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The Persistence of at Risk College Students into Their 8th Semester at a Private Christian College

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THE PERSISTENCE OF AT RISK COLLEGE STUDENTS INTO THEIR 8TH SEMESTER AT A PRIVATE CHRISTIAN COLLEGE

by

Rick Zomer

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Teaching, Learning, and Leadership
Dr. Louann Bierlein Palmer, Advisor

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
July 2006
It is estimated that the number of students who will begin a course of study but fail to complete a post secondary degree is between 28.5% (Tinto, 1993) and 50% (Brawer, 1990). This qualitative study reviewed sixteen students enrolled at a private Christian college who were deemed to be at risk based on specific pre-enrollment data but had successfully persisted into their senior year of college. Tinto’s Theory of Departure and the role of mentoring were used as lenses to determine: (1) the role of individual intentions and commitments in their persistence; (2) the impact of social and educational congruence on remaining enrolled; and (3) the influence of interaction with institutional community members on persistence.

The most significant findings regarding these at risk students who had persisted are: (1) peers play a significant role in the educational development of students; (2) social transitions are impacted by interaction with peers; (3) peers influence faith development (4) faculty are integral in transition issues; and (5) faith development is impacted by interaction with faculty. In each of these cases, variations of mentoring relationships were reported by at risk students.

This study concluded Tinto’s model was applicable to this population in that participants did develop commitments and intentions while interacting with the social and educational systems of the institution. Some participants however, discovered the
intentions and commitments they possessed prior to enrollment aligned with those of the institution. This leads to the possibility that at risk students at private Christian colleges go through a process of confirmation rather than alignment in regards to their personal intentions. Additionally, the significant impact of peers suggests the need for further study in areas such as the impact living arrangements and informal peer mentoring can have on the ability of at risk students to persist within this setting.
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Rick Zomer
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

Since the early 1970's, the issue of retention has received a great deal of attention from both college and university administrators and students. Partial rationale for this concern can be found in studies that estimate the departure rate for students who begin a course of study but fail to complete their degree is between 28.5% (Tinto, 1993) and 50% (Brawer, 1996). While these figures are primarily drawn from public institutions, retention statistics for students enrolling at a private college or university are still of concern with the number ranging between 8% (Tinto, 1993) and 17% (Walter, 2005).

There are numerous reasons why both individuals and institutions should be concerned about these figures. Institutions that recruit students to their campus but fail to keep them through graduation lose the opportunity to maximize the amount of tuition, room, and board revenue they collect from these students (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; Johnson, 1997; Nordquist, 1993). Conversely, students who discontinue from college or university without graduating do not actualize the return on their tuition expenses (Walter, 2005). This scenario may have increased significance at private institutions where some students have experienced a 30% increase in tuition since the beginning of this decade (Farrell, 2003).

Retention Theories

In this climate, it should not be surprising that numerous theories have been proposed that seek to understand and respond to the issue of retention. Theorists have examined the impact student performance (Spady, 1970), involvement (Astin, 1975), and environment (Bean, 1980) can have on student departure decisions. While each of
these studies have been cited in further examinations of the student retention issue (Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Metz, 2004), Vincent Tinto’s (1975) theory has been often viewed as the groundbreaking work concerning the student retention issue (Metz, 2004).

Tinto (1975) grounded his writings in Durkeim’s theory on suicide (1953) and Van Gennep’s work on cultural rites of passage (1960). Tinto’s incorporation of these concepts into the discussion of student departure led to the development of a two-dimensional longitudinal model (Tinto, 1975). He proposed that each individual came to campus with “pre-entry attributes” and a combination of intentions, goals and commitments. Tinto defined student intentions by referencing student’s choice of major or intended career path and believed commitments were demonstrated through religious, political, or social leanings. More specifically, it was the interaction of these unique individual student attributes with the educational and social systems of the institution that led to a departure decision.

Tinto posited that a departure decision was a longitudinal process and that a student who experienced isolation, adjustment issues, difficulty, or incongruence with the institution was more likely to depart than students who did not. Any four of these factors could result if a student believed he or she had failed to adequately assimilate her or his intentions and commitments with those believed to be exhibited by the institution through the social and educational systems on campus. Tinto’s work was the result of significant research done with national data on institutional retention and has been considered by some to be the most commonly accepted theory of student departure (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000).
While his work has garnered significant support, Tinto’s (1975) model has been criticized by others. Theorists such as Tierney (1992) and Tucker (1999) have critiqued Tinto’s work for inappropriately applying the values of dominant student cultures to minorities or for trying to make generalizations from his data source that are too broad. Despite challenges from these and other theorists, Tinto’s work maintains “near paradigmatic status” within the study of college student departure (Berger & Braxton, 1998).

**Empirical Research of Tinto’s Theory**

Due to its standing in the field, Tinto’s (1975) model has been examined in numerous institutional settings and environments. A large number of studies have reviewed the ability of his model to predict student retention in the short-term; from the date of initial enrollment into a third semester (Berger, 1997; Berger & Braxton, 1998; Berger & Milem, 1999; Cash & Bissel, 1985; DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000; Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Milem & Berger, 1997). A less frequent approach has been to examine the impact of Tinto’s theory on retention decisions beyond a student’s third semester on-campus (Fulcomer, 2003; Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002; Nordquist, 1993; Smith, 2002; Williamson & Creamer, 1988). While each of these studies will be reviewed later, it is interesting to note at this point that only three of these authors examined Tinto’s (1975) theory within the context of a private, Christian, liberal arts college. In all three cases the authors (Cash & Bissel, 1985; Fulcomer, 2003; Smith, 2002) called for further study implementing a longitudinal review of retention to be done to examine the applicability of Tinto’s model to their specific institutional environment.
Institutional Intervention Strategies and Student Variables

In an attempt to address the student departure issue on campus, institutions have tried to identify appropriate interventions. While Tinto’s (1975) theory has been examined in different institutional settings using several measures of retention, the application of his model’s pre-entry attributes has also varied from setting to setting. The process of examining current literature reveals there are a myriad of student background characteristics that institutions have considered in their retention approaches. More specifically, Tinto’s prior schooling variable has been gauged by reviewing high school grade point averages and standardized test scores in attempts to identify students who might be at risk of departure. Studies have used these measures to examine the impact of retention strategies such as academic support programs (Glenn, 2001), required extended orientation or first year student courses (Bean & Eaton, 2001), and faculty mentoring programs (Campbell & Campbell, 1997) have on at risk student departure decisions.

While all three of these approaches have received attention from researchers, the faculty mentoring program has a direct connection with Tinto’s theory in terms of the relationship he identified between faculty interaction and retention (Tinto, 1993). Other researchers have examined the impact contact with faculty can have on retention (Astin, 1975; Berger & Milem, 1999; Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Kuh, Schuh, & Wit, 1991) so it appears that faculty mentoring can be an appropriate perspective to use when examining retention, specifically Tinto’s (1975) theory.
Problem Statement

As previously mentioned, retention has been a significant issue in higher education for the past several years. There are institutional and individual reasons to be concerned about this issue and several theories have been offered to help better understand retention from both the student and institutional perspective. While Vincent Tinto’s (1975) theory has received broad acceptance and has been examined in various institutional settings there several reasons for this theory to be examined further. The majority of studies examining Tinto’s theory have chosen to define persistence in the short term, so little is known about the ability of his model to explain departure over time. Some studies have attempted to address this issue by applying Tinto’s model to students into the third and fourth year on campus but there has been a consistent call for more longitudinal data on Tinto’s theory.

In addition, little work has been done examining Tinto’s model within the context of private, Christian, liberal arts institutions. A study set in this environment that examined the applicability of Tinto’s model to the experience of students who had persisted into an eighth semester would respond to the gap that currently exists in this portion of the retention literature. The quality of this data would be further strengthened through using Tinto’s pre-entry attributes in participant selection. A review of variables such as high school grade point average and standardized test scores would allow participants to be selected who may have been thought to be least likely to succeed or at risk of departing college before degree completion.
Research Questions

This study examines the applicability of Vincent Tinto’s (1975) theory of student departure to the experience of students enrolled at a private, Christian, liberal arts institution. The researcher utilizes Tinto’s pre-entry attribute of prior schooling measured by high school grade point average, standardized test score, and results from the College Student Inventory to select participants. The goal is to identify students who may have been thought to be at risk of departure but who have remained enrolled into an eighth semester. In general, this study describes the degree to which Tinto’s theory is applicable to this specific population and, more specifically, what role if any faculty mentoring played in the ability of these students to persist. To that end, the following research questions have been developed to serve as a framework for this study:

1. To what degree did successful “at risk” students develop a level of commitment to their institution? Did these students develop individual intentions while they were enrolled at their institution? What role, if any, did mentoring play in that process?

2. Did successful “at risk” students form a sense of social and educational congruence with their institution? How, if at all, did this process interact with their personal intentions and commitments? In what ways, if any, was a mentor a part of this process?

3. What role, if any, did successful “at risk” students level of interaction with other members of the community play in their ability to persist at their institution? Did mentors help facilitate this connection?
Methodology

Due to the subject matter and context of this study a qualitative approach was utilized by the researcher. This study examines the impact mentoring had on at risk students who have persisted into an eighth semester at a specific institution. A qualitative methodology is appropriate for a study that takes place within a natural setting where an event occurs (Creswell, 1998). In this case the research took place at the institution in which the at risk students are enrolled, so a qualitative methodology is appropriate.

Furthermore due to the goals and focus of this study, a phenomenological approach was implemented by the researcher. This qualitative framework is appropriate because it has been utilized in various settings including education (Tesch, 1988) and the study participants in this research have all shared a common experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). In this study, students have been selected because they have shared a common prior schooling characteristic such as a low high school grade point average, standardized test score, or College Student Inventory result which would cause them to be considered to be at risk of discontinuing. An additional commonality is that despite exhibiting one or more of these factors, all of these students have persisted into an eighth semester of college.

In-depth interviews with 16 at risk students were conducted in an attempt to further understand the experience of these students and the degree to which mentoring relationships impacted the ability of these individuals to persist.
Summary

The goal of this research is to examine the experience of students enrolled at a private, Christian, liberal arts institution who were initially thought to be at risk of departure. More specifically, the researcher examines the experience of these individuals in light of Vincent Tinto's theory of student departure to explore the applicability of his model to this educational environment. This information is important because it provides longitudinal retention data from a setting that is currently missing from the literature. In addition, it sheds light on the applicability of Tinto's theory within the private, Christian, liberal arts college and investigates the impact faculty mentoring has as an intervention strategy.

The remainder of this work involves a review of literature (Chapter 2), a discussion of the methodology implemented (Chapter 3), a presentation of research findings (Chapter 4), and conclusions and suggestions for future research (Chapter 5).
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

Over the past thirty-five years, much has been written concerning the importance of retention from both the student and institutional perspective. Individuals have placed increased importance on obtaining a post-secondary degree while colleges and universities have experienced increased competition for students (Peltier, Laden, & Matranga, 1999). This chapter examines the prominent theories of student retention recently proposed with specific attention paid to Vincent Tinto’s (1975) theory of student departure. Studies examining his model are reviewed, focusing on the methodological selection and institutional settings chosen by various researchers. This chapter concludes by identifying institutional settings that have received limited attention in reviews of Tinto’s theory and provides a framework for reviewing his work within the context of a four year, private, Christian, liberal arts college.

Early Theories of Student Departure

Tinto’s theory of student departure is considered by many to be the most widely accepted on the topic of student retention (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000). The foundation for his work is found in Spady’s (1970) theory of student departure and the inferences he drew from Durkheim’s (1953) theory of suicide as well as Van Gennep’s (1960) work on rites of passage within cultures.

Durkheim wrote there were four types of individual departures or suicides that may take place as an individual makes transitions within a society, one of which he labeled as egotistical. This type of departure happens when an individual is unable to assimilate to a new environment, and as a result, chooses to permanently remove
themselves from that system. Spady applied Durkheim’s theory from the broader societal context to the college and university setting. Spady theorized students had individual characteristics and goals that were motivators and, as a result, academic performance had a significant impact on a student’s decision to remain or leave.

In addition to being influenced by Durkheim and Spady, Tinto’s (1975) theory was also impacted by Van Gennep’s (1960) writings on individual movements within society and the notion of rites of passage. According to Van Gennep, in order to successfully move from one place to another within a society, an individual must complete specific rituals or tasks which are celebrated upon completion. This process demonstrated integration with the community and was necessary for the individual to be accepted.

Astin’s (1975) work dealing with student departure was another significant influence on Tinto’s (1975) theory. Astin claimed that student involvement influenced persistence and extended Spady’s theory by adding additional variables he believed impacted students’ departure decisions such as financial aid. Astin proposed a three tiered theory of student departure comprised of an input/process/output model where student variables served as the inputs. These variables interacted with the experience or process of each student to generate an output of persistence or departure for the individual. The impact of previous theorists along with the importance time plays within Tinto’s model can be seen by an examination of the four main components of his theory.
Tinto’s Model of Student Departure

The concepts of departure, interaction, rites of passage, and involvement are significant components of Tinto’s theory of student departure. In addition to incorporating the writings of Durkheim, Spady, Van Gennep, and Astin into his theory, Tinto’s work is considered to be the seminal work on student persistence due to the importance he placed on a longitudinal perspective on student’s decisions to remain or withdraw from her or his institution (Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Nordquist 1993).

In addition, Tinto proposed that departure was the result of the existence or lack of interaction between an individual student and their institution (Berger, 1997). His theory of departure was developed after reviewing several national databases that contained aggregate information on student rates of departure drawn primarily from large, public, state institutions (Metz, 2004; Tucker, 1999).

According to Tinto, while a student is enrolled at her or his institution, the student may experience isolation, adjustment issues, difficulty, or feelings of incongruence as he or she moves through the process of developing individual intentions and commitments. Concurrently, students may have significant interactions with the institution’s educational or social systems. It is the interaction of these individual and institutional factors that impact a student’s departure decision (Tinto, 1975).

Firstly, Tinto believed a student could experience isolation while enrolled at a college or university if there was a lack of contact between that individual and the educational community (Tinto, 1975). It was important for a student to identify the opportunities available to them to make connections such as formal and informal
contact with faculty members and involvement with the various student cultures on campus. Each campus contains dominant and subordinate student cultures and Tinto believed a student’s decision to withdraw or remain at the institution depended upon the degree to which he or she felt connected to one of these cultures. The stronger the connection and the closer the culture were to the campus mainstream, the more likely the student was to remain (Tinto, 1993).

In addition to the concept of isolation, Tinto’s theory incorporates a second dynamic, the impact specific adjustment issues can have on student departure (Tinto, 1975). Students who experience difficulty or who are unable to successfully separate themselves from past connections or associations may be at greater risk to withdraw than students who are able to make a smooth transition into a new environment. Likewise, students’ departure decisions can also be impacted by an inability to adjust to the new educational, social, and intellectual communities present on a college or university campus. Tinto believed students who have strong intentions or commitments to complete a degree are less likely to experience significant adjustment issues and leave their institution (Tinto, 1993).

The third component of Tinto’s departure theory deals with the level of incongruence a student may develop while they move through their educational experience (Tinto, 1975). He stated a student may become aware of a mismatch between individual needs, interests, or preferences and those of the institution (Tinto, 1993). This may develop as a student becomes more aware of her or his institutional culture and can manifest itself in terms of a sense of intellectual or social incongruence. A student’s sense of “personal fit” with the campus environment can
impact a decision to remain or depart as individuals are less likely to stay if they do not feel a personal connection with the institution (1993).

Finally, Tinto’s theory of departure also includes a discussion on the concept of difficulty and the impact it can have on student departure (Tinto, 1975). In addition to the difficulty a student may experience in making transitions and new connections, Tinto postulates students may be unable to meet minimum institutional standards for academic performance which may lead to departure. According to Tinto however, the majority of student departure decisions are not based on academic failings. He theorized that individuals with high levels of commitment may be able to overcome academic difficulty, but he did not dispute that educational difficulty can impact persistence (Tinto, 1993).

A review of Tinto’s work demonstrates that he places a high level of significance on the interaction between the individual and the larger community, and the impact the ability to transition from one community to another can have on an individual’s decision to remain or leave a specific environment (see Figure 1). While many believe his model to be the foundation for what is known about student departure (Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002), there have been serious critiques made against Tinto’s theory and its usefulness for understanding the student departure puzzle.
Figure 1. Tinto's Model of Student Departure

Critiques of Tinto's Model of Student Departure

Despite the attention received in various persistence discussions, Tinto's work has been criticized by theorists for a number of reasons, among them the sources of data on which his theory is based and the applicability of his model.

A major critique of Tinto's theory can be found in the writings of Tierney (1992). He challenged Tinto's work in several areas including the sources he used, the impact they have on the claims of his theory, and his misapplication of Van Gennep's (1960) anthropological writings. Tierney points out that Tinto's theory is
primarily based on data drawn from a specific institutional type: the four year, public institution and, as a result, Tinto’s work should only be applied to students attending that type of institution. He charges Tinto’s data source is too broad to be able to appropriately apply his theory to other types of educational settings such as historically black institutions, women’s colleges, and small or private colleges or universities (Tierney 1992).

Tierney also charges that Tinto’s work inappropriately applies Van Gennep’s writings dealing with rites of passage. Tierney points out that the dominant culture typically determines what traditions or rituals an individual must adhere to in order to gain acceptance. According to Tierney, Tinto’s theory applies the rites of passage of the dominant white culture to the experience of all students, even those who do not come from this perspective (Tierney, 1992). He believes it is inappropriate to apply Tinto’s theory as an explanation of the transitional experience of minority or female students since his work primarily focuses on the rites of passage of the dominant culture.

In addition to Tierney’s critique, Tinto’s work has also been called in question by Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997). They reviewed his model and what they identified as the thirteen primary propositions of Tinto’s theory within the context of specific institutions, and found only five of his concepts had internal consistency. For example, their review did not show strong support for Tinto’s inclusion of academic integration in a consistent model of student departure. Their work furthered Tierney’s (1992) critique by stating that Tinto’s model had limited applicability to settings other than large, public, four year, institutions. While the authors did not call for Tinto’s
theory to be abandoned, they did state his model should be tested in other institutional settings before it could be applied to those environments.

Tucker (1999) extended Tierney’s (1992) critique of Tinto’s theory by claiming the aggregate survey data he used was too broad to make inferences about an individual’s departure decision. Tucker stated there was significant variability from one individual to another in terms of what went into a decision to remain or depart from an institution, so it was inappropriate to make specific claims from such a broad data source (Tucker, 1999). He called for a qualitative rather than survey-based examination of Tinto’s theory so an individual’s circumstances and input could be included in a review of the model.

In response to these critiques, examinations of Tinto’s theory of student departure have been done in various educational settings. A review of recent empirical research completed using Tinto’s model as a foundation will be offered with specific attention paid to the methodology, institutional setting, and operational definitions used to test his work.

Empirical Research on Tinto’s Model of Student Departure

There are several means of categorizing the research examining Tinto’s theory of departure. While such research has primarily implemented a quantitative methodology, studies have been set in both public and private institutions. In addition, the research is further divided in terms of the definition of student departure used. This review of empirical studies dealing with Tinto’s theory will initially be divided by the definition of departure selected by the researcher(s); and further categorized by the type of institution in which the study was conducted.
A large number of studies have examined Tinto’s theory of departure by examining student persistence within the context of a student’s initial year of enrollment (Berger, 1997; Berger & Braxton, 1998; Berger & Milem, 1999; Cash & Bissel, 1985; DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000; Milem & Berger 1997; Graunke & Woosley, 2005). These studies tested Tinto’s theory of departure by defining a student as having persisted if he or she remained from the date of initial enrollment into a third semester at the institution. An additional commonality among these studies is that all the researchers but Graunke and Woolsey (2005) chose to do research in the context of highly selective, private institutions.

An early examination of Tinto’s theory within the setting of a private institution was conducted by Cash and Bissel (1985). They sought to examine his model within the context of two small, church-related institutions, each with a student population of less than 2,000 students. The primary goal of the researchers was to examine Tinto’s theory, specifically the portion dealing with individual commitment. Cash and Bissel speculated this portion of Tinto’s model might have greater significance within the context of church-related institutions since students who attended these types of colleges often pay significantly more money in tuition and fees than do students attending larger, public universities.

The researchers used a quantitative methodology with surveys given to students as part of the orientation program during the first week on campus. Cash and Bissel included variables such as family background, academic aspirations, expectations related to involvement with co-curricular activities and interaction with
faculty (Cash & Bissel, 1985). The researchers administered a second survey in the spring semester and matched responses to determine which students enrolled for a second semester giving them an actual rate of persistence. Based on their data analysis, Cash and Bissel determined that the portion of Tinto's theory dealing with individual commitment was applicable to the church-related institution but that other factors may also influence departure. They called for further study within this environment and argued that the financial cost of attending a church-related institution presented unique challenges in determining the causes of student departure.

Berger (1997) examined Tinto's theory within the context of highly selective, private institutions after identifying this setting as a previously understudied population. He examined the impact that background characteristics such as high school grade point average, gender, race, and socio-economic status can have on social integration on campus and a student's decision to persist. Based on the setting of his study and the definition of departure selected, Berger stated there was a possibility of identifying a "mid-range" theory of departure as opposed to the macro model presented by Tinto and concluded that further study on persistence should be done in various institutional settings.

The examination of Tinto's model was further extended by a study conducted by Milem and Berger (1997). Like Berger's (1997) individual work, the researchers investigated Tinto's model within the context of a highly selective, private, residential institution. The goal was to examine the degree of connection between Tinto's work and Astin's (1984) Involvement Theory and the impact the two models might have on student departure. The authors used an indirect measure of persistence in their study,
considering a student to have remained enrolled if he or she expressed the desire to return. Milem and Berger acknowledged this as a shortcoming of their study of Tinto’s theory and called for further research on retention to use institutional data to determine student persistence rates (Milem & Berger, 1997).

In an attempt to improve the data used in examinations of Tinto’s model of departure, Berger and Braxton (1998) surveyed first year students at three different points in time during the initial year on campus. The impetus for Berger and Braxton’s study was their hesitancy to apply Tinto’s theory of departure to various institutional settings. According to the authors, Tinto’s theory is primarily based within the context of large, public universities where the first year departure rate is approximately 28.5%. As a result, Berger and Braxton felt it inappropriate to apply Tinto’s model to private institutions where the first year departure rate is much lower, with an average rate of 8% (Berger & Braxton, 1998).

The authors acknowledged there was a gap in the literature dealing with Tinto’s model of student departure within the context of private institutions. As a result they examined the interactive nature between student and institution included in Tinto’s model to determine the impact this dynamic had on departure decisions at highly selective, private, residential institutions. They included background variables such as a student’s high school grade point average and concluded that various student and institutional attributes impacted departure decisions (Berger & Braxton, 1998). However, the study was limited by only examining retention within the context of the first year of enrollment causing the authors to call for a longitudinal study of Tinto’s model of departure set within the context of highly selective, private, institutions.
Berger and Milem (1999) sought to improve upon earlier research examining Tinto's model within the context of highly selective, private, institutions by incorporating more student background variables in their study. In addition, the researchers utilized an actual measure of student persistence rather than a reliance on a student's self report of their intention to return. The authors included student characteristics such as race, socio-economic status, gender, family income, political views, and high school grade point average and gathered survey data at three points during a student's first year on campus. Berger and Milem reviewed institutional retention data in the fall of the student's second year to determine who remained and to examine the impact involvement with educational and social structures had on persistence decisions. These methodological decisions extended earlier research (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Milem & Berger, 1997) by increasing the number of student background characteristics used in the study and by including actual retention data. However, Berger and Milem acknowledged their work could only explain the impact of Tinto's model into the second year of a student's experience. As a result, the authors called for a longer term examination of Tinto's model that could review departure decisions made later in the college experience (Berger & Milem, 1999).

The work of Elkins, Braxton, and James (2000) addressed some of the limitations present in earlier examinations of Tinto's theory by focusing attention on the unique attributes of highly selective, private institutions. According to the authors, further study must be done on Tinto's model of departure in this environment, since students who choose to attend highly selective, private institutions may receive more support from family members and friends than students who attend large, public, state institutions. In addition, college attendance is more likely to be a value or expectation
for students attending highly selective, private institutions (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000).

Due to these factors, the authors reviewed Tinto’s model of departure within the context of a highly selective, private institution and from a student’s first year to the second. Students were surveyed at three specific points during the first year in an attempt to examine Tinto’s separation stage of student departure. The authors extended earlier studies by including background variables such as individual student scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or the American College Test (ACT) in their work (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000). The authors did find that initial student characteristics do influence departure decisions but their findings were limited because 16.7% of the students who began the study left the institution before the completion of their first year. As a result, the authors were unable to gain complete data on these students resulting in a call for more longitudinal data where the process of student transition and incorporation could be more fully examined.

Another study done in an attempt to examine Tinto’s model of departure and its ability to predict persistence was conducted by DeBerard, Spielmans, and Julka (2004). The authors studied students from a private institution and considered the student’s high school grade point average and SAT or ACT score as part of their definition of Tinto’s concept of individual attributes. Their decision to extend this portion of Tinto’s definition of attributes was based on Wolfe and Johnson’s (1995) findings on the ability the combination of high school grade point average and SAT or ACT scores had to significantly predict college grade point average. This allowed DeBerard, Spielmans, and Julka to improve upon the work offered by Berger and Braxton (1998) examining Tinto’s model of departure. By extending Tinto’s
definition of attributes to include grade point average, DeBerard, Spielmans, and
Julka (2004) reported the existence of a statistically significant correlation between
the combination of high school grade point average and standardized test scores with
retention.

While DeBerard, Spielmans, and Julka (2004) furthered the literature on
Tinto’s theory of departure and its ability to predict persistence at highly selective
private institutions by including grade point average and SAT or ACT scores, the
authors noted limitations that should be addressed in future research. Their
methodology was similar to that used by Berger and Milem (1999) or Elkins,
Braxton, and James (2000) in that the definition of persistence only accounted for
students who remained enrolled into their second year at their institution. In addition,
participants for DeBerard, Spielmans, and Julka’s (2004) study were drawn
exclusively from students enrolled in a specific psychology or sociology class. It may
be that students enrolled in this class had significantly higher or lower high school
grade point averages or SAT or ACT test scores which could skew the findings of the
study. The authors’ decision to implement this sampling strategy may inhibit the
ability to apply the findings of this study to populations outside of the students
enrolled in this class or those who attend the institution which hosted the research
(Creswell, 2003).

Graunke and Woosley (2005) sought to extend Tinto’s model of departure by
examining students who had remained into the second year of enrollment. In a
fashion similar to the works of Williamson and Creamer (1988), Smith (2002), and
Ishitani and DesJardins (2002), the authors reviewed actual sophomore retention data
in the exploration of Tinto’s model set at a public institution in the midwest. Graunke
and Woosley implemented a quantitative approach to examine the impact variables such as academic experiences, attitudes, and commitments had on student departure decisions. Participants were surveyed during the first semester of the academic year and at the mid point of the following spring semester.

Statistical analysis of responses from students who remained enrolled into the subsequent fall semester was completed to determine if background variables identified by Tinto could predict persistence. The researchers found that academic experiences, specifically in terms of degree and quality of student interaction with faculty, were a predictor of sophomore student retention. Based on this finding, Graunke and Woosley considered it appropriate to extend this aspect of Tinto’s theory to the experience of sophomore students. However, their research did not show academic intentions to be a significant predictor of second year student persistence so the applicability of Tinto’s theory to this population of students was considered to be limited.

As noted in the research presented by Berger, (1997), Milem and Berger, (1997), Berger and Braxton, (1998), Berger and Milem, (1999), Elkins, Braxton, and James, (2000), DeBerard, Spielmans, and Julka, (2004), and Grauke and Woosley; (2005) Tinto’s model has received considerable review within the context of highly selective, private institutions. However, the studies listed above have considered Tinto’s theory of student departure within the context of short term persistence from a student’s initial arrival on campus to her or his second year of enrollment. The studies have acknowledged this limitation and called for further examination of Tinto’s theory with a longitudinal view of retention that extends beyond the second year of enrollment.
Departure Defined as Enrollment Beyond the Student’s Third Semester

While not as numerous as work done with Tinto’s theory and short-term persistence, some studies have examined aspects of his model using a long-term view of student persistence (e.g. Fulcomer, 2003; Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002; Nordquist, 1993; Smith, 2002; Williamson & Creamer, 1988). These authors have extended the examination on Tinto’s model to include the impact his theory has on persistence into a student’s third and fourth year at his or her institution.

An early attempt to examine Tinto’s theory of departure beyond a student’s initial enrollment in a second year was presented by Williamson and Creamer (1988). The authors included many of the same student attributes found in studies that examined Tinto’s theory in the short-term such as race, socio-economic status, gender, and high school grade point average, but they defined persistence differently. The operational definition of a student who failed to persist in Williamson and Creamer’s study was an individual who was no longer attending his or her institution 20 months after initial enrollment.

Through the use of quantitative data collected through a national database and by defining persistence in the manner in which they did, the authors found that the emphasis Tinto placed on the impact social and academic integration had on persistence was diminished as a student moved into her or his third or fourth year of enrollment (Williamson & Creamer, 1988). The researchers found the impact student background characteristics had on persistence increased dramatically as students moved through college or university. The findings of the study caused Williamson and Creamer to question the ability of Tinto’s theory to explain departure decisions.
suggesting that the predictive ability of the model may be sensitive to the definition of persistence chosen.

While much of the data generated to examine various aspects of Tinto’s theory is from quantitative sources, Nordquist (1993) studied Tinto’s model by implementing a qualitative approach. In a manner similar to other research (e.g. Berger & Braxton, 1998; Milem & Berger, 1997; Williamson & Creamer, 1988), Nordquist included various student background characteristics such as family background and gender in her study of students from public universities in Utah.

Nordquist’s study used a distinct definition of persistence because it only included individuals who had already discontinued from their institution. Through interviews with 18 students, she examined how individual students described departure to determine if individual incongruence or isolation influenced the decision to discontinue. In addition, Nordquist sought to track each participant’s background characteristics to determine if a dominant theme or type emerged that impacted persistence.

Based on her findings, Nordquist upheld Tinto’s contention that incongruence and isolation had an impact on retention decisions but questioned the lack of significance his model placed on the impact student background characteristics such as gender had in his theory. Nordquist’s work is unique in the methodology she selected to examine Tinto’s theory, but its impact is diminished by the lack of participant diversity in her study. In addition, her study was limited by her decision to only interview students who had already decided to withdraw from their institution. Her findings would be strengthened by including participants who were still enrolled so she could examine Tinto’s theory in terms of the impact incongruence and
isolation played in the lives of these students. Nordquist acknowledged this limitation and called for further study of Tinto’s theory that included more minority student participation (Nordquist, 1993).

Ishitani and DesJardins (2002) reviewed Tinto’s model and his inclusion of three specific student background variables: family, individual attributes, and pre-college schooling. Their goal was to extend the ability of Tinto’s model to predict student departure beyond the first year of enrollment. To do this they expanded Tinto’s definition of student attributes to include gender, race, family income, educational aspirations, SAT score, and grade point average from the student’s first year at college or university (Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002). The authors selected a student sample from private institutions and attempted to derive a formula based on Tinto’s model that could predict departure into a student’s fourth or fifth year of enrollment.

The researchers’ attempts to derive a general predictive formula for student persistence were limited by the background student characteristics that were chosen to be a part of the model and the operational definitions of those variables. In addition to that limitation, Ishitani and DesJardins also noted reliance on quantitative data made it difficult to fully understand factors that relate to student interactions with their environment. As a result the researchers called for qualitative studies to be done that could further what is known about Tinto’s model and its implications for understanding persistence over the entirety of a student’s educational experience.

An additional exploration of Tinto’s model of departure is offered by Smith (2002) who set his study within the context of four private, Christian, liberal arts institutions. While Smith’s examination was conducted in the same environment as
Cash and Bissel’s (1985), Smith (2002) extends the examination of the impact of Tinto’s theory on retention in this setting by including data collected from students beyond the third semester of enrollment. Smith believed there was limited research on the impact of Tinto’s model in church-related institutions, so he examined the impact social and academic integration had on student departure.

Smith (2002) implemented a quantitative approach to examine Tinto’s model. The results of the study indicated a statistically significant relationship between social and academic integration and persistence at the church-related institution but acknowledged two significant limitations. Students were not given operational definitions for either social or academic integration so each participant defined the terms in her or his own manner. In addition, a disproportionate number of females completed the survey. Both of these factors limit Smith’s findings and results in the need for further research to be conducted within the context of the church-related institution.

A further attempt to study Tinto’s departure model within the context of church-related institutions was conducted by Fulcomer (2003). He examined a majority of the student background characteristics included in Tinto’s theory to determine the impact these variables had on retention at a private, church-related, liberal arts institution located in a mid-western state. Fulcomer referenced several factors such as high school grade point average, SAT or ACT scores, contact with faculty, co-curricular involvement, career aspirations, and financial concerns in the thirteen research questions he developed to examine Tinto’s model of departure.

Fulcomer used existing data from instruments that were administered at two specific points in time during the academic year. Information was used from the...
College Student Inventory and The Freshmen Survey that were administered during the first week of the fall semester. The responses from these two instruments were compared to the data generated from the administration of Your First College Year, a survey created by the Higher Education Research Institution (Fulcomer, 2003). The researcher found a statistically significant relationship between ten variables and student retention so Fulcomer concluded that Tinto’s model of departure partially applied to his study participants (2003).

The findings of Fulcomer’s study however, were limited due to its reliance on data from the Your First College Year, a survey instrument that was still in a pilot phase when it was used by the researcher. In addition, students who left the institution before the middle portion of the spring semester did not take all three surveys so information from these students was not included in the results.

The Connection Between Tinto’s Model and Institutional Retention Strategies

The past thirty years has seen numerous studies attempting to help understand student departure (e.g. Astin, 1975, 1996, 1997; Bean, 1980; Milem & Berger, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Despite the large number of available models attempting to explain student persistence or withdrawal, Vincent Tinto’s (1975, 1993) theory of student departure is viewed by many as the benchmark for studies of student departure (Berger & Braxton, 1998). The increased emphasis on student departure in general and more specifically, Tinto’s model, can be seen on the institutional (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000) and individual student level (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004).
Impact of Non-Persistence on Institutions and Individuals

There are several reasons why institutions have become increasingly interested in improving their retention rates. The failure to retain a student once he or she enrolls impacts the institution in terms of enrollment, budget, and public perception (Braxton, 2002; Nordquist, 1993). The impact of lost revenue from student departure is amplified within the context of private colleges and universities since these institutions often generate significant portions of their operating budgets from room, board, and other fees (Nordquist, 1993). In addition, the competition between institutions for students has continued to increase (Peltier, Laden, & Matringa, 1999) so it is not surprising that retention has been considered by some theorists to be the "lifeblood" of an institution (Hurd, 2000), while others have called for an increased emphasis on retention issues in institutional research (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000).

While departure has received significant attention due to its institutional ramifications, theorists have also examined several consequences that can result from a student’s decision to leave college or university before completing a degree. It has been argued that a student’s decision to discontinue from college or university may lead to the development of negative attitudes toward future intellectual growth (Ferguson, 1990), a potential lack of exposure to socializing agents (Perez, 1998), higher rates of unemployment (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004) and a decrease in earning potential (U.S Census, 2004). In addition, a student’s failure to complete a degree results in a lack of return on the money spent on tuition, room, board, and other fees by the individual (Walter, 2005). These factors demonstrate that student
departure has the potential to significantly impact the individual student as well as have ramifications for the institution he or she is leaving.

Aggregate numbers pertaining to student departure on the national level demonstrate the need for the increased emphasis on retention studies. It has been estimated that 28.5% of all students who enroll at an institution will discontinue before beginning a second year of study (Tinto, 1993). When departure decisions are viewed from a longer term perspective, it is estimated that 50% of all students who enroll at a college or university will not complete a degree (Brawer, 1996). Since these statistics are primarily based on research done at large public institutions, they differ from retention rates from highly selective, private, institutions. Research has shown the departure rate at these institutions to be somewhere between 8% (Tinto, 1993) and 17% (Walter, 2005). The figures from both types of institutional environments demonstrate that retention can be seen as a significant issue that warrants further discussion and research.

Explanation of Student Background Variables and Tinto's Model

As previously mentioned, Tinto’s model has often been used as the focal point for studies attempting to better understand or explain the process of student departure (Berger & Braxton, 1998). The foundation of Tinto’s theory is a component identified as “pre-entry attributes” comprised of family background, skills and abilities, and prior schooling. Each of these attributes impact a student’s ability to integrate her or his intentions and commitments with the educational and social systems of the institution (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Theorists examining Tinto’s model of departure have used multiple definitions for these “pre-entry attributes” with a large amount of variance in the definition used for prior schooling.
It should be noted that theorists examining Tinto's model of departure have considered pre-entry attributes to include factors such as a student's finances or financial aid award (Porter, 1991), the level of education attained by the parent of a student (Wallace & Abel, 1997), possessing liberal or conservative political views (Milem & Berger, 1997), race (Berger & Braxton, 1998), and gender (Graunke & Woosley, 2005). Some of these factors can be consistently applied to numerous studies because they have concrete definitions (e.g. race and gender) while other variables are more difficult to cross-apply because of potential variations between authors in the definition of the terms (e.g. financial issues and political views).

More specifically, studies have selected concrete background measures such as high school grade point average or standardized test scores to gauge an individual's level of prior schooling. These variables have been used in attempts to explain or predict student departure rates from large, public universities (Astin, 1997; Feldman, 1993). Other theorists have implemented results from the College Student Inventory (CSI), an instrument developed by Noel-Levitz that attempts to predict departure based on self reports of student motivation and aspirations (Retention Management System- Technical Guide, 2001). Rudmann (1992) and Harter (2001) used results from the CSI to generate background variables for their studies dealing with student departure in the community college and regional state university setting. Based on his results, Rudmann reported that the CSI could be used as a "driving force" in studies examining student retention (Rudmann, 1992).

Fulcomer (2003) implemented the CSI in a student departure study set at a private, Christian, liberal arts college and concluded that the instrument could be used in a strategy to achieve higher rates of retention at church-related institutions.
addition to using CSI results, Fulcomer included the cumulative high school grade point average and ACT score of all first year students attending the institution in which he examined Tinto's theory of departure. The researcher's decision to draw student background characteristics from the combination of standardized test scores, CSI results, and high school grade point averages provides concrete variables that could be used to further examine Tinto's model within the context of a private, Christian, liberal arts college.

Institutional Intervention Strategies

The variables mentioned above have been used in attempts to explain the degree of difficulty a student may experience or the likelihood that they will depart or remain at their institution (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000; Fulcomer, 2003; Harter, 2001). Concurrent research has also been done to explore the impact institutional intervention strategies may have in response to the issue of student departure presented by Tinto and other theorists. Perez (1998) and Glenn (2001) examined the influence conditional admit status and academic support programs can have on retention while numerous studies have been conducted reviewing the degree to which extended orientation classes or first year seminar courses affect student departure (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Hankin, 1996; Nelson, 1993; Szeleyni, 2001). This work, however, has taken place within the context of large, public universities or within the community college setting with little or no attention paid to retention strategies implemented at highly selective, private institutions (Berger, 1997; Berger & Braxton, 1998).

An additional intervention strategy, faculty-student mentoring relationships, has also received significant study within the context of public institutions (Campbell
& Campbell, 1997; Nordquist, 1993; Silva & Reigadas, 2000; Szelenyi, 2001; Wallace & Abel, 1997). Unlike academic support programs or freshmen seminar courses however, mentoring programs have received some attention within the context of highly selective colleges, in that researchers have called for the implementation of mentoring programs to assist sophomore retention rates in this specific educational setting (Smith, 2002).

**Background Variables and the Interaction of Tinto's Model and Mentoring**

Due to the nature of its design, Tinto’s theory of departure is able to be examined within multiple environments and from various perspectives. For example, his model includes a pre-entry variable called prior schooling (Tinto, 1993) often measured by reviewing a student’s high school grade point average and standardized test scores, regardless of what college or university the individual is attending. The inclusion of this specific background variable in Tinto’s model allows for his theory to be applied and examined in both public and private institutional settings.

In addition, Tinto’s theory suggests that retention is the result of a student’s successful assimilation to her or his educational environment which is comprised of social and educational systems, including faculty (Tinto, 1993). Tinto posits that interaction with faculty is an important component of student success research (1993) but does not provide one specific definition of faculty contact. Examinations of this portion of Tinto’s theory could look at traditional classroom based student interaction with faculty where there has been a significant amount of research demonstrating a relationship between faculty contact and student retention (Astin, 1975; Berger & Milem, 1999; Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Kuh, Schuh, & Whitt, 1991; Tinto, 1975).
One perspective that has been used to examine the impact of outside of class or non-traditional faculty interaction on departure is faculty-student mentoring relationships. Although widely researched (Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Nordquist, 1993; Santos, 2000; Wallace & Abel, 1997), the majority of this work has been set within public institutions, community colleges, or has explored the impact mentoring has on minority student departure. Smith’s (2002) call for research on the impact mentoring may have on retention rates at private, Christian, liberal arts colleges could be addressed by examining Tinto’s theory in this environment using mentoring as a framework. This perspective would allow for an examination of the impact outside of class, faculty mentoring has on a student’s departure decision. More specifically, the process of individual student interaction with social and educational systems along with the formation of congruence with the institution could be examined through the lens of a student’s experience with a faculty mentor.

Definition of Mentoring

The initial issue facing studies examining student departure and the impact of faculty mentoring is to define what constitutes a mentoring relationship and what does not. Jacobi (1991) believed research in this area was taking place without agreement on a general definition for the term and as a result there were a confusing number of studies that were tied to mentoring to varying degrees. His work produced over fifteen different definitions of the term “mentoring” from areas such as business, psychology, and higher education. Freedman and Jaffee (1993) noted mentoring was “threatening to become a buzzword without meaning” (p. 2) since it has been applied to teachers, administrators, students, principals, employers, employees, and
community members. As a result, these authors called for a consistent and clear definition of the term to be included in any study of mentoring and its impact.

Several studies have tried to present a consistent definition of mentoring with some attempting to trace the term back to what has historically been thought to be its roots. Lahman (1989) and Odell (1990), report that the term “mentor” can be traced back to Homer’s literary work, *The Odyssey*. They point to the existence of a character named Mentor who served as a guide to Odysseus’s son Telemachus while he was off fighting the Trojan Wars. It is believed that Mentor instructed Telemachus in the martial arts while also making him aware of his mistakes and educating him in all areas of life. It has been suggested that Mentor provided “nurturing, insightful, and supportive guidance” to Telemachus (Haensly & Parsons, 1993) in one of the earliest examples of a life-teacher/protege or mentor type relationship.

Several other authors have provided explanations for the term “mentor” that are more focused than those based on *The Odyssey* by attempting to place the term within one or two settings. Some studies have defined the term in the context of a business or career setting while others have framed the concept in the midst of a more personal relationship. Definitions from both settings will be offered with the goal of providing a framework for a working definition of the term.

Moore and Amey (1998) viewed mentoring as a process of “professional socialization” that involves an experienced person serving as a “guide, role model, teacher, or patron” (p. 40) to the less experienced individual. The definition provided by Fagenson (1989) also suggests that a mentor relationship exists within a corporate environment where the person serving as the guide is in a “position of power” and “brings the protégé’s accomplishments to the attention of those who have power in
the company" (p. 311). A similar definition is offered by Zey (1984) who states that a mentor is someone who manages the career development of another person “through teaching and counseling” and often times is responsible for promoting their junior to their next level.

Other definitions of mentoring provide an understanding of this relationship within the context of a college or university. Parkay (1988) suggests that mentoring consists of one-on-one teaching where an older person aids the transition of a younger individual into a “particular way of life.” This definition could be used to define mentoring in a business setting but seems more applicable to the type of relationship that can exist between a faculty member and a student. The mentor relationships described by Rudmann (1992), Nelson (1993), and Harter (2001) involved faculty members teaching students on an individual basis the skills and knowledge they would need to have in order to make a successful transition to the collegiate life. These studies seem to utilize a definition of mentoring in a similar manner to that suggested by Parkay (1998).

In addition to the necessity of defining the term and placing the relationship within an appropriate context, studies dealing with mentoring must also provide a consistent description for the type of mentoring that is taking place. To that end, Lavant, Anderson, and Tiggs (1997) describe two forms of mentoring; formal and informal. Their conceptualization involves a formal approach where mentoring is part of a set program or relationship with predetermined goals or outcomes and an informal frame. This approach allows for a relationship to grow from an initial point to one where mentoring eventually takes place without needing to be identified or acknowledged by both parties. This distinction is furthered by the work of Wallace
and Abel (1997) who framed the discussion within an education context. According to the authors, informal mentoring is that which develops from “natural student interaction with faculty, staff, peers, or others” while formal mentoring is developed with the intention to “increase retention of students, academic performance, and satisfaction with the college experience.”

Foster (2001) adds further complexity to the issue by suggesting numerous forms by which mentoring can take place. He acknowledges that often times mentoring takes place in the more traditional one-on-one approach where the mentor is older or more experienced than the individual being mentored, but Foster allows for additional formats. He suggests the existence of group or team mentoring in addition to on-line and peer relationships that serve the same function as traditional mentoring (2001).

The work of Foster (2001), Lavant, Anderson, and Tiggs (1997), Parkay (1998), and others demonstrates that there are multiple definitions for what constitutes mentoring and a number of potential formats in which these relationships can take place.

Rationale for Additional Study of the Impact of Tinto’s Model on Retention

An additional study of Tinto’s model of departure using mentoring as a framework is appropriate for several reasons. First, by placing the study within the environment of a specific, highly selective, private institution, this study fills the knowledge gap identified in the literature (Berger, 1997; Berger & Braxton, 1998; Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000) and responds to the call for single institution data on student retention (Metz, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).
In addition, the selection of a qualitative methodology in an examination of Tinto’s theory responds to the call for qualitative persistence data (Milem & Berger, 1997; Fulcomer, 2003). The decision to study Tinto’s theory from the perspective of students who have remained into an eighth semester provides and extends longitudinal data on persistence, a weakness of the current literature examining student departure (Berger & Milem, 1999; Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Smith, 2002).

Thirdly, by implementing the framework of faculty-student mentoring relationships at a highly selective, private institution, this study was able to examine Tinto’s model and the call for research on the impact of mentoring on persistence present in the literature (Smith, 2002).

Finally, much of the research done examining Tinto’s model has not combined high school grade point average and standardized test scores in the background variables portion of the study (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Berger & Milem, 1999; Fulcomer, 2003; Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Ishitani & DesJardines, 2002; Milem & Berger, 1997) while those that have (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000) took place at public institutions. Since high school grade point average and standardized test scores have been shown to successfully predict persistence (Astin, 1997; Feldman, 1993), the inclusion of these variables in a study of departure set at a highly selective, private institution examines if these findings could be maintained in a different educational environment.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine what factors contribute to college students' persistence decisions within the context of their current college or university. More specifically, this research seeks to identify students who were judged to be at risk of discontinuing from their institution based on a set of established pre-existing criteria, yet were able to persist in their education and progress towards graduation. The experiences of these students are examined to discover the individual influences that went into these phenomena and to understand to what degree, if any, these students were impacted by mentoring relationships during their enrollment at their institution.

The study focuses on sixteen individual students who are concurrently enrolled at the same institution, in their eighth semester (senior year) and who were considered to be at risk of discontinuation based on specific variables identified during their first semester. The goal is to investigate what factors these students identify as being critical in their continued enrollment and to examine what role, if any, mentoring played in their experience. This research is important because it deals with the experiences of at risk students and the factors that contributed to their persistence despite the challenges they faced.

Much has been written about mentoring and retention (Jacobi, 1991) and there have been continued calls for longitudinal data to examine the impact of various retention strategies (Tinto, 1993). This research responds to criticisms levied against studies dealing with mentoring and retention by providing clear definitions for that term and identification criteria for identifying at risk students. In addition, this study
responds to Tinto’s call in that reviews students who were identified as being the most at risk at the beginning of their college experience, but who have continued to remain enrolled. It examines the factors that allowed them to persist into an eighth semester at their institution, thereby meeting the longitudinal criteria proposed by Tinto.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, several terms must be given operational definitions in order to understand the goals and methods of this research. Specifically the following three terms must be defined: at risk students, persistence, and mentoring.

The literature provides several criteria by which a student may be considered at risk. Some of these characteristics include students that are part-time, female, from a low socio-economic class, first generation students, or those who are conditionally admitted. For the purpose of this study however, students were considered at risk if they have a high drop out proneness score on the CSI (a score of 6 or higher on the 9-point scale), an SAT composite below 840 or ACT composite below 20, and a high school GPA below 2.5.

Many studies dealing with the retention of college students define persistence as a student’s ability to remain enrolled into the second semester of their first year at college or university. Since this study examined the phenomenon of the most at risk students who have been able to remain enrolled for the longest period of time, persistence was defined as students who have been able to remain at the institution through seven consecutive semesters.
Finally these students were considered to have been involved in a mentoring relationship if they participated in a college sponsored mentoring program or consistently and individually met weekly or bi-weekly with a college faculty or staff member over the course of one or more semesters. Interaction with a faculty member is considered to be a mentoring relationship if the student was not enrolled in a class with the faculty member during the semester in question and if the purpose of their meeting was to discuss various topics that were not limited to the faculty member’s academic discipline. Interactions with a staff person are considered mentoring if they did not happen during scheduled work periods or if they were not limited to topics directly related to employment tasks or expectations. In both cases the relationship with a faculty or staff member must be viewed by the student as a means for learning life skills or lessons or as a means of encouraging the student’s personal growth or development.

Research Method

Due to the nature of this study and the subject matter to be reviewed, a qualitative research approach was implemented. There are numerous factors that must be included in the selection of a methodology such as the setting for the research, the goals of the study, and the nature of the subject matter. Each of these factors will be examined in further detail.

This study took place while the participants were still currently enrolled at their institution and covered their perceptions and experiences over the span of their educational experience. Data was collected from within the students’ educational environment where the study participants have experienced the factors and behaviors that may have influenced their persistence. Qualitative research takes place within a
natural setting where events occur (Creswell, 1998) so this methodology is well
suited for an examination of the experiences of at risk students at a specific
institution.

The selection of a qualitative study is also based on its’ ability to generate a
description of a given event or an understanding of a specific setting or environment
(Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). This research sought to comprehend the factors that went
into a specific number of students’ ability to persist at their institution and to gain an
understanding of the story of these students. Qualitative research is appropriate for
research that attempts to identify and make meaning of a specific experience (Patton,
2003) so this methodology was applied to the participants of this study.

The implementation of the qualitative approach was also appropriate for this
study given the numerous institutional retention strategies identified that are being
employed by colleges and universities. Qualitative research can be used as a rationale
or justification for a specific reform or change (Creswell, 2003) so the findings of this
study may be of interest to both the participants and the institution. This research
sought to understand the factors that went into at risk students’ persistence and what
role, if any, mentoring may have played in their experience. Information gleaned
using a qualitative approach in this setting may be useful to the institution in a
discussion about best retention practices for both the student and the college.

In addition to the influence the goals of the study have on the methodological
approach, the selection of a qualitative approach was also driven by the nature of the
subject matter selected for examination. This research sought to examine the factors
that these students identified as being influential in their ability to persist in her or his
educational pursuits. It would be difficult to identify all the possible variables that
might be identified by these students as impacting their persistence experience due to
the sheer number of possibilities. Factors such as educational difficulties, financial
constraints, family pressures, a change in marital status, mental and physical health
issues, and evolving career aspirations are just some factors that could have been
identified by these students. Qualitative research is appropriate when variables are
difficult to define or identify (Creswell, 1998) so the utilization of this methodology
is appropriate.

Phenomenological Approach

The qualitative tradition of research can be undertaken utilizing one of five
specific traditions: biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, or a
case study (Creswell, 1998). The phenomenological tradition was implemented due to
the focus of this research and the goals for the study.

The phenomenological approach has been implemented in several different
settings including education (Tesch, 1988) and as a result is appropriate for a study
dealing with the experiences of at risk students. Furthermore, this methodology
allows for the study of a group of individuals as compared to other approaches such
as a biography or a case study involving one individual (Creswell, 1998). The
phenomenological approach is suitable for the study of seventeen at risk students.

In addition to the number of participants, the phenomenological approach is
appropriate because the subjects of this study have shared an experience that is
unique to them. All seventeen students were identified as being at risk of
discontinuing but despite this label, have persisted in their education. The researcher
attempts to discover what factors these students identify as being influential in that
process and how they understand their experience. A phenomenological approach
attempts to make meaning of the events or interactions that occur to people in a given situation and to examine the process in which these individuals assign meaning to their experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The researcher attempts to understand what happened to allow these students to persist, but also sought to ascertain what the students themselves viewed as being influential in their ability to remain at their institution.

In addition to the influence the focus of the study has on the selection of the phenomenological approach, this methodology is also appropriate given the goals of the research. Phenomenological research allows for in-depth interviews with study participants (Creswell, 1998), an approach which gives the researcher the ability to gain greater detail concerning these students. The opportunity to follow up with participants in the midst of the study allowed the researcher to better determine what factors went into her or his ability to persist. This allowed for participant’s experience to be divided into textural and structural categories so the researcher can explore both the “what” and the “how” of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). This allowed the study to focus on how these students persisted rather than simply examining the factors that caused them to be considered at risk.

The process of data analysis within the phenomenological approach also aids the goals of the study. As mentioned previously, there are numerous factors that may play a part in an at risk student’s decision to persist or withdraw from their institution. The phenomenological approach is significant in that it allows for methodological reduction to take place in the data analysis portion of the research (Creswell, 1998). The researcher had the ability to identify themes or clusters of factors that went into
the persistence decisions of the participants during the data analysis phase which 
allowed for a further understanding of the experience of these at risk students.

Primary Data Collection

In order to ensure appropriate data collection and analysis, care was taken in 
order to obtain a criterion sample for this phenomenological study. The researcher 
ensured all participants experienced the same phenomenon in order for this method of 
study to be considered appropriate (Creswell 1998). Furthermore, every attempt was 
made to gather data from a purposeful sample in order to help the researcher gain a 
more complete understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2003). As 
a result, attention was paid to the process of selecting a setting for this research and 
the method of data collection and analysis.

This study took place at Calvin College, a four year, private, Christian liberal- 
arts institution located in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The institution is designated as a 
General Baccalaureate College by the Carnegie Classification system with a 
population of approximately 4,300 students. The college was founded in 1876 by the 
Christian Reformed Church as a training ground for ministers and currently offers 68 
majors and pre-professional programs of study. 54% of Calvin students come from 
the state of Michigan, 38% from other states, and the remaining 8% from other 
countries. The institution has a minority student population of roughly 6%, and 
approximately 2,300 students reside on the 390 acre campus located in a residential 
neighborhood in Grand Rapids. The institution has over 55 student organizations and 
numerous co-curricular opportunities for its’ students (Calvin, 2005). The researcher 
had little difficulty gaining access to this site since he has been employed by the 
college in the Residence Life Office since September of 1998.
Selection of Participants

Collection of data began by identifying a pool of potential participants from the students who began their Calvin studies during the fall semester of 2002. The researcher gained permission from the institution to access data collected from students who began Calvin that semester. More specifically, the researcher worked with the Calvin’s Center for Social Research, the Institutional Review Board, and the Office of the Registrar to gather data collected from the administration of the College Student Inventory (CSI) to first year students during their initial week on campus in the fall of 2002.

The researcher began the process of participant selection by contacting the Associate Registrar at Calvin College to obtain that office’s assistance in the process. The Associate Registrar works with college retention data, specifically, the CSI and was able to generate a potential participant pool for the researcher. The first step was for the Associate Registrar to review the CSI scores from students who completed the instrument during the first week of the 2002 fall semester. Students on this list were ranked based on their scores from the “Dropout Proneness” indicator of the CSI with the individuals who had the highest score being placed at the top of the list. This information was then cross-referenced with the student’s high school grade point average (GPA) and their score on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or the American College Test (ACT). These components were included in the selection of students based on the test results of the validity of the CSI. Additionally, studies have shown that students who score poorly on the SAT or ACT are more likely to discontinue from their institution and that the high school GPA is the most consistent indicator of persistence or withdrawal (Feldman, 1993). As a result, students who
began their enrollment at Calvin in the fall of 2002, and who had the highest Dropout Proneness score on the CSI along with the lowest high school GPA and SAT or ACT score, were considered to have been the most at risk of discontinuing for the purposes of this study.

Once the group of the most at risk students was generated from institutional data, the list was cross-referenced with student enrollment records to determine who was still enrolled at Calvin for the spring 2006 semester. Students who are on both lists were then ranked using the same criteria used to select the pool of most at risk students from the fall of 2002. This provided a list of potential applicants in that these are the students who have persisted at Calvin through seven semesters despite having several indicators suggesting she or he would discontinue at some point since the fall of 2002. This group of students was considered to have experienced the phenomenon of continuing at Calvin despite having several indications to suggest that they would not persist. The researcher asked the Associate Registrar to provide a list of the names of the seventeen students who best fit the phenomenological criteria, and as a result, would be eligible to participate in the study.

To ensure the privacy of individual educational records, the researcher was not given access to the student’s high school GPA, CSI, or standardized test scores. The researcher used contact information contained on the college’s web page to contact students identified as potential participants and invited them to participate in the study. An email was sent to each student including an explanation of the goals of the study and an invitation to participate in a personal interview lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Interested students were asked to respond to the researcher via email and scheduled a time for an interview.
In an attempt to maximize the breadth of the data from the individual interviews, the researcher sent a follow up email to students who had indicated a desire to participate in the study. This email confirmed the date, time, and location of the interview. In addition, the email included three questions that the researcher requested each student reflect on before the date of the interview in order to prepare for the study. The content of these questions asked participants to examine how their personal intentions and commitments might have been shaped during their college experience and their responses were reviewed by the researcher during the interview. The goal of this process was to provide participants with an additional opportunity for reflection outside of the interview process and gave the researcher the ability to expand on these issues during the 60 to 90 minute time frame spent with the student.

The researcher took care to comply with all the requirements of Western Michigan University’s Human Subject Review Board (HSRB). Written consent was collected before a student was allowed to participate in the study and steps were taken to protect each subject’s identity. This involved the use of pseudonyms for each participant such as “Student 1,” “Student 2,” and so on. Each student was also informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point and an explanation of the data collection and storage process was provided.

Data Collection

Due to the nature of the participant’s schedules, interviews were conducted at a time that was convenient for the student. The interviews took place in an office within the Student Life Office with each session being audio taped to ensure accuracy of records which allowed the researcher to focus on the student and their responses. The interview protocol and questions included in Appendix A were followed with
each interview lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Before an interview with a
student was conducted, each participant signed a consent form allowing for the
session to be taped and transcribed verbatim for data analysis. The transcription
process was handled by a third party hired by the researcher in an attempt to ensure
accuracy and limit potential bias. The researcher and the student both had the
opportunity to review the written record at a later date to ensure accuracy and to
allow for any follow up questions or comments by either the researcher or the
participant. The interview protocol is included as Appendix A.

Ethical Considerations

As previously mentioned, care was taken to follow all guidelines put forth by
the HSRB at Western Michigan University (WMU). To that end there were several
steps taken to ensure that the privacy of study participants was protected (Locke,
Spriduso, & Silverman, 2000). A protocol of informed consent was followed by the
researcher to ensure that participants are protected. This involved the researcher
obtaining permission from the HSRB before beginning any process of collecting data.
Students who were invited to participate were informed verbally and in writing about
the goals of the study as well as the data collection, analysis, and storage methods that
were used in the study. Before conducting an interview, each participant was asked to
sign a consent form indicating their desire to be included in the study. In addition, the
researcher advised each participant of their right to withdraw from the study at any
time. Participants were also informed that they could review the written transcript
from their interview and at that time, make any clarifying statements they felt were
warranted.
Finally care was taken to inform participants about the process of data collection, security, and storage. In this case, the recordings from the interviews and the transcriptions were stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office. These materials will be transferred to WMU at the conclusion of the study and stored there for a three year period. During this timeframe the records will be available for inspection and copying by the researcher or by individuals who have been authorized by the institution sponsoring the research. The researcher believes that there were no significant risks to students who agreed to participate in the study.

Data Verification and Analysis

A significant factor in the data analysis portion of a qualitative study is that the researcher is the primary means of data collection. As a result, the research must make every attempt to limit the impact of any bias that may exist. The direct involvement of the researcher in the data collection and analysis process is one of the key challenges of qualitative research (Creswell, 2003), so steps must be taken to limit its impact. This can be accomplished through the process of “member checking” where the study participant is allowed to review and clarify transcripts from the interview and statements made during data collection.

In an attempt to limit any bias in this study, each student was given the opportunity to review the record from their interview and make any statements or clarifications they deemed appropriate. In addition, attempts were made to “triangulate data” by seeking multiple sources of data from the study participants rather than relying only on student interviews. In this case this involved several sources: inviting students to include any records or artifacts that they felt spoke to
their experience, reviewing academic records with students, and/or exploring student journals in conjunction with the study participant.

The purpose of analyzing data in qualitative research is to divide information into as many categories as is appropriate (Jacob, 1987). The objective of this process is to identify themes from the frame of reference of the study participant and then to attempt to explain these patterns (Creswell, 2003) or to understand the essence of their experience (Creswell, 1998). In order to accomplish these goals, the method of data analysis implemented in this research involved the use of coding.

Moustakas (1994) states data should initially be divided into statements in a process known as “horizonalization.” This allows for categories of data to be developed where responses are “clustered” together to create themes within the data. From these clusters, the researcher sought to develop two distinct categories of data; one textural dealing with the “what” and the other structural dealing with the “how” of the experience.

In this case, this involved distinguishing between the actual experiences of what happened to the at risk students and how they experienced their education. Since the phenomenological approach to qualitative research is being utilized in this study, the researcher sought to develop codes for the data through a process of reading and rereading the participant’s transcripts. A “post-hoc” approach to the data analysis process was used in an attempt to gain an understanding of the phenomenon rather than seeking to generate codes “a priori” based on recent findings in the literature. Through several readings of the data, the researcher reflected and reviewed the responses of the individual participants in an attempt to create codes for similar experiences. These codes were reviewed to determine if they were textural or
structural in nature with the goal of dividing the codes into various categories. The overall purpose of the coding process utilized by the researcher was to gain an understanding of the "essence" of the experience of the study participants (Creswell, 1998). From this process, the researcher gained a deep understanding of the experience of these at risk students and determined what factors went into their ability to persist at their institution despite the challenges they faced.

Limitations

While the researcher made reasonable efforts to anticipate potential issues in the process of conducting this study, there are still limitations present in this project. The first is that this research was conducted using a qualitative methodology with a limited number of study participants. As a result, the responses of the 16 women and men who participated cannot be applied to other individuals enrolled at the institution or to a larger population of at risk students. The findings of this study can only be used to better understand and explain the experience of the individuals involved in the research.

The number of students eligible to participate in this study can also be viewed as a potential limitation of the research. Participants had to register a high drop out proneness score on the CSI (a score of 6 or higher on the 9-point scale), an SAT composite below 840 or ACT composite below 20, and a high school GPA below 2.5 in order to be considered at risk. Using these criteria, only 26 potential students were eligible to participate in the study a figure that accounts for only 2.4% of the 1,049 students who first enrolled at the institution in the fall of 2002. Additionally, of the sixteen students involved in the study, 25% were non U.S. citizens which can be viewed as a disproportionate number since the incoming class in the fall of 2002 had
a 6.7% international student population (Calvin, 2005). Likewise, 68% of the study participants were women, which is 12% higher than the overall number of female students enrolled at the institution for the fall 2002 semester. These figures underscore potential limitations derived from the composition of the study sample.

A final issue comes from the use of the term “at risk student” and the degree to which its inclusion in the research questions impacted the subject’s perceptions of the study. The CSI was one of the primary instruments used to identify students as at risk for this study but many of the participants did not initially recall taking the survey during the fall of 2002. As a result, some of the participants were not aware that they could be considered as at risk students and one of the individuals commented that the use of the term carried a negative connotation that did not characterize her college experience.

Conclusion

The goal of this research is to understand the experiences of at risk students and to examine what impact, if any, mentoring had on their ability to persist. The implementation of a qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows for a story to be told or gives the ability to generate an understanding of the meaning of an experience (Patton, 2003). The use of the phenomenological approach with the qualitative tradition is appropriate for this study because all of the participants have had similar experiences in that they have persisted despite being identified as possessing the same at risk factors. The researcher acknowledged and responded to ethical considerations in the research process, as well as followed appropriate methods of data collection and analysis to gain a deeper understanding of the experience of these students and the factors influencing their persistence.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine the applicability of Vincent Tinto’s (1975) theory of student departure to the experience of at risk students enrolled at a private, Christian, liberal arts institution. This chapter contains the results, with findings categorized into themes and sub-themes with explanations and discussion presented for each grouping. A discussion of the connection of these themes to Tinto’s theory of departure is presented in the “Review of Research Questions” in Chapter 5.

The researcher selected a qualitative methodology with the goal of implementing open-ended interviews with up to seventeen students who were enrolled at Calvin College, an institution affiliated with the Christian Reformed Church. While the goal was to interview seventeen students, one potential participant repeatedly missed his scheduled appointment so the researcher interviewed a total of sixteen students. These individuals were interviewed during their eighth semester at the institution, with each interview lasting approximately one hour. A standard protocol for all interviews was implemented in an attempt to address the research questions while still allowing for dialogue and discussion to take place.

Upon completion of the interviews, data were analyzed using a phenomenological approach in an attempt to understand each student’s experience (Creswell, 1998). The goal in this approach is to uncover the essence or meaning an individual attributes to her or his experience in a systematic or logical manner (Moustakas, 1994) using themes or clusters of data. This information was then used to determine if the experience of the study participants was consistent with the suppositions presented in Tinto’s (1975) theory of student departure.
Participants

Students meeting the criteria for this study had to have initially enrolled in college during fall 2002 semester and have scored a high drop out proneness rate on the College Student Inventory (a score of 6 or higher on the 9-point scale) along with an Scholastic Aptitude Test composite below 840, an American College Test composite below 20, or a high school grade point average below 2.5 on a 4.0 scale.

After a review of institutional data, the researcher identified twenty-six possible student participants through the Office of the Associate Registrar. From this pool, seventeen students responded to the initial emails and subsequent follow up phone calls by the researcher to schedule an interview. All but one of the students who initially agreed to participate in the study kept her or his appointment and was interviewed by the researcher. The participant pool consisted of eleven women and five men, all of whom are Caucasian. This admitted lack of diversity is fairly consistent with the overall demographics of the institution as 87% of the individuals who initially enrolled for the 2002 fall semester were majority students (Calvin, 2005). All sixteen participants were enrolled full-time at the institution and were traditional age college students. A brief summary of each participant follows with further demographic information included in Appendix B. The names have been changed and specific majors have not been included to protect confidentiality.

Donna is from the East coast and came to college with her Religion and Theology major selected but later added a minor. Calvin was the only institution she applied to. She attended a private high school and several members of her graduating class attend Calvin. Donna grew up attending a Christian Reformed Church. She lived on campus for three years but is currently living off campus.
Mike is from the West Michigan area and attended both public and private high schools. He is a member of a non-denominational church and several members of his extended family attended Calvin. Mike came to Calvin as Pre-Med major but switched to Secondary Education during his first year. He was placed on academic probation after his first semester and required to meet with an academic counselor for a semester. Mike lived on campus for his first three years but is currently living off campus. Calvin is the only institution he applied to.

Tara is from Canada where she attended a private high school. She attended a Christian Reformed Church throughout her childhood. Several members of her family attended Calvin. Tara applied to one other institution and came to Calvin undecided about her major before settling on Social Work. She has lived off campus for the last two years.

Bill is from Canada, attended a public high school, and was a member of a local community church. One of his siblings also attended Calvin and it was the only institution he applied to. Bill came to Calvin as a Secondary Education major selected but changed it to History during his second year. He studied overseas for a semester and lived on campus for his first two years.

Malinda is from the East coast, attended a private high school, and is a member of the Christian Reformed Church. Several of her classmates, siblings, and extended family members attended Calvin. She studied overseas for a semester and came to college without having a specific major selected but eventually decided to study Psychology. Malinda has lived off campus for the last two years.

Jane is from the mid-west. She attended a public school and was the only student from her high school or family to attend Calvin. She declared a Secondary
Education major prior to coming to college but changed it to Art Education after her first year. Jane was placed on academic probation after her first semester on campus and met with an academic counselor during her second semester at Calvin. She currently lives off campus.

John is from Canada and has lived on campus all four years. He attended a private high school and was raised in the Christian Reformed Church. He has been a student athlete all four years, came to college with a Psychology major selected, but later changed it to Economics.

Michelle is from the mid-west. She attended a private high school and several of her classmates, siblings, and extended family attended Calvin. She has been a student athlete throughout college and lived on campus for her first two years. Michelle came to college with an Education major selected and never changed it.

Janice is from Michigan and attended a public high school. She applied to three other institutions but decided to attend Calvin. She attends a Reformed Church and has lived on campus all four years. Janice came to campus with an Education and History major selected and never changed it.

Kristy is from the Grand Rapids area and attended public schools. She selected Calvin because one of her parents works at the institution. Kristy came to Calvin with an Art Education major selected and later dropped the Education portion of her major. She currently lives off campus.

Robin is from the mid-west and attended a public high school. She looked at four other institutions before deciding on Calvin. She came to Calvin undecided about a major and studied overseas for a semester before choosing an Inter-Disciplinary major. Robin has lived on campus all four years.
Cindy is from Canada and attended a public high school. Both of her parents went to Calvin and she came to campus undecided about a major before deciding on Exercise Science. She was placed on academic probation after her first semester and met weekly with an academic counselor during her second semester. Cindy was raised in the Christian Reformed Church and lived on campus for two years.

Jill is from the Grand Rapids area, went to a public high school, and had an older sibling who attended Calvin. Jill did not have a major selected when she came to Calvin but eventually chose Sociology. She studied overseas for a semester and lived on campus for her first two years.

Aaron is from West Michigan and attended a public high school. He is a first generation college student and grew up in a non-denominational church. Aaron changed his major during his first year from Computer Science to Information Systems and has lived off campus for one year.

Patrick is from the East coast and has been a student athlete all four years in college. He attended a private school and grew up in a Baptist church. He lived on campus for his first two years and came to Calvin undecided about a major but eventually chose Political Science.

Ann is from Canada and attended both public and private high schools. She was raised in the Christian Reformed Church and changed her major after her junior year from Nursing to Third World Development. She studied overseas for a semester and currently lives off campus.

Interviews were held in the Residence Life Office with each conversation audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Participants were then contacted and given the
ability to review the contents of her or his transcript in an attempt to validate the data through "member checking" (Creswell, 2003).

Themes

Analysis of the data provided two dominant categories that participants viewed as significant factors in her or his ability to persist: the influence of peers and the impact of college faculty. Fifteen participants specifically mentioned the impact of peers within various components of the educational experience. Likewise, thirteen of the sixteen respondents mentioned a faculty member directly, with the remaining three individuals commenting indirectly about faculty impact. These two dominant categories contained five major themes and several sub-themes. The peer influence category consisted of educational, social, and spiritual components, while the faculty impact category included faith development and transitional issues both inside and out of the classroom. Appendix C contains summary data of overall themes.

Peer Themes

Peer Theme 1: Peers Impact Several Aspects of Students' Educational Development

The impact of peers on study participants’ educational experiences was expressed in four specific areas: persistence decisions, selection of a major, educational transition, and college choice. Each of these peer themes will be reviewed in detail.

Sub-theme 1: Students are influenced by peers in persistence decisions. Study participants were asked to identify if there was a time during the past four years in which they considered dropping out of college or transferring to a different institution. Twelve of the sixteen participants indicated they had considered leaving the institution at various points throughout the past seven semesters based on several
reasons such as finances, academic difficulty, homesickness, or a lack of feeling connected to the institution.

Bill indicated he had considered leaving the institution during his junior year due to some conflicts he experienced after returning from a semester overseas:

I had some personal conflicts the first semester I was back. I thought at the time that I would either go back to China... or I was also thinking about enlisting in the army at the time... But you know at that point, you’re so close to being done.

John stated he had considered leaving college after his second and fourth semester as a result of conflicts he was going through as a student athlete stating:

It was both spring semesters of my freshmen and sophomore years and it was because of baseball. I wasn’t getting the playing time. Therefore I was very dissatisfied with my college career and wanted to move on. I was going to be a major leaguer and that was the end of that.

Michelle stated that she considered leaving Calvin in the midst of her freshmen year due to changes in her social commitments and the impact that was having on her college experience indicating:

It was freshmen year, three quarters of the way into the year. [I was] just talking with my good friend who was just down the hall and we were going to live together the next year... I think it was we were... probably just sick of the party scene and were like, “let’s just get out of here. How are we going to change this?”
The combination of home life, along with the stress of college manifested in the pressure of academics, was listed by Janice as the rationale for thinking about discontinuing. She stated:

Junior and senior year there were times when it just got so stressful and crazy and then mixed with everything else that was going on at home… you just have a combination of all of these things. There were times where I was just like, “if this doesn’t get better in a month, I’m out of here.”…There were times where I was just fed up and just wanted to drop out. And even knowing that I had set this goal to be out in four years and to graduate and do this with my life it was like “is it worth being so miserable right now?”

Another individual, Robin, indicated she had considered transferring to a different institution at several points during her four years at Calvin for financial and educational reasons:

I mean there were plenty of semesters like this one when I’m like, what am I doing here? This is incredibly hard. I’m sure that if I went to some other state schools, it would be one; cheaper and two; easier. It seems like all my other friends at other colleges and universities have it way easier than I do… Calvin is known for academics and how it is stressful at times.

The comments of the other seven students who indicated that they had considered transferring to a different institution or dropping out of college completely, mirrored the responses of the individuals quoted above. Decisions about persistence surfaced throughout these student’s four years of college and for similar reasons to those listed above: difficulty readjusting after a semester away, co-curricular issues, family concerns, individual pressures, and finances.
While the majority of participants reported they had considered discontinuing at some point during their college experience, the students consistently mentioned that peers had the most significant impact on their decision to stay enrolled. Of the twelve individuals who indicated they had thought about dropping out of college or transferring to a different institution, nine of them reported the primary reasons for staying at Calvin was the importance of peer relationships.

Donna indicated that the consistent contact she had with a senior she met during her first year at Calvin caused her to stay when she was thinking about leaving during her first year. She stated:

A couple of months later [she] put a little note on my door saying, “this might sound crazy, but you’ve been on my heart a lot... let’s get together if you don’t think this is stalkerish or whatever.” So I called her up... we just hit it off and she [was] like an older sister to me. So we met once a week and that was just wonderful.

Despite the difficulties at home and the academic pressures present at Calvin, Janice mentioned peers were the reason for persisting.

Even though college was rough, and I wasn’t enjoying it at times, other colleges definitely wouldn’t be better... I really liked what I was getting at Calvin and that I was able to get involved and have friends and the community that came together. I really like [it] and it seemed like a really good fit... so I knew that I wouldn’t go anywhere else.

The impact of peers on persistence decisions was reiterated by several other individuals. Michelle indicated that the relationships with teammates were a primary factor in her decision to stay despite difficulty with other peers: “I just had a hard
time leaving... [I was] getting into tennis and I really liked the girls and playing on a team.” Peers were also listed by Tara as a reason for staying at Calvin rather than finishing her degree at an institution closer to her home in Canada. “I had great friends and that’s a big part of it that you don’t want to leave.” Bill echoed this rationale in deciding to remain at Calvin rather than going back to China or enlisting in the army: “Everyone was just saying; ‘Why don’t you just finish? This is ridiculous’... You know at that time I had lots of good friends.”

The impact of peers on the persistence decisions of the study participants was underscored by Jill, who was one of the four students who did not report ever having considered dropping out or transferring from Calvin. When asked the question dealing directly with persistence she reported that she had never once thought about leaving Calvin.

I think the main reason is just because I have such a tight knit group of friends. I thought, “Why on earth would I want to leave this? This is so great” With just with the schooling, I was so happy with it so [I never considered leaving.]

Sub-theme 2: Peers influence the selection of college major. Thirteen of the sixteen students reported they came to Calvin without a major or had changed majors during college. Eleven of these students reported coming in with a major selected at the beginning of their first year but then changed directions during college. Many of these students indicated it was Calvin’s liberal arts core that opened up possibilities to study something the student initially didn’t know about. Jill referenced this:

I had absolutely no idea what I wanted to do and I was kind of freaking out, and then at the end of sophomore year... I took a sociology class and kind of
fell in love with it. If there hadn’t been core, I would have never taken that
class. So I’m really glad that we have these certain things you have to take.
Tara echoed the impact the college’s core requirement had on her major
selection:

I took Business 160 and I took Economics 221 and I hated it [but I had
always] thought I’d want to be an office person… But I took those classes and
I did not like it at all and I did not do too well in them. So, I took Social Work
240 [as a core requirement] and I really enjoyed it and I kind of found out
more that I wanted to work with people.

Malinda, Robin, and Mike also offered similar comments about how Calvin’s
core requirements helped in the selection of a major. Along side the structure of the
college’s curriculum, however, the influence of peers was listed by students as the
most significant influence in the major selection and clarification process.

The influence of peers on study participants’ selection of a college major is
noteworthy because it was mentioned as many times as was the impact of faculty. In
addition, peers were mentioned more frequently than the Career Development Office
which provides services to students who are looking to select a major or field of
study. It is interesting to note that only two of the sixteen student participants reported
using this service in the process of selecting their major. Tara and Robin reported
they had taken advantage of this opportunity, but four of the study participants
indicated it was their peers who influenced their selection of a given major.

Cindy reported she had hoped to major in dance while at Calvin, but the
college never went further than creating a dance minor. She was unsure about what to
do at that point but:
I met a friend of mine who told me about the exercise science major. That sounded really cool to me... and so I think that was my freshmen year, first semester that I decided that I wanted to do that and I stuck with it.

Other students reported that peers influenced them toward a specific field when they were in the process of changing majors. In the midst of her decision to switch from elementary to art education, Jane reported:

My friends were supportive in the process [of changing majors]... My housemates were like “I think this would be good.” I had another housemate who was kind of the art one. It was hard because I didn’t want to look like I was following her, type of thing... so I just waited for her [to be against the idea] but she was supportive.

Aaron was also influenced by the major selection of one of his peers. He mentioned it was a fellow student on his floor that provided Aaron with the motivation to change majors. He reported:

When I initially came to Calvin I wanted to be a computer science major. I took my first class... and I didn’t really like programming as much as I thought I did. So I was like “What am I going to do?” So, I had a friend in the dorms, and he was a computer science major at that time... He had switched majors at the time to Information Systems and was like “Hey, check this out.” So that’s when I switched and he switched the same time.

One study participant indicated it was the experience of his peers that caused him to change his major due to the amount of work and effort he saw his roommate putting into his pre-med major. Mike mentioned:
I took biology [with my roommate] and I got a C+ ...which was nice because we had the same lab and we had the same lecture but he was also taking chemistry. Throughout the whole year he was taking chemistry... and seeing how smart he was, and seeing how much he was struggling sent me a message that “I don’t know if this is going to be for me”... so I decided to minor in biology.

Sub-theme 3: Peers impact participants’ educational transition. The transition from high school to college was listed by a majority of the study participants as the biggest challenge faced during four years of college. While some students indicated that faculty members played a role in this process, six of the participants credited their peers with helping them make the academic transition to college.

The impact friends and other students had on her educational transition were noted by Robin:

I’m around all these people who are this type of student [“A” students] and I see myself to be that type of student as well... most of my friends are on the honor role or they’re just really good in their classes, they know what they’re doing. They know how to focus a little better... I should be that type of student, shouldn’t I?

Peers were also identified by Janice as a significant support in the process of making the educational transition to college. She mentioned:

In high school... I wasn’t a straight “A” student, but kind of like an “A/B” student. In college... classes are a lot harder, so realizing that it is a harder school and trying to keep up with that [was a challenge.] I had a lot of friends

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who were really strong students. So there's always kind of that push to do well.

Two distinct examples in which other students provided support during the transition to college academics were provided by Bill. First, he noticed differences between his study habits and those of his roommate.

He [his roommate] was a good student and I was a bad one and I got to see what a good one looked like. He would get up at 10:00 a.m. [on Saturday morning] and go to the library. That never occurred to me for about a year… It took a while until I realized that being a good student isn’t really about being naturally intelligent. You just have to work.

Bill’s initial lack of effort in his education was later confronted by students he met while studying overseas as part of a semester program. He stated:

I felt very guilty that these students who were much more intelligent, much more hardworking that I am, were confined to Beijing… They would say “I would love to go to the United States to study” and I was a second rate student who gets to go to college simply because of the accessibility of federal loans… a young man on a train told me after he struggled practicing English… “You know, you’re living my dream.” And I was just like “don’t say that to me. You have no idea…” I came back and thought that I should really start applying myself and actually make this privilege worthwhile.

The remaining three students who listed peers as being the primary support that enabled them to make the academic transition to college mentioned siblings that were also enrolled at Calvin (Malinda), sophomores who lived in the same residence hall (Patrick), and teammates (Ann). While none of the examples mentioned by these
six students fit this study’s definition of mentoring, it is interesting to note that Robin, Janice, and Bill’s comments reflect the impact repeated informal contact with peers had on their academic transition. The experience of observing other students over an extended period can be viewed as “informal” mentoring in which repeated contact and interaction with peers allowed Robin, Janice, and Bill to make a successful transition to college.

Sub-theme 4: Peers play a significant role in the college choice decision. This theme emerged from study participants being asked to share about the college selection process. Several institutional characteristics were mentioned by students such as the size of the college, the location of the institution, Calvin’s foundation as a Christian college, the ability to enroll without having selected a major, and the acceptance rate. While some of these attributes were mentioned by two or three participants, six of the study participants stated peers were the most significant reason for choosing Calvin, making this the most referenced group in the college selection process.

Janice had the opportunity to visit the college multiple times during her high school career because she had an older friend who was already attending Calvin. She reported:

I had a friend who was a year or two older than me who came to Calvin. I was close with her... and came down to visit her a couple of times. I went to Fridays at Calvin [college visit program] and stayed with her overnight... and then came down for another weekend where I just hung out with her in the dorms and then she had a concert for Gospel Choir so I went down to see her

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in that... My friend was more of a role model at the time than my older sister was.

Another student reported it was her interaction with members of the college’s tennis team while she was in high school that influenced her decision to attend Calvin. Michelle stated:

I knew I wanted to go to a division three school with a tennis team that I could play on and do well. I went on Calvin’s spring break for two years [while in high school] because the tennis teams would always go down to Hilton Head, South Carolina... I would get out of high school and go down with them and then I got to know the girls and the guys team and I just really liked it, I liked how close they were and how much fun they had.

Jill mentioned her college choice was influenced by the individuals she met while her older sister and a friend made the transition to college. She said:

My sister went to Calvin, so while moving her in when she was a freshmen... I just really wanted to come to Calvin, and I wished I was her. Just meeting all of her friends and I thought this is so cool. And then I went to Hope with one of my friends moving her in and I just didn’t get that same, I don’t know, vibe. So I just felt like I’d fit better at Calvin and so I always wanted to go to Calvin.

A variation on this theme was offered by Jane who reported it was her peers’ decision not to attend Calvin that caused her to choose the institution:

My church that I grew up in kind of fed into Taylor University. So it’s kind of like I was doing the opposite, which was [viewed as] a negative thing. Calvin’s considered very liberal compared to, you know, and you don’t have
to sign anything saying you won’t drink, you won’t smoke, you won’t
dance... I think it was the excitement factor of everything.

Tara acknowledged the impact siblings had on her college choice when she
reported “I chose this college because I am the sixth person in the family going
here... so that was a huge draw for me.” Two other participants reported the influence
high school classmates had on the college selection process (Malinda and Michelle).

It is interesting to note that of the six students who indicated peers were the
influencing factor in the college choice process, only one (Tara) included siblings in
the decision process while the remaining five students in this group mentioned peers
as the primary factor in college choice. The influence of peers on college choice was
mentioned as frequently as was the impact of Calvin being a Christian college and
more often than factors such as academics, choice of major, school location, size of
institution, and financial considerations.

Peer Theme 2: Peers Play a Significant Role in Students’ Social Transitions

All study participants were asked to reflect on their initial transition to Calvin
in terms of academic and social difficulty. Two individuals reported little or no
difficulty in either area while the remaining fourteen students were evenly divided on
which was more difficult: the academic or social transition.

Five of the seven students who reported the social transition was more
difficult than the academic, stated this challenge was intensified because they were
coming to Calvin from a different state or from Canada. Jane described dealing with
the impact coming to Calvin from an out of state public high school had on her
transition:
My freshmen year was really difficult for me in the sense that I didn’t find what I supposedly came here for... I guess for me it was more socially difficult because I had left my group of friends at home... I was leaving a public school and coming to Calvin, I viewed it like a utopia, and that quickly let me down... It was my owned skewed vision of Christianity and how people interact with one another... but I guess I didn’t think it would be so difficult to find whatever it was that I had created in my head that I was going to find socially.

Patrick reported that coming from out of state and trying to make the social transition to college was the most difficult part of his early college experience. He noticed:

Sometimes you just get the feeling that they’re [students from the Grand Rapids area] thinking they’re better than everyone else and they kind of hang out with the kids that they went to high school with... And you have to almost work to get in and be friends with those kinds of kids. And if you’re from the outside, especially if you went to a public school, I think they definitely view you differently.

The difficulty of making the social adjustment to college life from out of state was mentioned by several other study participants, including John and Tara. What is interesting is that both of these individuals had attended private institutions through high school. John noted:

The social transition was very hard. I had met some people [back home] and became friends and then separated because we all went our separate ways to college or university. And I came here and it started all over... I was really
confused. I didn’t quite understand how to function. I mean West Michigan in and of itself is a totally different atmosphere [than back home].

Tara mentioned that her transition was difficult because she “was a huge home person so going away from my mom was probably the worst part about it.” While five of the students who reported the social transition was the most difficult part the adjustment to college came to Calvin from out of state, the remaining two individuals came from the Grand Rapids area. One of these students, Jill, mentioned:

I didn’t think this [the social transition] was going to be a big deal for me. It’s only a mile away but I didn’t know anyone here. So it was kind of an overwhelming and scary feeling... I didn’t have friends right way and I didn’t know anyone on the floor.

A common factor between Jill and Kristy, the other local participant who indicated the social transition was difficult, was that both of these individuals attended public high schools. Kristy said that she “didn’t know anyone [at Calvin] from my high school or anything so it was a pretty big challenge.”

The impact of peers on social development was evident when participants were asked who they felt were the two individuals or groups who had the most significant impact on their college experience. There was a wide range of response including parents, college staff, and members of the local community. While several students responded by mentioning faculty, nine of the sixteen participants indicated peers had the greatest impact on them specifically in terms of social development and transitions.
Jill reported her peers were influential in making the decision to live in an intentional community when she moved off-campus after sophomore year and the impact that decision had on her:

It was a lot of people [from her residence hall], some of my friends and a student leader who was… interested in starting this community where we’re more intentional and you know, come together. We had family dinners, we called them on Fridays and it got to the point sometimes where there would be 30 people there… I think I’m more confident, and that has a lot to do with my friends.

Peers were also mentioned by Michelle as the rationale for changing decisions about the role alcohol played in her collegiate experience. She stated:

Junior year two girls in my house were [involved in college athletics] and they weren’t allowed to drink the whole season… and the stuck to it. I was like; maybe I ought to try it too. You know I kind of had to mess around [with alcohol] a little bit, but then you know…

Tara indicated her peers were instrumental in clarifying her political views, specifically in terms of individual rights. Since she was from Canada they would often hold this discussion within the context of universal health care. She mentioned:

It’s always interesting [socialist vs. free market debates.] My roommate went to the hospital last year… but she couldn’t leave the hospital until she paid them which I thought was ridiculous. I’d never experienced any hospital thing… and I never knew what it was like. I [asked her] how does this make sense.
Jill, Michelle, and Tara all reported that peers were the significant influence on various aspects of their social development. The impact of an intentional living community, the decision not to consume alcohol, and the clarification of political views and economic structures were all influence by repeated interaction and conversation with peers. None of these students characterized their experience within the mentoring context of this study, but it appears as though Jill, Michelle, and Tara were influenced over time by informal contact with peers, which is consistent with various definitions of informal mentoring present in the literature.

Peer Theme 3: Students’ Faith Development is Influenced by Their Peers

When asked how they had changed or matured over the course of the college experience, twelve of the sixteen students responded that personal faith was one area of growth. This finding may have been expected given that Calvin College is operated by the Christian Reformed Church and recruits students and programs based on the institution’s faith commitment. While both faculty and peers were identified as playing a significant role in this area of significant growth, participants made clear distinctions concerning how these two groups impacted faith development. The interpersonal relationships that influenced spiritual growth were primarily associated with other students, while faculty involvement was associated with course content in a Religion or Biology class or a professor’s willingness to help provide counsel on a personal issue outside of class.

The way in which personal faith grew in college varied significantly for each study participant. Some students gave concrete examples, like Bill who stated:

I don't go to church very often, but I won’t buy a car... because I know I need to be a good steward. But faith has challenged me when it comes to questions
about what I do with my money and also with substance abuse. Eventually, I had to be like... I'm a Christian and I want to make this world better for people and in no way does going to a party and getting drunk help that.

Malinda also indicated that she had grown in her faith but was trying to understand that in the midst of her cultural context. She said:

I value different things a lot more in terms of the role religion should play in affluent America. [I realize] how culturally specific my upbringing and mindset is and how much Calvin is a bubble of that culturally specific mindset... so I'm learning that the world is bigger than that, so that's been huge.

The response given by Jill was an example of how faith development in college had grown to include the consideration of how religion and political views came together. She mentioned:

I guess I was one of those who thought, I can't believe this and I don't want to admit it, but that all Christians are Republicans, and that's how it works. And I didn't know anything about politics, but I was just kind of like that, and my parents don't even think that. So I don't know why I thought that but then I realized that it [the idea] was ridiculous.

While several of the respondents who mentioned spiritual growth gave personal devotion and frequency of church attendance as the means through which their faith grew, other students specifically mentioned the role peers played in faith development. Donna credits an upperclassman for her spiritual growth during her first year of college:
I met with her once, sometimes twice a week. And we would just hang out in my room or go for a walk and pray together. Like I would be able to share what I was going through with her and... she understood because she had been here [at Calvin] for four years. The things that seemed a little difficult for me to understand, she was able to explain and now I feel as though I understand more of where she was coming from.

Jane reported that initially her parents were the dominant influence in her faith development but this changed as the result of debate and discussion with her friends at college. She indicated that prior to coming to college she would describe herself as having taken “her parents views” on various spiritual issues but when she came to college she would:

Argue with my friends as to why I don’t believe [what they did.] But when it comes down to it for me at this point, things have changed where I can get into my own personal theology but where there is a grey area... I don’t think we necessarily need the answer or can have the answer... I think it is definitely important to be aware and understand.

Conversation with her peers was also listed by Tara as an important influence in her faith development. She stated:

I think I’ve definitely explored it more and figuring out what they [her beliefs] are more... I talk with one of my good friends. We always have interesting conversations and I think through her I’ve realized that we do share some similar beliefs... but we just talk about something that just comes up and I’d say that’s helped me a lot to figure that out.
Faith development was a significant theme mentioned by twelve of the sixteen study participants. Faculty were listed by students as playing an important role in this area of the college experience but it primarily took place within the context of the classroom and flowed from course content. This aspect of faith development is further explored in the section dealing with the impact of college faculty.

Faculty Themes

Students identified faculty members as playing significant roles in two main aspects of their college experience: the impact faculty had on participant’s faith development and the influence of faculty on various components of the student’s educational experience. The first theme consists of students’ perceptions regarding the impact of faculty interaction on faith development, the willingness of professors to discuss faith issues inside or outside of class, and a faculty member’s willingness to help students with personal challenges or issues. The second deals with students’ involvement with faculty and how these relationships impact several student transition issues areas such as learning about the values, beliefs, and norms of the institution, selection of a major course of study, and transition to college academics.

Faculty Theme 1: Faculty Plays an Integral Role in Students’ Faith Development

When asked to describe ways in which they grew during the past four years, twelve of the sixteen participants indicated that they had grown spiritually through their college experience. In addition to the impact of peers, study respondents indicated Calvin faculty had played a significant role in their spiritual development and this had happened through interaction with faculty both inside and out of the classroom.
Mike reported two specific classes that caused him to grow spiritually during his college experience. The first was Religion 121, Biblical Theology which he credits with helping him:

Discover the Bible. You have all these different things you learn about the Bible and what the authors were trying to convey, and who they were writing their message to... so that's an area I've grown more, I guess textually about the Bible.

In addition, Mike reports his perspective as a Christian on evolution was changed as a result of a biology class he took. Prior to the class he:

thought evolution and monkeys were all one big theory and they all had to go together. If you believed in evolution, then you believed that humans came from chimpanzees... I wanted a Christian perspective, especially from the biology standpoint because I wanted to know if there was another side to things. I recognize that things change over time. The evidence is there.

Likewise, Michelle mentioned being exposed to a Christian biology class impacted her spiritual development by openly discussing evolution in class which “opened my mind a little, to be like maybe I don’t know.” Malinda reported taking anthropology of religion as an elective for the purpose of “challenging my thinking [because] there’s no reason to take the course whatsoever. It doesn’t count for anything.”

Robin stated the professor who taught her interim class on prayer was the most significant individual she experienced during her four years at Calvin. According to her, the professor:

Showed us that you can ask all these questions about God, about your faith, and prayer, not necessarily having any answers and [knowing] you might not
get these answers. So in that regard, I definitely learned to question things and know that there is no clean cut answer.

The impact of college course work on faith development for these four students took place within the context of traditional on-campus courses. Jill discovered that the most significant impact on her faith development was to take a class with a professor as part of an off-campus semester. Upon reflecting on that experience she discovered that:

Ghana [the location of her off-campus semester] was incredible and that it has changed me in so many ways. Spiritually, I just understand God differently, I think. And He works differently in Ghana than He does here. And I think He reveals Himself way different, you know to different cultures. And that’s been huge in how I understand God.

While Robin and Jill noticed the impact professors had on individual spiritual growth outside the context of a traditional semester-long class, one student mentioned the impact faculty had on her faith development even though she had never had the instructor for a class. Donna described her relationship with a Calvin professor after first meeting her during freshmen year when she:

Went to her [the faculty member’s] care group and have been involved in that since my freshmen year… So we have had contact throughout all four years and she’s tracked with me all four years. And [she’s] just been a continual spokeswoman of the voice of God.

While indicating his faith has grown as the result of interaction with faculty, Bill credits his overall experience at a Christian college with helping him develop
spiritually. He acknowledges he is trying to confront his “failings as a Christian” and states:

I’m still trying to work through these things. I don’t know how much of this has been a byproduct of my time here at Calvin, but I don’t think that going to a secular institution would have brought up these questions. I don’t think I would have been confronted with Christianity as much. I think if I went to a secular institution I could have just simply taken the path that a number of my friends have taken where they’re cultural Christians, or they won’t want to be involved with the institution of Christianity because it’s just so wrong.

In addition to participating in the process of faith development through college courses and church involvement, students also noted faculty members provided support in other ways, such as help with interpersonal issues or challenges. Participants reported the actions of faculty members in these areas served as a source of encouragement and an example of Christian service to them. Janice indicated how two professors were instrumental in helping her learn how to deal with a family member’s mental illness.

I became very angry and bitter about it [the illness] and I would want to take a break and go home, but home was just a wreck... I felt very lost and that was tough. There were several times I went in... [to see an Assistant Professor] and she would talk me through stuff.

Janice also mentioned she felt supported by a faculty member who she had for an off-campus interim course. That professor’s father dealt with mental illness so “he knew about it... and it was nice to have people here who had the same experience.”
Jill indicated her advisor was instrumental in her decision to pursue an alternative career path upon the completion of her degree. She is completing an internship with an organization that does organic farming in an urban context and expressed an interest in pursuing that opportunity rather than applying to graduate school. She states:

I don’t get a lot of encouragement elsewhere like friends, because it [organic farming] is so strange. They’re like “that’s going to be really hard, you have to have a lot of money for that. Do you know what you’re doing?” And he [the advisor] was like “you can do this, I’ll point you in the right direction…” so that helped a lot, getting the initial okay, because everybody else is just kind of like “you sure you know what you’re doing?”

Mike spoke about how his interactions with his academic advisor had grown beyond simply dealing with his major to include other personal issues.

He [his advisor] helps me when I just need advice about something or someone to talk to…like a big brother. He helps me with a lot of miscellaneous things that I have to do, like when I get in trouble… We talk about sports; we talk about coaching a lot… He’s just a good influence and leads me in the right direction.

*Faculty Theme 2: Faculty Impact Several Student Transition Issues*

During the process of reflecting on the impact of faculty, several participants reported professors had a major impact on their ability to make the transition to a new educational environment. Students reported faculty assistance in such areas as learning about institutional values, norms, and beliefs, the selection of a major course of study, and the transition to college level academics.
Sub-theme 1: Faculty initiate student learning about institutional values, norms, and beliefs. Students were given the opportunity to reflect on the culture of the institution and how that had influenced their experiences. When asked what they felt the dominant values, beliefs, and norms were at Calvin, eleven out of sixteen students responded with statements that clustered around two areas: the value placed on the college’s close connection with the Christian Reformed Church and cultural discernment. Students were then asked how they came to learn about these two areas, and ten of the eleven indicated Calvin professors had been instrumental in this process.

Six of the eleven students responded to questions about Calvin’s norms, beliefs, and values by referencing the connection the institution has with the Christian Reformed Church. Of these six students, four came to Calvin from a public high school and reported having limited understanding of the impact the institution’s denominational affiliation had on the college. Mike indicated:

I didn’t understand the difference between Christian Reformed and the Reformed perspective when I came here. . . I’m not Christian Reformed; I go to a non-denominational church.

Janice mentioned she came to Calvin after being raised in the Reformed Church and didn’t expect to find a difference at Calvin. She said:

I go to a small Reformed Church but apparently it’s different from the Christian Reformed Church. And I was like... what is the difference exactly?

When asked how they learned about this aspect of the institution, students made specific references to various courses and college programs. Jill mentioned Prelude, a first year required course for all students, while two other students
indicated a freshmen year interim class, Developing a Christian Mind, helped more fully understand the impact the Christian Reformed Church had on the educational experience at Calvin.

Aaron mentioned that a Religion professor helped further explain the impact the Christian Reformed Church had on the norms, values, and beliefs of the institution. He came to Calvin from a public school background and credits that professor with “helping him increase his appreciation” of the denomination. Jill had the opposite experience stating:

The religion classes were overwhelming to me because I had never had a religion class before. I remember wishing that I had a religion class in high school... I could tell that people were farther ahead in their knowledge of the Christian Reformed Church... those religion classes were pretty tough at first.

Along with equating the Christian Reformed Church with the norms, values, and beliefs of Calvin, four students also perceived the institution placed a high level of importance on engagement with popular culture or developing “cultural discernment.” Initially Donna thought this meant students could:

Go ahead and see these movies that might not be the best. Go ahead and listen to these things and do these things that probably aren’t good, but as long as you talk about them afterwards, that’s good. And for me discernment comes from... not necessarily choosing something that you know could not be good for you... and talking about it doesn’t make it okay.

In a similar fashion, Jane indicated she was unsure about the value Calvin placed on cultural discernment. She said she would:
Debate over Calvin’s understanding of going out and engaging in the world… it’s hard thing to define to say “okay, you can do this but you can’t do that”… so there is so much debate over it…and I think some of my views have changed.

When asked about the progression of clarifying views on this issue, students responded that attending campus presentations along with individual discussions with professors were a part of the developmental process. Donna reported attending a program dealing with discernment where she was able to “go there and just express things… and be able to be vocal and share and learn from that.” Likewise Jane reported an interaction with a professor freshmen year:

Who I think could sense my frustration with Calvin… I’d stopped by his office just to ask a question about a paper or something, he was my English 101 professor… and he sat me down and kind of talked to me about things. It was kind of like not what I was expecting. I didn’t realize that I just wore it on my sleeve like it was right there that I was just struggling with this stuff.

Sub-theme 2: Interaction with faculty is an important aspect of student’s selection of a major course of study. During the process of reflecting on how she or he came to pursue a given course of study, five students reported peers were influential in the selection of a major. Of the remaining seven students who came to Calvin undecided about a major or who changed majors during college, five indicated a faculty member played the significant role in the decision process.

John reported switching majors from psychology to economics after taking an introductory course from Professor X. He stated:

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I took [Economics 222] and I really enjoyed him [Professor X] He’s a good guy. He’s a really good guy. He also really helped me out during my college career... I said [to him] “I want to be an economics major and I want you as my advisor.”

Similarly, Jill indicated she had come to Calvin without a major and enrolled in a sociology class during the spring semester of her sophomore year because of the core requirement. At the end of that semester, her positive experience in the course led to her declare sociology as a major. She reports:

I haven’t changed my major since... Some professors played a role in that because they were really passionate about what they were teaching. So that got me excited about it and I just felt like I fit into sociology... I never would have thought it [sociology] was anything that exciting to me.

Jane stated it was the encouragement she received from an Art Professor during an art education class that helped her decide to change from an Elementary Education Major to an Art Education Major. She mentioned that she:

Still has [class] with him today and he’s a huge support... to me in the art department... You hate to think that one art professor could make or break it. But essentially if they’re encouraging and seeing what you’re doing... it helped me. At that time if [he] had been like, “no this isn’t working” or “your drawings are all messed up” I would have shied away.

While all three of these students credit a positive experience with a professor in a class that caused them to select a specific major, Ann reported that it was the efforts of a professor in the midst of a failed attempt to get into the Nursing program that led to her major selection.
Ann had indicated on her initial application to Calvin that she wanted to be a nursing major. She took the required core courses for the program and applied at the end of her sophomore year but was denied. After retaking some courses to improve her grades, she applied again at the end of her junior year but was turned down again. At that time she indicated she was “feeling really trapped” and “didn’t know what else was out there” and that she didn’t know what she wanted to do.

She met with one of her Nursing professors who encouraged her to study off-campus for a semester. At the time Ann indicated she had “nothing else to do and nowhere else to go.” She listened to the professor’s encouragement to look at different ways to be involved in the health care field without a nursing degree and applied and was accepted to the semester in Ghana program. She credits the experience she had in Ghana with helping her select a minor with a concentration in third world development.

*Sub-theme 3: Faculty aid in student’s transition to college academics.* Six respondents indicated peers played the most significant role in the transitional process to collegiate academics, but five of the remaining ten participants indicated faculty were the primary influence in this process.

Kristy indicated during her freshmen year a professor helped her when she was struggling trying to keep up in a core Philosophy class, while at the same time being enrolled in French.

I was taking two things that weren’t really my forte. I did go and talk with my French professor and she helped me out a lot and was encouraging to me. And basically [she] told me pretty much that I was at the same level as every other student and not to worry.
Likewise, Patrick found the academic transition to Calvin to be difficult after his high school experience but he did not have to make the initial contact with professors. He found faculty “cared about students” and they “set aside time outside of class to make themselves readily available.” Patrick credited the faculty with taking the initiative in helping him succeed academically upon his arrival to Calvin.

Mike also found the faculty were instrumental in helping him make a successful academic transition. The difference was that he was required to meet with a faculty member after being placed on academic probation after his first semester at Calvin. This individual served as an academic mentor or guide to Mike as he was required to meet with the faculty member weekly with the expressed goal of raising his grade point average. He reported this faculty member:

Just basically gave me confidence because that was a big issue at the time. I had just done horribly in the last semester and I didn’t know what was going on, or if I was going to get kicked out… We did a lot of concept mapping and stuff like that. Just different strategies to try and help me figure out what kind of learner I was and what I’d have to do to succeed personally… I wouldn’t have made it if it wasn’t for her, I really wouldn’t have.

Two other individuals, Jane and Cindy, were also assigned faculty mentors as a result of being placed on academic probation but neither of these individuals reported that this relationship was significant in their ability to persist. Jane mentioned that she initially perceived her biggest hurdle in coming to college would be the social transition so when she was given an academic mentor, she didn’t view it as a significant part of her college experience. She said:
I was telling actually telling my housemate the other day that I loved Calvin socially, my first two years... I just love it for the educational value now. Which is I just think part of maturing and growing up and coming to the realization of why we are at school.

While Jane mentioned that she grew to appreciate her educational experience, Cindy stated that academics have consistently been her biggest challenge in college. She indicated that she “got her act together” academically after being placed on probation and assigned a faculty mentor but mentioned it was a class she took during that time and not the mentor that helped her learn how to succeed academically. She said:

I realized that I needed to learn how to study and get my butt in gear. So I just started working harder... I took an anatomy class and just memorized everything. So I started doing that for all of my classes, just memorize all my noted... that’s the only way I can get decent grades.

While Mike, Jane, and Cindy were all assigned faculty mentors as a result of being placed on academic probation, Mike was the only individual who identified this person as a significant influence. Jane and Cindy both learned to appreciate or navigate through their academic experience but neither individual indicated that a faculty member played a role in that process.

It is interesting to note that of the sixteen study participants, nine students indicated they had decided to take the same professor for two or more of their classes during their college career. Six of these nine individuals identified a professor as being the key individual in the student’s process of selecting a major, helping with the academic transition to college, or playing a significant role in the student’s faith development. Kristy identified how a faculty member had helped her make the
academic transition to college. She describes how she had decided to take several classes from the same art professor:

I have formed relationships during my junior and senior year with people in the art department who have been really encouraging...with one particular professor. I took an interim class, then an intermediate and I just kind of formed a connection with the professor. I approached her asking questions about my projects and we kind of formed a personal relationship. So she’s been kind of a mentor to me.

Jane indicated a faculty member was the key individual in her selection of a major at Calvin. She noted that she decided to take the same professor for various drawing classes.

I think my relationship has grown over the years where I have had multiple classes with him... You could ask him a question. He will sit down and talk with you and go through ideas. He will tell you what his thoughts are and ask you questions. He’s very conversation oriented.

Janice indicated she had taken a professor multiple times because of the faculty member’s willingness to interact with her on a personal level. She states:

This is a professor that I had for a couple of classes. He was a really great guy. And I talked with him a couple of times, just randomly, he’s such a nice guy that you can just talk. And I can tell that about a lot of professors here that they want to know how you are and are interested in you.

Summary

Two major themes emerged from this study: the influence of peers and the impact of college faculty. Study participants identified these two groups as being
instrumental in terms of the spiritual and educational growth experienced by each student during her or his four years of college.

Ten of the sixteen study participants indicated they had experienced significant spiritual growth or awareness during college. Of these ten, the impact of the faculty and that from peers was evenly divided. Students primarily identified the influence of faculty in this area through course content in such areas as religion, biology, or sociology classes and the willingness of professors to "disciple" students or provide support during personal crisis was also mentioned. Study participants tended to credit peers for impacting spiritual growth through individual conversations or discussions.

The second category that emerged concerning the impact faculty and peers had on the students dealt with the participants' educational experience. Faculty and peers were both identified as playing a significant role in the educational transition to college and the process of selecting a major course of study. However, in the major course of study area, some students only indirectly mentioned the impact of the faculty, instead crediting the institution's core requirement as being responsible for their major decisions.

Two other themes connected to the impact of peers dealt with college selection and the process of social development. Nine of the sixteen participants credited peers with aiding in their social development while faculty members were not mentioned in either area. However, eleven of the sixteen students did indicate that the faculty was instrumental in the process of learning about norms, beliefs, and values. The study demonstrated students are aware that development is occurring in this area throughout the college experience.
While none of the two dominant themes in this study match the specific terminology used by Tinto (1975), it is interesting to note the connections between his language and the themes and sub-themes of this research. Tinto suggested persistence could be positively impacted by a successful interaction between a student’s intentions and commitments and the educational and social systems of the institution. Sub-themes dealing with persistence decisions, major selection, and educational transitions along with major themes such as social transition and faith development raise questions concerning the degree to which these components of Tinto’s model are present in this research. The results of this study lead to a discussion concerning the appropriateness of using Tinto’s theory as a lens to describe the experience of these students, which is presented in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study are summarized in this chapter, followed by a review of the three research questions presented in Chapter 1 and how they relate to these results. Limitations, recommendations for further study, and conclusions are also provided at the end of this chapter.

Overall Summary

This research studied the experience of students enrolled at a private, Christian, liberal arts institution who were initially thought to be at risk of departure but who did persist through to an eighth semester. The goal of this qualitative study was to examine the experience of these students in light of Tinto’s (1975) theory of student departure, exploring the applicability of his model to this particular educational environment. A phenomenological approach was implemented to help explore the experience of these students in light of Tinto’s model.

The underlying theory base for this research is Tinto’s (1975) model of retention and the potential factors that may impact a student’s decision to remain at or discontinue from her or his institution. According to Tinto’s theory, students enter college with individual intentions and commitments that must be aligned with the institution’s educational and social systems. The model acknowledges this interaction is impacted by several background characteristics a student possesses prior to beginning her or his educational experience. Persistence depends on the degree to which a student experiences difficulty, isolation, incongruence, or adjustment issues in this process. The fewer issues a student experiences in one or more of these areas, the easier the alignment will be and the more likely she or he will remain at the institution through graduation.

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The major themes that emerged from this study are that peers and faculty members played a significant role in the participants' collegiate experience. Three main areas of growth were identified by study participants: educational, social, and faith development. These involved students learning about motivation, career aspirations, lifestyle decisions, health issues, and the formation of personal understanding of theology and doctrine. The educational experience of these students was divided into four main categories: college choice; transition to college academics; selection of a major course of study and overall persistence decisions. Students discussed the issues present in the college choice process, learning expectations for college level work, factors that should be included in selecting a major, and what was a value to each student that influenced her or his persistence. Participants credited both peers and faculty for educational and faith growth while only peers were acknowledged as having influenced social development.

A comparison of these results to Tinto’s theory demonstrates an overlap between the findings of this study and his model. Tinto’s inclusion of student intentions and commitments and the interaction of these factors with the educational and social systems of the institution are evident in students’ identification of educational, social, and spiritual development. While individual participants did not specifically describe their experience in terms of the four student components identified by Tinto (i.e. difficulty, isolation, incongruence, or adjustment issues), these elements are present in the findings of this study. They are apparent in areas such as student selection of a major course of study, college choice, persistence decisions, and transitional issues. The applicability of the findings of this research
with Tinto’s model is evident in a comprehensive review of the study’s research questions.

Review of Research Questions

Research Question 1

The first set of research questions focuses on to what degree successful “at risk” students developed a level of commitment to their institution, whether these students developed individual intentions while they were enrolled at their institution, and what role mentoring played in that process.

In order to address these questions, the concepts of “level of commitment” and “individual intentions” must be further explained. Tinto posited that commitment was demonstrated by a student’s desire to attain her or his goals at the institution. Accordingly, the greater a student’s level of commitment, the more likely he or she was to persist (Tinto, 1993). The context of this study dealt with retention so it is appropriate to view the development of institutional commitment in terms of student’s doubts and decisions concerning persistence. While Tinto acknowledges that some individuals decide to get involved with higher education without aspiring to complete a degree, the selection of an institution and completion of a degree of study is an appropriate indicator of individual intentions. For the purpose of this study, the college choice process, the selection of a major course of study, and the ability to persist into an 8th semester appear to be a suitable lens to gauge if and how individual intentions were formed during a student’s educational experience.

Of the sixteen individuals who participated in this study, eleven students responded they had considered leaving the institution at some point during their experience at Calvin. In some cases this was due to educational difficulties or
challenges while others considered leaving due to social or co-curricular issues. Each student each had to decide if she or he was willing to overcome whatever obstacles existed in order to remain at the institution, or if it would be easier to discontinue. All of the participants remained enrolled which indicates a level of commitment to some aspect of the institution. The primary reasons participants gave for remaining at Calvin revolved around the impact peer and faculty relationships had on them.

The influence of peers was a consistent theme in the development of student intentions regarding choice of college, with six of the sixteen students indicating peers were an important element of their college selection process. The selection of one institution over another is an initial demonstration of student intention and participants mentioned the impact peers and family had on this process.

Individual intentions are further demonstrated by the selection of a major field of study. This decision can impact students’ further educational and career options so the process can be viewed as an indication of how students clarify or develop individual intentions during the college experience. Eleven of the sixteen participants indicated they identified or changed majors during the college experience and identified faculty and peer opinion and support as significant factors in this process. Some individuals changed due to the influence of peers while others switched after taking a required course for the liberal arts core or due to a positive experience with a professor.

The process of choosing a specific college, selecting a major, and then ultimately persisting into an eighth semester demonstrate that students who participated in this study developed institutional commitment and individual intentions during the college experience. While it is evident that peers and faculty
played a significant role in this process, further clarification concerning mentoring must be given before a response to the last portion of the research question can be offered. To that end, definitions of mentoring present in current literature must be examined before determining if the relationships between student and faculty in this study can be considered to be evidence of a mentoring relationship.

There are several definitions of mentoring in the literature applicable to the findings of this study. Moore and Amey (1998) defined mentoring as a process involving an individual who serves as a “guide, role model, teacher, or patron” (p. 40) to a less experienced individual, while Parkay (1998) explained the term as the process of an older individual aiding in the transition of a younger person into a particular way of life. The term has been furthered defined to include both formal and informal components by Lavant, Anderson, and Tiggs (1997). They describe formal mentoring as a relationship that involves predetermined goals or outcomes, while an informal approach flows from a relationship where mentoring takes place without being acknowledged or identified by both parties. Wallace and Abel (1997) extend formal mentoring by placing the emphasis on increased retention while the term has also been expanded to include the existence of peer mentoring (Foster, 2001).

The role of mentor as guide or role model to a less experienced individual is evident in the experiences of two study participants. Jill credits the support from her advisor as being key in her decision to pursue work with a local organic farming organization despite the lack of encouragement she received from her friends. Likewise Donna reported that her relationship with a biology professor was instrumental in her faith development during her college experience. Her experience fits the definition of faculty mentoring presented in this study since Donna never
enrolled in a class that this faculty member taught and the content of the subject matter did not primarily involve the faculty member’s academic discipline.

The results of this study also illustrate the existence of both formal and informal mentoring relationships. Three of the participants, Jane, Mike, and Cindy reported they were placed on academic probation at some point during college and were required to meet with a faculty member who served as a probational counselor. This relationship had set meeting times and an academic goal that the students had to meet by the end of the semester in order to remain at the institution. Jane, Mike, and Cindy’s experiences fit the description of formal mentoring since both students met weekly with a faculty member.

Participants also reported examples of informal mentoring in the process of clarifying intentions and commitments. Donna described how her experience during the first year of college was positively impacted by an ongoing interaction with a senior where the relationship grew from an initial meeting at a college program. Jane, Cindy, and Aaron reported that the process of selecting a major was impacted by peers. Jane was influenced by a housemate who was also majoring in art while Aaron switched to Information Systems when he saw a friend on his floor make a similar decision. In all of these cases there was consistent contact between the study participant and a peer, forming a mentoring relationship.

The development of student’s growth in terms of level of institutional commitment and individual intentions is evident in this study. All participants remained enrolled at the institution and the majority of students went through a process of selecting and clarifying a course of study. Furthermore, the experiences of at least six students match descriptions of formal or informal mentoring. As a result,
such mentoring can be viewed as playing a part in the process of the development of institutional commitment and individual intentions in the experiences of several of the students who participated in this study.

**Research Question 2**

The second set of research questions focused on whether successful “at risk” students formed a sense of social and educational congruence with their institution; how, if at all, this process interacted with their personal intentions and commitments; and in what ways, if any, was a mentor a part of this process.

While both social and educational congruence may collaboratively impact a student’s ability to persist, these two factors have distinct characteristics. Tinto (1993) stated that social congruence was primarily felt at the individual student level and was most evident in terms of peer relationships. While faculty relationships did factor into social congruence, Tinto posited an individual’s sense of “personal fit” with the collective values, behaviors, and norms of the dominant student culture had the most significant impact on the retention decisions. According to Tinto, informal interaction between students, such as those found between roommates at a residential college, played an important role in determining if an individual felt a sense of belonging or social deviance with her or his environment.

While social congruence is often evident from the individual context, students are more likely to experience educational congruence on an institutional level. Tinto (1993) also used the term “intellectual congruence” to describe the experience in which a student gauges the degree to which her or his skills and interests match those needed to succeed at the institution. Institutional demands may be too high or too low and as a result the student decides to leave, or is academically dismissed by the
institution. Tinto believed congruence between the individual and the institution in this area is thought to lead to student persistence.

There are several examples from this study demonstrating the development of social and educational congruence and the impact it had on the participants. Of the sixteen students in the study, nine discussed the process of making the social transition to college, a finding which can be tied to the concept of social congruence. Likewise, eleven of the participants discussed the academic transition to college, which relates to Tinto's description of educational congruence. A comparison of Tinto's theory with the findings of this study is included in Appendix D.

The influence of peers was reported consistently by study participants in their discussions of social and educational congruence. It should not be surprising that of the nine individuals who discussed social transition issues, all exclusively mentioned the influence fellow students had on this process. There was a split, however, between peer and faculty impact on educational congruence with six participants primarily naming fellow students and five individuals referencing faculty.

The existence of social and educational transition issues in this study, and the influence of peers and faculty, allows for a discussion of the impact mentoring can have in this process. In this study, the influence of peers on the process of social development was referenced nine times by study participants. Jill's report of an older student leader on her floor who influenced her decision to live in an intentional community and Michelle's statement regarding her roommate's impact on her evaluation of alcohol's role in her college experience are two examples of the impact peers played in social transitions.
It is interesting to note that while faculty were not specifically mentioned as having impacted participants' social development; ten participants indicated a faculty member had been influential in the process of developing her or his sense of values, beliefs, or norms. Aaron reported it was a faculty member's explanation of how the college's affiliation with the Christian Reformed Church impacted the institution's norms and values that allowed him to better understand his environment. Jane's experience of struggling with the issue of cultural engagement at a Christian college also connects to social development issues. It may be that students saw these issues as independent from the process of social development but the norms, beliefs, and values of the institution can be viewed as impacting the process of the development of social congruence.

Study participants' educational transition issues give an additional context for the existence of both formal and informal mentoring in this research. For example, students reported peers were directly responsible for providing motivation for increasing levels of academic effort. Bill reported being positively influenced by observing his roommate's level of academic effort while Janet and Robin indicated they were inspired by the examples of other women on the floor. The experiences of these students give clear examples of informal peer mentoring.

The impact of informal mentoring is also evident in other participants' experiences with faculty members. Kristy's level of educational congruence was impacted by her after-class interaction with a French professor who eased her concerns about her academic performance. Likewise, Patrick reported noticing that faculty set aside time for him outside of class while he was struggling to make the educational transition from high school. Mike was involved in mentoring from a more
formal perspective when he was required to meet weekly with a faculty member after being placed on academic probation during his first year.

These students’ process of forming social and educational congruence with the institution was connected to the participant’s ability to develop individual intentions and commitments. While Jill’s housing choice and Michelle’s decision to decrease the amount of alcohol she consumed can be viewed as an act of social alignment with peers, they can also be regarded as choices that formed the individual intentions of these women. Likewise, the experience Mike had with his faculty probation counselor and Kristy’s interactions with her French professor allowed these individuals to increase the level of educational congruence each individual felt with the institution. This in turn, made it possible for these students to commit to completing her or his coursework and according to Mike, allowed him to remain in school.

The process of developing social and educational congruence with the institution took various forms for the study participants. The consistent theme throughout the students’ experience was that peers and faculty played a significant role in their alignment with the institution in one or both of these categories. While there are several examples of informal mentoring relationships from the literature present in the students’ development of social and educational congruence, only Jane, Mike, and Cindy’s experience fits the formal definition of mentoring presented in this study. Mentoring can be seen as playing a part in the participants’ development of social and educational congruence however, the majority of experiences reported by participants do not fit the definition of a formal mentoring relationship.
Research Question 3

The third set of research questions focused on what role, if any, did successful “at risk” students’ level of interaction with other members of the community play in their ability to persist at their institution and whether mentors helped to facilitate this connection.

Several study participants indicated they had significant interaction with “other members” of the community during their college experience. These community members included individuals other than the student’s peers or faculty members such as counselors, staff persons, program directors, or athletic coaches.

Astin (1975) believed that student interaction with multiple facets of the institution was vital to retention. He viewed the concept of involvement as the central component of his input/process/output model of student persistence. The importance of student involvement with multiple facets of the institution is also present in Tinto’s (1975) model of persistence, specifically in the concept of isolation. Tinto posited that lack of contact with various areas of the institution could cause a student to feel isolated, potentially resulting in the individual potentially deciding to leave the institution. Study participants’ contact with multiple components of the institution outside of peers and faculty demonstrates that study participants were involved outside of these two traditional groups.

What is not clear from this research however is the degree to which this additional involvement impacted the study participant’s ability to persist? Thirteen of the sixteen study participants reported involvement in some area of the co-curriculum, but no one credited these experiences as having an impact on her or his ability to persist. Individuals reported being involved in athletics, residence hall government,
off-campus study programs, and personal, career, or financial aid counseling but the degree to which these experiences impacted persistence varied by participant.

Three students reported they had been involved with collegiate athletics during their four years. While Michelle and Patrick talked about the positive impact these experiences had on issues such as college choice and educational transition, neither individual credited the ability to persist with her or his athletic experience. Conversely John, the other student athlete in the study, reported that athletics was one of the main factors that caused him to consider leaving college.

While participation in intercollegiate athletics was mentioned by participants, other areas of involvement thought to have a natural impact on persistence such as living on campus or personal and career counseling (Peltier, Laden, & Matranga, 1999) were also not credited by participants as having an influence on retention. Only four participants indicated they had utilized personal or career counseling services and none of these individuals reported that these relationships were significant factors in her or his ability to persist. Ann was the only participant to directly mention contact with a staff person as having a significant impact on her experience. She stated her interaction with a Financial Aid counselor had been important to her during her junior and senior year but she stopped short of crediting this individual with helping her persist through to graduation. These meetings had components of mentoring in that Ann credits the individual with impacting her personal growth. However, the individuals interacted too infrequently and as a result; Ann’s connection with this staff person does not meet the study’s criteria for a mentoring relationship.
While students were not quick to credit relationships with coaches or counselors as having impacted their ability to persist, it is fair to say these relationships were significant in the participant’s experience. Michelle reported her coach was very supportive during her senior year as she dealt with some personal issues, while John credited a personal counselor and his coach as significant sources of support. These interactions were not facilitated by a mentor but demonstrated some characteristics of informal mentoring. Ann’s relationship with the Financial Aid counselor who she met with to discuss personal issues or John’s connection with his coach demonstrate the impact these individuals had on participants outside of the professional responsibilities of the staff person’s job.

The experiences of these students indicate that mentors did not play a role in involving participants with other members of the campus community because none of the participants reported that a mentor had introduced them to these individuals. Once these connections were made however, it appears as though the relationships between participants and other community members took on the characteristics of informal mentoring relationships. Students indicated they discussed personal issues with members of the college community outside of peers and faculty members such as coaches and counselors but participants stopped short of crediting these relationships as having had a significant impact on her or his ability to persist.

Suggestions for Further Research

There are several suggestions for further research that can generated from the results of this study. A similar project could seek to identify and interview at risk students during their first semester on campus and follow them through their college experience. This would address the issues presented by students who were surprised
by their inclusion in the study. It would allow for deeper reflection on the part of these individuals since there would be a greater length of time for the students to reflect on their experiences. Attempts were made in this qualitative research to add depth to the interviews by providing the questions in advance to the participants and allowing for member checking, but the data could be improved through earlier identification and interviews that could continue throughout their college experiences. While this research had the ability to incorporate a longitudinal perspective by examining students based on various background characteristics, early identification and interviews would give the ability to gather more comprehensive longitudinal data.

In addition, further research on at risk students at private, Christian, liberal arts institutions could focus specifically on peer mentoring. A consistent theme in this study was the impact peers had on participant's educational, social, and spiritual development, but the study lacked a working definition for the term. A significant amount of research has been done on the impact of faculty mentoring on students (Foster, 2001; Lavant, Anderson, & Tigges, 1998; Moore & Amey, 1988; Wallace & Abel 1997) with little attention given to the influence of peers. Further research could concentrate on the impact of peer mentoring at private, Christian, liberal arts institutions centered on a clear definition of the term.

A third area for future research could focus on the impact living arrangements have on at risk students' experience since several participants mentioned how roommates impacted educational issues. While some researchers have suggested that students should be paired with individuals of similar academic ability as measured by GPA, SAT, or ACT scores (Schroeder & Mable, 1994), further study could be undertaken to see the impact this would have on at risk students. It has also been
suggested that on-campus students persist at a higher rate than off campus residents (Astin, 1997; Schroeder & Mable, 1994) so research could be conducted to examine the impact housing arrangements have on the experience of at risk students within the context of a private, Christian, liberal arts institution. While this study did not focus on living arrangements of at risk students, several participants mentioned their roommate’s influence on their college experience, so further research could be conducted on the impact at risk students’ living arrangements have on the ability to persist.

In addition, this study could be repeated in three years with the same group of students to determine if they make the same meaning of their experience after having significant time to reflect on their experience. This process could bring further clarity to the themes that emerged from this study or provide additional insights on the experiences of the participants.

Finally, an additional study could be done to examine the experience of the other at risk students who began their college experience in the fall of 2002. Fifty-five students would began their college experience that semester met the criteria for this study with twenty-six of those individuals remaining into an 8th semester. Further research could be conducted on the twenty-nine individuals who left to determine if the lack of peer or faculty interaction influenced their decision to discontinue from the institution.

Overall Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the applicability of Vincent Tinto’s (1975) theory of student departure to the experience of students enrolled at a private, Christian, liberal arts institution and the impact mentoring had on the students’
experience. This qualitative research adds to the literature on student persistence by placing the study within a context in which little research had been done on Tinto’s theory of persistence. Berger (1997) and Elkins, Braxton, and James (2000) identified that the majority of studies examining Tinto were set within the context of public institutions and called for research to be done at private institution. Furthermore, this study provides longitudinal retention data, addressing an additional shortcoming in the retention literature presented by Graunke and Woosley (2005) and Smith (2002) by examining students who persisted into an eighth semester.

This research allowed for in-depth learning about the applicability of Tinto’s theory to the private, Christian, liberal arts institution. Participants indicated they experienced an alignment of intentions and commitments with the educational and social systems of the institution and that mentors played a part in that process. It was interesting to note that some of the participants indicated her or his intentions or commitments aligned with those of the college prior to enrolling since the student came from the church background with which the institution is affiliated. Other respondents mentioned they decided there was a prior personal fit with the institution based on the experience a friend or family member had at the institution. Both of these findings point to the possibility that students who attend private, Christian, liberal arts institution may go through a process of confirming rather than aligning personal intentions or commitments with those of the institution. The responses of participants indicating that students in this environment go through a process of confirming and/or aligning commitments and intentions with the social and educational systems of the institution demonstrates that Tinto’s model of persistence is indeed applicable to this specific educational environment.
The finding of this study demonstrating the applicability of Tinto’s theory of student departure within the context of a private, Christian, liberal arts institution answers critiques of Tinto offered by Tierney (1992). Tierney posited that Tinto’s theory was based on data from large, four year, public institutions so his work should only be applied within that context. This research however, found Tinto’s theory was an appropriate lens for examining retention within the environment of a small, private, Christian, liberal arts institution, refuting Tierney’s critique of Tinto.

In addition to answering Tierney’s critiques dealing with the applicability of Tinto’s theory beyond large public institutions, this research extends previous work done on Tinto’s model within the context of a private, Christian, liberal arts institution. Cash and Bissel’s (1985) paper was the initial work examining the impact of Tinto’s theory within in such an environment. The researcher’s found the existence of individual student commitments but did not find intentions to be a part of the overall retention model. Similar to Cash and Bissel, this research also found evidence of student commitments through sub-themes dealing with persistence decisions, college selection, and faith development. However, participants in this study also commented on the process of selecting a major, an example of student intentions, so the findings of this research extends Cash and Bissel’s earlier work.

Fulcomer’s (2003) work on Tinto’s model within the context of a private Christian, liberal arts institution was similar to this research in regards to the background student variables selected for study and the decision to focus on a single institution. While sharing these similarities, this research contradicts Fulcomer’s findings in two main areas: that retention is not positively impacted via student involvement with peers and that academic and career plans do not influence
persistence. Appendix E contains a comparison of Fulcomer’s work with the findings of this research. Fulcomer’s findings may have been impacted by his implementation of a quantitative methodology that relied heavily on correlations, but his findings in the area of peer influence are contradicted by this study. This research found that peers had a significant impact on retention in that participants credited peers with impacting persistence decisions, educational transitions, and the selection of a college major. In doing so, this study contradicts Fulcomer’s work and raises questions regarding the role of peer with the applicability of Tinto’s work in the private Christian, liberal arts institution.

The other significant investigation of Tinto’s theory within the context of the private, Christian, liberal arts institution was offered by Smith (2002). His work focused on the academic and social integration components of Tinto’s model while paying minimal attention to the impact student intentions and commitments had on persistence. His study found that the influence of peers was limited to social transitions and found that family of origin had a significant impact in retention decisions. In contrast, this study found minimal support for Smith’s findings concerning family of origin while broadening the role of peers to extend to academic transition issues. In addition, this study adds faculty to the list of influences in terms of the impact professors have on the transition to college academics. These findings along with the existence of student intentions and commitments in this research, raises questions regarding the role of peers and faculty in support of Tinto’s theory within the context of private, Christian, liberal arts institutions. Appendix F contains a comparison on the findings of this research with Smith’s study.
In addition to furthering what is known from earlier studies about Tinto’s model of persistence, this research furthers what is known about the impact of peer mentoring within the context of this study. Participant reports concerning the impact of mentoring on the participant’s experience are not surprising given the amount of research present on the role mentoring plays for at risk students. However, the frequency and impact peer mentoring had on the experience of these students is noteworthy since participants reported that peers were as significant a factor as faculty members during the college experience. While there are studies dealing with peer mentoring, a significant portion of literature focuses on the importance of faculty mentoring and ways to increase its’ effectiveness. The results of this study suggest that best practices for peer mentoring be given more attention in the research since participants referenced this category with the same degree of frequency as they did faculty.

It is also interesting to note what is not present in the findings of this study. As previously mentioned, the literature on at risk students and mentoring heavily emphasizes the impact of faculty. While study participants mentioned the impact of peers on the ability to persist, few if any references were made to other members of the institution. While two participants, John and Robin, mentioned they had utilized personal or career counseling services, none of the students specifically recognized a staff person as serving as mentor or being influential in her or his college experience. Several participants did mention that her or his close group of peers developed out of the community present during the first two years living in the residence halls. These students however, stopped short of mentioning a residence life professional or other community member as having played a significant role in the ability to persist.
Implications for Practice at Private, Christian, Liberal Arts Colleges

The individual experiences of the participants demonstrate that the components of Tinto’s model are present within the experiences of at risk students attending private, Christian, liberal arts, colleges. Student intentions and commitments were found to interact with the institution’s social and educational systems which impacted persistence. While confirming Tinto’s model, these findings also provide insight into institutional practices in regards to at risk students. This study demonstrates that at risk students do exist within the private, Christian, liberal arts college, and points toward the positive impact peers and faculty can have on these students. In addition to emphasizing the impact peers have on student’s major selection and academic motivation, this study also demonstrates that a significant amount of faculty impact was felt from experiences outside of the classroom. These findings should cause institutions to think about innovative ways to get peers intentionally involved with at risk students and to get faculty interacting with these students outside of the classroom.

Additionally, the role of “traditional” supports such as career and personal counseling and Student Life Professionals should also be examined in light of the findings of this study. Few participants mentioned being impacted by these individuals despite the fact that they historically been looked to by the private, Christian, liberal arts institutions as a key resource for at risk students. As a result these colleges may need to look for innovative ways to get career and individual counselors to interface with at risk students. One way to increase purposeful contact would be for Student Life professionals to be trained and serve as academic advisors.
This would give these individuals contact with at risk students in a more “academic” venue and give them scheduled intentional time with these students.

Finally, the strong theme of peers and their impact on at risk students could be used to rethink how specific Student Life policies are conceived. Decisions such as housing assignments could be reviewed to determine if more there are more appropriate ways to serve at risk students. It may be appropriate to intentionally assign at risk students a roommate who experienced a high level of academic achievement in high school in an attempt to provide the type of support and motivation mentioned by participants in this study. The size of many private, Christian, liberal arts institutions allows for this type of care to be taken in the housing selection process. However, this may involve institutions increasing the data they include in housing assignments or expanding the information they require on housing applications. It may also require the Housing Office to work collaboratively with the Admissions Staff and the Registrar’s Office to ensure at risk students are identified early and their academic information is used appropriately in the roommate selection process.

A final recommendation for improving peer contact with at risk students at private, Christian, liberal arts institutions would be to look for ways to be more intentional with the efforts of Resident Assistants and other Para-professional staff. These individuals are hired to build community within the residence halls and are selected in part, due to the inter-personal skills they possess. Resident Assistants could be trained to serve as peer mentors and be assigned an at risk student to meet with during the students first semester or year on campus. Funding for the Resident Assistant position already exists so there would be minimal additional costs to the
institution and involvement with peer mentoring could be made a condition of admission for at risk students. Such an arrangement would provide a context for peer impact in areas such as educational transitions, persistence decisions, major selection, and social transitions.

The relevance of Tinto’s theory within the study’s environment, the existence of themes dealing with peers and faculty influence, and the applicability of the findings to a discussion of institutional practice was generated from the experiences of sixteen similar yet unique individuals. While all of these students possessed comparable academic characteristics upon arriving on campus, the study participants experienced the impact of peers and faculty in different ways. Some students found support from a roommate or older student while others discovered a faculty member who was willing to help with an academic or spiritual issue. Despite having common characteristics that caused the student to be considered at risk each individual traveled a unique path toward the goal of completing her or his college degree.
REFERENCES


Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Project: The Persistence of At Risk College Students: The Persistence of At Risk College Students into their 8th Semester at a Private Christian College

Time of interview: ____________________________

Date of interview: ____________________________

Location: ______________________________________________________________________

Interviewer: ____________________________________________________________________

Interviewee: ____________________________________________________________________

Thank you for consenting to participate in this study. I would like to record the interview so the study can be as accurate as possible. You may request that the tape recorder be turned off at any point of the interview.

Questions that the subjects will be asked include:

1. Why did you initially chose to come to this college? What factors went into your college choice? Was Calvin your first choice?
2. Describe what your transition to Calvin and college life was like? In what ways was it more difficult than you thought it would be? Was it easier in any way? What did you find most difficult: the educational or social transition? Has that changed over the last seven semesters?
3. What characteristics of this institution initially appealed to you? Have these perceptions about this institution changed over your 4 years? Can you identify anyone who has been a part of that process?
4. Did you come into Calvin with your major or career path selected? Did you ever change your major or field of studies? What went into that decision? Was anyone else a part of that process?
5. Did you ever considering dropping out of college or transferring to a different school? If yes, at what point of your college career did this happen? Why did you ultimately decide to remain at Calvin?
6. Describe the biggest challenge you had to face at Calvin? How did you deal with it? Without disclosing anyone’s name or specific position, was anyone a source of support/encouragement to you at that time?
7. Did you find that this institution had different norms/beliefs/values than you did? How did you learn about this aspect of the institution? Do you still see a difference between you and the institution in these areas? To what degree has that changed over your four years?
8. Who has had the greatest level of impact/influence on you during your 4
years here? Peers/faculty/staff/parents? Have these factors change over your
experience?
9. Without disclosing a specific name or person's position, can you identify
one or two significant individuals from the institution impacted you for during
your college experience? If yes, did you seek that person(s) out or did they
approach you? How often did you meet? In what setting?
10. In what ways have you changed (intellectually, emotionally, and
spiritually) over your four years? How has that taken place? Who has been a
part of that process?

Thank you for participating in this interview. If necessary, may I contact your
for a follow up interview or to clarify some of your responses?
## Appendix B
### Summary of Participant Information

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PR= Attended private high school
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Both= Attended both private and public high school
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- a. persistence decisions
- b. college major choice
- c. educational transitions
- d. college choice

#### 2. Peer Impact on Social

#### 3. Peer Impact on Faith

#### 4. Faculty Impact on Faith

#### 5. Faculty Role in Transitions
- a. institutional values
- b. college major choice
- c. transition to college academics

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Appendix D  
Comparison of Themes to Vincent Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure

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Appendix E  
Comparison to Fulcomer’s (2003) Study

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Table 5

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<td>Methodology-mixed</td>
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<td>Background Variables:</td>
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<td>Retention studied into sixth semester</td>
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<td>Setting: Four private Christian Colleges</td>
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<td>Single institution: Calvin College</td>
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<td>Based on Tinto (1975) academic/social integration</td>
<td>Based on Tinto (1975)</td>
<td>Interaction between academic/social systems and student intentions/commitments</td>
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<td>Peer positively impact social transitions</td>
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<td>Dissatisfaction leads to decision about persistence</td>
<td>Peer positively impact social transitions</td>
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<td>Influence of family is significant</td>
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<td>Importance of academic integration</td>
<td>Faculty play an key role in transition to college academics</td>
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Appendix G
HSIRB Approval Letter

Date: February 9, 2006

To: Louann Bierlein Palmer, Principal Investigator
   Rick Zomer, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Mary Lagrave, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 06-0118

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled “The Persistence of At Risk Students” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: February 9, 2007

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Appendix H
Consent Document

Consent Document
Department of Teaching, Learning & Leadership
Dr. Louann Bierlein Palmer, Principal Investigator
Rick Zomer, Student Investigator
The Persistence of At Risk College Students: Assessment of Tinto's Retention Model and Institutional Mentoring Programs.

You are invited to participate in a study examining "The Persistence of At Risk College Students: Assessment of Tinto's Retention Model and Institutional Mentoring Programs." This study is being conducted by Rick Zomer, the Associate Dean for Residence Life at Calvin College, and a doctoral student in the Higher Education Leadership doctoral program at Western Michigan University, under the supervision of Dr. Louann Bierlein Palmer, his dissertation committee chair.

The following information is being provided for you to determine if you wish to participate in this study. In addition, you are free to decide not to participate in this research or to withdraw at anytime without affecting your relationship with the researchers or Western Michigan University.

The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of students who were originally thought to be at risk of not completing their college degree and the things that might have assisted you to persist through 7 semesters at their institution. If you decide to participate you will be asked to participate in an interview lasting between 60-90 minutes. To help in your preparation, you will be then be given three questions for you to reflect upon prior to the interview. These interviews will be audio recorded to ensure the accuracy of the collected information and all interviews will be transcribed into a written record. You would be able to ask the interviewer to turn off the audio recording equipment at anytime during the interview.

Please do not hesitate to ask questions about the study before participating or while the research is taking place. I will be happy to share the results with you at the completion of the study. Ensuring the confidentiality of data is the norm in research. Neither your name will not be used in the dissertation dissemination process; rather it will only be known to the researcher. Pseudonyms will be used for participants (i.e. Student 1, Student 2, and so on) and general terms will be used in reporting results (i.e. “Five of the students commented...” “Two students reported that...” etc.).

Written transcripts will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the office of the researcher for one year following the completion of the study. The written transcripts will be stored on the campus of Western Michigan University for at least three years.

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The audio transcripts will be destroyed once the transcription process has been completed and a written record is produced and you are confident that the written transcript accurately reflects your comments during the interview. There are no other known risks/discomforts associated with participating in this study.

There are several expected benefits from participating in this study. They are: 1) information on the experience of students who have persisted at their institution despite what others thought might be potential barriers to success; 2) a better understanding of the impact of services and programs offered by institutions to their students; 3) the opportunity to gain further knowledge about factors that are thought to be indicators of student success or difficulty; and 4) the ability for the researcher to participate in a qualitative study.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Rick Zomer, the student investigator at (616) 526-6633 (office) or (616) 915-0442 (cell) or via email at rzomer@calvin.edu. You may also contact the Chair, The Western Michigan University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (269) 387-8293 or via email at hsirb@wmich.edu, or the Vice President for Research (269) 387-8298 if any questions or issues arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use by the researcher for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) and by Calvin College's Institutional Review Board as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in the study if the stamped date is older than one year.

A signed copy of this consent form will be given to you for your records.