credit hour accrual.
The researcher chose to exclude freshmen level students from the focus group and individual interviews, although they could not be excluded from observation events. First-year students were excluded where possible so that the effects of success influenced by freshmen related intervention, (e.g., college success skills taught in the first year are more memorable earlier on in college rather than later along) could be mitigated.

The researcher’s focus was on a particular group of students who attend Honors Student Council meetings at MSU, a sample size of 30-40 students (approximately 10% of the total Honors College population). Students who attend the meetings provide an adequate representation of the entire Honors College and provide a convenient sample. Bias can be associated with samples of convenience: however, those examples usually involve people who are under the influence of the researcher, in this case, the researcher had no influence on any participant (Patten, 2007). Second, third, and fourth-year students were given an equal chance to participate in observations, interviews, and the focus group.

To increase participation, the researcher chose to integrate into the environment. Observations helped to advance integration by giving the researcher a reason to attend Honors Student Council meetings and multiple regularly scheduled Honors College classes taught by three different Honors College professors. Integration took place before the focus group meeting or individual interviews. The attendance of the observer in each setting had the added benefit of building relationships. Because of building relationships, the researcher was seemingly able to mitigate the negative, anxious perceptions that a “new person” sometimes causes and inspire 46% of students in attendance at an Honors Student Council meeting to agree to attend the focus group. The researcher’s integration prior to the actual focus group meeting also served as an aid to increase the richness of the focus group discussion.
The focus group meeting involved students who attend Honors Student Council meetings and were members of the Honors College. Input from the primary sample revealed that the optimum time and place for the focus group meeting was not directly after Honors Student Council meetings due to the high involvement in and the mandatory practice of an annual extracurricular event. The researcher held the focus group meeting on a different, mutually agreed upon date and time. Due to the flexibility of both participants and researcher, 81% of students who said they would attend were present as participants. Further analysis of those who did not attend revealed that 6% were first-year students, 6% were no-shows, and 6% arrived at the meeting too late to participate.

A clear advantage to using a focus group is that it allows the researcher to understand how respondents’ answers may change based on the social or the individual context. Focus groups generally occur until data reaches the point of saturation. Data saturation is the point at which adding more participants does not produce new information (Patten, 2007) or an adequate percentage of the eligible sample size has been utilized. The sample size is dependent on the type of study, Morse (1994) suggests 30 to 50 participants for an ethnography study while Creswell (1998) suggest 20 to 30 interviews for grounded theory and five to 25 for a phenomenological study. Due to the phenomenological approach of this study, the ideal sample size was 13 students.

Individual interviews took place immediately after observations and the focus group meeting so that respondent’s thoughts were fresh. Participants were chosen based off of common themes (first to go to college, supportive family, extrovert or introvert, changed major multiple times, and perceived as wise in their social group) that emerged after transcribing notes from observations and the focus group meeting. Questions used during individual interviews
were a reflection of the themes that emerge as a result of transcription. Individual interviews serve as a means to triangulate the data and find nuances that may be more difficult to discover in a group setting. The ideal sample size was five students.

**Data Collection**

The researcher collected all data, serving as the observer, interviewer, and examiner of artifacts. The researcher spent time in direct contact with participants, and tried to stay as close to the data as possible to gain a full understanding. The researcher used a semi-structured methodology during the focus group and individual interviews where direct interaction and guiding questions were used. Questions used to guide the focus group and individual interviews, as well as literature supported characteristics used during observations, are found in Appendices A, B, and C.

The benefit of the semi-structured methodology is that guiding questions are present; however, topical interjections are permissible which stray from the guide when necessary and allow discussions that may not have taken place in a more structured environment (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The researcher was cognizant of comments and facial expressions while a phenomenological approach was used to emphasize a focus on participants’ subjective experience and interpretations. The liberal addition of comments and facial expressions that either agree or disagree with focus group participants’ answers could skew the data.

The researcher developed the research questions after reviewing themes from the literature about successful influences on students. Interview question design made use of the Questions and Methods Matrix suggested by Maxwell (2013) in which the researcher assessed coherency and compatibility with the study. The Questions and Method Matrix required the researcher to ask, “why you want to collect and analyze the data in the way you propose and
what you will learn from this” (p. 120). The researcher then examined connections between methods and questions and displayed these answers in a matrix. Interview and focus group questions used to answer the guiding research questions, were written as open-ended, behavioral interview questions to provide a greater likelihood of rich answers from respondents. Questions were situated in a way that followed themes found in the literature and flowed smoothly from one to the next. Secondary questions served as subordinate points where further clarification or data mining was necessary.

The observation method chosen was that of partial participant observation and took place before any other data collection. The use of field notes allowed the researcher to log themes and other data deemed relevant in order to build an understanding of the Honors College environment. The researcher was able to integrate into the observable culture to ensure a stricter participant observation of the natural phenomenon. The presence of the researcher during observations allowed students to acclimate to a new individual in the environment and influenced genuine participant responses to questions during the focus group meeting and individual interviews (Trochim, 2006).

Faculty and key participants received an initial notification of the researcher’s future presence in classrooms and meetings through an email sent by the Honors College point persons. The researcher then personally met with each faculty member who agreed to allow the researcher into their classroom. Personal meetings took place before classroom observations began. The researcher then began attending regularly scheduled classes and Honors Student Council meetings. After allowing a suitable time for acclimation, the researcher personally asked students to participate in focus group meetings to be held after Honors Student Council meetings. The researcher described the objective and assured their confidentiality in participating, as well
as the anonymity of their responses. A one-page consent letter was given to all participants and those volunteering were asked to read the consent letter and sign a copy. The consent letter is included in Appendix D. The researcher, in accordance with IRB protocol, has retained materials (recordings, consent forms, and transcriptions) in a password protected, electronic location. Destruction of all paper copies occurred after documents were stored on the researcher’s PC. Federal regulations require the researcher to maintain these documents or resources for three years once the study is complete.

The researcher made use of a personal recording device to record the responses of participants during the focus group and individual interviews. A significant benefit of recording responses is that it allowed the researcher to be more involved in the conversation without worrying as much about writing notes. Storage for transcribed recordings are in a Word document to allow for color-coding and sorting of information based on themes.

The researcher also made use of the personal recording device to record his own thoughts. Once each data collection method was complete, the researcher recorded thoughts in an audio format. All data collection methods were transcribed for coding.

**Data Analysis**

As an alternative to more traditional quantitative-oriented criteria, this study made use of four criteria used to judge the soundness of qualitative research, proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The criteria cover four areas; credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Due to the qualitative nature of the data and methods, the establishment of credibility was apparent through the level of acceptance gained by the researcher in this educational environment. Transferability was confirmed by the generalized nature of the area of concern; increasing the graduation and success of college students. Dependability was shown
through the triangulation of data via the distribution of similar feedback among students whether in a group setting or otherwise. External auditing was also used to ensure that themes noted in the data by the researcher were also apparent to individuals outside the study (Cohen, & Crabtree, 2006). Confirmability was also apparent after a reviewing of notes and judgments made about potential bias or distortion (Trochim, 2006). Member checking was utilized to rule out the possibility of misinterpretation and identify bias or misunderstandings (Maxwell, 2013).

A framework analysis of the data proved to be the natural form of progression. According to Gale, Heath, Cameron, Rashid, and Redwood (2013), a framework analysis involves transcription and reading of the data, familiarization, identifying a thematic framework from emergent issues, coding to identify specific data that corresponds to themes, charting using headings from thematic framework, and interpretation through searching for patterns and associations in the data.

Notes taken in observations and recordings from the focus group and individual interviews were all transcribed immediately. A separate set of journalized memos were kept so that insights which occurred during transcriptions were not lost. Transcriptions involved the researcher listening to audio recordings of meetings and typing notes into a Word document. When all notes were transcribed, the researcher read data from each collection method separately and on different days so to have a clear and objective process. After a thematic framework was observable, themes allowed for the labeling of bins. Color-coding was used while analyzing sets of data to allow the researcher to identify corresponding statements and place similar statements under the correlating research question. After data were categorized under research questions, the researcher searched for themes again and coded data per commonalities. An open coding
methodology was utilized during all analyses which allowed for a pure appreciation of emerging topics.

Triangulation of data took place as a result of speaking with different people on different dates, and at different points in time throughout the day to ensure that data was rich, robust, comprehensive, and well-developed. Triangulation also occurred as a result of the three-different data gathering methods used: observations, focus group, and individual interviews.

Data collected from observations, the focus group, and individual interviews were stored in audio, video, and/or transcribed format on the researcher’s PC. Confidentiality and anonymity remain for the life of the data due to the ethical consideration that the researcher gave to each participant. When transcribing data, the researcher used first names as identifiers for participants who displayed answers that are particular to the person or seemed out of place. The researcher also used descriptions of each participant using pertinent characteristics such as age, academic major, and class status. Security of data was assured through the use of multi-character passwords on each device. The researcher used headphones to assist with maintaining anonymity and confidentiality when transcribing recordings.

Summary

The use of observations, a focus group, and individual interviews while using a phenomenological design proved to be the best collection method for available data. Observations, the focus group, and individual interviews allowed for triangulation of the data. Transcription of data gathered was necessary so that themes could emerge. Data validation made use of four criteria used to judge the soundness of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The chosen methods
allowed for a better understanding of what causes success in the academically advanced student at the second, third, or fourth-year in the MSU Honors College.
Chapter IV: Findings and Analysis

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to discover the process of cumulative integration for academically advanced students in the collegiate environment. The definition of the academically advanced student is the second, third, or fourth-year college student who maintains honors college enrollment status and is deemed academically advanced. Several studies have focused on success as it relates to honors and non-honors students: participation, retention, student satisfaction, and gender-related success (Astin, 1984, 1993; Braxton, 2014; Tinto, 2012; Noldon & Sedlacek, 1998; and Seidman, 1991). Other studies by Noldon and Sedlacek (1998), Collins-Gross (2001), and Capuana (1993) have made comparisons between student groups such as honors, non-honors, and students with honors ability who chose a non-honors route.

Since previous studies have sought to explain student success through singular factor approaches, they do not reveal a definitive resolve. Understanding what influences student success defies a single solution. Research must focus on observing the whole student to reveal the cumulative effect of factors that correlate with the themes found in the literature to reach a conclusion. Previous research identifies social and academic integration, intrinsic motivation, and key interactions with peers, faculty, and advisors as themes for student success and was highlighted in the literature review. The definition of cumulative integration in this study is the degree to which the whole student learns by perceiving and experiencing the influential advantages that arise from the combination of social and academic integration and intrinsic motivation, coupled with key interactions that intermingle throughout the collegiate journey.

Sample. Honors College students were chosen as an academically advanced sample because acceptance into, as well as requirements to complete a degree distinguished with honors, requires academic rigor and co-curricular commitment beyond that of the non-honors student
population. The selection of participants for this study was by convenience. The sample population consisted of 149 Honors College students at MSU. The researcher chose to only allow second, third, or fourth-year students as participants in the focus group and individual interviews since 52.3% of attrition occurs in years beyond the first year. However, all levels of students were present at Honors Student Council meetings and classroom observations since all class levels participate.

Data collection took place from January to April 2017 and began with observations of the Honors Student Council meetings. Once the researcher had permission from the administrative office of the Honors College to attend Honors Student Council meetings; there were no barriers to entry. The average attendance at Honors Student Council meetings was 35 students: seven males and 27 females. Observations took place during four Honors Student Council meetings.

The researcher was also given permission by the administrative office of the Honors College to observe Honors Students in the classroom. Classroom observations posed some barriers to entry and could have been more timely. Barriers to entry such as, faculty overlooking the email from the researcher, faculty being out-of-town, and choosing the right classroom activity to observe (i.e., class discussion rather than a test or field activity) were causes for delay. The average attendance during classroom observations was 15 students: four males and 11 females. Observations took place during four regularly scheduled Honors Student classes. The researcher observed four Honors classrooms that were based on three different subjects taught by three different Honors Professors. One class was observed twice due to being the first to allow the researcher’s entry.

The focus group had no barriers to entry, but did encounter scheduling difficulty. The focus group was initially scheduled to precede an Honors Student Council meeting; however,
only four students volunteered due to prior extracurricular Honors College commitments.
Discussion with the group allowed for the discovery of a mutually agreed upon date where more
students could attend. Polling the group revealed 16 students who showed interest in
participating. The focus group was made up of a total of 13 students who were upperclassmen:
ten second-year students, two third-year students, and one fourth-year student; the sex of the
group was one male and 12 females.

Finally, individual interviews experienced no barriers to entry. The researcher chose
students for individual interviews based on characteristics students displayed during prior data
collection methods (i.e., parental/sibling influence, a realized appreciation for the Honors
College, and attending local government meetings). There were five individual interviews that
consisted of: three second-year students, one third-year student, and one fourth-year student; the
sex of the group was one male and four females.

Fictitious names were chosen to identify individual’s comments that were relevant to
understanding the research purpose. Names were chosen based on the first letter of their first or
last name and matched with the number of letters in their first name. Fictitious names were used
to identify students who participated in individual interviews and were assigned to help protect
the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants while increasing clarity of explanations.
The researcher was also careful to remove personally identifiable information concerning other
participants or individuals whom students referenced when that identity could make the
participant’s identity known. Descriptions of students selected for individual interviews are
found in Table 5. More can be learned about the entire sample from Table 6.
Table 5
*Description of Students Selected for Individual Interviews*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fictitious Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cole</td>
<td>Second-year student, first to go to college in his family, but family is supportive, neither completely introverted or extrovert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juliette</td>
<td>Second-year student, both parents and siblings went to or are currently attending college, extroverted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>Third-year student, parents and siblings went to college, introverted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savannah</td>
<td>Fourth-year student, one parent and siblings went to or are currently attending college, both parents place value on college, introverted, but motivated to do extroverted things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francesca</td>
<td>Second-year student, both parents and siblings went to or are currently attending college, extrovert</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6
*Sample Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Sample</th>
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<th>Female</th>
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Use of Interactions to Socially Integrate

The first research question sought to understand how academically advanced upperclassmen used interactions to socially integrate. Through the described data collection and analysis, the following themes were discovered.

Observations

*Peer to peer social influence.* When observations began at the Honors Student Council meetings, the researcher was informed that the president of the Honors Student Council was studying abroad and would return the following week. The vice president and sergeant at arms
were the points of contact for questions about nuances and processes that were unclear. After the first meeting, the researcher asked the Sergeant at Arms a few *ad hoc* questions to increase clarity. As a response to one of the questions the Sergeant at Arms was unsure of, she said “I would ask our vice-president, she's really awesome.” The reference to a fellow board member in this way did not seem as though she was trying to postpone answering the question, but a way to help the researcher find answers by referencing a more knowledgeable peer.

The President had returned before the next meeting and observations revealed that once the meeting began, she had been missed by the group while she was away. The board and the structure of the meeting seemed to become more grounded as the other board members relinquished interim power and returned to previous roles. The president was given a warm welcome from the group, evident from hugs and socializing before the meeting began, as well as several kudos from the “kudos-can.” The “kudos-can” is a ritualistic behavior that allows students to write a message on a note and have it read by the Sergeant at Arms at the end of the meeting. The portion of the meeting involving the “kudos-can” is a fun time where students snapped their fingers, instead of applauding, and laughed at what was announced.

**Focus Group**

**Sense of community.** Multiple times during the focus group meeting, a sense of community was evidenced within the Honors College. One student mentioned, “the Honors Student Council feels like home and I really enjoy it.” Another student mentioned she “loves everyone in the Honors College and loves how everyone builds each other up.” Still another student said “she loves the community in the Honors College and thinks that MSU does a good job building that” [creating opportunities for groups of like-minded individuals to interact].
There were multiple mentions of being supportive of each other and building each other up within this community of students. Students were even inquisitive about the researcher’s background and research interests. One student mentioned:

Everyone is very supportive. No one is trying to be better than anyone else, instead of saying, “Wow that’s stupid research,” they said, “Wow can I help you with that.” Everyone is open to new ideas and curious to know what you are going to do with your research. Students encourage each other to be the best version of themselves.

She also went on to mention that “I would not be successful in the Honors College if it was not for my friends. Socially, students have different interests, but are still really interested in what other people are doing; living vicariously through each other.” Another student supported the theme by stating “It is nice to have a community of students who are enduring the same struggles and can stress out together. Other students are busy too, but it is not to the same level as honors students.” The “level” represents advanced requirements that are expected of honors students and are not expected of the general collegiate population. The students in the group showed compassion for a male student after he said that he “felt as though he was surrounded by students in the Honors College who seemingly have everything figured, but he did not.” The group was quick to respond that they did not have everything together and empathized with his sentiments.

**Individual Interviews**

**Peer to peer social influence.** During individual interviews, three-of-the-five students interviewed noted at least one fellow student whom they admired or had influenced them to start being active. Sue, an introverted third-year student, said that her friend who is also in the Honors College was the reason she came to the Honors Student Council meetings, “she drug me to the
meetings. I would not have started getting involved if it had not been for her. Getting involved in the Honors College Student Council meetings was my first step to getting involved.” Savannah, an introverted fourth-year student, noted that she admired the past president of the Honors Student Council:

She seemed like she had everything put together, the meeting started promptly at 9:00 PM, the structure was good, everything had sign-ups and everything was really organized. My freshman eyes had never seen anything run that smoothly. She did everything with a lot of grace. She was a very kind person and had good relationships with all her professors. I learned a lot from her; she was a good role model.

Juliette, an extroverted second-year student, noted that she became good friends with two girls who were on the same floor, had classes together, and were also in the Honors College. “Those two kept me sane. They helped me study because I did not know how. They pushed me to get out of my comfort zone, and I now push them to get out of their comfort zone.” Juliette said that she and the other two girls reminded each other about deadlines, “They were like another mother figure or annoying sisters to me.”

**Sense of community.** Individual interviews also reveal the importance of a sense of community, but captured as a need to be around like-minded individuals. A need to be around like-minded individuals can be divided into two elements based on student comments: a sense of community in the residence halls and the ability to carry on a good conversation. Cole, an extroverted second-year student, spoke extensively about his experience, “Being part of a community of honors college students who endure the same struggles/curriculum makes them easier to relate with and builds more on the sense of community than college already is.” Cole
explained that there are two Honors College students in his entire dorm and very little sense of community. “I did not meet anyone else in my residence hall until after Christmas break. There are a bunch of resources for students that no one uses: meeting rooms, recreation rooms, pool tables, I have never seen anyone using those.” However, he mentioned that he noticed a different presence in the new residence hall where more Honors College students were present. “There is a great sense of community. There is a study hall on every floor, and I always see someone in those. There are always people in the lobby watching movies, hanging out, or having meetings.”

Savannah, who is from a larger city, also made comments that reveal a similar experience to what Cole mentioned. Savannah said “I am the only true introvert in my family. Between my friends and family, there was always someone asking for my attention, to do something.” Savannah later explained that:

There was a lot of loud boisterous things going on. Then I came to MSU, and it is very quiet, and I was put in dorms that are away from everyone else. I was not around a lot of other Honors College students, and I was very lonely my first year and a half of college. Even though I need and enjoy time alone, I really enjoy social engagement. People are in families and when you leave those families for college you have friends to fill that void; so you need that community to stay healthy.

Savannah went on to say that one of the things she likes doing now is making people feel included because she has experienced not feeling included. “I am a very introverted person, but it is important for me to make connections and have discussions with people. I like interesting, smart people who are passionate about what they do; they are easier to connect with.” Savannah
also said that “not all Honors Students are interesting, some just want to check the box and move on.”

Cole expressed his thoughts on why the sense of community is greater in the new dormitory. “Honors College students are scattered throughout the residence hall. The students who want that sense of community are the leaders and rub-off on the students who may not have that same sense of community.” Cole also said “I have seen honors and non-honors students become friends and then the non-honors students begin being more involved. I think this is because the non-honors students feel obligated to do better.” Cole’s beliefs align with information gathered during observations. During one of the Honors Student Council meeting observations, the researcher was informed that honors students recruit their non-honors roommates to participate in functions organized by the Honors College. Cole went on to say that “sometimes the honors community only wants to be with other honors students, and do not go searching for non-honors friends. I think that if honors students branched out, then the sense of community on campus would rise.” Francesca, an extroverted second-year student, helped to confirm Cole’s thoughts when she said that “I hang out with people who are more academically-minded and do homework together. My friends in high school were school-minded and being around them encouraged me to continue to be school-minded.”

**A desire to be involved.** Students in the sample said that they arrived at MSU knowing very few people, but longed for a sense of community and relationships. Students explained how they branched out and found organizations to be a part of and thus, built relationships. “I tried things that were appealing to me and went to different organizational meetings to see where I fit.” Another student said:
I came to MSU knowing no one, so my goal was to make one friend. I accomplished this goal by attending at least one meeting at any group that seemed to be based on something that interested me. If I liked it, I would continue attending, if I did not like it, I would stop attending.

A different student said that she was always involved in a lot of things in high school, so when she arrived at MSU, she wanted to be involved, but did not know many people. “After studying abroad in the spring of my freshman year, I felt like I did not know anyone. I was motivated to get out there and get involved, so I got involved with the Honors Student Council.” Another student said that she just stayed in her dorm room her entire freshman year. “Not being involved was awful. I started attending Honors Student Council meetings and joining clubs. Being involved has reduced my anxiety. I am delighted that I can have fun and participate in education at the same time.”

**The maturation of experience: learning and belonging.** Individual interviews revealed a correlation between experiential learning and belonging. When asked, what defines success in college, Juliette said “I think that the experiences you have in college and the ability to develop those is better than just grades. I am here for the experience, not the degree, if I learn something, then it was successful.” Cole had a similar response to the same question, “If you have done well in the time frame of college, then it will lead to something good in the future, spend time wisely and that will set you up for the next thing in your life.”

When asked, what prepared students most for success in college, Juliette responded that classes in high school that were experience based turned her toward her major.

Experience based classes provide a real-world perspective that taught me common sense and how to be humble. I have had embarrassing moments where I said,
“Oh yeah I am strong; I can do that,” so then I had to prove it, and it did not go well.

Summer Orientation was an experience that stood out in the mind of another student. Sue expressed that the main thing that has contributed to her identity at MSU has been her experience working Summer Orientation, not her Summer Orientation experience itself. “It is not so much the experience, but the people you are experiencing it with.” After seeing how much she has grown from Summer Orientation, Sue stated that she “wants to find other things that she can grow from in different ways. You never know what something can lead to; maybe you will meet someone who needs to meet you.” Sue said that learning about organizations at MSU through Summer Orientation helped her, “There are so many organizations and things to be involved with, going to one thing will lead to something and that will lead you to something else.”

Sue’s sentiments were supported by Savannah when she expressed thoughts about building relationships through organizations at MSU. Savannah said that she forms relationships with people through getting involved with activities and taking a leadership role, “That’s how I feel as though I am a part of things and have friends. I am community driven and like to have friends, but it is hard for me to just make conversation with people.” When speaking about her first year and a half of solitude, Savannah said that:

Relationships were a struggle and academics were easy, so since I did not have any friends I studied more and academics were even easier, so I had all this free time. I started funnelling energy into other things, like a photography blog. I took a lot of walks, went to a lot of little stores, and started joining organizations and going to club meetings.
Social Integration Summary

Themes that appeared throughout data collection and were deemed significant are: peer to peer social influence and a sense of community. Peer to peer social influence emerged as significant in two of the data collection methods under the first research question; revealed in observations and made known during individual interviews. Peer to peer social influence is applied in a more broad and general sense during focus group meetings, appearing as an antecedent of a sense of community.

A sense of community emerged in two data collection methods. During focus groups, a sense of community was mentioned as support and encouragement which caused a sense of belonging. During individual interviews, it was associated with being around like-minded individuals who have a desire to be involved. Even the theme, the maturation of experiences: learning and belonging, displays instances where students learned because of a sense of belonging to a group. A summarized version of themes associated with social integration can be found in Table 7.

Table 7

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<th>Source</th>
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Use of Interactions to Academically Integrate

The second research question sought to understand how academically advanced upperclassmen use interactions to academically integrate. Through the described data collection and analysis, the following themes were discovered.

Observations

Value of faculty/student relationships. During observations of the Honors Student Council meetings, students spoke about an upcoming event where Honors Professors met Honors Students outside of the classroom for a social hour at a local restaurant. The sole purpose of the event is to have a time where students and faculty can mingle casually outside of the classroom. The students seemed excited when speaking about the event. One person on the Honors Student Council told the group that it is “a time for fun and good conversation.” A similar event was also announced during a different Honors Student Council observation. A board member announced that an “Eat, Talk, Think” event was drawing near. During the Eat, Talk, Think, professors invite students to eat and discuss a predetermined topic that is of some interest to the professors. Eat, Talk, Think was described as “good food and neat topics.”

Classroom interactions. During classroom observations, it was apparent that some classes were more talkative than others. At the beginning of a social science class, where desks were in rows facing the instructor, everyone was very talkative before class began and no one sat by themselves. Most students were in small groups, standing or seated irregularly at their desks. At the beginning of a non-profit and leadership class, students hardly spoke at all, although the environment seemed friendly; the professor nodding his head and smiling at students as they entered the classroom and found their seat. Desks were also in rows facing the instructor. Still,
during another classroom where global civilization was the subject, students were seated in a circular pattern and most students chatted casually before class.

Each classroom observation took place during a lecture or discussion setting so that interactions between faculty and students were observable. All faculty members were adept at calling each student by name to comment on the discussion. Most students seemed actively engaged for the length of the class. All things in each class were relatively equal aside from the subject, professor, location of the class, time of day, and desk layout of one classroom.

**Organization and control of classroom or subject.** All three professors observed displayed organization in their structure of the discussion and used certain methods to cause students to recall assigned subject matter. One professor made use of a picture displayed to the class on a projector screen and asked them their thoughts pertaining to certain questions about the picture and what they had read and then written essays about. The same professor encouraged students to branch out and use resources in the town where the university is located. Another professor asked the class to describe something about themselves as it pertained to a certain question, which made the discussion more personal. During the same class, the latter professor also divided students into groups of two or three when discussing a different question. Still, in the third classroom observation, questions were posted on the screen in front of the class and students responded freely to questions posed by the professor about their thoughts on the subject without being prodded too much to do so.

All three professors seemed to have control of and were very knowledgeable about the subject they taught. Occasionally, students’ comments would cause the discussion to veer in a different direction outside of the subject; however, each professor was adept at getting the conversation back on topic. Each professor clearly covered future assignments and schedules for
upcoming classes and announced at least once that they were available after class, during office hours, or via email if anyone needed assistance.

**Focus Group**

**Impact of faculty and staff to advance beyond mediocrity.** The impact of faculty and staff were noticed to be prominent in the focus group. However, comments made by the sample did not only focus on the impact that faculty and staff had at MSU, but also key encounters throughout their entire K-12 experience. One student said that she was not sure about the honors classes before she took a class, but after experiencing the more personalized approach from her world civilization professor, she said: “I was motivated by smaller class sizes and the enthusiasm of Honors College professors because it brings the Honors College to another level.” The researcher noticed other students nodding in agreement at her statements. The same student went on to say that she had not planned on coming to MSU until she received an email from a recruiter that said MSU had an Honors College. The email went on to say that she could participate in the Presidential Scholarship competition and that the Presidential Scholarship was directly linked to the Honors College. The student was not chosen for the Presidential Scholarship, but the recruiter told her that she could still be in the Honors College and sent her an application. “I thought the Honors College would be really cool since I had always been an honors student in high school and middle school.” Another student said that she had been filtered through the gifted and talented education system since she was in the fourth grade. She told the group about her experience saying “I was given a test in elementary school and then one day per week I was taken to hang out with other nerdy and excited kids. I knew that I would do the same in college.” Another student explained her journey differently: “Teachers and guidance counselors put me in the advanced placement (AP) classes because I was doing well in classes
that were prerequisites. One teacher asked me why I was in the normal class and encouraged me to take honors classes.” Another student mentioned she “had a great health teacher in high school that I took classes with for three years where I fell in love with helping people.” A final comment about influence during K-12 referenced taking classes offered in high school designed to help students decide what they want to do. “The teacher helped me decide to be a biochemist, and I got to shadow at a hospital. I plan to shadow more to help me identify areas where I could specify.”

The influence of faculty and staff beyond K-12 seemed to be important as the element of self-discovery became more prevalent:

The summer before my senior year of high school, I toured schools in this area and talked to a school counselor who had a friend that pursued Organizational Leadership in her Masters. I researched the degree and thought it would be good for my Masters, but what would I do for my undergrad? While touring the MSU campus, I walked past Wilson Hall and noticed that the building housed the Organizational Communication department. I researched the degree and decided that it was perfect.

Another student said that “I used Career Services at MSU and professors to help me decide what I wanted to do.”

Students also identified time spent in class with faculty members caused them to decipher how they absorb and retain academics the best. “My AP European History class made more sense when the subject was taught as a story with an emphasis on why that happened not just dates and events.” She found that she retained more information when a story was applied than through discussion. Another student recalled a time when she was in class and they were
learning about the cardiovascular system, “Students were in teams and the teams had to race around the cardiovascular system. When I took biology in high school and later college, I thought of the giant picture of the cardiovascular system on the wall of that teacher’s classroom.” One student said he learned the best when his teacher worked through problems on the computer while it was cast onto the screen via projector or assigned goofy ways and associations with breaking words down to assist in memorization. Finally, a student said her German teacher assigned different colors to masculine and feminine words so that students could better identify the instances.

**Learning modalities.** Throughout the focus group meeting, the sample expressed ways in which they learn most efficiently. One student said she “learns the best in a one-on-one or small group setting where teachers know their student’s names and understands how their students perform the best.” Other students said, “I am a very visual learner,” “I am an experiential learner,” or “I learn by reading.” There were pockets of students who learn similarly, but one learning modality was not found to be prevalent.

**Individual Interviews**

**The impact of faculty and staff.** The influence that faculty and staff have on students continued to also appear as a theme in individual interviews. Four-out-of-five students referenced at least one person who made an impact on them personally along their educational journey. Sue informed the researcher that the head staff member, who oversaw Summer Orientation, made an impact because she visited her high school during her junior year and then remembered her name the next year when she returned to the same high school. Sue has also seen the director of Summer Orientation remember others this way too. “The fact that she cares so much made an impression on me and encouraged me to be a better version of myself.” Sue
went on to say that the administrative staff in the Honors College has been a huge factor in her success, “Not because they sat down and told me that this is how I should spend my time, but they offered themselves as a friend and mentor that you can just talk to.” Sue also recalled that a previous extracurricular activity director from high school gave her great advice and showed love to her and her siblings.

Cole spoke about the type of relationship he currently has with a faculty member and a previous teacher from high school. Cole explained that his advisor is also one of his professors and mentors in research. “As a Presidential Scholar, I am required to do five hours of research per week.” Cole also said he thinks that students and professors in his major are more of a “tight knit group” than other areas due to consistently working together to put together and host events for middle and high school age students. “Each student also has to have a set number of observation hours, so you naturally develop a relationship with them.” Cole also said he was very close to a teacher in high school who taught the subject that is now his major in college:

She became friends with my parents, had taught at MSU, and completed the college process. She helped me navigate the college terrain since no one in my family had attended college and could offer advice. She did things like, help me fill out scholarship applications, prepare me to interview for the Presidential Scholarship, and make connections for me with people in my major by sending an email that says, “He is a good kid; look out for him.” So, when you arrive, the professors already know you.

Juliette explained there were multiple people who had had an impact on her since becoming a student at MSU. The professors and staff she mentioned all played a part in helping her discover her research interests, pushed her to get her research off the ground, provided great
advice when she was thinking about changing majors, and “actually care, but that holds true with most professors at MSU, but particularly the ones in my major.” Juliette likened her advisor and staff members in the Honors College to “mother figures on campus who are nice to have in your corner.” Juliette went on to say that “they know who you are when they see you in public. This is not just an 8-5:00 PM job where while they are on the clock they will build relationships, but outside that, they do not know you exist.”

Savannah also spoke about people in the education setting that made an impact on her. When describing the impact of a faculty member, Savannah said, “He helps me make sense of things; you can learn a lot just by explaining things to him.” Savannah also said she had a calculus professor who was very passionate about his work which caused her to be excited about going to his class. Becoming adept in calculus has been beneficial to her major. Savannah also had a horse riding coach while at MSU who is not associated with the college. “She pushed me hard. She gave me boldness and caused me to be less afraid because she pushed me past my fears. Even physical things do not scare me as much anymore.”

Francesca did not have the same enthusiasm about faculty and staff that made an impact in her life, but she did mention that she talks to one of her Honors College professors often and he is very encouraging. She also said that she emails her advisor “all the time.”

**Impact of the institution.** All five of the students interviewed toured MSU multiple times or spent five weeks at the MSU campus for their Governor’s Scholars Program placement (GSP). Cole said that his first impression of MSU was negative. He said that he toured MSU a couple times and toured the University of Kentucky (UK) five times. “UK really rolled out the red carpet. I loved the campus and felt as though it would not be a continuation of high school.”
Cole ended up at MSU because he received the Presidential Scholarship, but later learned that it was the right decision:

I ran into a professor that I knew from UK while at a conference on behalf of MSU. He told me that I made the right decision by going to MSU. The professor told me that UK could not have offered these types of experiences until graduate school, that vouches well for MSU.

Cole went on to say, “If you want to be engaged and you want these opportunities afforded to you, they will come. All you have to do is show interest and professors will get you involved with the right people.” Cole extended those sentiments to a larger scale when he said:

Whether it is community members, peers, or faculty, they all have the same consistent message: If you have a goal, you are driven, and you want to do something, then you can and there is no one who will tell you that you cannot. The confidence and support from everyone you meet builds students up.

Sue said that she did not remember choosing MSU and had always thought that she would attend Western Kentucky University since that is where other family members went. “I just kind of ended up here after being placed here for five weeks through GSP.” Sue mentioned she could not imagine herself anywhere else and has a fear of big cities so the size of Murray is comfortable. “I feel pride in telling people where I go to school.” Sue also said that “I even wear MSU shirts wherever I go because I want to see if others notice it. Someone will always say, ‘Go Racers.’ It’s not one of those over commercialized universities.”

Juliette mentioned that she remembers having negative feelings toward MSU the first time she came to visit. “I think that the long drive, being cramped in the car and not wanting to go in the first place had something to do with it.” She was given MSU as her GSP placement
and spent five weeks here. Her perception changed after that experience. “MSU became my home away from home, and I got to be part of the community.” GSP and her Presidential Scholarship is why she came to MSU. “MSU is home, more of a family atmosphere than what I felt with GSP. Juliette went on to say she is attracted to the smaller campus and how well MSU is integrated into the town of Murray, KY itself.

Francesca’s GSP placement was also at MSU. “MSU is so much different in the summer because there are not a lot of people in Murray. I like the small-town feel, even though it is a big university. I really like the campus; it is beautiful.”

Savannah said the sense of community attracted her as well “Murray is a very safe and nurturing environment that is not too pushy and a little isolated.” Savannah mentioned that “Murray does not have an extensive amount of resources, but as a student you pretty much have access to all of them.”

**Preparation for college.** The final theme discovered in individual interviews, although students did not speak extensively about it, was preparation for college. Three of the five students interviewed said that high school prepared them well for what to expect in college. One student explained that they did not have a hard time adjusting to college due to taking AP courses in high school that had a similar workload. “High school was good at preparing me socially and academically.” Another student said that she went to a great high school with great teachers and a lot of resources that helped prepare her for college. A third student said that her high school really helped her, “All of my friends came to college and were freaking out because they never had to study or do all these assignments at the same time and that had been my life throughout high school.”
Although all five students interviewed took AP classes in high school, two students explained that they did not know how to study when they arrived at MSU. Sue said that “when I got to MSU, I continued doing the same thing I had always done and I am getting by, I am figuring it out as I travel this journey.” Juliette said “I did not learn how to study in high school. I took AP classes, did my homework, and learned from that, but I had to learn how to study once I got to college.” As third-year and second-year students, both Sue and Juliette are still learning how to study.

**Academic Integration Summary**

All three data collection methods reveal that the faculty and staff of an institution are important when influencing students. Each theme under the second research question serves as antecedents to the impact of faculty and staff. Individual interviews provide an additional level of solidification for the influence of faculty and staff by revealing the overall impact of the institution and also the impact of the city where the university resides. A summarized version of themes associated with academic integration can be found in Table 8.

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<td>Individual Interviews</td>
<td>The Impact of Faculty and Staff, Impact of the Institution and Preparation for College</td>
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Use of Intrinsic Motivation to Establish and Meet Goals

The third research question sought to understand how academically advanced upperclassmen use intrinsic motivation to establish and meet goals. Through the described data collection and analysis, the following themes were discovered.

Observations. Observed behaviors did not correlate with the third research question. Intrinsic motivation is expressed through questioning and in conversation, but difficult to naturally observe. Therefore, the third research question has no observed themes that are directly related.

Focus Group

Spoken or implied expectations. The focus group meeting revealed that family was a factor for students to be who they are, either like their family or different. This theme was apparent based on many of the comments that students made about their families, parents’ careers, influences from siblings, or those close to them. One student indicated that she comes from an educated family. She mentioned that a third of her family has a doctorate, her sibling was in honors classes, but she does not have the same ability that her sibling has. She also said she loves challenging herself. Another student’s parents like traveling and exposing their children to different cultures to help make them more well-rounded.

Students also spoke about their parents’ careers or sibling influence. “My dad is an attorney and mom is a teacher,” “both of my parents are science teachers,” and “my neighbor is a registered nurse and like a second mom, I like talking to her about nursing.” Siblings also had a unique influence on the sample: “My older sister skipped third grade so I did too,” the same student also mentioned working hard to become an honors student because of being jealous of her sister.
Students also wanted to meet the expectation of their families because of family expectations or for themselves. One student said, “My parents used to tell me when I was young, ‘How cool would it be for you to be the first doctor in our family?’ So, I decided yeah, I am going to do this.” Another mentioned, “My parents expect excellence out of their children so they told me that I was going to be in the honors college.” Another student stated that her parents wanted excellence, but that it was not of chief importance. “My parents do not expect straight As. Their children’s emotional wellbeing is more important to them.” The same student feels as though she found her career interests on her own, “I know that I want to be in international affairs and love cultures. I always looked forward to those classes in high school, so I knew that was the right path for me.” But she also mentioned, “I love history and my dad always had the history channel on.” Finally, another student mentioned that she had always wanted to be a vet, but her parents wanted her to know she could do other things if she wanted. “My parents sat me down and told me that I could be whatever I wanted. I did not have to be a vet.”

**Historicity of advanced placement classes.** Most students in the sample had a history of taking honors or advanced placement classes before arriving at MSU. Comments included: “I have always been an honors student in middle school and high school,” “I was an honors student in high school,” and “I always ranked high in my class.” These statements reveal that honors or advanced placement classes are a learned and expected behavior in this population and that the student will strive to continue or experience a sense of failure. Greta told the group that after skipping third grade and falling behind in fourth grade, she started studying harder and thus did better in class. She went on to say, “I took honors courses because I wanted to.” When discussing why students were participating in the Honors College, Greta went on to say, “When I
set my mind to something, it usually happens.” She then explained a lofty set of goals that she wants to accomplish over the next decade and said, “My time here at MSU and the Honors College has caused me to really go for it.”

Two students also spoke about their experience with non-honors classes and how that experience made them realize they needed honors courses. “I took a non-advanced placement class that did not challenge me, and it was a very frustrating experience.” and “Honors classes were not offered at my school; so, I had never really been challenged because classes were easy.” These statements reveal that students who experience non-honors or non-advanced placement classes longed for something more even if they had not experienced honors or advanced placement courses. Where honors classes were offered prior to college, this group said they were enrolled in those courses and among that population.

**Realization of personal gain due to the Honors College.** The group of students interviewed for the focus group have a sense of pride about the Honors College; a pride that is not typically noticed until after one has finished a difficult task. A realization of the significance of the present moment has helped students recognize this feeling. “I was required to be in the Honors College because of my scholarship, but would have done it anyway due to the challenges that the classes present,” others were shaking their head in agreement. Another student said, “I like to be challenged academically and had always planned on being in the Honors College or program at whatever school I decided to go to.” She also said that she would not change being in the Honors College even though she is very busy.

Other students indicated some initial reluctance on becoming or continuing as an honors student beyond high school, but now are glad they persisted. “Now that I am in the Honors College, I could not see myself being anything else. It is too much a part of who I am as a
student, and it has helped me discover my research passions.” Another student said that “I like to be involved in everything and like to challenge myself. I would not have chosen to be in honors classes unless I had to, but I am now glad that I had to.” Focus group participants also mentioned some of the benefits of being in the Honors College at MSU:

Taking classes in smaller groups where the professor is a really good teacher and writing a thesis really does something to you from a personal growth standpoint.

Things done and opportunities presented to Honors College students may be the thing that causes a high-profile company to hire you, not just because you were in the Honors College itself.

A different student also mentioned she believes the extra requirements such as studying abroad and the thesis give Honors College students an advantage when applying for graduate school or going into the workforce.

**Individual Interviews**

**Motivation and drive.** Motivation was also revealed in individual interviews, but it appeared as an emotion that people do not generally associate with positively; fear or anxiety. Cole “labeled himself as goal oriented because of a fear. A fear that I did not know what I wanted to do with my life. I want to know what is next.” Sue said, “I am motivated by the fear of failure, inner perfectionist anxiety. I have always gotten straight A’s and feel like I should continue to get straight A’s.” Sue went on to say that “I am also motivated by my scholarship and having to maintain a certain GPA.” Sue also said, “I like to stay busy, but if I start something I have to finish it. I will always keep going unless I just cannot, and it makes me upset if I cannot and then have to drop something.” The activities that remain are the things that she is most passionate about. Juliette said that her dad is a successful person, and she likes to be
able to “do things without folks being able to say that my dad did that for me. I work four nights a week at the college to help with that goal.” Juliette also presented another interesting statement:

There are some students in my major who are just as driven, but are not in the Honors College. Other Honors College students are just in it for the fellowship or to schedule classes early and will drop out of the Honors College as soon as they get to a high enough level that they can get their classes early. True Honors College students want to learn about the world around them.

Francesca said that she believes that “the non-honors student population cannot relate; we (Honors College Students) are all driven to succeed and very supportive of each other.”

Multiple students expressed that Honors Student are committed to their goals through statements such as: “My accomplishments are through self-actualization other than encouragement from my parents” and “It is not so much being smarter, but being interested in knowing things.” Other students also shared similar comments that reveal an internal drive. The result of statements like these are students who meet their goals and have the resilience to continue progressing despite opposition. Examples of resilience are stated under the individual interview theme; difficult situations that helped form the student.

Influence of individuals in the student’s life. The family of students seemed to cause the student to establish goals and interests concerning college, career, or personal involvement in activities. Cole went to college because he was motivated by his background, practically no one in his immediate or extended family has a college degree; however, his family is very supportive of him. Cole is also interested in politics, but is not sure what influenced that interest because his parents have never been engaged in politics. Cole said he thought that his interests may have
begun watching the news in high school. “I decided that this is how our country governs. I went to meetings to explore my passions and beliefs and realized that politics influences everyone and everything.” Cole also mentioned multiple times the value he places on community, but said that his family shows no interest in being involved in the community. “I had a great experience growing up; I just wanted something different.”

Sue’s answers to questions provide evidence of the influence that people have on her. Sue said that she comes from a well-educated family, with most in her immediate family having a bachelor’s or master’s degree. She and her mother have spoken about college and her mother’s college experience in the past. These stories seem to motivate Sue. Her mother is certainly part of her support system, “She keeps me focused on what really matters when I am caught up in other things that do not matter and I am stressed.” Sue is also musically talented. Several people, including her siblings, grandmother, aunt, friends, and herself all play musical instruments.

Juliette also comes from a well-educated family where she said she was “raised and conditioned to only accept the best. My parents expected nothing less than A’s, which was pretty easy in high school.” That level of expectation has caused Juliette to continue to feel like she should still get all A’s in college. Juliette said that college has always been mandatory for her and her siblings, “My parents did not say that we had to go to college, but it was expected due to all the success we had in high school and since none of us were pursuing a trade.” Juliette went on to say her parents were very supportive of her and her siblings and cannot remember a time when they did not take an active part in their lives. Throughout the conversation, comments revealed that Juliette’s mom and sister are very similar, they like to read books for example, and
Juliette and her dad are very similar, they enjoy working outside. “Being outside is big for my entire family, and we are all pretty involved in our community.”

Savannah has a good support system in her family. Savannah’s mom and sibling each have bachelor’s degrees and her dad is a tradesman. “My dad could have been an engineer; he just cannot sit still long enough and my mom works in manufacturing as a nurse.” Savannah described her sibling as the social one and said that she had obtained a business-related degree and is now pursuing a master’s. “My sibling is the social one, so I thought I needed to be the smart one.” Savannah likes to be outside moving around and sweating. “That’s probably my dad coming out in me, but we are a very, go out and do, family.” Her family is motivated by career and making money so they can buy what they need, but “that’s hard for me, because I am motivated by things that make me feel good and connecting with people.”

Francesca also comes from a supportive family who is educated. “I am motivated by the success of my dad; I would hate to disappoint him.” Francesca told stories that her dad had told her about when he was in college, and she wants similar experiences. Her dad always played sports with her and her siblings and she loves sports now as well. “I am closest with my sister, but we are total opposites. I think a lot of who I am is because I want to be different.” Her sister places value on giving, but Francesca has a hard time thinking of others. Her friends were also very supportive and school-minded. “Being around them encouraged me to be school-minded.” Friends in college have also influenced Francesca, “I came to college thinking like my parents, but have since gained friendships that cause me to question what I believe and challenged me to explain why I believe it.”

**Difficult situations that helped form the student.** Students seem to further become who they are as a result of enduring difficulty. A unique characteristic was noticed after the
students finished explaining their story; they went on to tell about things they are doing or a mindset change they had made to mitigate similarly difficult situations in the future. Not only do students gain in the areas of perseverance and resilience, they are also finding ways to make the world a better place for people they encounter; lessening the chance that someone else may endure that same struggle.

During individual interviews, each student spoke about difficult situations that helped shape them as a person. Situations include: social isolation, sexual assault, family members who suffer from depression and the family member’s attempts at suicide, and crippling anxiety. Each difficult situation made the person experiencing it stronger because of perseverance and growth. Students shared statements that reflect on the experiences: Concerning social isolation, “going from being popular and involved to not knowing anyone and not having a leadership role was difficult.” One student also spoke about making friends on the other side of the world to end a year and a half of loneliness. “Being with them and feeling like I belonged was really needed.” Concerning sexual assault, “That made me realize that I had a community who was there for me and I am stronger because of that experience.” Concerning depression and suicide attempts, “Because of that experience, I learned that I need to work on caring for other people and that there are more important things in life than how far I go. It grew me a lot.” Concerning crippling anxiety,

It was terrifying for me to step out and do anything like this, but I pushed myself to do it. I did not realize the impact the experience was going to have. I have grown, and it caused me to be bolder in others areas of my life.
The students not only grew from the difficult experiences, they also used the experience as motivation to help others, extending the community-mindedness of this sample. Concerning social isolation and anxiety, a student who needed friends said,

That experience has made me want to pass that (the benefits of being bold) on to others and be an even bigger part of my community and a leader more than I did before. I really needed that and it makes everybody’s life better.

Another student spoke extensively about joining an organization to make students feel welcome and getting involved early on because she did not. Because of being sexually assaulted, one student realized the importance of the larger community and having a support system. She now wants to duplicate that for others. Depression and suicide attempts caused a different student to learn how to care for others and to assign value to things outside of self.

**Personal characteristics.** The researcher noticed a pattern in the identified behavior of students. Individual interviews revealed that sample students share certain characteristics that may contribute to success. Characteristics found to be most prevalent include: willingness to be friends with anyone, pride in the Honors College and eventual diploma, being the wise, responsible one in their group of friends, drive and passion with a purpose, inability to say “no” very easily, an ability to be introverted or extroverted, a servant heart, and understanding of themselves and how they can grow. The sample also revealed that they learn from their environment by allowing situations in their lives to mold them into who they are becoming. The aforementioned characteristics are not endowments that are only specific to the honors student population, but can exist in any population. However, characteristics mentioned need the social support of people around them to grow from a thought or feeling to an action. The validity of this statement is made known by the connections students made while picking a certain career
path, doing things that will help them grow as a person, and having an optimistic outlook on all they do.

**Intrinsic Motivation Summary**

The spoken and implied expectations of everyone in the student’s life, especially individuals with whom the most frequent contact is made, are the most influential. The level of influence depends on the degree to which the same constant consistent message is presented. A higher level of expectations for the individuals in this study produced a history of being enrolled in honors or advanced placement courses and caused an eventual appreciation for the personal gain that they provide. The student’s perseverance is tested due to the elevated requirements in honors courses. Because of an appreciation for personal gain, students are not only able to maintain resilience, they are also able help others because of what they have endured. Personal motivation comes from different sources for each person, but fruition of their motivation produces similarity in these Honors Students. A summarized version of themes associated with intrinsic motivation can be found in Table 9.

**Table 9**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>None Observed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus Group</td>
<td>Spoken or Implied Expectations, Historicity of Advanced Placement Classes, and Realization of Personal Gain Due to the Honors College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Interviews</td>
<td>Motivation and Drive, Influence of individuals in the Student’s Life, Difficult Situations that Helped Form the Student, and Personal Characteristics</td>
</tr>
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Summary

Data collection produced a rich data set for analysis and matched well with the three research questions. A common theme between each research question has been the influence other people have on the student. Peers, family, faculty, and staff produce a community of support and encouragement that help propel student success. Influence alone is not enough to produce results. The student must internalize impactful components that then become habits and ingrained characteristics. Once the impact of peers, family, faculty, and staff is seen as a benefit to the student and is ingrained as a characteristic, the student will make efforts to reproduce those feelings for others. Chapter five will conclude the study with a discussion of the most significant themes and their implications.
Chapter V: Conclusions and Discussions

Introduction

Retention, persistence, and completion are all characteristics associated with student success; however, when addressed specifically, a path to student success that encompasses the entire collegiate journey has yet to be found. The answer to what determines student success will not be found by specifically addressing characteristics of student success, but by recognizing that cumulative integration produces successful students. Student success will continue to be a process that employs multiple factors to produce the cumulative effect. Success for students in the collegiate environment defies a single solution and therefore relies on the cumulative integrative properties of three key domains: social and academic integration and intrinsic motivation, coupled with key interactions that intermingle throughout the collegiate journey. The degree to which the whole student learns by perceiving and experiencing the influential advantages that arise from these domains of influence, propel the student beyond mediocrity and have multiple advantages.

Beyond the effects that student success has on the college, this study gains importance when considering how an increase in student success may produce a larger group of intellectually inclined, productive citizens with a zeal for community post-graduation. Conclusions from the research as well as implications for the findings will be discussed in this chapter. Related research questions and ideas, generated by involvement with the topic, will be discussed as future research, other ways of addressing the research questions, and methodology modifications. The chapter will conclude with a summary of major findings and insights from the research.
Conclusions

Dominant domains give insight into the phenomena observed as a result of the purpose of this study: to discover how the academically advanced upperclassmen of Murray State University perceive that they cumulatively integrate into their environment. The data sample produced an interesting compilation of sources of influence which serve as antecedents for three dominant domains: community, preparatory experiences, and self-discovery. Dominant domains also correlate well with sources of influence in the literature review and assist with understanding how the academically advanced upperclassmen of MSU perceive that they have cumulatively integrated into their environment. The individualized theory of Chickering and Associates (1981) assumes that no single approach to subject matter, teaching, or resource allocation will work for all students and maintains that curricular content and instructional methods must meet the needs of the individual student. Heaney and Fisher (2011) also state that “no single measure of specific participation in sports, Greek organizations, clubs, or other organizations emerged as a significant predictive factor” (p. 73).

Community. Social integration is the student’s perception of their degree of social affiliation with others and the degree of congruence with the attitudes, beliefs, norms, and values of the informal social communities of a college or university (e.g., daily life, personal needs, campus facilities, clubs, organizations, personal experiences, and student acquaintances) (Braxton et al., 2014; Gross, 2001). The actual affiliation and congruency with others is influenced by the amount of energy one is willing to put forth to integrate. Characteristics of the data revealed that community was mentioned as, feeling like home, building others up, supporting each other, realizing interdependency on fellow students, enduring the same struggles together, and empathizing. During individual interviews, a sense of community was referred to
as a need to be around like-minded individuals. Two of the students interviewed shared similar stories about the feeling of isolation due to being placed in dormitories, which had the physical attributes to promote community, but were missing engagement and integration with like-minded individuals. However, they each noticed a much different presence when immersed in an environment which had more Honors College students. The new environment not only had the physical attributes to promote community, but also people in those environments who were like-minded individuals and who wanted and needed similar things. When like-minded individuals who want and need similar relationships interact, the potential for community increases.

Braxton, Hirschy, Yorke, and Longden (2004) and Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) looked deeper into the importance of communities and found communal potential to be a critical element in the formation of community. The definition of communal potential is a student’s belief that subgroups exist within the various communities of their institution who hold similar values and beliefs. Communal potential is built during mutual situations and experiences with peers in residence halls Berger (1997), the classroom Tinto (1997, 2000), and student peer groups Astin (1993).

Communal potential garnishes additional strength when considering that it acts as an antecedent to psychosocial engagement. Braxton et al. (2014) defines psychosocial engagement as “the amount of psychological energy that students invest in interaction with peers in extracurricular activities during the fall semester of their first year of college” (p. 168).

However, if the definition of psychosocial engagement is extended to include all years of college, then communal potential becomes community and is a much more important factor which, is not confined to residence halls. Therefore, as a student’s awareness of the existence of these groups grows, their willingness to expend psychological energy on extracurricular
activities and social events increases as well (Braxton et al., 2014). Students who want to build a sense of community will inspire others, who may not be predisposed to become a member of the community, potentially serving as builders of communities themselves. Once like-minded people are in environments together, connections begin to take place through conversations that might not have happened otherwise, and relationships are strengthened.

The social and academic influence of community come together when considering learning communities. Astin (1993) found that the most influential interactions, in the collegiate environment, were peer group interactions. Since peer group interactions carry so much importance, even in academic settings, and the definition of psychosocial engagement is how much energy a person is willing to spend on interactions: psychosocial engagement will then influence how much interaction takes place in those communities. Participation in learning communities generates contributions toward a student’s academic and intellectual development in a positive way because it adds to the frequency and quality of interactions between students (Braxton et al., 2014).

Astin (1993) also claimed that the strongest effects of time spent studying are on academic development and preparation for graduate school. However, other positive correlations included scholarship, social activism, promotion of racial understanding, awareness of one’s impact on the environment, theoretical contributions to science, improvement in the student’s chances of choosing a career in science, engineering, and college teaching; most of which are characteristics of community. While multiple students in the sample indicated that they will continue education beyond their baccalaureate degree, each student participating in individual interviews spoke about career aspirations, which correlate with effects of time spent on studying and growing a sense of community. Students spoke about their passions which
included: scientific research in the biological realm, serving others through producing similar positive experiences, making a difference by being an advocate for people, and becoming an engineer who is motivated by doing the things that matter most. Communal potential tends to permeate students who maintain the motivation to think beyond how their actions will influence themselves.

Belonging is a crucial characteristic of community and experiences help to develop a sense of belonging. As a person matures, additional value is then placed on experiences. Honors College students realize the importance of their time in college, not only associating that importance with academia, but also interactions which reinforce a sense of belonging. Sentiments from three out-of-five students interviewed during individual interviews support this notion: “I think that the experiences you have in college and the ability to develop those is better than just grades. I am here for the experience, not the degree, if I learn something then it was successful,” “It is not so much the experience, but the people you are experiencing it with,” and “I form relationships with people by getting involved with activities and taking a leadership role. That’s how I feel as though I am a part of things and have friends.” The value placed on experiences and relationships while in college helps to grow community and supports the impact of preparatory experiences.

**Preparatory experiences.** The definition of academic integration is a student’s perception of how well their attitudes and values align with those of the formal academic communities (e.g., faculty, staff, classrooms, and libraries) of the institution and a feeling that they are not intellectually secluded (Braxton et al. 2014; Gross, 2001). Students interviewed expressed they learned best through experiences. However, it is the ability of the student to recognize the powerful impact of those experiences that causes maturation to occur. Preparatory
experiences encompass the shaping capabilities of the formal and informal experiences. During individual interviews, one student expressed that classes, which were experiential based, prepared her best for college and subsequently caused her to turn toward her major. The preparatory experiences derived from another student working Summer Orientation was labeled as the most influential for her and even contributed to her identity at MSU. Looking back on the experience from her present state, she expressed that because of how much she has grown as a person through Summer Orientation, she “wants to find other things where she can grow in different ways.” Still another student, who needed relationships with other people, began joining and attending organizations and club meetings to find friends after a year and a half of self-induced isolation. Preparatory experiences give students a meaningful reason to interact and the continuance of those meaningful interactions influences community, which then produces opportunity for self-discovery.

The theory of student involvement supports preparatory experiences and suggests that the more involved a student is with their educational program (socially and academically) the higher likelihood of student learning and personal development. However, additional involvement is only beneficial to a certain point; too much involvement socially or academically can lead to isolation (Astin, 1984). Braxton et al. (2014) suggests that flunking classes is rarely the sole reason why students depart from college. A students’ level of engagement on campus prevails as a determining factor. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) concluded that, “one of the most inescapable and unequivocal conclusions we can make is that the impact of college is largely determined by the individual’s quality of effort and level of involvement in both academic and non-academic activities” (p. 610). The findings of Astin (1984); Braxton et al. (2014); and Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), are proven within the Honors College. Honors Students could
very easily become academically isolated due to two of the added requirements of being in the Honors College, writing a thesis and studying abroad. However, the Honors College encourages and provides opportunities for students to be involved so that they do not become isolated, while allowing the benefits of experiences to continually take place. The Honors College Student Council meetings and involved faculty and staff of the institution who encourage students to be involved, are the main platforms which allow involvement to develop. Peer group interactions are significantly influential in the college environment. The values, attitudes, self-concept, and socioeconomic status of the peer group are far more important in determining how individual students will develop than are the peer group’s abilities, religious orientation, or racial composition (Astin, 1993). The impact of peer group interactions are difficult to observe due to the way people change interactions when others are present. Personal interviews revealed that three-of-the-five students interviewed noted at least one fellow student whom they admired or had influenced them to start being active. The act of being active for two of the three students mentioned is significant due to their introverted nature.

Next to peer groups, faculty has the most significant impact on student's undergraduate development (Astin, 1993). Per Komarraju, Musulkin, and Bhattacharya (2010), interactions seem to be beneficial to both student and faculty who place value on the opportunity to know each other better. Seemingly as important as frequency and types of interactions are the aspects of interactions. Approachability, respect, interaction outside the classroom, and career development are the most influential concerning self-confidence, motivation, and achievement. Students who interact frequently are more likely to express satisfaction with their institutional experience in the areas of friendships, course variety, intellectual environment, and management of the institution (Astin, 1984). Faculty-student interaction also has an impact on student success
in the areas of: academic attainment outcome, intellectual and personal growth, behavioral outcomes, and career outcomes (Astin, 1993). Some Honors Professors at MSU seem to realize the importance of these types of interactions. Observations of the Honors Student Council revealed that social hours and eat, talk, think events happen regularly and are as students expressed, “a time for fun and good conversation” and “good food and neat topics.”

Preparatory experiences before college better prepared students for what to expect when they arrived at college and help eased the transition. The process of preparing the student for success will inherently involve setting straight or confirming notions of what college is or is not, as most students arrive at a university with certain expectations and perceptions. Hellend, Stallings, and Braxton (2002) add that the accuracy of the notions that students hold to be true helps to determine how the student views the institution, either positively or negatively. Braxton et al. (2014) informs the reader that “the greater the student’s initial level of commitment to their college or university, the greater their level of subsequent commitment” (p. 165). Honors students have arrived at their institution adequately prepared to be successful in later, advanced years and levels of college. Three out-of-the-five students interviewed said that their high school experience prepared them well because of advanced preparatory characteristics in their K-12 experience: the advanced workload of advanced placement classes, great high school faculty and resources, learning how to study, and completing multiple assignments at the same time. However, two-out-of-the-five students who participated in individual interviews said that they did not know how to study when they arrived at college due to never having a need to study in high school. They each expressed that they are presently figuring out how to study. Students said that they are gaining skills that they lack through the help of more capable peers. Pre-college preparation seems to be effective for some students; however, even some high achieving
students still arrive at college underprepared. The biggest problem with education is the illusion that learning has taken place. Students who are only required to memorize and transfer information are not effectively prepared. Teachers at all levels, P-20, must take an individualized approach to education which views people as individuals and causes everyone to stretch beyond comfortably complacent goals.

A student’s report of good teaching is a result of good teaching by faculty and a continuous concern for student growth and development by placing a high value on the students themselves. Students develop a reciprocal perspective of the faculty member and the institution’s sincerity when they take courses taught by the faculty member (Braxton et al., 2014), so these perspectives from each side of the relationship cause perpetuation which then becomes an intrinsic characteristic. Preparatory experiences then assists self-discovery because students notice internal and external benefits from their actions and they want to increase the chances that those situations will happen again.

Self-discovery. The benefits of self-discovery are revealed in the preparatory experiences include forced interpersonal relationships caused from enrolling into honors classes. During the focus group meeting, multiple students mentioned that they were required to be in the Honors College because of a scholarship or a feeling of obligation due to always being in advanced placement classes. The same students expressed that they were reluctant to continue as an honors student, but are now glad they did. Students proclaimed that: The Honors College is “part of who I am,” “I like to be involved in everything and I like the challenge,” “the Honors College is a smaller group where the professor is a really good teacher,” “I was motivated by smaller class sizes and the enthusiasm of Honors College professors because it brings the Honors College to another level,” and “honors college students have an advantage when applying for
graduate schools or going into the workforce.” Because students have experienced the benefits of the Honors Student environment, they now realize that this is something they want and need to be most effective.

All five students who participated in personal interviews also said that they did not want to attend MSU or that it was not their first choice. However, after experiencing the campus, due to placement through the Governor’s Scholar Program, they each discovered that the school which was not their first choice was the perfect fit. Students spoke about opportunity afforded at MSU and in the town of Murray, becoming a part of the community, and feeling as though they were in a safe, nurturing environment. The researcher did not anticipate the significance of the same constant, consistent message of support coming from the city of the university.

Informal difficult situations were apparent in each student’s personal interview and helped the researcher see where a source of determination was derived. Students spoke about situations including: social isolation, sexual assault, family members who suffer from depression and their attempts at suicide, and crippling anxiety. Each difficult situation made the person experiencing it stronger because of perseverance and growth. Easy situations in life do not form people, but difficult situations have great forming capabilities if the person experiencing them will allow themselves to be malleable. Because of difficult situations, students went on to tell about things they are doing or a mindset change they had made to mitigate similarly difficult situations in the future for others. Students said that they had joined an organization to make students feel welcome and get involved early, realized the importance of the larger community and having a support system, learned how to care for others, and how to assign value to things outside of self.
Maturation because of the difficult situation is significant due to involving a process that takes the student on a journey from simple to more complex and develops an appreciation for who they become along the way. Students were not proud that the difficult situation happened, but were motivated by their resilience in each situation. “Going from being popular and involved to not knowing anyone or having a leadership role was difficult,” that student later realized that he does not always have to be a leader to be involved. After being sexually assaulted, friends made her “realize she had a community that was there for her and she is stronger because of the experience.” After one student pushed herself beyond her anxiety “I did not realize the impact the experience was going to have, I have grown and it caused me to be bolder in others areas of my life.” Difficult situations helped to form the student due to the perspective building capabilities of the experience. Perspective is not an inborn characteristic, rather it must be developed over time and through situations that take place. Each difficult situation that students shared with the researcher ended in personal change that was focused on self-improvement and helping others. The forming capabilities could have just as easily been negative and shaped the student in other ways. Self-developmental qualities of the student along with positive relationships, were likely the factor that caused “good” to prevail in these instances.

The implications of this level of self-discovery are significant. Students who have the ability to be resilient and allow maturation to occur will not fail, success may not always be inevitable, but value and growth will take place in all experiences. A history of external and self-induced expectations has caused Honors Students to need a higher level of engagement and challenge to feel successful.
**Discussion**

Social and academic integration rely on how well the student’s attitudes, values, and beliefs align with the formal and informal communities within their institution of choice. The more closely attitudes, values, and beliefs align, the better integration occurs. Within that integration is how willing students are to accept new or other students. The researcher found that the Honors College students at MSU were very welcoming and accepting of others. Students are naturally searching for places where they belong and when they notice a group of like-minded individuals interacting, it nurtures growth. A sense of community then begets a sense of community. As the sense of community grows, the influence of the people who the student interacts with tends to grow stronger.

The extension of psychosocial engagement to include the second, third, or fourth-year college student and its role as an antecedent for community help to explain why Honors College students are willing to be accepting of others, be involved in a variety of clubs and organizations, and promote social good. The extension of community from social to academic integration through learning communities, causes community to gain additional strength. When the collegiate expectations of hard-working, open-minded students are met with the student-minded faculty and staff of a supportive institution who promotes the growth of community, great possibilities are ahead and the value that students place on experiences increases.

The experiences in life form students into who they eventually become. The future version of the student will eventually be a better, more finely tuned version of themselves if key interactions between peers and student-minded faculty are present. Students in the sample had the ability to recognize the significance of the experience either while it was taking place or
shortly thereafter and sought to duplicate the benefits for others. This level of altruism is an advanced leadership characteristic that helps to reinforce community among the students.

Preparation for Honors College students began early in their K-12 experience. Preparation in their K-12 experience better prepared them for what to expect in college and eased the transition. Multiple students mentioned that they were initially required to be in advanced placement classes due to teacher selection or parental expectations, but soon found pride in the challenge that honors classes provided. Students need to be immersed in higher level thinking and expectations that stretch individuals beyond mediocrity before college so that they can perform at a higher level. The number of years needed will vary from student to student. Students who do not experience higher level thinking and expectations during K-12, enter college in an academic deficit. Due to the individuality involved with learning, it is difficult to determine levels of deficiency, but if “the impact of college is largely determined by the individual’s quality of effort and level of involvement in both academic and non-academic activities” (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991, p. 610), then the K-12 experience is equally as impactful when preparing students for college. The main difference is that during K-12, students must be more reliant on the guidance of faculty and staff due to being unable to self-guide until the end of the K-12 experience. Deficient students maintain the ability to maturate; however, the transition to a new environment, new friends, a part-time job, etc., cause reaching the collegiate level of maturation required for student success to be more difficult. However, for some, difficulty may enhance one’s ability to self-discover and assign significant value to experiences.

Institutions may be able to influence the dominant domains, community and preparatory experiences by creating environments where these situations are nurtured, but allowed to grow organically. The organic growth of community and preparatory experiences will influence the
Community brings people together, preparatory experiences help to add meaning and purpose to time spent together, which then creates opportunity for self-discovery. Due to the intrinsically motivated nature of the Honors Student, students will naturally self-identify and try to replicate things that add value. Forced communities and preparatory experiences may produce synthetic benefits that appear to be sustainable; however, the laborious task of doing so will lack the ability to induce self-discovery since these occurrences do not occur naturally.

**Limitations of the Study**

Several limitations were experienced while conducting the study. Limitations seem to be easier to identify when viewed post-circumstantially rather than pre-circumstantially. However, limitations identify areas where future research can improve upon the foundation that this study has established and help to further understanding in this field. The first limitation was the difficulty involved with observing characteristics of intrinsic motivation. Observations were necessary, however, due to allowing the integration of the researcher into the identified environment and allowing for the adequate selection of students who participated in individual interviews. While methodologies were identified to be effective data gathering techniques for all three research questions, no data were verified through observations in the third research question. Additionally, it is difficult to obtain a true measurement of intrinsic motivation via focus groups. Thus, the implementation of an instrument to measure motivation during observations and focus groups would be beneficial.

A second limitation was access to analytical data found in a particular report and a separate spreadsheet. The executive summary report is generated by the Office of Retention and the spreadsheet is information kept by the administrative office of the Honors College about
Honors College students at MSU. The executive summary report was going to be used to provide information on grit, resilience, self-efficacy, and social and academic integration of MSU students. The Executive Summary report would have allowed the researcher to make comparisons between honors and non-honors students and look deeper into the effects of self-efficacy. The spreadsheet from the administrative office of the Honors College would have provided the individual names with respective section numbers, email addresses, academic major, race, gender, and academic level for all students enrolled in the Honors College. The spreadsheet would have served two purposes: means for communication with sample and provide depth for collected data. Quantitative data in the form of reports and spreadsheets that will allow comparative analytics to support qualitative findings would have helped to strengthen data in this study.

A third limitation was the lack of diversity in the sample. Honors College students that the researcher encountered in this study were homogeneous. The lack of gender, race, and ethnicity may have affected findings. Similar findings with groups that include more males, race, and ethnicity will solidify the effects of the dominant domains that studying this sample revealed. Sampling honors students from other institutions could help to diversify the sample.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The promotion of research beyond the freshmen level student assumes that institutions integrate previous findings and refining of findings by authors such as Vincent Tinto, John Braxton, and Alexander Astin. Findings of previous authors lay the foundation for effectively beginning one’s collegiate journey. Research that supports the importance of studies beyond the freshmen level has the potential to extends one’s success further than the collegiate years.
**Interactions.** Interactions of all kinds and levels of significance seem to be important in all three research questions of this study: socially, academically, and intrinsically. Interactions garner additional strength when each person in the interaction places value on interaction with the other person. Future research that studies the significance of interactions with family, peers, faculty, and staff as one moves through each subsequent year of college and as needs change would help to further understanding around student success. Comparing the needs of Honors Students to the needs of Non-Honors Students may also be helpful in causing each group to improve.

Most people in the Honors Student’s life have placed value on interactions with the student. Parents have been supportive, peers, who are in similar situations, are also supportive and curious, and teachers are encouraging. The honors student environment thrust upon the student may have given the Honors Student a false sense of reality if the work environment does not reveal similar support. Future research could measure the ability of students to integrate, survive, and thrive in the workforce.

**Career success.** One of the many reasons students attend college is so that they have a higher probability of finding gainful employment. Future research should revisit students who were participants in the study to ascertain whether they deem themselves to be successful in their careers and the value that they now place on their pre-career experiences. Perspectives of previous students could help institutions better prepare a workforce and community members that exceed expectations. A focus on if the previous student finds themselves in a community of like-minded individuals and questioning previous students to determine if they were adequately prepared for entry into the workforce, similar to preparation for college, may be helpful. Finally, how are the expectations of others influencing their drive now and have they encountered new
difficult situations which caused personal growth. Post-graduate inquiries that are even partially supportive of findings would be a desirable finding for both the institution and students.

**Measuring the importance of pre-college experiences.** The theory of student involvement supports preparatory experiences and suggests that the more involved a student is with their educational program (socially and academically) the higher likelihood of student learning and personal development. The theory later explains that this is only true to a certain point; too much involvement socially or academically can lead to isolation (Astin, 1984). Future research should consider how and at what point in a student’s pre-college experience does the application of the theory of student involvement become the most significant in counteracting present or what may develop into future learning or developmental deficits.

**Summary**

The chief purpose of the honors college is not to create a more difficult undergraduate education, but to immerse similar students together in an environment that is marked by higher levels of ideas, discussions, creativity, and excitement. Honors colleges have become a more personalized form of education that is available to a highly responsive group of students. Community, preparatory experiences, and self-discovery are all dominant domains that work interdependently to enhance the ability of the academically advanced Honors College student at MSU to cumulatively integrate. The three dominant domains generated in this study show interdependence in that some of the identified sources of influence affect multiple research questions so that each one profits from the presence of the other. The ability of students to simultaneously undergo existential maturation in the areas of community, preparatory experiences, and self-discovery will produce a culture that generates future students who place value on the same things. The cumulatively integrative properties of community, preparatory
experiences, and self-discovery help to further a practical application of the complexities assigned to social and academic integration and intrinsic motivation, coupled with key interactions that intermingle throughout the collegiate journey. The dominant domains correlate with success that defies a single solution and instead identifies areas that will affect the whole student. The tangible characteristics of community, preparatory experiences, and self-discovery are applicable for all students and makes students’ success attainable for anyone. Each path to success must remain individualized and become self-guided at some point during the student’s academic journey; however, the most opportune time may vary per individual.
References


Austin, C.G. (1986). Orientation to honors education. Fostering academic excellence through honors programs. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, No. 25, 5-16.


Appendix A

Focus Group
Focus Group Questions

• Why are you participating in the Honors College? (motivation)

• Have you always been in honors classes?

• How do you learn best? (academic)

• Visual/Auditory/Kinesthetic – when did you figure that out?

• What measures did you take to integrate within the culture of MSU? (social / academic)

• Seek to be elected into an office? Seek out events to attend? Volunteer?

• How would you describe the sense of community found within the Honors College and MSU? (social / academic)

• How did you arrived at the decision to pursue your career path? Take me through the process. (motivation)

• Are you using the same process to identify your next life goal?

• How have peers within the Honors College at MSU contributed to your success?
Appendix B

Individual Interviews
Personal Interview Questions

1-The influence of peers/faculty/staff - advisors – *academic*

How would you define success in college?

(Probe) What prepared you most for success in college [as the student defined it]?

(Probe) How do you feel certain people at MSU have contributed to your success?

(Probe) HC faculty

(Probe) HC peers

(Probe) HC staff, e.g. Edminster, Inman

2-Faculties interest in students/institutional policies and practices - *academic/intrinsic*

Who do you rely on for guidance through this collegiate journey, e.g. answer your questions when uncertainty is realized?

What was your perception toward MSU before you arrived?

(Probe) What is your perception of MSU now?

3-Self-efficacy – *intrinsic*

How would you describe yourself?

(Probe) How do you feel certain people at MSU have contributed to your identity?

What motivates you?

(Probe) What inspires you to perform at a higher level than what is expected of the ‘typical’ college student?
(Probe) Why do you feel a need to be actively engaged at MSU?

(Probe) What end results do you desire in exchange for your time?

Does career indecisiveness concern you?

(Probe) Why?

4-Cultural capital – intrinsic (investment in bank account of these people, made by various individuals throughout their lives; separates these students from other students)

What is the education level of your parents (and older siblings if applicable)?

What do the people closest to you (e.g. friends, family, mentor) place value on/in/doing?

(Probe) How did the ‘value add’ impact your life growing up?

(Probe) In what way might it impact / have impacted your determination as to whether an extracurricular activity is worthwhile?

5-Sense of community (learning) – academic (needs to be around others who are likeminded; can rely on each other for answers to questions; a net – metaphor)

Students have identified the following Honors College attributes as reasons for their commitment to HC: research thesis, study abroad, small class sizes, energetic faculty, sense of community.

Were you drawn to one or more of these Honors College attributes or something different?

(Probe) Why?

Why is it important for you to belong, participate in a community of like-minded individuals?
6-Advanced/early preparation for college – academic (excellence started long ago; prepared for success; exposed to other experiences apart from masses; someone else saw potential and invested in their success; study habits already in place)

Describe a time(s) in your life that was difficult/made you uncomfortable, but you believe made you a better learner/student/person as a result.

(Probe) Did anyone help you through this trial?

(Probe) Why did you choose [restate who the student chose]?

How did past experiences help prepare you to transition into college?

(Probe) Who was most influential in either advance of or during the transition into college?

(Probe) Why?

7-Identity – social (honored to be in HC; HC recognized them based off objectives measures; more expected of me, but willing to deliver because of group identity)

How would others describe you?

(Probe) Would friends in the Honors College describe you differently than friends outside of the Honors College?

(Probe) Why (if answered yes)?

How do you determine whether an extracurricular activity is worthwhile?

(Probe) Given your current extracurricular activities, why do you want to be involved while attending MSU?

(Probe) What end results of the extracurricular activity do you desire in exchange for your time?
Miscellaneous Interview Questions

What differences do you perceive exist between those who elect participation in the Honors College and the traditional college student who was not eligible or chose not to participate in the Honors College?

Probe: college experience

Probe: life beyond college

Probe: how are you different from other college students?

Why were you able to avoid academic and behavioral mistakes commonly leading to early student departure from college?
Appendix C

Literature Supported Characteristics Used in Observations
Literature Supported Characteristics Used in Observations

- How big is the classroom audience?
- Do you observe active learning (e.g., active learning includes discussions, the type of questions faculty ask the class, role-playing, cooperative learning, debates, and the types of questions faculty ask on examinations)? Active discussion at board meeting?
- What percentage of the class stays after to speak with the professor? *Engagement.*
- How many students show up at least 5 minutes early to class and/or board meeting? *Engagement.*
- How many students are late to class and/or board meeting? *Engagement/unengaged*
- Does the professor act/verbally mention that he/she is available and students are welcome to use him/her as a resource? *Measure of faculty’s interest in students.*
- Do professors encourage students to attend events outside of the classroom/board meeting? *Cultural Capital.*
- Are there students that seem to fit-in better than others (e.g., talking before class/board meeting to more than one person and participating in class/board meeting or being isolated)? *Communal potential – psychosocial engagement. Individual interviews.*
- How organized are professors? Do they teach with clarity? *Academic integration.*
- What percentages of students are wearing/have MSU gear? *Branded/bought in*
- Are many of the same students in each class together/at board meeting? *Learning community.*
Appendix D

Consent Letters
Consent Letter: Observation Informed Consent Letter

Principal Investigator: Scott Adair, MSU P-20/Community Leadership doctoral student

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Ben Littlepage, Assistant Professor, COEHS – blittlepage@murraystate.edu – (270) 809-2796

Research Timeline: October, 2016 – August, 2017

Study Title: Cumulative Integration

Name of participant (please print): ___________________________________ Age: ______

The following information is provided to inform you about a research project, for which your participation is being requested. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate. Please read this form carefully and feel free to ask any questions you may have about the study and information provided below.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: The purpose of this study is to discover how academic and social integration and intrinsic motivation cause academically advanced students at MSU to cumulative integrate in the collegiate environment. The academically advanced students are defined as sophomore, junior, and senior level students who have remain enrolled in the Murray State University Honors College.

WHAT WILL WE ASK YOU TO DO: Participation will involve students interacting with peers, faculty, and staff in the classroom and Student Advisory Board meetings. Proceedings will be made from field notes and your responses will be included in it if you choose to participate.

RISKS OF PARTICIPATION: There are no risks associated with participation in this study.

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION: There are no individual benefits for participating in this study. The information gathered will be used to assist Murray State University determine best practices for student retention and graduation.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the observation is voluntary and you may choose to withdraw your participation at any time. No penalty or prejudice will be imposed should you choose to withdraw participation.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Responses to questions and comments made during the observation will be treated confidentially and only first names should be given. The only way people will be addressed in field notes will be by first names only. Confidentiality depends on the cooperation of all members being observed and cannot be guaranteed. Data storage, including electronic copies of consent forms, will on the researcher’s password protected PC. The researcher, Dr. Littlepage, and participants will be the sole individuals granted access to the data and/or consent forms. Data and consent forms will be destroyed three (3) years from the end of study.

STATEMENT BY PERSON AGREEING TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY:
I acknowledge that the risks and benefits of participation have been fully explained to me and that the investigator has offered to answer any questions that I may have concerning the procedures to be followed or my rights as a participant, and that those questions have been answered to my satisfaction. By signing this document, I voluntarily consent to participate in this research project and have my voice recorded.

Date: _______ Signature of participant: __________________________

Date: _______ Signature of researcher: __________________________

THE DATED APPROVAL STAMP ON THIS DOCUMENT INDICATES THAT THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY THE MURRAY STATE UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS. ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT THE CONDUCT OF THIS PROJECT SHOULD BE BROUGHT TO THE ATTENTION OF Dr. Ben Littlepage AT blittlepage@murraystate.edu OR 270-809-2796. ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT SHOULD BE BROUGHT TO THE ATTENTION OF THE IRB COORDINATOR AT msu.irb@murraystate.edu OR (270) 809-2916.
Consent Letter: Focus Group Informed Consent Letter

Principal Investigator: Scott Adair, MSU P-20/Community Leadership doctoral student
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Ben Littlepage, Assistant Professor, COEHS – blittlepage@murraystate.edu – (270) 809-2796
Research Timeline: October, 2016 – August, 2017
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WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO: Participation will involve answering questions in a group setting about your academic and social integration while enrolled in the Honors College. An audio recording of the focus group proceedings will be made and your voice will be included on it if you choose to participate.

RISKS OF PARTICIPATION: There are no risks associated with participation in this study.

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION: There are no individual benefits for participating in this study. The information gathered will be used to assist Murray State University determine best practices for student retention and graduation.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the focus group is voluntary and you may choose to withdraw your participation at any time. No penalty or prejudice will be imposed should you choose to withdraw participation.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Responses to questions and comments made during the focus group will be treated confidentially and only first names should be given. The only way people will be addressed during recordings will be by first names only. Confidentiality depends on the cooperation of all focus group members and cannot be guaranteed. Data storage, including electronic copies of consent forms, will on the researcher’s password protected PC. The researcher, Dr. Littlepage, and participants will be the sole individuals granted access to the data and/or consent forms. Data and consent forms will be destroyed three (3) years from the end of study.

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Date: _______ Signature of participant: ____________________________

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Consent Letter: Individual Interview Informed Consent Letter

Principal Investigator: Scott Adair, MSU P-20/Community Leadership doctoral student

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Ben Littlepage, Assistant Professor, COEHS – blittlepage@murraystate.edu – (270) 809-2796

Research Timeline: October, 2016 – August, 2017

Study Title: Cumulative Integration

Name of participant (please print): ___________________________________ Age: ______

The following information is provided to inform you about a research project, for which your participation is being requested. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate. Please read this form carefully and feel free to ask any questions you may have about the study and information provided below.

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WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO: Participation will involve answering questions in a private setting about your academic and social integration while enrolled in the Honors College. An audio recording of the individual interview proceedings will be made and your voice will be included on it if you choose to participate.

RISKS OF PARTICIPATION: There are no risks associated with participation in this study.

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION: There are no individual benefits for participating in this study. The information gathered will be used to assist Murray State University determine best practices for student retention and graduation.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the individual interview is voluntary and you may choose to withdraw your participation at any time. No penalty or prejudice will be imposed should you choose to withdraw participation.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Responses to questions and comments made during the individual interview will be treated confidentially and only first names should be given. The only way people will be addressed during recordings will be by first names only. Confidentiality depends on the cooperation of all people who participate in the individual interviews and cannot be guaranteed. Data storage, including electronic copies of consent forms, will on the researcher’s password protected PC. The researcher, Dr. Littlepage, and participants will be the sole individuals granted access to the data and/or consent forms. Data and consent forms will be destroyed three (3) years from the end of study.

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