Understanding the Experiences of Students Re-Admitted After Academic Suspension as Part of a University-Initiated Process: A Qualitative Study

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UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS RE-ADMITTED AFTER ACADEMIC SUSPENSION AS PART OF A UNIVERSITY-INITIATED PROCESS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

by

Gary L. Versalle

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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A Doctoral degree can never truly be considered the effort of a single individual, although a single individual receives the credit (and the hood).

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But those questions forced me to re-think every decision I made, which led to selecting the correct methodology for my study, and to a better understanding the entire process. Also, thank you to Dr. Randy Ott. Your willingness to share your knowledge of the Reclaim the W program and your comments and suggestions kept this study focused on the most important subject – the students.

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Gary L. Versalle
Student persistence and retention continues to be a major issue facing most institutions of higher education. With ever more diverse student populations, researchers studied a multitude of groups and sub-groups of students based on ethnicity, sex, socioeconomic status, or age. These studies looked at how these various student groups can be supported and retained. Students who returned to school after having been academically dismissed are one group which has been consistently underreported. Reentry practices remained largely unchanged and still require the student to initiate the process. This phenomenological study examined the experiences of students accepted into the Reclaim the W program, a unique program where the reentry process is university-initiated by inviting a number of dismissed students to reapply and potentially be reenrolled immediately with no requirement to sit out and wait to return. Themes identified from the data both confirmed existing knowledge and presented emerging themes on student retention and persistence. The confirming themes identified were Causes Leading to Academic Dismissal, Reactions to Academic Dismissal, and Factors Contributing to Subsequent Success. Themes presenting new knowledge were Reactions to an Invitation to Reapply and Reactions to No Waiting Period.

This study looked at giving these students a voice regarding their experiences in the hope of benefitting future students who face returning after dismissal. The positive
experiences of these students have implications for practice in improving retention and persistence processes aimed at returning academically dismissed students. The expansion of the Reclaim the W Program beyond the original target population shows how it has benefitted returning students at Western Michigan University. One recommendation is for institutions to look beyond standard student-initiated reentry programs and consider university-initiated programs, not limited to simple study skills classes offered over the summer. A recommendation for future research is to look at a wider range to institutions who have implemented institution-initiated programs.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Retention issues have been a concern of colleges and universities for over 50 years (Vail, 1966) and these issues remain a focus of university administrators today (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) as nearly every institution of higher education struggles with retention and persistence of students. The impact of a college education on a student’s life and future earnings is well documented. Students not earning at least a college certificate, are more likely to be unemployed, require social services, become incarcerated (Swail, 2004), or earn less than someone with post-secondary education (Hoell, 2006). Yet, despite overwhelming evidence that post-secondary education or training can have a major impact on a person’s life and earnings, only slightly more than 50% of all students who enroll in a college or university will graduate with a degree or certificate (Spradlin, Rutkowski, Burroughs, & Lang, 2010). Even with untold efforts and nearly universal focus by institutions and researchers, this number has not significantly changed. This same number was reported by Sexton (1965) over 50 years ago. During those years, the demographics of college students has changed considerably (Lucas, 2006). Yet the processes put in place to retain them remains the same.

Background of the Study

Identifying specific causes for lack of persistence can be difficult. Students may leave an institution for a variety of reasons. Many will voluntarily leave when they discover that college, in general, “is not for them” or they do not have the skills necessary to succeed (Maroney, 2011). They may not have been able or willing to integrate either academically or socially (Houle, 2013) nor develop a “sense of community” at an institution (Goertzen, Brewe, & Kramer, 2013,
Other students may voluntarily leave prior to completing their academics due to family, employment, or other external issues (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011).

While voluntary departure accounts for the majority of students leaving an institution, there is another group of students who leave before completing their education. However, this group does not leave voluntarily. These students are involuntarily dismissed or suspended by the institution. They may be dismissed for disciplinary reasons, such as behavior issues or academic dishonesty. More often, however, students are involuntarily dismissed for failing to meet academic standards as established by the institution (Hoyt & Winn, 2004).

Most institutions of higher education commit to identifying reasons that contribute to students’ poor college success in an effort to increase retention and persistence rates to improve student persistence and graduation rates. Regardless of the reasons, students leaving early can have devastating effects on the families, communities, the institutions themselves and, of course, the students. Academic failure can be a devastating blow to a student’s self-confidence and motivation to continue and succeed. Failure and leaving early - prior to earning a degree - can also become a severe financial burden as the students can, in effect, be penalized twice. First, they may have student loans that must be repaid after the student leaves the institution regardless of their completion status. Second, since those without a college degree typically earn less than college graduates (Hoell, 2006), those loans may be repaid with lower wages due to not having earned a degree. “Often, students have loans that demand repayment whether or not the student completes the degree…and usually on wages that are at the lower end of the earning spectrum” (pp. 29-30).

**Problem Statement**

Many decisions students make regarding whether to leave or remain at an institution are beyond the control of that institution. They are personal, such as family, financial, or
employment issues (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). These three concerns account for the
majority of dropout decisions by students with Spradlin, Rutkowski, Burroughs, and Lang
stating, “Up to 75 percent of all dropout decisions are non-academic in nature” (2010, p. vii).
However, the remaining 25 percent, which is still a substantial amount, is based on challenges
with academics or lack of academic success. In other words, a large percentage of student
departures is based on academic failure (Austin, 1992; Beal & Noel, 1980; Kopp & Shaw, 2015).
This reality can represent a substantial loss to the institution and create problems for the student,
their family and society in general.

One of the ways institutions can offset student loss is by readmitting previously
dismissed students, whether they left voluntarily or involuntarily. Since the distinction represents
different issues, it requires different solutions. Students who stop-out usually consider their
departure as temporary and have the intention to return (Tinto, 1993). However, students who
leave involuntarily may never return. They may view their dismissal as a sign of failure but may
also view it as an incentive to “grow up” and “mature” and then to return to complete their
studies (Osborne, 2013).

Most institutions have a readmission policy that allows students to apply to be reinstated
after having been out for a period of time. Some institutions may even require students to attend
another institution prior to re-applying (Osborne, 2013). In nearly all cases, the process for
readmission is initiated by the student, not the institution. The students are told to contact the
institution when they feel they are ready to return. However, there are a few institutions that
invite students to re-apply after an academic dismissal, requiring attendance in a summer
“bridge” program or study skills class to help with their studies (Berkovitz & O'Quin, 2006;
Prior research has examined students who applied after a waiting period before being readmitted. Himmelreich (1967), McDermott (2007), and Brady (2008), looked at the success of readmitted students. More recently, Carter (2013), Osborne (2013), and Reynolds (2013) all studied individual student experiences after being readmitted. These studies looked at students who had been academically dismissed and voluntarily applied for readmission after meeting institution criteria. These criteria normally consist of a waiting period, a student-initiated application, and proper paperwork, which frequently included an essay explaining the reasons they first entered academic probation, why they were not previously able to change their grades sufficiently to escape academic dismissal, and what will change if they are readmitted (Central Michigan University, 2016; DePauw University, 2016; James Madison University, 2016). While written requirements for readmission may vary slightly from institution to institution, a mandatory waiting period is almost always required, as is the notion that students will re-apply when they feel they are ready to return as opposed to being invited to return.

Osborne (2013) noted that “earlier studies such as Himmelreich (1967) had the assumption that more time away would allow for maturation which can help change a negative academic situation” (p. 27). However, Hall and Gahn (1994) found that those students who reapplied immediately and were granted an exception to return were the most motivated to earn their degree, thus addressing their academic situation. The students they studied were allowed to reapply and were re-admitted without the usual waiting period. Meador (2012) found that there was no statistical difference in student success between students who were immediately readmitted and those who had to wait for a specific period of time as “…in all cases examined, there were no significant results, indicating that the time a student was out of college after being academically dismissed played only a little role in their success when the student returned” (2012, pp. 112-3). Some suspended students do not want to wait to return but, instead, want to
return immediately (Hall & Gahn, 1994). The longer the potential waiting period, the more likely a student will not return; resulting in the institution losing enrollment and, possibly, tuition dollars while incurring additional costs. “Institutional costs of student attrition include the loss of future tuition, fees, and faculty lines, and increased student recruitment costs” (Hoell, 2006, p. 3).

These reasons are all viewed by institutions as justification to readmit students after they had been academically dismissed. Based on the studies highlighted above, researchers find students often persist after a successful appeal of academic dismissal. Other studies found how students fare when they return through a student-initiated process after sitting out for a mandatory waiting period. What this study shows is how students make meaning of their experiences if they are invited to return via an institution-initiated process to enroll in regular classes without sitting out for a mandatory waiting period.

**Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of traditional college students who were readmitted through an institution-initiated process. For the purposes of this study, traditional students are those who entered higher education in the fall immediately following their graduation from high school. They are under the age of 25, attend college full-time, are employed part-time, and have no dependents. After experiencing academic probation at the end of their first semester, and dismissal at the end of their first year in college, these students were successful after being invited to return. Each student passed all of their classes during their first semester back with a semester GPA of 2.0 or higher. Then these students enrolled for classes the following semester. This study also looked at how those experiences shaped the students’ decision to return and shape their future endeavors.
The following research questions guided this study: 1) *How do students’ experiences inform their decision to re-apply?* 2) *How do students interpret the invitation from the university to re-apply after academic dismissal?* 3) *How do students make meaning of no mandatory waiting period?* 4) *How do their experiences in the Reclaim the W program shape students’ goals?*

**Conceptual Framework**

Attribution theory of motivation will frame this study as it looks at student experiences and behaviors. Originally presented by Fritz Heider (1958), attribution theory looks at an individual’s perception of themselves and how they react during periods of success and/or failure. This was supported by Weiner (1985) in his study on motivation and emotion. “A motivational sequence is initiated by an outcome that individuals interpret as positive (goal attainment) or negative (nonattainment of the goal)” (p. 564). This was reiterated 20 years later by Martinko (2004) who found “there is substantial evidence that one’s causal analyses of events, particularly negative events…influence their subsequent reactions” (p. 229).

This can be especially beneficial when examining the events that influence behaviors of students. “Attribution theory provides an important method for examining and understanding motivation in academic settings” (Anderman & Anderman, 2009, p. 1). Attribution theory examines an individual’s beliefs about why certain events or outcomes occurred and the likelihood of the same result occurring again. For students, events that may influence behavior can occur inside or outside of the classroom. Being turned down for a date, not being interviewed for a job, failing an exam, or receiving a lower grade than expected on an assignment, can all be viewed as negative events, which could trigger a negative self-perception. Of course, the converse is also true. Getting the date, being hired for a new job, or passing an exam or class can
all be viewed as positive events by students. The students’ interpretation of these events can alter how they behave going forward.

Attribution theory describes how individuals describe the causes of failure and how those causes are interpreted. The causal explanations of their failures help explain their subsequent behaviors and reactions. If a student attributes their failure on a paper or class was due to a single cause such as a lack of effort or ability, the attribution will affect their subsequent behavior in similar circumstances or activities. Using attribution theory as the framework will help to identify the causes these students attribute to their academic dismissal and to understand their subsequent behavior.

Methods Overview

The research approach for this study will be descriptive phenomenology. A phenomenological approach is appropriate when the study “describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). While a descriptive phenomenology “does not try to go beyond the given…a descriptive analysis attempts to understand the meaning of the description based solely upon what is presented in the data” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 127). This approach will allow me to use the words of the students to describe their experiences and how they made meaning of them and responded to them without adding any of my own interpretation.

Data collection for this phenomenological study consisted of two formal semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using the 7-phase method of data analysis as described by Marshall and Rossman (2011). A purposeful sample of 7-10 students was the intended sample size. The sample was recruited from the population of 63 students who have successfully completed the program at any point during the four years of its existence and were still enrolled at the time of recruitment. After a rigorous recruiting campaign, the final sample consisted of
five students who were interviewed on the main campus of the university over a six-month period during 2017-18.

**Significance of Study**

The current focus on student persistence, retention, and success in higher education compels institutions to use every possible opportunity to assist students in these endeavors. By readmitting students who had previously failed academically, colleges and universities are encouraging those students to try again and, possibly, succeed (Hoell, 2006). Although there are signs that research into this area is changing, readmitted students have typically been studied as a group, not as individual students (Houle, 2013).

In recent years, qualitative studies have looked at the experiences of students readmitted after academic dismissal as part of a standard student-initiated process (Carter, 2013; Osborne, 2013; Suchan, 2016). Other students have examined the motivation of students who have returned to class through the normal student-initiated process (Houle, 2013). Other researchers have examined the success of these students after returning through a student-imitated process (Brady, 2008; Meador, 2012). Each of these studies has looked at students readmitted through normal student-initiated processes.

The only studies researching students admitted or readmitted through an institution-initiated process looked at entering first-year students invited to attend summer bridge classes or readmitted students invited to participate in summer study skills programs (Lonn, Aguilar, & Teasley, 2015; Slade, Eatmon, Staley, & Dixon, 2015; Tomasko, Ridgway, Waller, & Olesik, 2016). No studies have looked at students readmitted to normal enrollment through an institution-initiated process. This study adds to literature on students readmitted after academic dismissal and helps to improve practice by looking at student experiences with a new approach to improving student persistence and retention.
Summary

It is important to remember that students are not merely numbers, but individuals. Each has lived a unique set of experiences while sharing similar experiences. I wanted to understand the individuals beyond their student ID numbers and GPA’s. During this study I talked with, and listened to, students who have experienced the highs and lows of academia: their initial college acceptance, then academic probation followed by academic dismissal, and subsequent re-admission and success allowing them to persist. By speaking with, and listening to individual students, I have attempted to personalize the issues of academic dismissal policies and re-admission.

This study will help institutions to better understand the students as these institutions prepare their programs of student support, either for students who go on academic probation, or those who are academically dismissed and readmitted. This is important to the persistence and retention agendas of higher education institution because “interruptions in enrollment can also reduce one’s chances of earning a degree” (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007, p. 41).

Ultimately, my intent was that the findings would help institutions better understand students who have been academically dismissed. “Within the larger group of students who drop out of college, students who are involuntarily dismissed through temporary suspension as a result of unsatisfactory academic performance are unique within higher education” (Houle, 2013, p. 11). Yet many of these students possess the skills necessary to succeed.

This study is organized into six chapters. Chapter I presents the background and conceptual framework, with the purpose statement, problem statement, significance of the study, and the research questions. Chapter II reviews the literature covering issues of persistence, academic probation, suspension and readmission policies in higher education. Additionally, the
review includes a discussion of Weiner’s Attribution Theory, focusing specifically on how attributions apply to education. Chapter III presents a discussion of the descriptive phenomenological methodology being used. In an effort to personalize the different students, Chapter IV presents individual life stories. In chapter V, there is an overview of the findings and a description of how the data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed to arrive at confirming and emergent themes. Chapter VI is a discussion of those findings with limitations and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

This descriptive phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of traditional college students who were readmitted after academic dismissal through an institution-initiated process in which they were invited by the university to re-apply and enroll in regular classes without the typical waiting period. This chapter reviews the literature on post-secondary student persistence, as well as university retention practices and processes, the reasons students leave institutions of higher education, and the impacts leaving can have on students, their families, the institution, and society. The review will further look at readmission of students who have previously left an institution as a method used by higher education of increasing the students’ persistence rates. As this study focuses on students who left involuntarily due to academic failure leading to academic dismissal, this review concentrates on the experiences and development of students who had been academically dismissed and then applied for readmission under traditional, student-initiated readmission policies and processes. The sparse literature on students who were readmitted under an institution-initiated process is also reviewed. Since attribution theory of motivation was used as a framework to support the present study, this review also looked at Heider’s (1958) original work defining the causal dimension of locus of control and whether the attribution is viewed as internal or external. This continued with Weiner’s expansion (1972, 1979, 1985, 2010) adding two additional dimensions of stability and controllability. The chapter closes with a focus on how attribution theory is applied, and is particularly relevant to education.
Persistence and Retention

Student persistence and university retention rates are major concerns of virtually every institution of higher education today (Ost, Pan, & Webber, 2016) and have been a concern for over 50 years (Beal & Noel, 1980; Hoyt & Winn, 2004; Jensen, 2011; Noel, 1976; Tinto, 1993; Vail, 1966; Wang & Pilarzyk, 2009). There are multiple reasons for this focus. Primarily, success in college tends to lead to success after college; success after college benefits the individual and society as a whole. Workers with a college degree not only average between 33% more (with an associate degree) and 75% more (with a bachelor’s degree) lifetime income over those without a college degree, they also face lower unemployment rates (Abbe, 2009; Larson, 2014). This will continue to be true in most industries, but will be increasingly important in manufacturing, the most innovative sector of the economy, and one that “continues to shift toward advanced production methods” (Klobuchar, 2013, p. 3). These advanced production methods require training beyond high school as businesses work to stay competitive in the global marketplace (Maroney, 2011). By extension, workers must advance to remain competitive.

Toward this end, student support services remain a central activity of colleges and universities in an effort to increase student persistence and university retention rates. Today’s students “are supported by the largest number and variety of support programs…than ever before in the history of education in the United States” (Hoell, 2006, p. 18). Nichols (2010) and Jensen (2011) provided numerous examples of models of retention on which many of these programs are built. These included models proposed by Tinto (1975), one of the most widely accepted, Aitken (1982), Bean and Metzer (1985), and Braxton and Lee (2005).

Much of the need for the variety of programs is due to the current and increasing diversity of today’s college student. However, this has not always been the case. Beginning in 1636, when Harvard was founded, through the mid-1700’s and the establishment of the
remaining eight colonial colleges, advanced education was only for “men of culture and refinement” (Lucas, 2006, p. 104). This term referred to young, mid-to-late teen, and wealthy white males as they were intended to fulfill the college mission of preparing civic and religious leaders. This began to change in the mid-1800’s when Oberlin accepted women as students and the change continued as colleges for African-Americans began to open in the mid- to late-1800’s (Lucas, 2006). Changes in the make-up of college students continues to this day. In 1970, the typical college student was male (55%), Caucasian (84.3%), and 19-years-old or under (33.1%) with only 27.8% of students being 25 or older. This 19-year-old male Caucasian was the traditional student. However, today’s students are increasingly non-traditional. They are older, with nearly 41% over the age of 25, while those aged 19 and under only account for 19.5%. They are also more likely to be female (57%) and less likely to be Caucasian than they once were. Caucasian students now account for just 57.6% of student populations, with African-American students (14.1%), Hispanic students (17.3%) and Asian students (6.8%) making up most of the remaining 42% (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016). This has led to the need for a greater variety of programs to support this diverse make-up of students (Hoell, 2006).

Institutions have many programs and processes used to support students and their persistence. Most institutions provide tutoring for students struggling or requiring assistance in math, reading or English, or in many cases, a combination of these subjects. Advising, both general and focused on “at risk” students, provides direction and, frequently, just someone for students to talk to (Nichols, 2010). Often, special classes provide focused instruction. Many universities offer a separate and complete student support department, headed by a support coordinator, to organize programs and to identify students who may, or do, need help. Some universities offer student success coaches to assist students who are in, or may be heading into, trouble (Farrell, 2007). Frequently, these students are identified using early warning indicators.
that identify students who may be struggling by looking for indicators of potential problems such as missed readings, excess absences, and low exam scores (You, 2016). By providing early warning signs of potential problems, these indicators can allow institutions to offer support to students before their struggles become overwhelming (Pleskac, Keeney, Merritt, Schmitt, & Oswald, 2011).

Yet despite this level of support, only slightly more than 50% of all students who enroll in a college or university will be retained by that institution and persist to graduation with a degree or certificate (Pleskac, Keeney, Merritt, Schmitt, & Oswald, 2011; Spradlin, Rutkowski, Burroughs, & Lang, 2010). Suchan (2016) reported the national average for bachelor’s degree completion within 5 years was 49.5% at four-year public colleges and universities, while just over 55% of students did so within 6 years. This suggests that there are still opportunities to be found in methods and programs that support student retention by looking at new and innovative programs designed to address the needs of the diverse demographics of today’s college student population. One such method is looking at institution-initiated reentry programs opposed to the traditional student-initiated programs.

**Impact of a Student Leaving**

There are several reasons for focusing on student retention, one of which is the wide-ranging impact of students leaving an institution before completing educational goals. Student departure can have both an immediate effect as well as a long-term impact on the student’s finances. The most immediate is loss of student loans and the repayment of those loans that must begin when they leave, regardless of whether or not they have completed their studies. These loans, frequently used by students for living expenses beyond tuition, books, and fees, are often repaid with incomes that are usually at the lower end of the pay scales (Hoell, 2006). Over time, individuals without a high school diploma, or at least a postsecondary certificate, are more likely
to be un- or under-employed, become incarcerated, or to require the benefits of social services (Swail, 2004). This is because “there is clear evidence that college graduates earn more money, have access to more opportunity, and get the jobs that require a college degree” (Hoell, 2006, p. 26). In today’s world, even many hourly manufacturing jobs require an education or skills beyond basic high school. More and more manufacturing jobs are becoming technologically based and using robots in place of human workers. However, those robots require human intervention to program or adjust them to perform their tasks. Typically, this requires mathematics beyond simple algebra (Klobuchar, 2013).

Students’ departing college before they complete a certificate or degree has a negative impact on the institution, as well. The effect of decreased student retention rates on the institution may include lost tuition and lost indirect income in other areas.

It is also argued that an institution loses on ancillary revenues—those that come from students living on or relating to the campus. These would include bookstore revenues, on campus restaurants and entertainment, residence hall fees, and even lost financial aid revenue (Swail, 2004, p. 10).

Early student departure may result in excess or unused infrastructure and staffing, or even potential loss of reputation. The loss of reputation can lead to lower future enrollment or applications, leading to increased recruiting costs, while further loss of reputation may lead to an avoidance of the institution by potential faculty or students.

Although the impacts to the student and the institution have been broadly studied and reported, less studied is the impact felt beyond the student and the institution. A college education, or lack of education can impact the student’s family, the local community and potential employers (Smith & Cumpton, 2013) and, in an even wider reach, the nation (Gamson, 1991). The impact to the local community, for example, is two-fold. Swail (2004) posits that
immediately there is “a loss to local establishments that benefit from students” (p. 10). Long-term, there can be an increased use of social services, direct loss of wages, which would result in fewer taxes paid, as well as fewer purchases including housing, transportation, clothing and other purchases related to an individual or family life (Swail, 2004).

To reduce the loss of students, colleges and universities have developed multiple programs and processes to retain students and lower the number who leave. Whether these programs begin before a student even attends one class, as in the case of summer bridge programs, or after they’ve been placed on academic probation or reinstated after academic dismissal, such as the Back on Track support program at the University of San Francisco, institutions of higher education are showing an intensified commitment to increasing student retention and persistence.

Why Students Leave

Students leave institutions for a wide variety of reasons, but leaving falls into one of only two broad categories – either they leave voluntarily, or they leave involuntarily. This is a critical differentiation. Bray, Braxton, and Anna (1999) noted that, in general, students who fail to achieve social integration depart on a voluntary basis, while students who fail to achieve academic integration depart on an involuntary basis. Tinto (1993) noted that “institutions often make the unwarranted and quite mistaken judgment that all student departures can be equally well treated by a single policy action…since the roots of differing forms of departure are distinct in nature, the preventive actions institutions take to treat those behaviors must also be distinct” (p. 140). Much of the research on students who leave does not attempt to separate the two. Yet the reasons for students leaving an institution vary considerably based on whether they chose to simply leave that specific institution and enter a new and different institution, or they plan to leave higher education altogether. Tinto (1993) identified these choices as institutional or system
departures. Identifying the reasons and the intent behind student departures, allow institutions to develop programs to address specific reasons.

**Voluntary Departure from Higher Education**

Some students who voluntarily leave an institution may actually choose to leave higher education completely, what Tinto (1993) refers to as “system departure” (p. 8). They may leave early due to family, employment or other external issues beyond their control or to which they give a higher priority (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Some will leave when they discover that college, in general, “is not for them” or feel they do not have the skills necessary to succeed (Maroney, 2011). They may find the effort required to be successful in college is not worth it for them or their plans for the future (Tinto, 1993).

Many of these students may have found they were underprepared and not ready for the rigor of higher education compared to the effort required in secondary education. Bailey (2009) found that universities are facing increasing rates of underprepared students. As many as 60% of incoming first year students need to take one or more remedial or developmental classes to bring their skills up to the level required for the rigor of higher education (Bailey, 2009; Tierney & Garcia, 2011). Testing has shown that these students possess gaps in the skills necessary to succeed, such as study habits, time management or basic academic skills. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) suggest that being under-prepared can lead to a loss of “academic self-confidence” (p. 220) as students move from high school to higher education. This is exacerbated when a student feels they do not possess the necessary skills to succeed. The cause for this can be due to lack of effort on the part of the individual, or it may be due to lack of rigor at the secondary institution. Carlisle (2015) found that students who did not attend a high school with a “college-going climate” (p. 26) may not look at attending college as a normal path after high
school graduation. Obviously, there can be multiple benefits to being in a college-going climate. One definite advantage would be the development of exploration which involves “considering and evaluating options when determining one’s direction in life” (Carlisle, 2015, p. 27). This exploration could include academic exploration and a commitment leading to an academic identity, which includes the student’s decision whether to attend college and how strongly they feel committed to that decision (Carlisle, 2015).

Another potential problem that could lead a student to choose to leave higher education altogether is the phenomenon of imposter syndrome. Originally identified by Clance and Imes (1978) in high-performing females, imposter syndrome causes a person to feel they may not belong in the position they hold and they worry that someone will discover “they are…intellectual imposters” (p. 242) and do not have the expected ability. King and Cooley (1995) described imposter syndrome in college students as “an intense feeling of intellectual inauthenticity,” believing any success is not deserved and future successes are unlikely (p. 304).

Kumar and Jagacinski (2006) posited that imposters would be prone to adapt ability-oriented goals, since they tend to compare their abilities to someone else. They found that “among men, imposter fears were primarily associated with ability-avoid goals” while “among women, imposter fears were positively related to ability-approach goals” (p. 155). Ability-avoid goals are shown by avoiding any tasks that could demonstrate lack of ability, especially when compared to others. In contrast, ability-approach goals are exhibited by striving to out-perform others.

The choice of goals adapted is determined by how the individual defines competence or ability. If they define their competence as individual skill, they will look to master a skill or task. However, if they use a normative standard, comparing themselves to others, they will adapt ability-approach goals in an attempt to out-do others. These beliefs when held by students can
lead to specific behaviors, including class failure or leaving higher education to avoid being discovered as not possessing required skills or being intellectually inferior (King & Cooley, 1995).

**Voluntary Departure from an Institution**

Students may voluntarily leave a specific institution, which Tinto (1993) called “institutional departure” (p. 8), planning to enter a different institution if they find that a particular institution is not a good fit for them. They may feel they do not quite “fit in” and may not develop a “sense of community” at an institution (Goertzen, Brewe, & Kramer, 2013, p. 30). So, they fail to integrate into the institution’s social structure, potentially leading to the isolation that can lead to academic failure (Tinto, 1993).

However, other students may fit in the social structure of a specific institution, but do not become engaged with educationally effective activities. Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges and Hayek (2011) identified engagement in these activities as “a key factor to whether [students] will survive and thrive in college” (p. 10). Earlier, Kuh, Laird and Umbach (2004) had identified an academically rigorous curriculum, challenging writing assignments, team-based assignments, and oral presentations as some examples of educationally effective activities. According to Kuh et al. (2011), the greater the engagement, the greater the likelihood of a student persisting. Conversely, disengagement may cause a student to leave and seek a different institution or to leave higher education altogether.

Yet, simply saying a student failed to integrate or become sufficiently engaged does not always tell a student’s complete story. They may feel a strong sense of identity with a specific group, which becomes their “reference group” as they develop an identity. Torres, Howard-Hamilton, and Cooper (2011) defined reference groups as “the social groups persons interact with to make meaning of who they are as social beings” (p. 42). Integration or a sense of
belonging to these groups is context- and domain-specific (Strayhorn, 2016). A student who identifies with multiple groups may successfully integrate into one group while failing to integrate into another. For example, a student may integrate into a specific social-identity group (racial, sexuality, gender), while failing to integrate into academics or to become part of an academic-driven group.

Other groups may have a misdirected focus. For example, a group’s social activities may take precedence over academic activities. As part of such a group, an individual student may feel a strong sense of community socially, yet find or believe they have little autonomy or independence if they feel strongly influenced by that group’s “choices or attitudes, values and behaviors” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 222). If the group does not have an academic focus, the student may accept such behavior as the norm.

**Involuntary Departure from an Institution**

Research has shown that academic dismissal accounts for approximately 25% of all students who leave an institution (Carter, 2013; Tinto, 1993). Departure of students who leave due to academic dismissal are considered involuntary. Involuntary departures occur when the student is not permitted by the institution to return or reenroll. This can be a substantial number. For an institution with an 70% retention rate, they lose 30% of their students each year. If 25% of those are involuntary, that means the institution loses approximately 8% of their student body involuntarily each year. In rare occasions, this happens for reasons of discipline, such as student violence or misbehavior (Hoyt & Winn, 2004). The primary reason students leave involuntarily is academic suspension or dismissal due to academic failure, defined as a failure to show academic progress, or due to possessing a low cumulative grade point average (CGPA) (Hoell, 2006; Houle, 2013; Hoyt & Winn, 2004).
Academic Dismissal

Although there may be other potential signs of problems, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) suggest that college grades are the single best predictors of student success, including persistence and degree completion. As support of this, the universally accepted threshold for meeting undergraduate academic standards at four-year institutions and two-year community colleges is a 2.00 CGPA on a 4-point scale (Kopp & Shaw, 2016). Holding a CGPA below 2.00 at the end of a semester at most institutions will mean a student will find themselves on academic probation. However, there are exceptions. For example, at Radford University (2018) and Central Michigan University (2018), any new full-time student who earns a GPA of less the 1.00 at the end of their first term, is automatically suspended, skipping probation. Two other exceptions are Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences (2016) and University of Alaska-Fairbanks (2016). These institutions may place a student on academic warning prior to probation. Undergraduates at either institution who earn a semester GPA of less than 2.00 for the first time will be placed on academic warning. Students on academic warning who earn a second semester GPA of less than 2.00 will be placed on academic probation regardless of CGPA.

While on probation, some institutions require students to earn a semester GPA higher than the required CGPA. For example, probationary students at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro must earn a 2.30 GPA every term until their CGPA reaches or exceeds 2.0 (The University of North Carolina Greensboro, 2013). However, if a student has a CGPA below 2.0 and fails to raise it above 2.0 by the end of the following term, or fails to show academic progress by not successfully completing sufficient classes at an acceptable level, they will normally be academically dismissed or suspended, which is considered academic failure (Nelson, 2009).
Many institutions have an appeal process by which suspended or dismissed students can contest their suspension. In cases where there were extenuating circumstances, the student’s appeal may be approved and the suspension may be overridden, allowing the student to enroll and return to classes without waiting the mandatory waiting period. However, since their CGPA was below 2.0, they will typically remain on probation until their CGPA reaches the 2.0 threshold (Regents of the University of Michigan, 2018).

Appeals are not guaranteed or automatic (DePauw University, 2016; James Madison University, 2018). In many cases, the appeal may be denied upholding the original suspension requiring the student to leave the institution. If a student’s appeal is not successful, or if they should elect not to appeal and accept the suspension, they need to initiate the process at a later date if they wish to return. However, they can only apply and be considered for readmission after waiting for a required length or time or number of semesters, as specified by the institution. In other words, it is up to the student to decide when they are ready to return and to petition the institution for readmission.

**Reasons Students Return**

Research has shown there can be as many reasons as there are students to explain what motivates students to return after academic failure. But typically, those reasons can be reduced to a few common themes, including embarrassment or shame from their original dismissal with new-found support providing increased confidence (Houle, 2013), or life transition issues or career goals (Austin, 1992; Lucas & Hunt, 2001, 2002; Suchan, 2016).

Overcoming embarrassment or shame is a major reason students return. For all students, the emotional response to being placed on academic suspension was, as would be expected, negative (Houle, 2013). In her study of academic suspension and student readjustment, Houle found that students initially may have been too embarrassed to tell family and friends that they
failed in their education goals or that they were dismissed by the institution, feeling that sharing this experience with peers or friends would be too difficult. Most of the participants were very limited with whom they shared their academic difficulties, very seldom sharing their difficulties with their peers. However, all the participants found that it was with family they could more easily confide and look to for support.

This feeling may have begun when they were placed on probation prior to being dismissed and continued through dismissal and beyond. However, once suspended, the student may have discovered support they previously did not know existed. In his landmark study of student success after returning from academic dismissal, Austin (1992) reported that returning “successful students enjoyed a greater proportion of support from their family and friends” (p. 95). Such support may have increased due to the suspension or simply from the fact the students shared their experiences. Whichever the case, increased or newly discovered support is another strong reason students return after suspension, possibly succeeding where they had failed previously. This finding has been corroborated in the work of Carter (2013), Houle (2013), and Reynolds (2013) in their studies of students successfully returning after previous academic dismissal. In each study, the support of family and friends was listed as a motivating factor in their return to school.

Sharing their experience with family, while difficult, can help individuals overcome the shame they originally felt and give them the increased confidence to return. This is because once they share their failure, they may learn of others who faced similar experience. This may have led to a “if they can do it, I can do it” determination (Austin, 1992), causing students to be motivated by the knowledge that others have been able to return and be successful.

Life transition issues, especially career goals for older students, is another major reason students return. Austin (1992) found successful returning students “were much more apt to have
a ‘Career Oriented desire,’ especially as it related to advancement in their current career” (p. 93). This was supported by Lucas and Hunt (2002) who also found that a career focus was a strong motivator for older students, while first-year students were more intent on building self-esteem. Houle (2013) also reported suspended students found the importance of a college education became clearer as a result of being in the world of work while on academic suspension, where they came to realize that their future earning power and job-satisfaction were limited without a college degree. This “real world” realization gave them motivation to return to college (pp. 68-9).

Students return to higher education after academic dismissal for a multitude of reasons. Whether they feel new support from family and friends, or are facing life transitional issues, they feel motivated to return and succeed.

**Readmission Processes**

Institutions do not re-admit students believing those students will fail academically. By re-admitting a student previously dismissed for academic failure, an institution is implying that they believe the student can succeed if given a second chance. Importantly, institutions have a primary goal of providing an education to students. To ensure success in this goal, institutions have implemented academic standards that determine if students are allowed to continue or not.

As part of their retention and persistence efforts, most colleges and universities re-admit students who have left, whether that leaving was voluntary or involuntary. While an institution may require or recommend a student to attend a second institution to raise their GPA to an acceptable level (California State University Northridge, 2016; Central Michigan University, 2018; Colorado State University, 2015), they may also require the dismissed student to create an academic success plan as part of the readmission process (DePauw University, 2016; Rice University - Office of Academic Advising, 2016). Also, they may require a waiting period longer
than a single academic term before a student is allowed to reapply (Florida State University, 2016; Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne, 2015; Kent State University, 2013). However, the one constant in current readmission policies is that they are student-initiated. The student is expected to reapply when they feel they are ready.

**Student-Initiated Processes for Readmission**

The typical process for re-admitting students who have been academically suspended consist of similar steps regardless of the institution. In some cases, students are required attend a second institution to take classes and raise their GPA to acceptable levels. In other cases, a student decides to attend a second institution in an effort to raise their GPA. However, in nearly all cases there is a waiting period between the time a student is dismissed and when they are allowed to reapply to the institution for re-admittance. This waiting period is justified by “the assumption that more time away would allow for maturation, which can help change a negative academic situation” (Osborne, 2013, p. 27). This waiting period can also give the student an opportunity to fix or change the circumstances that caused them to fail academically. Some of these changes can include adding or refining necessary skills, such as time management and study skills (DePauw University, 2016).

The period students must wait can vary and is not always defined in terms of time. For example, at the University of Arizona, no specific time period is mentioned. But before they can reapply, the student must present “evidence that underlying conditions have materially improved and that he or she is now capable of academic success” (2015). At the University of Alaska Fairbanks (2016), a suspended student may be allowed to remain at the university without sitting out for the waiting period, but only as a non-degree seeking student, and they are only allowed to take a limited number of credit hours. These students are also ineligible for most forms of financial aid. To be considered for readmission, or in the case of continuing non-degree students,
the students must repeat previously failed courses and achieve a CGPA of 2.0 or higher. They must also complete additional courses with a GPA of 2.0 or higher at UAF or at another regionally accredited institution.

However, most institutions provide specific time frames a student must remain away from the institution before they can reapply and be considered for readmission (Florida State University, 2016; Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne, 2015; Kent State University, 2013). Where a specific waiting period is defined, the minimum time students must sit out is frequently one academic term, identified as fall or winter/spring, and does not generally include the summer term. The academic catalog for Iowa State University (2018) tells students they “can only be reinstated after at least one academic semester has elapsed since they were academically dismissed. The summer session is not a semester for the purpose of being out of school one semester.”

An example of a typical waiting period can be found on the website of Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) where they notify potentially returning students, “Students dismissed for the first time must sit out for a minimum of one regular (fall or spring) semester” (The Trustees of Indiana University, 2018). However, the wait can extend up to an academic year or longer. A case of an even longer waiting period is specified by Florida State University. Their website informs academically dismissed students they can only be readmitted if they “have been absent for two or more consecutive semesters, including summer” (2016). In this case, the semesters are not defined as being academic or summer. This means a student can sit out fall/winter, winter/summer or summer/fall. This is determined by the timing of their suspension. However, in an example of a longer waiting period, students from Wright State University are not permitted to enroll for any courses at the university for a full calendar year, or three consecutive semesters, including summer (2015).
Once a student sits out for the required waiting period, the next step is usually to complete an application for readmission and to submit an essay or reentry letter explaining what events or causes led to their academic failure, and what the student will change if they are allowed to return. Further requirements may include letters of support from family, friends, employers, faculty from other institutions, or faculty and advisors from the suspending institution (DePauw University, 2016). Some institutions also require a student to present an academic plan as part of their readmission process. For example, at Rice University (2016), a student must present an academic plan that “reflects their personal and educational goals, clarifies priorities, and makes the most of an undergraduate experience.” After their paperwork is completed and received by the institution, the students may also be interviewed by the institution’s counseling or advising personnel, or specialized readmission committee before being considered for re-admission (Central Michigan University, 2018).

After a student is re-admitted, they are generally considered to still be on probation as their CGPA will still be below the accepted threshold. They may be required to attend support classes or meet with an advisor on a regular basis. One example of a support class is part of a “program (that) engages formerly suspended students to discover strengths and make informed decisions that will assist in accomplishing academic, career, and life goals” (The University of North Carolina Greensboro, 2013). In some cases, returning students may be required to repeat earlier classes, especially if they keep their same major. However, they may be limited to specific classes while on probation or only allowed to take a restricted number of credit hours, (The University of Arizona, 2015). In some cases, they may be required to change their major. Whatever the case, these requirements are intended to help and encourage returning students to persist and succeed.
In Hoell’s (2006) qualitative study of students “who had experienced academic difficulty, academic suspension and reinstatement, and a subsequent return to good academic standing” (p. 83) she examined the experiences of student success after academic dismissal and found that readmitted students who had previously experienced the requirements, rigor, and distractions of higher education had a better understanding of what to expect when they returned. She noted that many returned with “the old habits left behind (and which) were replaced with new ones that included more focused study habits, closer contact with instructors, and better class attendance” (p. 163). Similarly, in Carter’s (2013) study of community college transfer students returning from academic dismissal at a four year research university, one student felt so different toward his education after being re-admitted that he reported “…it’d just kill me if I didn’t get a degree now” (p. 154).

Encouraging readmitted students to succeed is not a new concept. Himmelreich (1967) studied readmitted students’ achievement nearly 50 years ago. Twenty years later, Leppel (1984) wrote about the returning students’ academic performance, and Santa Rita, Jr. (1998) studied the characteristics that made readmitted students successful. While the success of academically dismissed students who return has been researched in depth quantitatively over the last twenty years (Austin, 1992; Beck, 1996; Hall & Gahn, 1994; Hoell, 2006; Liberto, 2002; Suchan, 2016), there is a lack of qualitative research addressing the experiences of students who were reinstated after academic dismissal (Reynolds, 2013).

**Institution-Initiated Processes for Readmission**

Inviting students to return to an institution after academic dismissal is not a new nor a unique concept. However, the invitations are rare and usually limited to an invitation to attend summer bridge or study skills classes (Berkovitz & O'Quin, 2006; Michael Getty, personal communication, 2016). While the intent of these classes is to improve students’ academic
performance and increase persistence and retention, post-dismissal bridge classes are not the same as pre-enrollment summer orientation (bridge) classes, which have different goals. The pre-enrollment orientation classes are generally intended to offer entering freshmen an exposure to academic and residential experiences, allowing them to gain familiarity with the campus and, possibly, faculty and staff (Lonn, Aguilar, & Teasley, 2015; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Slade, Eatmon, Staley, & Dixon, 2015;). Post-dismissal classes offer learning in skills required for success in higher education, such as study skills, academic planning, identifying campus support resources, and time management (Boyd, et al., 1994; Reynolds, 2013; University of San Francisco, 2018).

As of 1992, University of Maryland, College Park students returning after academic dismissal have been offered the opportunity to attend a study skills class over the summer (Boyd et al., 1994). The skills taught were felt to be useful before and, if the students were re-admitted, after readmission. This class focused on skills such as goal setting, listening, and textbook mastery. Re-admission was not guaranteed, but the invitation suggested that successful completion would improve their chances. While Boyd noted that not all students were admitted after the summer skills class, there was significant improvement in the students’ persistence among those who were admitted. The university found that the study skills program produced statistically significant differences in retention, between the dismissed transfer students seeking reinstatement who participated in the program and those who did not participate. These findings suggested that further replication should involve intensified efforts to attract dismissed students to this kind of summer program (p. 6). Bridge and study skills classes usually have unique goals depending on whether they are targeted toward incoming freshmen or returning students after academic dismissal. They are unusual in that they are based on an institution-initiated process. In
addition, they have one other commonality, they are offered in the summer outside of the traditional academic semester.

**Reclaim the W**

Students in the present study had been academically dismissed then invited to participate in a reenrollment program that was university-initiated. However, this program was offered during the standard fall academic semester, not during summer, allowing students to participate while being enrolled in “regular” academic classes. This program extended beyond a simple summer bridge, or study-skills, class. Per the university’s Registrar webpage (2015):

This program is designed to reenroll first year students that have been dismissed at the end of their second semester with the intent to provide a second chance, specifically for those students who had struggled academically. As part of the program, student would take an intrusive support class as part of their regular schedule of classes, not as a summer class.

**History and Purpose of Reclaim the W**

Reclaim the W was introduced in 2014 as a collaborative effort between two university departments at Western Michigan University -- the Center for Academic Success Programs (CASP) and the Registrar’s Office. This program provides additional structure and assistance to allow readmitted students to continue their programs of study after their previous academic dismissal. Students admitted as part of Reclaim the W are shown how to take ownership in their education and, with additional supports, have potential to graduate from the university.

Tinto (1993) noted that “the largest proportion of institutional leaving occurs during the first year” (p. 14). With this in mind, Reclaim the W originally targeted first-year students who had been dismissed at the end of their second (spring) semester with a CGPA between 1.00 and 1.99. In 2016, that target was expanded to include transfer students whose CGPA also falls
within this range. The invitation to reapply is sent to students about 14 days after the dismissal letter. After receiving the university’s invitation, students may apply for this program by submitting an application and essay, and after receiving an advisor recommendation.

**Screening Process and Acceptance**

Following the spring semester, the Director of CASP receives and reviews the list of all students who were academically dismissed at the end of that semester. First-year students with a CGPA below 1.00 are automatically removed from consideration. Then, using an additional set of criteria which includes grades earned in basic classes like math and English, grades earned in any ‘core’ classes of the student’s declared major, any jobs the student may have held, and whether they missed or kept appointments with their advisors, the Director then removes certain other students leaving a reduced list of potential candidates. This reduced list is then forwarded to student advisors who provide additional screening, possibly removing additional students who have had issues with attendance, submitting assignments, and similar difficulties. The further reduced list is returned to the Director of CASP who works with the Registrar’s office to send out the program invitations.

Students who accept the invitation, then submit an application and essay. These are reviewed by the Director. Those whose application and essay are approved are accepted into the program and are sent a letter notifying them of their acceptance into the program.

As part of their acceptance into the Reclaim the W program, students must agree to the following conditions (Registrar, 2016):

- Attend an orientation session before the semester begins
- Register for no more than 15 credit hours including the recovery class
- Authorize the University to make course (schedule) adjustments on their behalf
- Meet with a college advisor at least twice during the semester
- Pass the Academic Recovery and all other courses the semester they return
- Earn a semester GPA of 2.00 or higher

Understanding the experience of the students who have participated in this program will add to the literature on students reinstated after academic dismissal. By understanding these experiences and framing that understanding in attribution theory, the findings can contribute to changes in practice and processes leading to increased persistence and improve student retention.

**Attribution Theory**

Attribution theory states that individuals seek to identify causes for their successes and failures (Heider, 1958; Weiner & Kukla, 1970). Attributions are an individual’s ideas of justification of these outcomes. These thoughts can then shape or determine their future actions and behaviors (Abramson, Garber, & Seligman, 1980; Cortes Suarez, 2004; Weiner & Litman-Adizes, 1980).

Heider (1958) provided the groundwork for application of attributions within the field of social psychology in his seminal work *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relationships*. Later, Weiner (1972), influenced by Heider, expanded on that groundwork and was one of the first to extend this theory to academic achievement. Later, focusing on understanding the causes students attribute to their successes and failures in the academic setting, Weiner (1985) presented a strong argument regarding the link between attributions and achievement. Since student achievement is a major part of persistence, it is critical to understand how students react to their academic performance, either positively or negatively (Houle, 2013) and to what they attribute their achievement.

**Heider’s Attribution Theory**

The study of attributions was first proposed by Heider (1958) in his analysis of the causal structure of actions. Heider proposed “causal description in perception” (1958, p. 23) as a way of
looking at, or analyzing, phenomenal description, or how a person experiences interaction with their environment. He believed these interactions could be identified, described, and understood by someone using a phenomenological approach to see or feel the experience of another through their perceptions.

Using this causal analysis, Heider (1958) posited that individuals search for causes as a means of predicting behavior. He proposed two “fundamental concepts” (p. 16) related to behavior: “can” and “try.” The concept of can is closely tied to ability, which impacts our prediction of future behavior by the perception of whether a person can, or cannot, accomplish something. The closely related concept of try is tied to effort, or a prediction that a person will or will not try or succeed at some task. These concepts can allow us to make predictions of ourselves or others. A person with a high level of both can and try will give a much different prediction, higher likelihood of success, than a person with a low level of either or both, which would more likely lead to a prediction of failure.

The concepts of can and try, or more accurately, ability and effort, were categorized by Heider (1958) as personal. Together he termed them as an “effective personal force” (p. 83) showing the internal traits of personal causality. However, there is a second or environmental force that also impacts behavior and outcomes. Effective environmental force consists of factors external to the individual, such as task difficulty, or simply luck, which he termed as “variable environmental factors” (p. 91). These were viewed as an internal/external dimension for understanding causality.

**Weiner’s Model of Attribution Theory**

Expanding on Heider’s internal/external locus as a valid dimension of cause, Weiner et al. (1972) suggested that some internal causes, such as ability or aptitude, remained stable and constant, while others, such as effort, focus or mood, could fluctuate and be unstable. They
reasoned that fluctuation or stability was a valid second dimension of causality. Rosenbaum (1972) suggested that while some causes can be internal and unstable, they can be controlled. As an example, more effort could be put forth to complete or accomplish a task. Originally identified by Heider (1958), this dimension was later integrated into achievement theory by Rosenbaum (1972) and labeled *intentionality*, citing examples such as effort or instructor bias as intentional, while task difficulty or mood were unintentional. This dimension was viewed as necessary to differentiate some causes in common dimensions. Weiner (1979) used mood and effort as examples of unstable internal causes while being quite distinctive. He went on to identify the third dimension of causality as controllability.

While attribution theory has been widely researched and discussed with variations in the number of dimensions offered and considered as valid (Meyer, 1980; Passer, 1977; Rosenbaum, 1972), the most widely accepted variation remains the three-dimension taxonomy presented by Weiner (1979). As shown in Table 1, Weiner (1979) presents these three causal dimensions with corresponding factors or levels–locus of causality (internal/external), stability (stable/unstable) and controllability (controllable/uncontrollable)–to help understand emotion and motivation.

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**Attribution Theory in Education**

Weiner (1972) viewed attribution theory as critical to understanding causal beliefs in education stating that attribution theory has “significant implications for the educational process”
He closely tied attribution theory to achievement motivation. Achievement is rarely more important than in education. Students strive every day to achieve, whether they are preparing for tests, writing papers or completing in-class assignments. The level of individual achievement can be easily traced to student perception of causality (Anderman & Anderman, 2009; Cortés Suárez, 2004)

Anderman and Anderman (2009) suggest that “Weiner's model is particularly informative” in understanding student motivation as “attribution theory provides an important method for examining and understanding motivation in academic settings” (p. 1). Understanding how and why students fail can help institutions as they develop plans to support students, as well as help students help themselves. For students, locus determines academic self-esteem, while stability prompts a student to believe the future is predetermined or that it can be changed by effort, and controllability creates the feeling of being in command of one’s fate (Hunter & Barker, 1987). Austin (1992) found “successful students seemed more open to the idea that many factors were at play in their initial failure and in their ability to be successful a second time in school” (p. 86), whereas unsuccessful students were more prone to blame only one factor for their failure.

Research has shown effort as a major factor in determining success or failure. In attribution theory, effort is an internal and controllable factor. In their report of attribution theory in the classroom, Hunter and Barker (1987) found that students can put forth the effort they feel is justified, stating “students will be better learners if they believe success depends on effort more than on luck or ability” (p. 1). For example, high-achieving students in their report exerted enormous effort, believing that to succeed, they must believe they expended effort. In contrast, students who believed success or failure was the result of ability, task difficulty or luck, felt there was no point in putting forth a lot of effort, as these are external and not controllable. According
to Hunter and Baker, perception matters to students, not reality. If students believe they have no control, they may feel as if they are a pawn of others. However, even if they feel nervous or scared, having control, such as how much effort they expend, can help them feel in charge. This feeling is critical for students. Hunter and Barker (1987) wrote that “students must accept the fact that much of what happens to them is a result of what they do” and not what they are (p. 3).

As previously noted, student grades remain the main indicator of success or failure, whether those grades are for individual assignments, an entire course, or displayed on their transcripts. A student’s perception of whether they succeeded or failed, and an analysis of why they succeeded or failed, can have an effect on future performance.

Weiner’s attribution theory of motivation coupled with achievement is particularly appropriate as a lens to view student perceptions. Leppel (1984) reported that motivation “is transformed into observed academic behavior” (p. 46). Student motivation to achieve tends to increase when they view events positively and either stable or controllable, while their motivation tends to decrease when they view events as negative or uncontrollable. Their level of motivation, in turn, tends to be reflected in the amount of effort they expend in a task (Carter, 2013; Hunter & Barker, 1987; Meador, 2012).

**Summary**

This literature review examined what is currently known about motivation and goals in student-initiated readmission processes as they currently exist at institutions of higher education (Austin, 1992; Beck, 1996; Carter, 2013; Houle, 2013). It also revealed that very little is known about student motivation with institution-initiated readmission processes. Indeed, there is a dearth of literature on institution-initiated readmission after academic suspension that allows students to immediately return to ‘normal’ classes, and how that process impacts student motivation and success.
Without that understanding, we are unable to apply causes to success or failure. Yet, “humans must identify a cause for everything that occurs” (Houle, 2013, p. 36). By better understanding student perceptions, we can better see how students attribute their successes and failures and how that drives their future efforts.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of traditional college students who were readmitted through an institution-initiated process. This chapter first provides a brief description of qualitative inquiry and justification for the selection of a phenomenological research approach, including the study’s design and rationale. Next, the strategies used to select the site and recruit and sample the participants were reviewed. Finally, the procedures that were used to collect and analyze the data including the processes used to ensure trustworthiness will be discussed in depth. Finally, limitations of the study are acknowledged.

Research Questions

The design and methods described in this chapter were used to answer the following research questions, thus adding to the body of research on the experiences of students returning from academic dismissal: 1) How do students’ experiences inform their decision to re-apply? 2) How do students interpret the invitation from the university to re-apply after academic dismissal? and 3) How do students make meaning of no mandatory waiting period? 4) How do the experiences in the Reclaim the W program shape students’ goals?

With any study, there are two questions that must be answered before any research actually begins: Can this topic be researched? and Should this topic be researched? To answer the first question, the researcher must identify a possible problem, such as a gap in the literature for a known area, or a new, formerly un-researched topic. From there, the researcher needs to ask – can this topic be researched? Is there potential data or a population that can be studied? Then,
after determining that a topic can and should be researched, the researcher needs to evaluate how to research the topic, and determine what questions need to be researched and answered. As a student who had previously been academically dismissed, not only once but twice, my interest was in students who had experienced the same event – academic dismissal. However, my interest was in the experiences of students who had been invited to re-apply after dismissal as part of an institution-initiated process.

**Research Design and Rationale**

The choice for using a qualitative research design with a descriptive phenomenological approach was determined by the purpose of the study: to gain an understanding of the experiences of students who lived the high and low experiences of academic probation and dismissal and were successful after being re-admitted through an institution-initiated process. Researching a group of individuals who share a common experience would point to using phenomenology (Creswell, 2013). By taking an in-depth look at the common phenomenon, we can better understand their experiences.

Per Vagle (2014), phenomenologists want to study “the world as it is lived, not the world as it is measured, transformed, represented, correlated, categorized, compared, and broken down” (p. 22). To accomplish this, I collected data using semi-structured interviews comprised of open-ended questions with the intent of identifying themes related to the individual and collective experiences of the students and how they made meaning of those experiences. The interview questions followed a chronological sequence asking the students first about their life and collegiate experiences that led up to their experiences on entering college. These were followed by questions concerned with being placed on probation, their academic dismissal, invitation to re-apply, and their subsequent re-admission. The final questions discussed their experiences specific to the Reclaim the W program and then their plans for the future.
Merriam and Tisdell (2016) consider education as one of the applied social sciences or fields of practice. “An interest in knowing more about one’s practice…leads to asking researchable questions, some of which are best approached through a qualitative research design” (p. 1). In this, they agree with Vagle (2014) and, as an educator, I agree with them in wanting to know the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of the students’ experience, not the ‘how much’ or ‘how often.’ Creswell states this is a major challenge of qualitative research (2013). Talking with students through the use of semi-structured interviews allows for better understanding of the students’ stories and helps them better understand their experiences. Robeson (1998), elaborates:

because the phenomenological approach is concerned with reality as it is constructed by the informant, the primary source of data for this project will be interviews with each of the informants. These interviews will allow us to better understand the “images, theories, ideas, values, and attitudes” which these reinstated students use to frame their understanding of the world and their approach to college (Robeson, 1998, p. 69).

The use of interviews allowed me to help the subjects remain focused on their experiences without pointing them to expected answers. The ultimate goal was to better understand the experiences of these students and how they made meaning of these experiences.

**Researcher Placement and Reflexivity**

Unlike written surveys which are used to gather data, interviews are typically face-to-face requiring the direct involvement of two or more people. For an interviewer to receive complete and open responses, there must be a rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee. When conducting interviews, Seidman (2013) works to find a point where there is a level of comfort between the interviewee and himself, but not an equal partnership where they would have more of a conversation than an interview. He looks to say “enough about myself to be alone and responsive but little enough to preserve the autonomy of the participant’s works and to keep the
focus of attention on his or her experience rather than mine” (p. 98). The problem comes when
the relationship becomes “we” and there is no clear line between who’s experiences are being
discussed and who is making meaning of those experiences.

One technique used to minimize the direct involvement of the researcher in data
collection and analysis in the use of bracketing of past knowledge of experiences of the
researcher (Giorgi, 2009; Vagle, 2014). Bracketing “does not mean removing all past knowledge.
Rather, it involves putting aside or rendering non-influential this knowledge” (p. 67). A second
technique is reflexivity which Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe as “an attitude of attending
systematically to the context of knowledge construction, especially to the effect of the
researcher, at every step of the research process” I journaled my own experiences as an
undergraduate student who had been academically dismissed twice. This process helped me
recognize my experiences in order to reduce as much as possible their impact on my assumptions
and expectations and focus on the student’s actual experiences. While the influence of my
experiences on the study could never be completely eliminated, it could be minimized by
recognizing the experiences as uniquely mine, not those of the students being studied.

My Experiences as a Student

During the interviews, I found that I had many overlaps with the participants in my study.
I was a first-generation student who faced academic failure twice, leading to a period of suffering
from imposter syndrome. This was enhanced by being a college-prep student in high school,
while being from a working-class family. As a first-gen student, the message I received from my
family was that I didn’t need a college education, as I could get a job working in a factory.

The first time I experienced all the “normal” failings of an unsuccessful student, I spent
too many days in the student union, and not enough in the classroom. That led to too many
incomplete assignments and failing too many exams. Eventually, I just gave up and did not even
try to accomplish anything. After waiting the mandatory period, I re-applied to the same institution and, again, failed to achieve academic success, receiving a GPA of 0.3 during my first term back and was summarily dismissed again. Eventually, I returned for a third try and succeeded. Although it took me 16 years to earn an associate degree, and an additional 6.5 years to earn my bachelor’s degree, I continued and eventually received an MBA.

These failings and successes are mine, and I had to recognize this and not force myself into the experiences of the study participants. By being aware of this potential issue in advance, I believe I minimized the possibility of my thoughts, issues, and past experiences altering the results reported by those who I interviewed. Bracketing my experiences in this matter allowed me to isolate my “biases in order to be open to the experience itself” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27).

Population, Sample and Site

The students who participated in the study were members of a criterion-based, purposeful sample. Purposeful sampling is appropriate when “the goal is to select cases that are likely to be ‘information rich’ with respect to the purposes of the study” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, p. 179). A specific type of purposeful sampling, known as criterion sampling, works well when the study’s participants “satisfy an important criterion” or phenomenon (2007, p. 184). In this case, the criteria are probation at the end of the students’ first term, dismissal at the end of the second term, being invited to reapply, being readmitted, and successfully completing of all courses during their first term back. This includes the program’s intrusive support class.

Participants for this study were recruited from a pool of approximately 63 students who successfully completed the intrusive support course during the first three years of Reclaim the W at the university. Recruitment took place through the Center for Academic Success Programs (CASP), with the Director acting as gatekeeper. Besides being director of CASP, he also was the
sole instructor of the support class. As such, he had a previous and unique relationship with each student from the class and was able to identify those students who had successfully completed the class. For this study, the Director’s role was solely as the presenter of the study to his former students. He was not told which students showed an interest in learning more about participating in the study or which students did or did not contact me. He also was never told who actually participated in the study.

Creswell (2009, p. 13) specifies phenomenological research as involving “a small number of subjects”. Therefore, the goal for this study was to recruit a sample of 7-10 participants from the population of 63 students who met the criteria of the study. The entire population of 63 students received a total of three emails from the Director. Each email included a copy of the recruitment letter (Appendix A) identifying the purpose of the research and inviting them to participate. This letter explained that their participation would remain confidential, and their responses would only identify them by code name, not by their actual name or by any individually identifiable data. I was identified as a doctoral student, unaffiliated professionally with the university. Students were given my personal contact information and were invited to contact me if they were interested in learning more about participating in the study.

This process was repeated three times over a five-month period in an effort to reach the target sample size of 7-10 participants. The first email was sent in April 2017. This was not an ideal time, as students were focused on the upcoming end of the term and end-of-term activities. However, I was contacted by four students who all agreed to participate and were interviewed. A second mailing went out over the summer in 2017. There were no responses to that email. A third mailing, sent out two weeks after fall classes began in 2017, resulted in five responses. Three students expressed interest but decided not to participate. Two others scheduled interviews. One was a “no show”, and one was interviewed as the fifth participant. My
committee chair determined that I had done my due diligence and could continue with a sample of five students.

To permit the participants to feel comfortable during the interviews, and to minimize potential stress or concerns, all of the first interviews and four of the second interviews, were conducted face-to-face and scheduled on the main campus in library study rooms. These rooms provided a secure, comfortable environment, yet allowed for the confidentiality of the participants. This not only ensured the maximum familiarity for the students, it minimized any potential issues with them having to travel excessively. The only second interview not conducted face-to-face was due to the participant being very pregnant. Her interview was conducted via a series of emails.

**Instrumentation**

Interviewing is probably the most prevalent form of data collection in phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2013). Its purpose is to understand “the lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make of the experience” (Seidman, 2013, p. 8). The term interviewing includes a wide variety of practices. This variety includes tightly structured interviews with preset, normally closed-ended questions at one end of the spectrum and open-ended, unstructured interviews that can almost seem to be a conversation between interviewer and interviewee at the other end (Seidman, 2013). For this study, I used semi-structured interviews (Appendix C) with open-ended questions that were designed to draw out the participant and their responses by not limiting their answers to pre-selected choices. These questions included the use of probes that drilled down into the experiences.

Beginning with the idea that semi-structured interviews were an appropriate method of data collection, I began to identify and record potential questions during my review of the literature. I added more questions during discussions with my committee members. The original
list included questions that did not directly contribute to answering the research questions. This list was reviewed, revised, and culled using Seidman’s (2013) concept of not collecting any data that wouldn’t be used in the study. This resulted in a list of interview questions that would likely contribute significant data to the study. Once the questions were pared down to a strong potential list, I conducted pilot interviews with a single student from the population of interest. Based on those interviews, I further revised the list of interview questions and re-ordered them into a logical sequence following the students’ experiences in the order they happened.

The list of questions was divided into two sections, so participants could be interviewed more than once to increase the depth of information received (Seidman, 2013). Although, Seidman recommends a group of three interviews running 90 minutes each, I chose two 60-minute interviews, as three interviews would have been difficult to schedule with students in this population. Seidman’s three interviews focused on life stories, experiences, and how participants make meaning of those experiences. I focused on walking students through a timeline of experiences. The flow of the questions in the first interview asked about the students’ experiences beginning before they entered college, leading to questions about their experience with academic probation. These were followed by questions related to their academic dismissal, their experiences with the invitation to return immediately through the Reclaim the W program, and their application and acceptance into the program. Questions in the second interview began with asking about student experiences in and after the program, which lead to questions on their future plans. Although basic interview questions were written and asked of each student, there were occasional responses that required additional, unscripted questions to expand or clarify answers. These were unique for each interview, so not all unscripted questions were asked of all of the participants.
A semi-structured interview format let the participant “take any direction he or she wants. It does not presume an answer” (Seidman, 2013, p. 87). This allowed me to direct, but not lead, the flow of the discussion keeping it from getting too far off track (Giorgi, 2009). This was sometimes a critical step as two of the students tended to go away from the answer and each actually stopped and asked, “What was the question again?” Directing the flow allowed me to keep the discussion focused on the various experiences without limiting the students’ ability to fully elaborate on those experiences. This allowed me to let the participant voice their feelings, experiences, and thoughts by permitting them to speak openly and not be led in a specific direction or feel limited to only specific answers.

**Data Collection Procedures**

At the beginning of each interview I worked to establish a rapport with the student. Before each interview, we discussed the IRB-approved informed consent form (Appendix B) and I was able to answer the few questions presented to me. During these pre-interview discussions, I asked a number of demographic questions (Appendix C: Interview Instrument) and asked permission to audio record the interview. I explained that recording the interviews would ensure more accuracy when the interviews were transcribed. Better accuracy would help with better analysis which, potentially, would lead to better findings. An additional part of establishing rapport included letting the students know that these interviews were not intended to make judgements, but to better understand their experiences. With three of the students, these pre-interview discussions included answering their question about why I was interested in their experiences. This led to me briefly describe my experiences being suspended twice as an undergraduate. Finally, to guarantee their confidentiality, I asked them to select a pseudonym, which would be the only way they would be identified. I assured them that I was the only person
to know which pseudonym identifier would be associated with which student. Four of the
students used the names I had pre-selected. The last student chose his own pseudonym.

Once the interviews began, I spoke only if I felt clarification was required or to
acknowledge a point. I focused on not presenting my thoughts or opinions. At the end of the first
interview, we scheduled a second interview, and I gave each student a $10 gift card for the
retailer of their choice. The second interview began where the first interviews ended with me
asking clarifying questions, if necessary, and then concentrated on details of their experience
during and after the program leading to questions on their future plans. Each interview was
scheduled for 60 minutes. Only two interviews exceeded that time and they were the students’
choice as they wished to expand on answers they had given earlier. At the end of this interview,
each student received a $20 gift card.

After all interviews were completed, I transcribed the recordings myself in an effort to
review and “immerse” myself in the data (Richards, 2015). Following that, I used the transcripts
to write the life story of each student. As part of the process to ensure trustworthiness, both
transcripts and the life story were sent to the students asking them to read them for accuracy and
offer suggestions where needed, a process known as member-checking (Lincoln & Guba, 2013;
Seidman, 2013). Only one student felt a correction was needed.

Data Analysis Procedures

In qualitative research, data analysis follows a recognizable pattern. The seven steps of
qualitative data analysis developed by Marshall and Rossman (2011) are 1) organizing the data,
2) immersion in the data, 3) generating categories (units) and themes, 4) coding the data, 5)
offering interpretations through analytic memos, 6) searching for alternative understandings, and
7) writing the report or other format for presenting the study (p. 209). This is the process that I
followed for this study.
Once the data were collected and analysis began, my first step was to organize the data. This was not a one-time step, but a continuous and repeated operation that was necessary to speed up and improve the analysis process. The digital audio recordings for this study are stored in encrypted files.

For the second step, I immersed myself in the interview recordings to become intimately familiar with the data. To accomplish this, I did my own transcription. Then I reviewed each transcript by listening to the audio recordings a second, and sometimes a third, time to ensure accuracy. Only by this immersion could the data then be properly organized into themes or categories (Step 3) and then further grouped by coding the data (Step 4).

These same two steps which Marshall and Rossman (2011) named as Steps Three and Four, were also identified and expanded by Saldaña (2013). He specifies these two steps as two “cycles.” The first cycle is when data are grouped by one or more of seven methods. Each method describes the purpose or thought corresponding to the further subcategories in that group. However, Saldaña also posited that researchers could use Eclectic coding during Cycle One, which involves more than one of these methods. He further noted that use of more than one coding method in the first cycle, paired with analytic memo writing and recoding in the second cycle, will change and probably reduce the number of codes into integrated findings.

Originally, I began with the thought that Provisional coding, using a list of themes found in a similar study (Houle, 2013), would be a good starting point for my study. However, because the students in Houle’s study were readmitted via a traditional student-initiated process, the differences in our focus of research lead me to add Pattern coding, where I grouped similar words and phrases of the participants together. However, later during this first cycle, I began to realize that there were many emotions being expressed. So, I also began to use Emotion coding, which labels the emotions experienced by the participants.
After the first cycle of coding, Saldaña (2013) specifies a second cycle using different methods on the findings from the first cycle. In this case, I use Pattern coding, a method that identifies data with similar codes. This organizes the data into sets or themes. Since these students had similar experiences, their thoughts, feelings, and emotions were similar, although they may have been expressed in different words.

After competing Marshall and Rossman’s third and fourth steps (or Saldaña’s cycles), I moved to step five, ‘offering interpretations through analytic memos,’ which they describe as the researcher’s “thoughts about how the data are coming together in clusters or patterns or themes he sees as the data accumulate” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, pp. 212-3). They both suggested that by writing memos, the researcher can find gaps, identify linkages, stay immersed in the data, and record changes in thought during the process. My memos showed that although I had begun looking for themes similar to those that Houle (2013) identified, there was a major change in themes and emotions due to the different processes used for re-admission after dismissal. These memos helped me identify emerging themes that were based on how the new processes influenced students.

After walking away from the data and analysis for about 30 days, I returned to begin step Six, which consists of searching for alternative understandings. Part of this forced me to look at possible errors I made in the earlier analytic steps. Marshall and Rossman (2011) suggest that participants who may not have given a complete answer or possibly held something back could be re-interviewed. But I felt that was unnecessary due to the member-checking I did by sending the transcripts and life-stories to each participant asking for corrections and additions. At this point, I did listen to the interviews once again and re-read the transcripts to ensure my familiarity with the data.
These steps culminated in the final step – writing this report. Richards (2015) stated that if the researcher has been writing analytical memos, notes and thoughts during the entire process, a large portion of the report has already been written, and changes in thoughts or directions have been recorded. I found this to be true. Many of the findings in Chapter 5 had been written to some extent through memoing and only needed expansion.

Each step of the analysis process entailed data reduction, which shrinks and focuses the data into smaller, manageable groups or sets that represent the essence of the phenomenon. Reduction has an aim to “reachieve [sic] a direct and primitive contact with the world as we experience it or as it shows itself-rather than as we conceptualize it” (van Manen, 2014, p. 220).

Giorgi (2009) and van Manen (2014) both posit that this can be accomplished by bracketing, which Giorgi defines as “bracketing of past knowledge or nonpresented [sic] presuppositions about the given objects” in order that “critical attention could be brought to bear on the present experience,” which is also known as the “epoché” (p. 91). As the volumes of collected data were reduced to smaller, manageable experiences, I was able to turn raw data with no inherent meaning into findings that represent the essence of the participant’s experience, without my preconceptions or experiences tainting the result.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is critical to evaluating its value. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that four objectives must be accomplished for a researcher to demonstrate the trustworthiness of a study’s findings. The researcher must show that the study has *credibility*, which is confidence in the truth or accuracy of the findings, *transferability*, which indicates that the findings can be applied in other contexts, *confirmability*, which is the extent to which the findings are shaped by the respondents, not the researcher, and *dependability*, to show the findings can be repeated. These objectives formed the basis of a trustworthiness protocol for this
qualitative research. The protocol provides evidence of the rigor used in this study, as well as the process used to document that rigor (Amankwaa, 2016).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest a progression of techniques to achieve these objectives. To ensure the credibility of my study I employed two of the suggested techniques. The first technique suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) called *prolonged engagement*. They viewed this as most effective for long-term field observations. Since this was a short-term interview process, there was no opportunity for prolonged engagement. In its place, I used rapport building since the time I was able to spend with each student was limited. To accomplish this, I spent as much time as possible with the students before, during and after the interviews. During the short walk from where we met to the interview room, we briefly talked about classes, lunch, and work. While these brief discussions did not necessarily contribute directly to the study, they did help the students feel comfortable and this comfort helped establish a rapport and gain their trust. These brief discussions also gave me some insights into each student. During the interview, not rushing the responses allowed participants to fully answer each question, expanding those answers where necessary.

The second technique, which Lincoln and Guba (1985) described “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314), was member-checking and is also recommended by Richards (2015) and Saldaña (2013). Member-checking can be completed at different times during the research process. I used this technique at two different stages. First, during the interviews, I would respond if I thought the answers needed to be expanded or clarified. Then, after both interviews were completed and transcribed, I used the participants’ responses to write the life story of each student, focusing on their experiences and emotions. Finally, I sent each student their transcripts and the life story with instructions requesting that they read them and make changes, deletions, or additions for clarity and accuracy of their experiences. I asked that
they read their answers, as well as my analysis of those responses, to be sure they presented a clear picture of their experiences and that I had accurately described their experiences. Only two students responded. One student suggested no changes and one responded with a change. That was to correct the timing of a specific event. I had stated that it occurred in the wrong semester. That was corrected.

A third possible technique, triangulation, consists of using multiple sources for data such as interviews, essays and observations. I chose not to use this technique as the only other possible source of data was the essay written by each student while applying for readmission. Since they would have been prepared to maximize the possibility of their acceptance, I chose to focus solely on the participant interviews believing them to be a more valid source of information.

The best technique for ensuring transferability is the use of thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Richards, 2015; Saldaña, 2013). This involves using multiple sources including actual responses, but also my observations and descriptions. These observations included notes I made during the interviews when I noted changes in facial expressions, emotions, or body language. Richards (2015) recommends that researchers listen to audio records and review transcripts and “edit in new things...like laughter or hesitation” (p. 65) to be sure that narratives “contain detail of recall and imagery, interpretive comment and contextual knowledge” (p. 65) resulting in thick description. Besides doing my own transcription of the recorded interviews, I listened to each recording multiple times to better understand each student's experiences then writing the participants' life stories which provided thick description of their experiences.

Confirmability can best be ensured by the use of an audit trail and reflexivity. Richards (2015) recommends that the researcher keep a log, or audit trail, of their reflections on their role in the study, the concepts or viewpoints discovered, where they originated, how they fit within
the data, and the level of confidence the researcher has in those concepts. As I developed the original proposal, I began to record my thoughts and the direction I thought the study would take. This note taking continued as I began to refine the interviews and collect the data. I made further entries as I started to analyze the data, considering my original thoughts and how they changed as new ideas or concepts were discovered, grouped and re-grouped. In qualitative research, the researcher becomes part of the study by establishing relationships with the participants. As there is more contact between the researcher and participants, that contact will change the relationship. Maxwell (2005) recognized that these two dynamics are part of reflexivity given “the fact that the researcher is part of the social world he or she studies” (p. 82). By being aware of my part in the study, I was able to look at how I have impacted the study by my choice of design, the structures I put in place, the interview questions selected, and the methodology I used to analyze the data. A major part of my reflexivity was realizing I have biases, interests, areas of knowledge in the subject while at the same time, I have gaps of ignorance. These could all contribute to my analysis, findings and recommendations.

For dependability, the only suggestion from Lincoln and Guba (1985) was an inquiry audit. This necessitates having persons not directly involved in the data collection and analysis processes, review and examine them, along with the results of the study. This was completed by the writing coach. She read and reviewed the processes and data multiple times asking questions and offering suggestions to verify and improve the processes as well as the data and results.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

In qualitative research involving face-to-face interviews, where the interviewer is an active participant, there is a risk of researcher effect, or “how the relationship between researcher and respondent may bias responses” (Livesey, 2014, p. 62). This relationship can be affected by the differences in race or ethnicity, gender, linguistics, age, or power (Seidman, 2013). This was
a potential issue as the participant may have biases against my characteristics as the researcher/interviewer. Therefore, student reactions to me being the researcher could have led to another possible limitation, the openness of the participants. Their willingness and ability to be open during the interviews could have limited the honesty of their answers. To encourage openness and honesty during the interviews, they were scheduled on the main campus in library study rooms. These rooms provided a safe, comfortable, and confidential environment. Additionally, I began each by being open with the participants and identifying early in the process that I will not be making any judgments regarding the students’ choices or experiences. In some cases, this was reinforced by relating my experiences as an academically dismissed student.

The data used in this study were collected from students who had been invited to re-apply for admission after academic dismissal. The results may not be generalized to other institutions that do not share a similar program. This study was limited to those students who had successfully completed the Reclaim the W program. Prima facie, they are more motivated than those who chose not to return. This study is limited because success was evaluated after the completion of the class. Therefore, long-term success cannot be identified or deduced from the results of this study.

Students are traditional undergraduate students from Western Michigan University, the same university where I am a doctoral student, which could create a potential for unconscious bias. This form of bias is described by psychologists as “part of everyone’s social identify; we are ‘hard-wired’ to respond positively to people we perceive to be like us’ (Oxford Learning Institute, 2014, p. 1). Since I am a student as the same university as the students I interviewed, this was a strong possibility. Recognizing this potential issue allowed me to make a conscious effort to avoid it. To minimize the likelihood of unconscious bias, I stressed to each student prior
to any interviews that I was not looking for any particular answers or responses. I was only looking for open and honest answers about their experiences and what those experiences meant to them personally.

There are some delimitations that created parameters for this study. For the purpose of this study, the population was limited to a specific population. Participant selection was focused on select students from the Reclaim the W program. The study excluded other students from the university, including many who participated in Reclaim the W but who did not meet the criteria for this study. Second, participation in the study is voluntary and therefore the sample is self-selecting. The students who chose to participate may differ in important ways from students who did not choose to participate. The final delimitation was the researcher’s connection to the university where the study was conducted. The goal of the study is not to generalize the results to a population, but to identify potential factors related to persistence and non-persistence among non-traditional adult students.

**Conclusion**

Marshall and Rossman (2011) suggest that “phenomenological approaches seek to explore, describe, and analyze the meaning of individual lived experience [where] analysis proceeds from the center assumption that there is an essence to an experience that is shared with others who have also had that experience” (p. 19). The phenomenological research method allowed me to gain and present a better understanding of the experiences students faced during and after academic probation, suspension and readmission, specifically through an institution-initiated process, and how they perceived those experiences. By using semi-structured interviews to collect the data, I was able to hear their experiences and how they understood them, in their own words. Then by doing my own transcription of the recorded interviews, I was able to immerse myself in the data to gain a deeper understanding of what the students felt and how that
helped shape their behavior in and beyond school. That understanding helped shape the analysis of the data which allowed the themes to emerge as evidence of the essence of the experiences.
CHAPTER IV

INDIVIDUAL LIFE STORIES

This chapter presents the stories from the participant interviews, allowing these students’ voices to be heard. As the transcripts of the interviews were completed, they were sent to the students to verify accuracy and completeness. These final stories were also presented to the students for accuracy. Although their responses are reported in the aggregate, each student is an individual with their own unique story to share. The flow of each story begins with basic descriptions of each student, including demographics. It continues with the students’ thoughts on their families, Reclaim the W, and their experiences in higher education up through their completion of the program.

The students were all traditional students when they attended the support class. They enrolled in college during the fall following their graduation from high school. At that time, they were all 18 or 19 years old, unmarried, and living with their families before moving to a residence hall at school. The names used are all pseudonyms chosen either by the student or me.

Table 2
Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>2014</td>
</tr>
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<td>M</td>
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<td>2016</td>
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Student Stories

Abbie

Abbie is a white female and, at 22, is the oldest student participant in the study. She completed the program in the first year it was offered, 2014, and hopes to graduate before the end of 2017. Raised in a small town in southeast Michigan, Abbie describes herself as a rather independent person. Although she talks to her mother, she did not give the impression they were particularly close. In fact, she barely mentioned her family. She only mentioned her mom as someone she talked to after being dismissed from the university.

Abbie presents herself as a woman of extremes. She is all in or all out. “I don’t see the point in half-assing things.” As examples of her extremes, she described herself as lazy early in high school, “My freshman and sophomore years of high school, I definitely did not put effort in, which solidly sunk my GPA initially.” However, she reported that she buckled down in her junior year, not necessarily to improve her GPA, but more as an experiment, saying, “I think it was my junior year that I got straight A’s because I was curious if I could do it.” Her senior year, she tapered off slightly to receiving B’s, but still graduated with a fairly low GPA.

Even though she viewed college as a “fresh start” to get herself and her grade point back on track, she said that this lack of drive continued once she entered college. Abbie felt she “started out fairly strong,” including planning study sessions with friends. However, her grades were low primarily because she “got a little bit of a shock that college is a bit harder than high school, and I couldn’t so laxly get the grades that I wanted.” This was compounded by the fact that she really wasn’t sure what she wanted to do after college, so, she wasn’t sure what to do in college. “Initially when I applied to go to [the university], I applied to like four universities. I didn’t tour any of them. I actually didn’t really want to go to college. (laughs) I... didn’t have a
real interest in it.” She did realize that she needed to make some effort, but her efforts were not successful. As a result, she ended up on probation after her first semester.

On top of the additional rigor of college over high school, Abbie faced an additional outside issue over which she had little control. Her roommate was raped during the “Welcome to Campus” week prior to classes. Her roommate became despondent and lethargic, eventually becoming suicidal. During that term, the roommate attempted to kill herself on at least three separate occasions. Abbie tried to monitor her friend’s behavior, which lead to her ignoring her own classes. But after the third suicide attempt, Abbie realized she was not only hurting herself, she was ill-equipped to help her friend alone. Her best effort with each attempt was to contact the police. Her roommate eventually moved out of the residence hall and moved in with another friend, male, who basically took over responsibility for her care, allowing Abbie to turn her focus back to school.

Unfortunately, Abbie felt the damage had been done, and she was not able to recover her grades. She was placed on academic probation after Fall semester. However, since she attributed her academic problems to the experiences with her friend, Abbie did not feel she needed to make many changes to her study habits. This lack of change could not overcome her low CGPA, so at the end of Spring semester, Abbie was academically dismissed. She stated that the dismissal came as quite a shock to her. When she received the notice in the mail, her first thought was, “Thank you for telling me I’m stupid.” Then, she said, she panicked. So, Abbie called one of her friends who was an Army Ranger veteran. This friend calmed her down, but pulled no punches and stated things that got Abbie’s attention:

“All right, shut up. This is what you’re going to do. You’re going to make these phone calls. You’re going to get on top of it. You need a plan of action…like you’ve got to start getting on top of things. Crying’s not going to fix it…you need a plan.”
So, she began calling everyone she could think of to see what could be done. These calls included the registrar’s office and department advisor, instead of her program advisor. However, she also began to investigate alternatives, including attending a local community college, which she viewed as her “panic contingency plan.” She felt that staying out of school for the required semester before returning would actually mean not returning to school at all. “I knew because of my previous mentality that, if I stopped going to school, I wouldn’t come back to school. I would never get that degree.” She also worried about disappointing her mother, who had told her that she’d “be the biggest idiot on the face of the planet if I had the opportunity to go to the university and…threw that away.”

About two weeks later, Abbie received the letter from the university inviting her to re-apply to the university as part of the Reclaim the W program. This second chance was a contingency she had never considered. She immediately contacted her advisor, who said she would recommend her for the program. However, when the class was explained to her, Abbie did not view it in a positive fashion. She thought it sounded more like a “how to not be an idiot class.” But she wrote the required essay and was ultimately accepted into the program. She reported that once she attended the initial pre-term program meeting, she began to have second thoughts. She felt the facilitator of the meeting was very demeaning to the students and that impacted her initial attitude toward the class. “I think I had a bad taste in my mouth about that from the beginning.”

Despite her misgivings, she felt she needed to work hard to be successful in the class. “I just needed to put my head down and go to work.” She felt that was what she had to do to stay in school “regardless of how my personal feelings are toward the professor.” While she considered a lot of the classwork to be menial activities, she said she understood the purpose of it. She felt it required the students to stay on top of things, get organized and develop good study habits.
Abbie admitted that as it turned out, the class wasn’t as bad as she expected it to be, so she was “more willing to be part of the class” and willingly participated in class activities.

Even though Abbie knew she continued to “butt heads” with the instructor on-and-off during the term, she believed she did benefit from the class. She also felt that her attitude improved as she began to see the benefits. She admitted she didn’t completely change toward the class, but “my overall attitude… was less generally spiteful.” She said that this led to an improved attitude overall toward school, and this improved attitude lead to improved grades. Abbie views receiving an A in two classes as her most important academic success that term. Those A’s helped her to understand “I can do this.”

Of course, it wasn’t all easy. She viewed her greatest challenge as having to attend classes she personally viewed as unnecessary. She admits she does “not like doing things that aren’t necessary. I consider unnecessary actions a waste of my time.” But she attended every class knowing that she was a “habit-based” person. If she skipped once, she anticipated the second time would be easier and the third time easier still. So, her challenge was to attend every class. She met that challenge.

Abbie mentioned a second challenge for herself during the interviews. She planned to graduate within a year. She felt that coming from academic dismissal to graduation was her main goal. Along the way, she won a scholarship from the Women in Aviation group and will leave the school with two job offers.

**Brandon**

Brandon is a male of mixed race and a first-generation college student who reported viewing his opportunity to be part of the program as a “shining light of hope.” Basically, during his first semester, he “hung out” with a group of friends in the dorms. However, these friends
would just stay in their rooms playing video games and “vaping” or smoking e-cigarettes. But Brandon began to realize these friends “weren’t the exact best people to hang out with…it wasn’t ‘til like the spring semester where I realized that these guys are idiots…Ok, I may be an idiot, but I ain’t that type of idiot.” He quit spending time with this group of friends and found a new group, including his current roommate, during his second semester.

When Brandon entered college, he felt he hadn’t changed from high school. He was lazy. “I’m one of those who say they’ll do something…and not do it.” The first example he gave was when he told himself that he would talk to his academic advisor when he first went on probation – but he didn’t. Then he said he “would study more.” Again, he didn’t. He said it was halfway through this second semester when he finally said, “Wake up, dammit!” Even though he realized that he was in trouble, he didn’t talk to anyone, maybe “a couple of friends.”

Brandon never talked to his parents about being placed on probation, even though they were paying the bills through a Parents Loan for Undergraduate Students (PLUS) loan. But he did attempt to relieve his stress by venting his frustrations at his parents, specifically his dad, without ever telling them of his problems. “I didn’t do nothing physical. I just started yelling at him.” He felt that venting caused feelings of guilt, since his parents were paying for a student loan. After he stopped yelling, he said he just took a long walk to calm down. When he returned, his dad told him, “I’m glad that you took your walk…you had to let it out.” However, he never told his parents he had been placed on probation.

Even though he didn’t seek help from others, Brandon reported that he tried to help himself while he was on probation. One of the changes Brandon planned for that semester was to go to the library more often in an effort to improve his academic performance. “Technically I did…[because] one trip to the library is more than zero,” he joked. He did admit he actually went to the library five or six times that term, but he felt he “did the right thing, but too late.” He
didn’t begin to go to the library regularly until late in the semester. He believed that did not give him enough time to fix his GPA, and he was dismissed at the end of that semester.

Even though he knew his dismissal was coming, his first thought was, “Oh, shit.” He said he checked his email about 6:00 am “out of habit.” Every morning he would “look at the news feed, look at my email, and stay in bed.” Even though he had his dismissal confirmed, he thought it was just “too early for bad news” and already wanted that day to be over.

Brandon said that what bothered him most was that he had met with his advisor a couple weeks prior and was told, “With your current grades and everything…you’ll do fine.” Then, when he called the advisor after receiving the dismissal notice, he was told, “Oh, I thought your grades were better than that.” Brandon felt that conversation hadn’t changed anything, but it still bothered him. The advisor did tell Brandon that he should write a letter to his program advisor explaining his situation. He wrote a letter and called the advisor. “I was kind of desperate.” He felt that he had made all these changes near the end of the term and had done well, but he wanted to prove himself. So, he not only wrote a five-page letter explaining that he knew he had had a rough year, but that he had a plan to turn things around the next year. Additionally, he called the advisor to discuss his options. During this call, they scheduled a time to talk. Even though he had left Kalamazoo at this time and returned to his parents’ home in the Chicago area, he “kind of wanted to prove that I wanted to come back.” So, he drove back to campus, which is about a 2-3-hour drive and met with his advisor for only about 15-30 minutes. Then he drove back to Chicago in time to work in the afternoon. He said his advisor told him that he could have just called, but Brandon didn’t feel that was enough. The advisor told him that she didn’t know if this effort would help. It didn’t. Brandon was still dismissed.

Once he was dismissed, Brandon began to consider his choices. He considered finding a job and taking a year off from school but realized “this isn’t for me.” So, he also considered
attending a community college in the Chicago area where he could study his then current program, criminal justice. He also thought about entering the military because of their incentives for service, his experience in ROTC in high school, and the fact that his father and grandfather had both been in the service. His mother, on the other hand, had other ideas, telling him, “get that college degree first.” He considered himself fortunate because he never had to make a choice of what to do because he was invited to apply for enrollment in Reclaim the W.

Brandon reported that he felt very grateful that there was no waiting period to enroll in the program. “I know it’s really bad to say, but it meant…if I get accepted in this, it’s just like any school year (not taking classes over the summer). Nobody would notice anything.” He knew how lucky he was being able to continue his classes without a break, and without having to tell his parents that he had been dismissed. He had actually called the director of the program asking what he was looking for in the required essay. After being told he was only expected to submit a two-page essay, Brandon took the letter he had previously written for the advisor and condensed it from five pages to three. “I condensed it to about three pages. Cause it’s really hard for me to delete certain paragraphs. Like, ok, which one will help me out the least.” After he sent that in with the enrollment form, he was accepted into the program.

Being accepted meant that Brandon felt he had a “clean slate” and could begin to build himself up. “During that (summer semester) with the anxiety thing [I had from self-esteem issues related to the dismissal]…I basically broke myself down...I was a mess.” But his acceptance into the program meant he could begin to build himself back up. It also meant his parents never found out. Brandon never told his parents he was accepted into the program because they still didn’t know that he had been dismissed. So, when he got his acceptance letter, he told them that he had been admitted into a writing class “that will help me with academics and leadership. It will also help me…write scholarships.”
Beginning with the first mandatory meeting before the semester began, through the entire term, Brandon said he felt comfortable because he wasn’t alone in this program. During that meeting, the students were told, “You know you’re all in the same boat, and we’re here to help you.” Brandon was originally worried that the teachers would come in with an attitude like some of the administrators in his high school. Their attitude was, I’m here “with a PhD…and I have to work with you guys who failed.” But that never happened. The teachers even shared their stories of struggling in school, which he believed added to his comfort level and the comfort of the entire group.

Brandon admits that he liked the class, although he didn’t like all the assignments. A couple of the writing assignments seemed to be “experimental” to Brandon, but he completed them anyway. He even completed the time-log, where he had to track his study time. “I was at this location, I studied this, worked at this…and for how long.” Between classes he said he would visit the library to “do whatever I needed to do.” Brandon believed if he left campus to go to his off-campus apartment, he would stay there and not do his homework. He promised himself that he would study more, and that he would spend more time in the library.

Because of this, he felt like he was working hard, while some of his classmates “didn’t even try at all.” He said he wasn’t trying to compare himself to them, but it was hard not to do so. He was going to the library on a regular basis, and generally spending “a lot more time studying… (and on) Sundays commit myself to finishing things up.” This was because he felt he wanted to better himself academically. This extra time studying, and time spent at the library, led him to what he considers his most important academic success that term. “I know this sounds bad [that I don’t have other successes to point to], but actually getting A’s & B’s” was his greatest success. After being lazy through his high school career and getting dismissal at college, seeing high grades gave him a strong sense of accomplishment.
Brandon does not feel like he experienced many negatives during the program. Although, he had problems with some of the other students, who “say they want to (succeed), but actually don’t. That’s one of my pet peeves. I know I sound like a hypocrite, but I really hate it when they’re going to do something, but they end up not doing it.” According to Brandon, he no longer has that problem. Now when he says he’ll do something, he does it.

Carol

Carol is a white 19-year-old female who completed the program in fall 2016. She is a first-generation student. Her father had attended a semester of college, but never finished because, “He didn’t like it. It wasn’t for him.” However, her mother followed Carol’s lead. Carol felt that since her mother had encouraged her to attend and succeed in college, she should return the favor and encouraged her mother. Her mother enrolled and began attending classes in the summer of 2017, just after Carol had been dismissed. Carol also has a younger sister who will be graduating from high school in about two years. Carol believes she is a role model for her sister. “I never expected to want to be a good role model for anyone…until I had a sister.”

Carol actually applied to and was accepted at a couple different colleges before committing to the university. One was near where her father and step-mother lived, and the other was near where her mother lived. But she only applied to universities because she felt like a disappointment after high school.

Junior high and middle school, I never got all A’s. High school, never got all A’s…to me it was a miracle that I even graduated. None of my family members went to college, and lot of them still got great jobs. And now you can’t get anything without a degree…you can’t find any form of work. And I didn’t want to be doing retail…for the rest of my life.
Yet, being a first-gen student brought a lot of stress to Carol because she had no one to talk to about what to do, when to do, or how to do. She had applied, but never even toured the university before applying. She believed that since she “got accepted into a great university…that was that. I needed to go there.”

Carol reported struggling during her first year of college.

A lot of people can ease on by in their first semester, but I am not one of them. I was not prepared for college life at all. Those high school classes where they try and set you up and tell you how much work it’s going to be and how stressful it’s going to be…that proved nothing compared to when I came here.

Her biggest concern was being successful. So, she felt very stressed when she went on probation at the end of her first semester.

Throughout high school I was always telling [my sister] to not give up on her coursework in junior high…so, when I first found out I was on probation, my immediate thoughts were “Oh my goodness, what am I going to do? Will my sister and my mother still be proud of me after all of this?

Unlike Brandon, Carol spoke with her mother when she found that she had been placed on probation. Although disappointed, Carol felt that her mother still supported her. Even though she didn’t speak directly with her sister, father, or step-mother, they all knew she was on probation. She did not tell any of her friends because she felt embarrassed. “I didn’t want them to know.” She also did not speak to anyone on campus. Early on she “realized that the advising offices were not helpful to me. They’re helpful to other students. But when it comes to my…needs, I feel as though I know what I want to take, and I know what I want to do.”

So, Carol entered her next semester on what she felt were her own terms. She only enrolled in 1000-level first-year classes and left higher-level classes alone, so she wouldn’t push
herself so hard. “I took classes that I knew, or thought I could, succeed in.” She had been taking higher-level classes because she felt she needed to “prove something, not only to myself but to my family members as well.” Carol said in her second semester, she had “decided to be a freshman.” She related that taking those lower-level classes, made a big difference for her compared to her first semester. She also decided to go to the library more, often staying until it closed. Carol said that she studied much more, but even with all these changes, she was dismissed at the end of that semester. This proved to be even more disappointing than being placed on probation because

I had tried so hard, but I didn’t see anything in return. And that was the worst part…I did a lot of self-loathing because throughout the term, I thought, if I had just studied for one more hour I could have done well on that exam. If I had just gone to the library that night instead of going to bed early. Ya know, it was a lot of reconsidering my choices.

Basically, Carol believed it was best if she kept the news of her dismissal within her household. Again, she spoke with her mother, and then she called her father. But it was harder on her because of her grandfather.

My granddad gave me tuition money because he knew that is what…my grandmother would want him to do. So, I felt like I wasted his money…it was quite a lot, and I felt like he wouldn’t be proud of me.

After the dismissal, Carol considered attending a local community college. She also thought about not going back to school at all. “It wasn’t like I was mulling it over for four or five nights…it was maybe an hour or so. And …it was a stupid idea.” Primarily because she “didn’t want to be stuck in my hometown forever like all of my other family members.” But, also because “I loved being in school, no matter how hard it got.” However, she was getting conflicting messages from her parents. Her mother was pushing her to continue with her
schooling, while her father and step-mother were pushing her to take the semester off and get a job. Her mother was definitely against that.

She’d say, “No, you know yourself better than anyone else does, even your parents.” She told me to think about what it would be like if I took that semester off. And I thought about it, and I didn’t like it. I would get used to working and making money and not having to worry about classes...I could just work up in my small retail job…and then die eventually after working 60 or 70 years at that one job.

She didn’t like that idea, nor did she like the way it made her feel. “I didn’t like the version of me that I was imagining.”

Fortunately, she then received her invitation letter to the Reclaim the W program. “I received that letter very quickly and it was a huge weight off my shoulders knowing there was still a chance for me to get back in without having to wait the semester.” Her initial concerns though, were on whether taking the class and joining the program was the right choice for her. “I was a little hesitant about it, even after talking with [the instructor] about it, for a good majority of summer. I did think it was too good to be true.” She later admitted that her biggest concern was the lack of information about the program. Yet, once she decided to apply and was accepted, she knew she had made the right decision. “Once I found out that I had definitely got back into the program…my life was set.”

Carol laughingly said she expected to get all A’s the semester she was in the support class, which would have been quite the challenge, as she had never gotten all A’s all through school. “I thought this class would guarantee me an easy grade…I thought it would help me through my other classes.” But she felt it only helped in one or two other classes, stating the others were “total curve balls that I had to figure out for myself.”
Another of her expectations for the class was to learn “to stop blaming myself for the consequences of my actions because there are things you can prevent and things you cannot. I was blaming myself for the things I could not prevent.” While she could not give a good example of this, she claimed the program helped her realize this and, for the most part, she feels she has accomplished this. But, “there are still some instances where I find myself blaming myself for the little things. And it definitely has gotten better.”

During the class, Carol made some major changes in her lifestyle. She made sure she tried every day and did not sleep in and miss class. She also changed her evening routine, by not going out with friends and staying home to study or finish a paper instead. Still, she viewed these as relatively low expectations compared to others and, at times, this led her to believe she did not think of herself as a successful person. However, the class “definitely helped me realize that I…had much more potential that I realized.”

Overall, the support class was a positive experience for Carol. She expressed the wish the instructor would have put more emphasis on relationships in the classroom. “I did make a lot of good relationships with that class…(but)…I do wish we were able to delve deeper into personal relationships.” Carol wishes there had been more interaction outside of the classroom. “I do wish we had more activities outside the class…some required thing that we had to do as well as go to class. (For example,) I do wish we could meet at the library to help each other study.”

The only negative experience Carol had in the class was that she felt there were too many students not attending every class without any consequences. This, despite the fact that “it was a class where if you showed up, it was an easy A.” She could not understand how these students, who were all in the same situation she was in — attending a second-chance class after academic dismissal — could just “blow off” the class. She felt that may have been one of the main reasons they were dismissed originally.
During that term, Carol made some serious changes in her lifestyle. She “started taking better care of herself,” both mentally and physically. She started seeing a therapist regularly and began to realize “how to remove myself from environments that I was not comfortable in, such as my old apartment.” She continued to visit the library regularly, frequently staying until it closed, to the point where she felt that “it became a second home to me.” Lastly, she developed what she described as an “really weird abnormal” study method with her good friend. The friend would give her a gummy bear for every page she read, “because she knows that gummy bears are my favorite candy.” She credits that study method with her passing every test she had in one particular class. “I don’t understand it, but it worked.”

Carol now is much less stressed than she was when she started classes. And she has a new goal — a friendly competition with her mother. Her mother has started to double-up and take two classes each semester instead of just one. But Carol wants to be the first to graduate. “I was the first one in my family to attend class. I need to be the first to graduate.”

**Denise**

Denise is a white female, aged 20. She completed the program in the third year that it was offered. Her home was on the east side of lower Michigan. Denise is a Criminal Justice major, which she hopes leads to a career as a conservation or Department of Natural Resources (DNR) officer.

Denise was actually surprised and confused when she was notified she was placed on probation at the end of her first semester. She stated that she felt she “did good in all my classes except one.” Her probation was especially surprising given that she “never got less than a 3.0 [in high school].” But she accepted her probation as a challenge. “Getting on academic probation
was pretty big for me. But it was basically just telling me that I really need to get my act together.”

Like many first-year students, Denise had been prone to doing her assignments at the last minute, cramming for tests the day before, and skipping classes. Her experience in high school was “you can skip a week and still know what’s going on.” But she found that college was quite different. “You miss one day in college and you’re lost.”

She discussed her probation with only two people – her roommate and her mother. Both of them basically gave Denise the same response, but in significantly different terms. While both of them said she could do better, her roommate, who has since become her best friend, told her, “You’re just being lazy and slacking.” Denise admitted this was true, yet difficult to hear. Her mother phrased it as knowing she has more potential and could do better.

Denise knew that probation was not a good thing, but the severity of it she did not realize right away. During the term following being placed on probation, Denise changed some of her habits. She spent more time on her homework and tried to attend class more regularly. But missing class “continued to be a problem” primarily due to a “big lack of motivation.” This lack of motivation contributed to her academic dismissal the following term.

Because she was not completely motivated, Denise felt sure she was going to be dismissed. But once she actually received the notification, she realized that dismissal was a much bigger issue for her than probation. “I was pretty disappointed” and felt the dismissal was “a shock to me…I was pretty embarrassed.” Due to her embarrassment, she did not want to discuss this with anyone, especially her brother. Denise remembered her brother speaking disparagingly of his friends who were kicked out of college when he attended, and her thoughts were, “Here I am getting kicked out.” However, even though she was “embarrassed and disappointed” with her dismissal, Denise began to put to her plans into effect. These were plans she had begun to make
prior to her dismissal. Her primary plan was to attend a local community college, get her grade point back up, and reapply to the university. One alternative she considered was to move back home and attend a community college back there. Either of these, she viewed as a cost savings, due to lower tuition at a community college. Moving back home would save additional money. “That way I’m not paying for an apartment…or anything.” But she also realized that either of these plans meant “I wasn’t coming back to the university.”

After dismissal, Denise’s first conversations were with her mother. These were very difficult conversations. “My mom was obviously not happy.” But her mother was more reassured when Denise said she had a plan and had already applied to the local community college. Denise’s conversation was even shorter with her friend. The friend’s only response to learning of Denise’s dismissal was “That sucks.” Denise was so embarrassed. She never told her friend what her actual GPA was. Her friend’s hovered around 3.0, and Denise’s was below 2.0.

Denise did have one additional conversation that she did not have after her probation. Her father opened the letter regarding the dismissal and was understandably confused because he was not even aware of the probation. But his comments were similar to her mother’s. He told Denise to “get your act together.” What made all these conversations so embarrassing and disappointing for Denise was that her friend, mother, and father all knew, as well as she did, that she could do better. She began to think, “It doesn’t matter I got kicked out. I’m just going to save more and go to [a local community college].”

This changed when she received the invitation letter from the Reclaim the W program. Denise reported that she was pretty excited to apply even though she wasn’t sure what the program actually was. All she knew was that she had the possibility of “a second chance.” She wrote the required essay explaining what happened and what she would change. When she was accepted into the program, she “was really excited.” Unlike the limited number of conversations
she had after being on probation and being dismissed, when she was accepted into the program, Denise talked to “everybody!” These conversations were much different, as was her entire attitude. “Yeah, I got kicked out because I was being lazy…but I got re-accepted, so I’ll be working a lot harder.” Her acceptance was both relieving and motivating for Denise. “I was really determined to come back…I’m going to show everybody I can do this…and I’m going to graduate.” To accomplish this, Denise determined to “go to class every day” and to “really pay attention in this [support] class” and regularly attend the support class and all of her classes.

The support class was not at all what Denise expected. “It had more like a class structure…where I thought it was going to be more of…like a study hour like you had in high school, where they just help you with your homework.” But she found it much more helpful, by teaching skills to enhance time management, organization, and not waiting until the last minute to begin assignments. “There’s a lot in there that I’ve actually used...like writing on the calendar and in your planner. And when to start things AND when to work on it, [and] when it’s actually due.”

Using these skills proved beneficial to Denise. She passed all of her classes both the semester she took the support class and the next semester. To accomplish that, she used the time management skills she had learned, and she “made sure to turn in all assignments on time, which was a major problem of mine leading up to my dismissal.” Part of her success was due to allowing time to “work on assignments while also allowing time for proof reading and asking questions.” She also did not skip classes. She knew “it could lead to a lower grade and even lead to being academically dismissed again.”

Part of Denise’s issues with classes were problems with remaining focused. Since she completed the support class, she has been diagnosed with severe ADHD, and is being treated.
She feels this has also been a big part of her turn-around. Denise even feels confident enough now to enroll as a full-time online student.

Denise spoke of receiving a BA [grade between A & B] grade as “the most important academic success” she had during term she returned. This contributed to a semester GPA of 2.5, “which was my best GPA at the time in college.” Two terms later, she “finished one of my courses with an A and received a (semester) GPA of 3.25, which has been my biggest success” since completing the program. When she received these grades, she couldn’t wait to share them with her mother.

I was shocked at how well I had done and shed some very happy tears. I couldn’t wait to share my academic success with my mom because she has always been my biggest motivator and making her proud is one of my biggest goals.

Denise has two additional goals. One is to “graduate college with at least a 3.0 GPA” leading to training courses for her career. The other goal is raising the baby she is expecting at any time.

**Marshall**

Marshall is a 21-year-old male student of mixed race. He is also the only student in this study who was not dismissed at the end of his first year. He was dismissed at the end of his second year, or the end of his fourth term. Marshall had gone on probation at the end of his first semester, but his grades improved, so he went off probation at the end of his second term. Unfortunately, he slid back and returned to probation again at his third semester and was dismissed at the end of his fourth semester. Unlike his classmates who entered the program in their third semester, Marshall entered the program in his fifth semester, during the fall of 2016.

Marshall had not struggled in high school. In fact, he “skated through high school. No problem, ya know, 29 ACT, 3.33 GPA.” After taking AP classes in high school, he began college
with 13 credits. He expected classes would be just as easy for him, but found they were not exactly what he expected. He began college thinking, “college is gonna be a breeze. And man, it hit like a truck. Ha…I didn’t know how to study.”

When he entered the university in the fall of 2014, Marshall had not decided which program to enter, so he entered as undecided. He eventually decided on Computer Science (CS) after being advised by university admissions that, since he was undecided, “it’s probably going to take you like six years.” His original plan was to complete his degree in four to five years. But, because he chose a program in an effort to avoid attending for six years, he chose a program he did not really like and had little interest in pursuing. During our interviews, he recognized the irony of choosing a program in an attempt to avoid attending for six years, and that he most likely will end up attending at least six years because of that decision.

Marshall considers himself to be “a pretty creative person.” But also feels “intimidated by creativity because there’s no rules and you can do whatever you want,” which was why he chose Computer Science. There was the creative side, but with specific limitations. He felt it was the best of both worlds because you can literally make whatever you want. But, because you are coding, you have to follow certain rules. So, it’s infinite creativity with rules. So, I was like, “maybe that’s a good balance,” plus there’s big money.

Unfortunately, the Computer Science program wasn’t what he hoped it would be. “It felt like some of the professors were not in the realm of teaching you. They were more in the realm of ‘let’s hone the skills of the people who know what they’re doing’.” He realized that he was a student who “had minimalistic knowledge, so I definitely needed to be taught.” Coupled with the fact that “college hit like a truck,” Marshall was placed on probation.
In the next term, in an effort to improve his GPA, Marshall retook two of his Computer Science classes. Some of his friends who had moved on to the next classes helped him understand the material and he passed those classes. This improved his GPA, and it was now high enough that he was able to get off of probation following the spring semester.

Things reverted in the next fall term, and Marshall was placed back on probation at the end of the term. He had taken a couple more CS classes and passed them. But he did not pass them with a high enough grade to be able to remain in the CS program. Still struggling, Marshall did not want to “go full withdrawal because at that point, I would have not been making satisfactory academic progress, and I’d have to start paying back my student loans.” So, in an effort to avoid having to drop all of his classes, Marshall dropped two classes, which left him with just two general education classes. However, he felt he could only focus his efforts on one of the two classes, letting the other class go “because it wasn’t mathematically possible” to pass that class. So, he “was basically taking one class at that point.”

At that point, he changed his major to Business, but still with an undecided focus. He didn’t “know why I didn’t think about that (before). I was more business-minded anyway.” Marshall’s parents are divorced and during high school, he would split his time staying with one or the other. When he was staying with his father, he would come home after school, and they would “watch the closing bell of the stock market.” This was his favorite activity with his father. Together they would watch world news and the stock market and make purchasing decisions. “That was what made me go, ‘I need to go business (as a major).’”

However, during this semester, he also had serious issues with his roommate, who was dealing drugs among other things. The roommate ended up being arrested, but the end of this distraction came too late for Marshall to recover his grades. Continuing Computer Science as a
major and having problems with the classes, as well as the issues with his roommate, led to him being placed on probation the second time at the end of the fall term.

After going on probation for the second time, Marshall talked to his advisor “trying to figure out ways to make it work.” He felt comfortable because he had been on probation once before and felt he knew the process. After talking to his advisor, Marshall also talked to his girlfriend and parents. The message from each was consistent, “Get your ass in gear.” This didn’t bother him too much coming from the advisor because he felt that was part of the job, or coming from his girlfriend because she was his girlfriend. However, he felt differently hearing it from his parents.

With my mom and dad…wanted to slap them. Because it was…it was all my fault and I knew it was all my fault…I’m a 19-year-old. I’m an adult…I know it’s my fault. I’m taking responsibility. I don’t need you to keep shoving it down my throat.

He was quite defiant when being talked to by others, but was very hard on himself and told himself, “What you’re doing is stupid.” Because he was on probation at that time and still struggling, Marshall knew his semester GPA was going to be less than 2.0, and he knew dismissal was coming. “But I hated it. I hated getting the letter.” What made it worse was at the time, he was staying at his mother’s home. But his primary address was his father’s house and his father received the dismissal letter. “I knew it was coming. But they didn’t know it was coming. So, I definitely act like it was a surprise.” Marshall told he parents he was frustrated and would talk to an advisor. In reality, he left the house and instead of going to campus to see his advisor, he went and played disc golf for a couple hours. But when he returned, he told his parents that he had been to the advisor, and said the advisor told him what his options were and what he could and couldn’t do. Although, he had known about his options for a while, he acted like he just found out.
Marshall said the dismissal letter removed all of his hope. He told himself, “this is officially real, like you’re out.” The reaction from his parents made it worse. His dad told Marshall he was very disappointed, and his Mom yelled. In an effort to calm them, he told his parents he was accepted at a community college located in the same city as the university. He also talked to his younger brother, saying he had always looked up to brother, primarily because he had “a better head on his shoulders.” During the talk with his brother, Marshall started crying, “I was a mess.” Later, he talked to his girlfriend. She had known it was coming because they had been looking for apartments, but he suggested they wait. Although she was upset when it actually happened, she was supportive, assuring him, “You’ll make it.”

After being dismissed, Marshall considered a number of options. Among these choices, Marshall considered attending one of two different community colleges. One was near his mother and father. The other was in the same city as the university where he would live with his girlfriend. He also considered becoming a tool & die worker like his father. But after spending a day job-shadowing his father, Marshall decided he didn’t want that kind of work, having to get up at 5:30 every morning.

Then he received the invitation letter to the program. He wrote his essay and was accepted. The first thing he did was call his brother and his girlfriend. Being accepted, and being able to share that news, made Marshall “feel great.” He entered the program with two simple expectations of himself. He also felt the class was designed to give students a boost and to help improve their grade point, so his second expectation of himself was getting an A in the class, saying, “If I don’t walk away with an A, I’m gonna kick myself.” The other expectation was not disappointing others, including the person who believed in him when he applied for the program, I didn’t know if it was the person teaching my class. I didn’t know if it was the janitor who walked by, who’s actually in…undercover boss mode. And he’s actually the
president of the business college. I don’t know. But somebody saw something that they believed in me. I can’t let them down.

Marshall had one simple expectation of program – help him get to the point “where I won’t fail.” After so many starts and stops, and steps forward followed by steps backward, Marshall wanted to continue moving forward. He realized the problem was his. “The university offers so many resources (to help students) that I just don’t take advantage of…like…this is my fourth year here. I went to the communications center for the first time.”

Because he had taken an “academic recovery” class after his first time on probation, he was worried that this class “was going to be a lot of stuff from the first (class).” Because the class is “designed to give you an A,” Marshall was worried that he would get his “easy” A, and then after the class revert to his former habits. But his thoughts started changing during the class. It began the first day of class when he found that one of the instructors was his advisor, with whom he felt he had a good relationship. “YES! This is gonna be great! She is actually going to help me.” He found that the class was more than an easy A. He also learned study skills he had never developed and still uses them a year later.

Marshall considers the A received in that class, his first college A, as his greatest academic success.

Even though it was in a class designed to give you an A, it definitely felt good to actually see the big boy on the transcript. When I look at my (transcript) semester by semester, I see C’s and D’s…the next semester I see a CB and C’s and (quietly) some D’s…and then that semester that I got my first A, no D’s! A CB is the lowest I think I got that semester. Then…two B’s.
The following semester he received similar grades, but did receive one D. “That was my fault…I refused to do a particular assignment every week because I felt it was not necessary. And that ended up costing me.” He’s retaking that class and is on track to get an A.

Overall, Marshall says this experience has made him more confident and less likely to back slide into the habits he had fallen into before. “It could happen…but for me, I can’t let it happen. It can only go up. I can’t let myself mess up again. I refuse to do so.”

**Summary**

The five students who agreed to participate in this study had striking commonalities, but also had many differences. All five were from the Midwest. Three were from Michigan, one from Ohio and one from Illinois. Each participant entered the university as a traditional student enrolling right after completing high school, were 18-years-old, unmarried with no dependents, and only employed part-time.

Among the commonalities each student was admitted to the program immediately following academic dismissal. They then successfully completed the support class and showed academic progress during their first term back. They also agreed to be interviewed as part of this study. Each also showed a willingness to be open and provide answers which contributed to and helped identify both confirming and emerging themes. These students also readily provided information to me they hadn’t always shared with others including family members.

Although there were commonalities, there was a difference in majors. Their majors included aviation maintenance, aviation flight science (studying to be a pilot), criminal justice, English, and business. While all three of the female students were white, both male students were of mixed race of two different mixes. But there was also one glaring difference. The greatest difference was in how and with whom they communicated following dismissal and acceptance into the program. With the exception of Brandon, each discussed their dismissal and future plans
with family and friends. Brandon never told anyone he had been dismissed or reaccepted.

Overall, the differences and similarities between the students provided rich detail and data.
CHAPTER V
RESULTS

The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of traditional college students who were readmitted through an institution-initiated process. During the first semester of their re-enrollment, these students participated in an intrusive support class in addition to their regular classes as part of the Reclaim the W program. The data for this study were collected over a period of six months in 2017, using personal interviews of five college students who experienced these events at Western Michigan University. This chapter presents findings that will be used to answer the research questions: 1) How do students’ experiences inform their decision to re-apply? 2) How do students interpret the invitation from the university to re-apply after academic dismissal? and 3) How do students make meaning of no mandatory waiting period? 4) How do their experiences in the Reclaim the W program shape students’ goals?

Using Saldaña’s (2013) Cycles of Coding, each interview was then coded and analyzed. Several themes were identified from those interviews. Three of the themes confirm existing research: Causes Leading to Academic Dismissal, Reactions to Academic Dismissal, and Factors Contributing to Subsequent Success. Two others represent emerging themes, touching new areas of research into academically dismissed and reinstated students and their subsequent success: Reactions to An Invitation and Acceptance into the Reclaim the W program, and Reactions to the No Waiting Period. A third emerging theme was the observations students made specific to the Reclaim the W program.

Table 3 lists each theme with a brief description or list of their respective sub-themes.
Table 3

*Themes Identified from Interviews*

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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
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<td>Causes Leading to Academic Dismissal</td>
<td>Being Un- or Under-Prepared Impact of Outside Influences Lack of Understanding Regarding Probation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reactions to Academic Dismissal</td>
<td>Shame and Embarrassment Impact to Relationships Alternatives for the Future</td>
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<td>Reactions to An Invitation and Acceptance into the Reclaim the W program</td>
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<td>Attending Classes Every Day More Time at the Library Better Organization / Time Management Improved Study Habits Personal Changes</td>
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<td>Observations About the Reclaim the W program from Students</td>
<td>Incorporation of Planning Tools Student Accountability Increased Personal Connections</td>
<td>Emerging</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Each theme, along with the corresponding sub-themes, is described in more detail below with highlights including key points from the student’s experiences, using quotes to support the themes.

**Theme I: Causes Leading to Academic Dismissal**

There were no new themes discovered regarding causes leading to academic dismissal. The three causes identified by the students seemed to fall into a common pattern of being un- or under-prepared for the rigor of college, the negative impact of outside influences, and not being
aware of the severity of being on probation. These causes are consistent with existing knowledge regarding this problem.

**Subtheme: Being Un- or Under-Prepared**

The students offered a variety of explanations for their lack of preparation. For example, Denise simply didn’t work at being successful in college. “I treated [tests] like high school tests. I’d study the day before and be like, ‘Oh, I’ve got this,’ and then I’d get to the test and was like, ‘Oh, my gosh.’ I’d first got [into academic trouble] in the class that you’re only graded on four tests. So, that wasn’t very good planning for that class.”

Despite having taken college-prep classes in high school, Carol found she was not as prepared for college as she had hoped to be.

I was not prepared for college life at all. Those high school classes where they try and set you up…and tell you how much work it’s going to be, and how stressful it’s going to be…and what advising offices are going to be like. That proved nothing compared to when I came here.

Brandon felt under-prepared, and he just ran out of time adjusting to college. “At the time [I was placed on probation], I was still getting used to the college environment.” He was “one of the people that…would say they would do something and not do it.” He was referring to studying and talking to his advisor when he began to feel like he was in academic trouble.

**Subtheme: Impact of Outside Influences**

Three participants identified strong outside influences that affected their studies or the time that they could have been focused on school and schoolwork. Each eventually realized the influences were creating distractions that were detrimental to their studies and their grades, but the realization came too late in the semester to correct the problem and improve their grades and GPA. While each experienced a strong outside influence, the experience of each was unique.
For example, Brandon was influenced by the crowd of friends he was part of. He didn’t really begin to study or ask for help until the middle of his second semester. That was when he finally told himself to, “Wake up, dammit.” Part of waking up for Brandon was realizing he also was with the wrong friends.

The people I was hanging out with…weren’t the exact best people to hang out with. They would just stay in their room. They’d be part of the vaping stuff [electronic cigarettes]. They didn’t go to class or anything. They’d stay in their room and play video games and stuff. It wasn’t ‘til the spring semester where I realized these guys are idiots. I was like, “Ok, I may be an idiot, but I ain’t that type of idiot.”

So, he changed his study habits and found a new roommate, but it was too far into the semester for his changes to impact his work and provide high enough grades to raise his GPA above the threshold needed to avoid dismissal.

Marshall had a roommate that was dealing drugs and ended up being arrested. The setup of their dorm room was different than the typical two-room setup, where the room off the hall is used as a living or study room. The second room, which can only be reached by walking through the first room, is typically used as the bedroom. In Marshall’s case, the room off the hall was designated as his and the second room was his roommate’s. So, anyone wanting to reach the roommate, whether it was another student, someone buying drugs, or the police, had to walk through Marshall’s room. Multiple times he considered moving but kept putting it off. So, the distractions continued until the roommate was eventually arrested. But it was too late in the semester for Marshall too recover and improve his GPA to avoid dismissal.

Having a roommate raped during the week before classes begin and that roommate being suicidal forced Abbie to make some major decisions even before the semester began. One was to forego her own studies to help her friend. By the time she realized that she was not physically or
emotionally equipped to provide the support her friend required, she was already on probation and not able to improve her grades sufficiently to avoid being dismissed.

**Subtheme: Lack of Understanding Regarding Probation**

When the students received the notification that they had been placed on probation, their reactions varied in intensity. But none felt panic or really understood that this was the first step toward potential dismissal. The notification sent to the students did not offer specific steps or contact information. The notification used phrases like, “Please refer to our website…” and “Listed below are a few of the many resources available…” It wasn’t until they were dismissed that they realized being placed on probation was serious.

Abbie was caught completely off-guard. “My immediate reaction was a complete shock...almost immediately I started making phone calls to see who I could talk to.” Denise also was surprised she had been placed on probation. “I was confused as to why I was on probation because I did good in all my classes except one.”

Brandon, on the other hand, realized, “I was in trouble (laughs).” But, he didn’t really panic or make any immediate changes. It wasn’t until the “the second half of the spring semester…until I actually [told myself] wake up, dammit” At that point, he made a change. He started “going to the library [more than I did the first term]. Which technically I did…one trip to the library is more than zero.”

However, none of the students made significant changes to their behaviors or study habits while on probation. The hours spent in studying or at the library remained low barely above the hours they spent in the same activities prior to being placed on probation.

**Theme II: Reactions to Academic Dismissal**

Although each student had experienced some level of academic success in high school, each struggled for success in college (although for different reasons), and each was ultimately
dismissed for academic failure. Being notified they had been dismissed triggered strong emotional responses in each of the students and each reacted differently to dismissal. These strong emotional responses were the first theme identified as a reaction to being dismissed.

**Subtheme: Shame and Embarrassment**

Although the students expressed a variety of emotions, ranging from simple disappointment in themselves to regret for their actions to anger, the most common emotions these students felt were shame and embarrassment. Although they shared this emotion, each described their shame or embarrassment in different ways.

After the semester ended, Abbie had stopped at her apartment to pick up her mail before going home. She found the dismissal letter. Abbie’s dismissal came as a surprise to her. “My immediate reaction was a complete shock.” As she described the experience:

I was absolutely mortified by the fact that I had…had gotten the dismissal letter. [I] opened the mail while I was sitting in the parking lot, and then I just sat there freaking out, and I was like, I can’t just stand here and freak out in a parking lot. (She laughed.) At some point, I’ve got to start making things happen… I already felt like a complete idiot because I had gotten a letter saying you’d been kicked out of school for being lazy. (She laughed again.) …I felt really dumb that I’d gotten to a point where I was already kicked out of school.

She willingly accepted responsibility for being dismissed. She knew she had reached this point due primarily to her own decision to help her roommate, but also had some doubt about the amount of effort she put forth when she wasn’t helping her roommate. “The other circumstances did not help, but I mean, I’m positive a portion of it I could have tried harder.” It was this doubt about her effort that contributed to her embarrassment. It was a combination of shame and doubt
that limited the number of people Abbie contacted after her dismissal. The only person she talked to was her advisor.

Denise, on the other hand, said she wasn’t surprised when she was dismissed, but certainly felt some shame about being dismissed. She said she had suspected that she was going to be dismissed and tried to make adjustments in her behavior and study habits, but without apparent success.

I kinda knew it was coming. And I was pretty disappointed, I wasn’t surprised or anything. But, I was pretty disappointed because I was always doing good in high school. So, it was just kind of a shock to me. And…I was pretty embarrassed. I was basically embarrassed and disappointed in myself. But…I took that emotion and I started already planning ahead before I even got dismissed.

Denise was worried about how her family and friends would react to her dismissal, so, she only talked to her best friend and her mom about it. Her mom was disappointed, but “when I told her…I already have a plan. I’m already applying to [a local community college]. She was much better. [And she said,] ‘I’m glad you are taking responsibility for it.’” Her best friend didn’t “really say much. She was just like, ‘Wow, that sucks.’”

Denise did not make any attempt to contact her father about either being placed on probation or being dismissed. But, “my dad got the letter in the mail. So that’s how he found out. And he was kind of confused because he didn’t even know I was on academic probation.” According to Denise, his only response was, “What are you going to do? Get your act together.” She also chose not to tell her brother. In conversations Denise had with her brother while he was in college, he had always spoken disparagingly about his friends who had been dismissed. “And here I am getting kicked out. I was like, just basically embarrassed and disappointed in myself.”
Carol wasn’t surprised either to find she had been dismissed, but she had hoped for the best while she expected the worst.

I remember, I was at my mom’s house and I was like, “I should check my email and find if grades have been posted.” And I checked my grades, and for a minute there, I couldn’t breathe.

Much of what worried and embarrassed Carol about failing was also the fact that she was a first-generation college student, “Being the first in my family to go to school really brought a lot of stress …I felt like I was a family disappointment.” But still, she called her mom after learning she had been dismissed.

I called my mom, and for a minute I couldn’t talk to her because I was crying so hard. And she ended up coming home [from work], and we talked about what I was going to do next because at that very moment, it seemed I was not going back to school, and I would not return [to the university].

Brandon was also aware that he was going to be dismissed but was angry, mainly with himself. While he expected to be dismissed, until the very end, he hoped it wouldn’t happen. “I was like, ‘Oh, shit.’ Because like I said before, I was expecting it… you’re expecting it, but…you really, really don’t want to hear the truth about it.” But once it happened, he felt so embarrassed, he never told anyone he had been dismissed, including his parents.

The only thing that they (his parents) mentioned is that I didn’t do well in my first year. But then again, they’re like very criticizing…especially for me. Because I’m…what do you call it…cause I’m the older child…and my mom says a lot, the hamster…and so basically, my mistakes get passed on to my sister. As…they know…Ok, don’t do what your brother did. (He laughed as he said this.)
Marshall also knew he was going to be dismissed, and he actually experienced a wider range of emotions himself than the other students. His communication with his parents was also quite different and less open than the other students, who had spoken with one or both of their parents.

When I got dismissed, I knew it was coming, umm…but I hated…I hated getting the letter. I was actually at my mom’s house when [the letter arrived, but] it went to my dad’s because that’s my primary address. So, my dad opens the mailbox, sees the letter from Western…(acting as if he is reading the letter) “Dear guy, you’ve been academically dismissed. Due to whatever…blah…blah.” So, dad calls me. I knew it was coming, but they didn’t know it was coming. So, I definitely act like it was a surprise. And I was pissed. Then I was super frustrated.

Most of his frustration centered around the fact that he had entered school with so many credits that he could have been a junior after one year. But due to being placed on probation twice, he was still a freshman after attending college for two years.

**Subtheme: Impact to Relationships**

Being dismissed impacted many of the relationships these students had with others. For a couple, it impacted their relationship with their families positively. Each of the female students spoke with their mother. While the students felt they had disappointed their families, each felt these discussions helped the relationship. For example, Carol “talked to my mom…she was the one I was afraid about disappointing.” She feels this actually helped her bond with her mom, thus making the relationship stronger.

For the male students, the impact was much less positive. Brandon never told his parents that he had been dismissed. Even though he never actually discussed his dismissal, the dismissal did impact the relationship with his parents, specifically with his father. After having kept the
stress inside he, “let it all out because I had been bottling it inside…I just went at it as my dad…I did nothing physical. I just started yelling at him.” But afterwards, his dad seems to understand. “You had to let it out.” In a similar fashion, Marshall’s relationship was also less than positive. “With my mom and dad, [I] wanted to slap them.” He did not attempt to blame anyone and accepted the responsibility. But, he resented his parents’ response. “I know it’s my fault. I’m taking responsibility. I don’t need [my parents] to keep shoving it down my throat.”

Dismissal impacted one other relationship—the relationship the students had with their advisors. Abbie and Brandon are both in an aviation program and both contacted the program advisor over their own advisor. Abbie “felt she was more competent at these types of situations.” While Brandon, contacted the aviation advisor because of his previous experience with his advisor. During his second term, he was fairly confident that he was going to be dismissed. So, he contacted his regular advisor, explaining he is probably going to be dismissed at the end of the semester. He was old, “with your current grades...you’ll do fine.” But when he actually was dismissed, he contacted the advisor again and was told, “Oh, I thought that your grades were better than that…I don’t think I can help you.” Brandon obviously agreed and now only works with the program advisor.

**Subtheme: Alternatives for the Future**

The dismissal forced the students to reevaluate and look ahead to their futures. This brought the second theme from students being dismissed. Once they moved past their initial reaction to the dismissal, the students almost immediately began making alterative plans. This is the one area where the five students followed similar paths, had similar thoughts, and made similar decisions. There was little variation. Four of the students looked at attending a local community college during the semester they would have been required to sit out. This was the
“go-to” plan for each of the four. At the same time, all four of them also considered not returning to school, but just getting a job. This option was universally rejected.

Denise considered leaving school and just working before rejecting that idea. “I basically knew if I went home and did that, I wasn’t coming back to the university. So, I was like, that’s not happening.” She then decided to attend the local community college during the off time, the semester she was required to sit out.

I took that emotion and I started already planning ahead before I even got dismissed. And was applying to [the local community college] and had a plan to do classes there and then re-apply at [the university].

Carol briefly considered but rejected working almost immediately. She looked at different types of jobs she could possibly get and didn’t like what she saw, especially since she was working in retail while she was a student.

I didn’t want to be doing retail. I do retail. So, I didn’t want to be doing retail for the rest of my life. Ummm…and going back towards working hard and not seeing anything in return…I (pause) I was…my first thought was I’m never doing this again. Ummm…my first thought was to not to go back to school…because I didn’t want to repeat this. You know, academic failure. (But) it was very brief that I considered not going back to school. It wasn’t like I was mulling it over for four days and five nights…it was, maybe, an hour or so, and I was, like, it’s a stupid idea. I loved being in school no matter how hard it got. So, after rejecting the option of work, Carol considered attending another college. But, instead of just looking at community colleges, she also considered two other universities.

Like the others before considering attending another college, Marshall also thought about working instead of returning to college.
I job shadowed [my father] one day and said, “Forget this. I’m not doing this. How have you been getting up at 5:00 am for the last like 25 years? Bump that, I’m not doing this.” [But, my dad] was like, “You can work third shift.” Nooooo…No, I don’t want to do this anyway at all. At that point, I was like this dude Flo-Rida [a hip-hop artist], and we can be career delivery drivers [reference to song lyrics]. And we can just do that for the rest of our lives. (At which point he laughed, knowing that was not an option.)

So, like his fellow students, Marshall considered attending a local community college, but had to decide between two different possible schools. Since his parents were living in separate cities, and there was a community college in each city, he had to decide which one to attend.

Because according to my advisor, I was told if I was going to come back to Western, I have to take a full class load semester and have a 2.5 or 3-point average. I can’t remember which it was. She was very specific about full load. Because at first, she was, “Take a semester and get this.” And I was like, “Question…if I take one class and get an A, does that count?” She was like, “No.”

So, at that point, Marshall began to plan to attend one of the two community colleges. His choice would have been primarily based on who he lived with during the summer. His parents, although they were divorced, lived in the same city. Marshall considered the community college located in that city. However, he also considered the community college located in the same city as the university where he would live with his girlfriend.

Abbie was the only one of the five to not consider working instead of attending classes. Her thoughts were focused completely on having no break in her classes. So, she took the thought of attending the local community college one step further than the others by actually attending classes over the summer and not waiting for the off-time in the fall. Her thinking was,
If I did a semester there because they told me that would be about the off-time. And then I’d have to re-apply. So, I figured, you know, if I did that community college and I kinda bust through on that one, I can re-submit. But I really didn’t want to have a lapse at being at [the university]. Even if, technically, I had been dismissed at that point.

Abbie thought that if she attended summer and fall (the off-time), then she would be able to reapply for winter without a break. While she began attending classes over the summer, she received her invitation to apply to the Reclaim the W program and, after being accepted, was able to take classes in the fall back at the university.

Theme III: Reactions to Invitation and Acceptance into Reclaim the W

Before the fall term arrived, each student received the invitation to re-apply as part of the program. Although a couple students believed the invitation came within days of their dismissal letter, the university waited two weeks before mailing the invitation letters. Their responses to this invitation, and the ensuing class, bring out the next major theme: Reactions to the invitation and acceptance into the Reclaim the W program, with sub-themes of emotional responses (again), increase in motivation or determination, and changes in communication.

Subtheme: Positive Emotional Response

Being invited to apply for re-admission so soon after being academically dismissed, and eventually being accepted into Reclaim the W, created emotional responses as passionate as the emotional responses to their academic dismissal – but the emotions were quite different. The words each student used to describe their acceptance into the program were all slightly different. Yet, each portrayed similar themes of hope and of receiving a second chance to succeed.

In fact, four of the five students welcomed this invitation stating that it gave them a chance. For Abbie, Carol and Brandon, it was “a second chance.” While Marshall said he had
“another chance.” Abbie felt “general relief, that meant a contingency for me…I got my second chance.” Brandon viewed his second chance as a “shining light of hope (and) a clean slate.”

Of the five, only Carol felt any hesitation about applying for the program. Her concerns were based on the lack of information regarding the program. “I think what held me back immediately was the fact that there wasn’t much [information] on it. I would have loved [to have] heard about the successes of other students before I determined my own.” But once she received her acceptance, she knew “my life was set. I was going back.”

**Subtheme: Increase in Determination/Motivation**

One of the emerging subthemes from this study was the change in participants’ motivation, specifically their increased determination to succeed. Their acceptance into Reclaim the W appeared to increase each student’s resolve to continue and to succeed in the program, and in school generally. Each student felt an increase in determination or motivation to continue and succeed after receiving the invitation to reapply and being accepted into the program. For them, it was an opportunity to reverse their perceived failure as evidenced by their dismissal. They knew that success would require additional effort and focus on their part.

Once she was accepted into the program, Abbie stated her path to success very directly, “I need to put my head down and get to work.” She had no illusions about what it would take or who had the responsibility. She knew it was her task to complete and she accepted that responsibility.

Denise also had the determination to continue and succeed. But she also recognized that it wasn’t going to happen automatically or miraculously. She had to take the proper steps to ensure that she succeeded in the class, the program, and school. “I need to go to class every day, I need to pay attention in class…and just get motivated to go [every day].”
Each accepted the responsibility of succeeding for themselves. Although Marshall accepted the responsibility for his success, he was also afraid of disappointing someone. But he didn’t really know who that someone was. All he knew was that someone trusted him enough to believe he could succeed in the program. He was determined to succeed this time because he told himself,

“Somebody’s watching you, man. Don’t let them down.” I can let myself down…because I can justify it to myself. Gonna feel like a dummy for doing it, but I’ll be able to justify it to myself. But, the number one thing that makes me hate myself…is when I disappointed those that believed in me.

This increased his need to succeed, not only for himself, but in order not to disappoint the person or people who showed trust in his ability to succeed.

Whether their goal was to graduate, to make their family proud or simply to not disappoint themselves, each student showed a new determination after being accepted into Reclaim the W.

Subtheme: Changes in Communication

As would be expected, the conversations the students had after their acceptance into the program were much more pleasant and less stressful than those they had regarding their dismissal. Where the dismissal had been embarrassing and caused the students to limit who they talked to (if they even chose to talk to anyone), their acceptance into Reclaim the W brought an entirely different mindset about communication to most of them.

When she had been dismissed, Denise had only spoken to her mom and her best friend. “[It] was like, wow, just embarrassing.” But after being accepted into the program, Denise felt quite different about discussing school with others. During the interview, I asked her, “Who did you talk to about being accepted [into the program]? The same two people? Or…” She
interrupted my question to say, “Everybody! I talked to everybody! I was like, I got kicked out. But, I get to go back. I got a second chance.”

Marshall’s change in communication duplicated Denise’s. He was working delivering pizzas and using his phone for mapping his deliveries. While he was checking directions at a stoplight, he noticed he had received an email from the university. “I was, like, joy…ecstatic…all the good emotions. Almost crashed my car, not gonna lie.” Then, after he read the email, “I texted my girlfriend and my brother first. I knew they were both at work. It was about 6:00 [in the evening], I think, I knew my dad was out of work, so I called him…and I called my mom right after.”

The only student who did not open up about being accepted into Reclaim the W was Brandon. He decided not to tell anyone, since he had told no one he had been dismissed. In fact, when his father inquired about the acceptance letter, Brandon told him he had been accepted into a writing class.

**Theme IV: Reactions to No Waiting Period**

Each of these students had originally received a letter from the university informing them they had been academically dismissed. The letter further explained that part of the process of re-application required them to sit out for an academic term. Then shortly after, usually within two weeks, they received a second letter from the university, which included the invitation to re-apply and an explanation that, if their application was approved and they were accepted into Reclaim the W, they could return the next semester without having to sit out.

**Subtheme: Strong Feeling of Relief**

As would be expected, the possibility to return without having to wait for an academic semester generated strong emotional response and a sense of relief in these students. After having spent approximately two weeks agonizing over their dismissal and evaluating different
options for their futures by trying to decide between work and attending a second institution, each of the students was grateful for the opportunity to re-apply to the university that had dismissed them. They understood that being accepted into Reclaim the W meant they could return without sitting out, and they felt relief they could continue their studies uninterrupted at their original university.

Because she had known she was going to be dismissed, Abbie planned ahead and enrolled at her local community college for the summer. “I knew that if I took that semester off, I wouldn’t come back to school.” Then, she received the invitation. For her, “that meant a contingency for me. My initial concern [about being dismissed] was having a lapse in my schooling.” As it worked out, she did not have a lapse. By attending the local community college over the summer, she went straight through the summer into fall where she was able to continue after having been accepted into the program. She has continued attending year-round since then and just graduated last summer.

For Brandon, not having to sit out a term meant something even more important for him. “It meant that…I know it’s really bad to say, but it meant hey, if I get accepted in this [program], it’s just like any school year. Nobody would notice anything.” Since he had never told his parents about being dismissed, and still hasn’t, no waiting period meant that his parents would just think he took the summer off, as normal.

Between the time she received her dismissal letter, and the time she received the invitation letter, Carol had a very stressful time wondering if she should attend community college or not. Receiving the invitation and the potential to return to school in the fall, Carol interpreted as a sign that she was destined to continue school and keep attending until she graduated.
It...sort of meant everything. It meant a lot to me. I spent the summer reevaluating everything I’ve learned being here. And did a lot of self-loathing because throughout the academic term, I thought, if I had just studied for one more hour I could have done well in that exam. If I had just gone to the library that night instead of going to bed early. Ya know, it was lot of reconsidering of my choices, and (pause) this just…this just felt like a ummm...(pause)...like I said, too good to be true. But this just felt like…a sign I should be back in school because I was considering not going. It just felt like a sign. And I wanted to…(pause)...I understood the weight of my decisions very quickly. Over the summer, and…this letter meant everything to me because it meant that I could have another chance at succeeding and making my family proud.

Denise was happy to receive the invitation and also felt more motivated to continue and succeed.

I was just relieved and…I mean, obviously, my plans [to attend the local community college] were out the window…(laughs)...I was ready to go back. I was really determined to come back. So…I have a lot more motivation just from getting that saying I could re-apply right away. It gave me this like excitement for school and I’m like…I’m going to show everybody I can do this, and I’m not going to get kicked out. And I’m going to graduate.

Consistency and practicality is what the lack of a waiting period meant to Marshall. His first response at being dismissed was that he might enjoy having a semester off or, at least, not attend the University.

That made me feel great, man. I was looking at it was the only positive of [being dismissed] was having to do a semester off, or a semester at a different university or community college was for this semester is gonna be cheap…this is gonna be nice…my
student loans will take care of all the tuition. That was my mentality when I was like, alright, I’ve got to go to community college this fall. So, then when they said I could come back in the fall…I was like, Yes! I can stay. I don’t have to do…part here…part here to get the degree from here. I’m gonna be back. Everything is gonna be great.

**Theme V: Factors Contributing to Subsequent Success**

Each student took something away from the support class they attended as part of the Reclaim the W program. For a couple, it was a change in attitude toward school or studying. For others, it was a change in habits. But, all of them credit Reclaim the W with contributing to their changing behaviors and subsequent success in school.

**Subtheme: Attending Classes Every Day**

Abbie admitted she experienced a change in her attitude toward school in general, which lead to her change in behavior.

As the semester went on…it was an attitude change. This is what I have to do. I told myself I couldn’t skip any classes…it’s just like homework. If I miss one assignment, I’m gonna miss more assignments. I will because I justify it to myself, like, I didn’t [do it] the one time, and I was fine. World didn’t fall apart…that’s fine. And I know I’ll justify to myself. Well, I know I do it. That’s the worst part. So, if I miss a class, I’m like, you only missed one class this semester…it’s fine. Hey, you’ve only missed two classes this semester…it’s fine. Well, you’ve missed so much of the class anyways, there’s no point going now. I don’t want to get to that point at the end of the semester.

She did not reach the point of saying there was no point in going because she had missed too many classes. She made a conscious effort to attend every class session for every class. And that attitude and determination continued all the way through to her graduation.
Denise had a similar change in attitude and behavior. She realized that she could be successful in college, but it would take change on her part. Much of this realization she credits to the Reclaim the W program, where her initial doubts changed into positive thoughts and actions. My thoughts changed drastically throughout the course and have continued to change for the better. Once I was actually in Reclaim the W, I didn’t really see how it was going to help me. But, by the end of it, I realized it does help…a lot. I definitely studied a lot more. I spent more time on my homework and I went to class a lot more. The first semester I skipped a lot, which continued to be a problem until the last semester. I’ve realized in college, you’ve got to go to class or you’re not going to do good. My thoughts changed drastically throughout the course and have continued to change for the better.

Subtheme: More Time at the Library

A couple of the students also mentioned that their attitude toward the library changed over the semester they took the support class. Brandon, especially, cited the library as one of his new habits. The library was not one of the places where Brandon spent much time even when he was living on campus in his first year. Although he moved off-campus after his acceptance into the program, he realized visiting the library was a necessity. But he also knew it would take a conscious effort on his part to go.

Living off campus, I knew at the beginning of the year, I’d go home and stay there. So, (now) I just stay at the library to do whatever I needed to do. I dedicated my Sundays to come to the library and work. Yeah, been here a lot of times. I’ve even like unofficially designated my own seat in the library. I go up to the area where I study and somebody’s sitting there…I’m like, “what the hell, man? You’re sitting in my seat.”
Subtheme: Better Organization/Time Management

Another skill students gained from the class was being better organized, which contributed to better time management. During the interviews, the students didn’t mention being overwhelmed by the time required for college. But they did identify themselves as more being lazy or procrastinating. The class helped them realize that they control their own destinies and could change their behaviors to perform better in their classes. Carol felt this really helped her succeed.

[The class] was definitely very helpful. What they do is set you up very well for success. I was never a very organized person until this class. And I didn’t know how it would impact me at home either. [I] started organizing everything, not just my classwork. This class affected me more than I thought it would. I am very organized now. I make lists and lists and lists. And I like to cross things off. I have every month written out. It’s all color-coded and I’ve got assignments written in.

Denise expressed a similar sentiment, stating:

I learned how to manage my time. And I organized when to start my homework instead of when it’s due. I made a schedule of when to start, when to work on it, then when it was due. That helped a lot.

Marshall supported both statements. He not only changed to become more organized but learned to start his assignments earlier, so he would have more time to complete them and turn them in on-time.

I started doing my homework more often and not turning in assignments a week late.

[Before the class,] my biggest problem was more of the I’m an unorganized lazy procrastinator, and I just didn’t do the homework. This is my life now.
**Subtheme: Improved Study Habits**

While Denise and Marshall both gave specific examples of changes they made, both of them also stated in more general terms, that they developed better study habits. Denise knew she, “definitely studied a lot more. I spent more time on my homework, and I went to class a lot more.”

While Marshall said,

The other big boost for that class that helped, it actually taught me how to study. [A big part was] the fact that studying was part of my grade. I didn’t just show up [at the study area], swipe in and watch YouTube videos. I was like, while I’m right here, I might as well [study].

And that adjustment in their study habits works for them.

Carol, on the other hand, used a different incentive to change her study habits, but she knew she needed to change because her prior methods were not working at the college level.

That kind of mindset made me realize that all my other study habits were not working. I got scared that they weren’t. So, I stopped doing my normal routine, and I started doing these really weird abnormal things. Like at one point, one of my friends, would give me a gummy bear for every page I read because she knows that gummy bears are my favorite candy. So, every time I read a page, I got a gummy bear and that was my incentive. And for every test I had in that class, I passed. I don’t understand. I don’t understand at all. But it worked. There were definitely a couple more things that I did differently. It was just little things here and there.
**Subtheme: Personal Changes**

All of the students credited the class with helping them make other behavioral changes that benefitted them and allowed them to succeed after their initial failure. Carol described her changes by stating

First and foremost, I started taking better care of myself. If I’m not at my best performance, I can’t do the things that I want to do. There are lots of things I want to do. But if I’m not able to do them, I won’t get to accomplish my goals. [For example,] early on realizing how to remove myself from environments that I was not comfortable in…such as my old apartment.

Leaving an uncomfortable environment was also discussed by Brandon.

The people I was hanging out with at that time …weren’t the exact best people to hang out with. Like, they would just stay in their room. They’d be part of that vaping stuff [and] I was just a lazy student hanging with the wrong type of people. [So,] I just completely ditched them…found my current roommate [and we] basically do study sessions and stuff like that to help each other out.

For Abie, it was simply a matter of “trying to be a bit happier with myself.” She realized she had put herself into this situation and was trying to maintain a positive mental attitude.

None of the changes was revolutionary. Yet, each was effective as much for the success it brought, as well as its simplicity. But, what really seemed to make these changes successful was that the students saw results and believed in the changes and themselves.

**Observations About the Reclaim the W program from Students**

One unexpected result from the interviews were the observations that the students made about how to make the class more effective. At the end of each second interview, I asked two additional questions: 1) *What do you wish I would have asked you about the Reclaim the W*
program that I didn’t? and 2) Is there anything else you want to tell me about the Reclaim the W program? The answers they offered fell into two areas – changing the use of planning tools in the class and what they perceived as a lack of student accountability. Those observations weren’t offered necessarily to make the class easier, but essentially to make it more effective with more demanded of the students. One additional suggestion was partially aimed toward the class, but also beyond. This was for increased personal connections during and after the class.

Subtheme: Incorporation of Planning Tools

One of the most effective changes students identified in their improved study habits was the use of a calendar or planner. This planning tool was introduced in the class, but only as one of a number of possible tools students could use to succeed. Its use wasn’t fully incorporated or required in the class.

Abbie thought the idea of a planner was very helpful, but under-utilized. It was presented as a tool and left up to the student to decide whether, and how much, to use it. But she recognized that simply introducing a tool was not conducive to developing a habit for continued use beyond the class. She recommended that the planner not only be introduced, but its use required for the entire semester.

So, the thing was, if you’re not doing something the entire semester and just getting that habit so incredibly down, that it really is a habit, it’s not going to happen after the semester [ends]. So, I almost feel like there would need to be more continued feel in a lot of the activities. If throughout the semester at some point I think they went over, here’s planners…using planners…and stuff like that. If this was something that they actively went, “Hey, did you write out your planner?” If your gonna kind of babysit people through it, you might as well get on top of them for things like planners and things like
that. Because then you’re not missing assignments because you wrote it down. You have all that information…I feel it was presented as a tool.

Marshall also found that using the planner helped him stay organized and helped him know when assignments were due. He accomplished this by gathering all of his syllabi and spending one evening writing in assignments, papers, and due dates. “Once I get the syllabus for all the classes, I spend one evening for like six hours [entering the assignments in my organizer].”

Carol took the use of her planner beyond simply writing in all the assignments for her different classes. She not only wrote in due dates but start dates when she felt she needed to start an assignment in order to have it done on time. To further clarify events and assignments, she color-codes everything by class.

Oh, here’s something I changed, too. Take a look at my planner. It is color-coded by class. I already have every month written out. So, it’s all color-coded and I’ve got assignments written in. So, I’ve got assignments written in daily ‘cuz it’s one of those daily calendars. Because I didn’t like planners that were just this. I needed to write everything out. So, everything is written out…I’m at that point to where I don’t feel as anxious anymore… I feel so much better. This is very helpful. I recommend this to [other] people as well.

Having the right tools, understanding their use and benefits, and actually using them, is one of the biggest reasons these students feel they were able to succeed in the program and beyond. This isn’t surprising given they identified lack of organization and time management as reasons that contributed to their initial probation and dismissal.
Subtheme: Student Accountability

Another observation the students made was an apparent lack of effort or caring by some of their fellow students and the apparent lack of accountability or penalty for skipping or not attending classes. Since these students felt strongly that this class was a “second chance” for them to succeed, they almost felt like it was a personal affront the other students did not seem to care that they received this opportunity others were not given.

Abbie felt strongly about the lack of effort put forth by some of her classmates, and what she perceived as a general lack of accountability of their lack of effort.

I think the one thing would be is to kind of get real about who is actually wanting to put this effort in. But there are just some people that just…well, first of all, there are people who never show up to class and things like that. Obviously, they don’t care. So alright, at that point you don’t care. I get it. It’s like not the most fun class. But go to class. Every time you miss a class…that doesn’t make sense to me. You might as well get the information from it. No matter what the information is. I think it’s…good that it gives you the opportunity to come back. But I also think they should be a little bit more…on top of the people that are [skipping class].

Brandon echoed these thoughts about classmates’ efforts and class attendance. He also felt especially strong about students not using the opportunity they had been given with Reclaim the W.

There’s these groups of people who say they want to [succeed], but actually don’t. And…ah…that’s one of my pet peeves. I know I sound like a hypocrite, but I really hate it when they’re going to do something, but they end up not doing it.
Subtheme: Increased Personal Connections

Three of the students felt there should be more personal connections during and after the class. They enjoyed the personal connections they made during the program and recognized that there was a reason for the structure of the class, especially with the regular use of small group work. Even though they may have taken different paths to arrive in Reclaim the W, they all shared a common experience.

Marshall recognized that one of the purposes was to build a bond between students and help them be open because of that common experience.

They definitely tried to make you feel like it’s a community. At least for our class, they keep on stressing this is a safe place to talk. Everybody here is in the same boat. Maybe a little bit different story, but we’re all going for the same goal. Which, I felt, was very helpful.

Carol took a more personal view about activities in the class. She enjoyed the interactions with other students and wished they could have been more frequent in the class and could continue after the class had ended.

I do wish we were able to delve deeper into personal relationships, ya know. I do wish we had more group activities outside of class. I do wish we could meet at the library to help each other study. I do wish that there were some required things that we had to do as well as go to class. But then some people would not show up to the class. Despite the fact that it was a class where if you showed up, it was an easy A. A lot of us struggled with a lot of different reasons for being. I wished we could have built on that a little as well. I do wish there was more required meetings.

She also wished that there had been some “success stories” presented in the pre-semester meetings or early in the class. “I would have loved [to have] heard about the successes of other
students before I determined my own.” One way this could be accomplished is by using a suggestion Brandon made and that the instructor incorporated into the class. For one of their writing assignments, Brandon suggested that the class write letters to the next incoming class. On the last day of class, they were given a last writing assignment. Brandon suggested they each write a letter that could serve to welcome the incoming students in the next class:

It was during the last day or class. We ended up writing a paper, like little letters for the students...for when they come in the fall. Like this new batch of students. Yeah, I actually suggested that to [the instructor]...and he said, yeah, that’s good idea. So, after our little final exam, if you want to call it that, we wrote [letters to the next class]. Some people just wrote paragraphs. But I wrote the whole thing. Just basically saying [the instructor is] a nice guy and he will help you. If you have any questions, you can go to him for help.

Brandon never said if this was a one-time thing or if it was going to be incorporated into the curriculum for future classes, but he felt this could be a good way to help the next group of students feel welcome and more comfortable in the class.

This could help students like Marshall. He was ambivalent about the class, even after the class was over. But he was clear on what he would like to see added to the class:

I don’t know if I’m glad I went through it, and I’m glad I went through it. I don’t know if I’m glad it was just the one semester though. I feel like follow-ups would be helpful. Send email from somebody...even a meeting time because...as I said, it was...it was great...it was awesome. I feel like it doesn’t have to be, like, mandated that you get follow-ups and that kind of thing. But I feel that just a little remainder that, hey, push yourself. That kind of deal... It would be nice to know that the dude watching you is still watching you and keeping you on track.
Since her reason for being dismissed was different than most other students in the class, Abbie had a different view of personal connections. She would have liked to have seen some acknowledgement or recognition from the instructor that some students are there not necessarily from being lazy.

Not everyone is there for the same reason. You know, the person who is academically struggling, maybe you know what, they really need that planner. They need like…they need to know where the tutoring sessions are, where additional tutoring time could be.


While she knew that her circumstances may have been unique, she wasn’t happy that the class seemed to focus exclusively on students who she perceived had been dismissed due to laziness, procrastination, or just poor study habits. As Marshall noted, they may have taken different paths, but they all ended up at the same spot.

All of these thoughts and suggestions – more out of class activities, sharing successes, writing a welcoming letter, and follow-up are variances on personal connections that these students feel would benefit other students and lessen stress and anxiety.

**Summary of Themes and Findings**

Table 4 is a summary of the themes and sub-themes identified from an inductive analysis of the data gathered from the interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Theme/Sub-Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1. How do students’ experiences inform their decision to re-apply?</td>
<td>What was going through your mind when you found out you were placed on probation?</td>
<td>Causes leading to academic dismissal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who did you talk to about being on probation?</td>
<td>Impact to relationships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

*Crosswalk Table of Research Questions and Identified Themes*
Table 4 – continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How did those discussions make you feel?</td>
<td>Shame and embarrassment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What changes did you consider making the next semester?</td>
<td>Factors contributing to subsequent success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you feel to being academically dismissed?</td>
<td>Shame and embarrassment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who did you talk to about being dismissed?</td>
<td>Impact to relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did those discussions make you feel?</td>
<td>Shame and embarrassment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact to relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What options did you consider after you read the dismissal letter?</td>
<td>Alternative for the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What made you consider those options?</td>
<td>Factors contributing to subsequent success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2. How do students interpret the invitation from the university to re-apply after academic dismissal?</td>
<td>When you first learned about RTW – what were your thoughts?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who did you talk to about being accepted into RTW?</td>
<td>Changes in communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did that/those discussion(s) make you feel?</td>
<td>Positive Emotional Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3. How do students make meaning of no mandatory waiting period?</td>
<td>In the original dismissal letter from the university, it stated that the normal process for academic dismissal involves having to wait at least one academic semester (Fall or Spring) before you could reapply. Then, in the RTW invitation letter, it stated you could reapply and, if accepted, be readmitted in the fall, without waiting. What did that mean to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4. How do their experiences in the Reclaim the W program change students’ future plans?</td>
<td>Describe your experiences with the RTW program?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you were accepted into the program, what were your expectations of yourself?</td>
<td>Factors contributing to academic success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you were accepted into the program, what were your expectations of RTW?</td>
<td>Factors contributing to academic success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you describe your experiences with the RTW support class – UNIV 1030?</td>
<td>Factors contributing to subsequent success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4 – continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How did your thoughts change during the class?</td>
<td>Increased determination/motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You passed all your classes that semester. What did you do differently</td>
<td>Factors contributing to subsequent success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>from your previous semesters?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What made you decide to make those changes?</td>
<td>Increased determination/motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you describe the most important academic success you had during</td>
<td>Increased determination/motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that semester?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you feel when that happened?</td>
<td>Increased determination/motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now, tell me about one academic challenge you faced during that</td>
<td>Factors contributing to academic success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>semester?</td>
<td>Increased determination/motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you deal with that challenge?</td>
<td>Increased determination/motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What could the university have done differently to help others return</td>
<td>Observations about the Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>from academic dismissal?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Given what you have reconstructed about the program and your life,</td>
<td>Increased determination/motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>where do you see yourself going from here?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you wish I would have asked you about the RTW that I didn’t?</td>
<td>Observations about the Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there anything else you want to tell me about the RTW program?</td>
<td>Observations about the Program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Final Thoughts

Approximately 50% of students who begin college persist and earn a degree (Spradlin, Rutkowski, Burroughs, & Lang, 2010). The causes are varied, but academic ability is rarely noted. Typically, students who struggle in their first year of college, do so other reasons. They may find themselves to be unprepared or underprepared for the rigors of college. Or they may find that there are outside influences that may distract them from succeeding. The findings in this study confirm and support those earlier findings.
There were two keys provisions in this readmission program; the first was no waiting period, allowing the accepted students to return without having to sit out one academic semester. The second key was the invitation, making the program institution-initiated opposed to the standard student-initiated programs. The invitation gave students the opportunity to return and take regular classes during the fall semester while they were enrolled in the student success class. I was not able to identify any institutions that invited students to return for classes during an academic semester. The only programs I identified which included an invitation were those that would invite students who had already re-applied and been accepted, to take a summer study skills class. As in this program, these invitations are rare and only sent to a select group of students.

Each student was very excited to be given this opportunity when they were first accepted into the program. At the end of the support class, and their first semester back, they were also excited to have been successful in completing the class and looked forward to continuing something they thought they had lost.
CHAPTER VI
DISCUSSION

This study was directed by four research questions: 1) How do students’ experiences inform their decision to re-apply? 2) How do students interpret the invitation from the university to re-apply after academic dismissal? and 3) How do students make meaning of no mandatory waiting period? 4) How do their experiences in the Reclaim the W program shape students’ goals? Descriptive Phenomenology was selected as the research methodology best suited to provide answers to these questions.

Using in-depth interviews, I could listen to the student participants as they described their experiences in and out of school, what circumstances led to those experiences, and what those experiences meant to them, their families and friends. The students also described how those experiences impacted their academic status, academic careers and their thoughts on the future. Further, they made observations with recommendations on how programs like this could be enhanced to benefit academically dismissed students and the institutions that reinstate them. The intent of this study is to better understand the experiences of these students and how those experiences impacted their lives, their decisions, and their academic and personal plans. From this understanding, I hope to offer suggestions for ways to change current methods and future practices of reinstatement of academically dismissed students in an effort to increase the academic persistence and retention of these students.

Using descriptive phenomenology produced considerable amounts of complex data. These data were analyzed using a logical and systematic, seven-step process (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). This resulted in five themes which embraced the students’ collective
experiences represented by the ups-and-downs of academic struggles, suspension, reinstatement, and eventual academic success. The crosswalk table below shows the findings identified by the research questions and how those findings either confirmed existing knowledge or led to new ideas adding to existing knowledge.

**Discussion/Description of the Findings**

Over the last fifty years, student retention and persistence levels have remained consistent, and relatively low. During the same time frame, the demographics of college student bodies have vastly changed, yet the methods and processes used to improve student retention and persistence have not been modified to reflect these changes. At institutions that have a formal appeal process where students can appeal a dismissal due to extenuating circumstances, a successful appeal means the student can return to classes immediately. However, if they are not successful in appealing their dismissal, if they choose not to appeal, or if the institution has no formal appeal process, students who have been academically dismissed are typically required to sit-out a specific time period waiting until they can reapply. During that time, it is assumed that the student will mature or change the situation which contributed to their dismissal. However, also during that time the student may decide to attend another institution or may decide to leave higher education altogether.

In any case, if they decide they are ready and wish to return to the same institution after waiting, they can apply for reinstatement or re-admission. In these cases, the beginning of the process is student-initiated. However, students who experienced the Reclaim the W program, reapplied after they were invited to reapply through an institution-initiated process. This process is unique among institutions of higher education and therefore, the experiences of these students are also unique.
This table presents the themes identified from inductive analysis comparing these themes to current literature.

Table 5
Comparison of Current Findings to Literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Findings</th>
<th>Other Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| #1. How do students’ experiences inform their decision to re-apply? | • Shame/embarrassment  
• Increased Support  
• Changing relationships after invite | • (Houle, 2013) Embarrassment at dismissal, rebuilding self-esteem  
• (Reynolds, 2013) Family support influenced decision to apply for reinstatement  
• (Austin, 1992) Greater support from family and friends  
• (Lucas & Hunt, 2001) career orientation | |
| #2. How do students interpret the invitation from the university to re-apply after academic dismissal? | • Surprise  
• Positive emotional response  
• Changes in communication / relationships?  
• Positive response due to ability to continue without interruption | • New to this study | |
| #3. How do students make meaning of no mandatory waiting period? | • Improved relationships  
• Factors contributing to subsequent success  
• Increased motivation and determination | • (Meadows & Tharp, 1996) length of time between dismissal and return as factor of success  
• (Hall & Gahn, 1994) length of time a factor of success  
• (Meador, 2012) length of time not a factor of success  
• (Woodard & Suddick, 1988) length of time is a factor | |
| #4. How do their experiences in the Reclaim the W program change students’ future plans? | • Improved relationships  
• Factors contributing to subsequent success  
• Increased motivation and determination | • (Carter, 2013) Increased motivation to succeed  
• (Osborne, 2013) Family support  
• (Maroney, 2011) Family and friends as support  
• (Liberto, 2002) Factors of success after suspension | |
The students who participated in this study presented themselves as confident and motivated to continue and succeed in their education and beyond. This was a change from their attitudes and mindset prior to Reclaim the W. The themes identified during the interviews and subsequent analysis reflect this change in attitude and were used to answer the research questions used in this study.

**RQ #1) How do students’ experiences inform their decision to re-apply?**

There are three themes which emerged from the data which addressed the first research question. While each is unique and individual, all three themes are interrelated. The themes are: Initial shame and embarrassment, Increased support, and Change in relationships after students received the invitation. Together, these themes confirm existing knowledge in this area.

Each of the students identified their initial shame and embarrassment after dismissal followed by their desire to redeem themselves in the eyes of their family and friends as a driving force in their decision to apply for reinstatement. This supports the findings of Osborne (2013) who noted that, “Embarrassment was another major sub-theme...the majority of the students mentioned how embarrassed they had felt about being academically dismissed” (p. 79). Despite their embarrassment, two of the students (Abbie and Carol) spoke to family members immediately. They needed to share their dismissals. However, in a couple of cases (Denise and Marshall), the students initially decided not to discuss their dismissal with family or friends in an effort to minimize their embarrassment. Yet that information was eventually discovered.

Knowledge of the dismissal led to the second theme: Unexpected increased support. Whether they spoke with family and friends initially, or later, the students discovered increased support from their family and friends which was unexpected. This support was noted nearly 30
years ago by Austin (1992) who said that “successful students [returning after academic suspension] stated they received a greater amount of support from their family and friends” (p. 87). This was later also supported by Houle (2013) and Reynolds (2013) with Reynolds noting that participants in that study “also referred to family as a source of encouragement and inspiration” (p. 184). After their initial shame of being dismissed, support from family and friends was a strong inspiration in deciding to return. This support lead to changing relationships.

Parallel to their unexpected support, the students in this study found their relationships changed after they received the invite to reapply. Whether it was due to support they received or that fact that their situation was already known, the students found discussions with family and friends were easier and led them feeling closer in their relationships.

The students’ decision to return after academic failure supported and was supported by Weiner’s Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1972) which is the framework used to guide this study. Attribution theory says whether a student assigns their failures to internal or external causes will impact the degree of effort they later put forth after a failure. If their failure is viewed as attributable to an internal causality, typically identified as effort (Weiner, 1979), it is regarded as something they feel they can control and they perceive themselves to be proactive opposed to reactive in their efforts. These students attributed the causes leading to their dismissal to an internal controllable causality related directly to the effort they felt they put forth or the focus they had on events.

All students in this study displayed a substantial shift in their mindset toward school as shown in their changing attitude toward academics and changing behaviors including a significant increase in focus on studies, use of the library, and other support systems with the ultimate intent of graduating and being successful in a career. This intent was aided by their prior experiences with the rigor of college, their belief that the initial failure was due to internal
causes, the shame and embarrassment they felt on being dismissed, their concerns over the long-
term impact on their potential careers, and the positive support they received from family and
friends which increased their belief in themselves.

RQ #2) How do students interpret the invitation from the university to re-apply after
academic dismissal?

Since the program is unique, the findings related to the second research question bring
new knowledge to the topics of retention and reinstated students. Being dismissed from the
university brought a realization to these students that they not only failed themselves and their
families but being dismissed also meant they had to make decisions regarding their immediate
future. Prior to dismissal, like most students, four of them had planned to only work over the
summer and return to the university in the fall. Only Abbie planned to continue classes without a
break. However, for these students, plans for the immediate future now was whether to attend
another institution in the fall or find employment beyond summer. But what was of greater
concern was having to sit out an entire semester after summer.

Initially, on receiving the dismissal letter, each student understood they were required to
sit out a minimum of one academic term. Additionally, they understood it was their
responsibility to determine when, or if, they were ready to return. However, the invitation
changed that dynamic. They were completely surprised to receive the institution-initiated
invitation after originally receiving the dismissal letter. At first, they weren’t quite sure how to
interpret the invitation; was it too-good-to-be-true? Or was it, in fact, the opportunity they hoped
for? Since the Reclaim the W program is not widely advertised, none of the students was aware
of its existence prior to receiving the invitation. But before deciding to accept the invitation, each
student searched on the university website for information or called the contact number to learn
more. As would be expected, the invitation to re-apply created a strong positive emotional
response in each student giving them a potential new opportunity that they viewed as a second chance.

After experiencing the shame and trauma of dismissal, receiving the invitation was a surprise, but also worked as a new motivator. Receiving an invitation soon after their dismissal was transformative. The students felt this invitation from the university showed that someone trusted and believe in them, someone they were not aware had any concern. While the dismissal brought shame and embarrassment, the invitation created a new sense of confidence and optimism for success.

**RQ #3) How do students make meaning of no mandatory waiting period?**

Although there is relatively little research on the impact of having students sit out after dismissal, the knowledge is mixed how an immediate return after dismissal impacts student success. In 1988, Woodard and Suddick (1988) studied dismissed students and found a significant difference in success between students who returned within one year versus those who returned past one year. They found that 76% of the students who returned within one year had academic success. Among those who were gone longer than one year, the rate of success varied significantly based on their status. The rate of success dropped to 63% for those who received counseling while only 38% of those who did not receive counseling succeeded. Similarly, Hall and Gahn (1994) and Meadows and Tharp (1996) found that those students who reapplied immediately and were granted an exception to return were the most motivated to earn their degree and proved to be the most successful. The students they studied were allowed to reapply and were re-admitted without the usual waiting period. However, nearly twenty years later, Meador (2012) found that there was no statistical difference in student success between students who were immediately readmitted and those who had to wait for a specific period of time as “…in all cases examined, there were no significant results, indicating that the time a
student was out of college after being academically dismissed played only a little role in their success when the student returned” (pp. 112-3).

In this study the lack of a waiting period after dismissal was a significant factor. The original dismissal letter sent to these students stated they not only had been academically dismissed but were required to sit out an academic semester before they could initiate the reenrollment process. However, the dismissal itself seemed to create a need in the students to continue their studies without interruption. During the short period (in most cases, this amounted to approximately 14 days) between receiving the original dismissal letter and receiving the invitation, the students briefly considered taking the semester off from any school and finding a job. Each of them quickly rejected this due to concerns they felt about being “trapped” in a job and not returning to the university or even to education at all. After that decision, they decided to enroll in a local community college for one semester, hoping to return to the university after that semester. Once they had been dismissed, each wanted to continue and graduate from the university. Therefore, the opportunity to continue at the university without a break was viewed as a lifeline allowing them to continue as they wished at the university.

Each of them felt that continuity was essential to the success they experienced as part of the program. These students realized that sitting out a term would potentially mean not returning at all and experiencing a life of employment less than what would be possible once they obtained a degree. Each student felt a connection to the university which seemed to develop or increase after their dismissal. Working or attending a second institution was unacceptable to them, so the chance to return immediately meant the chance to continue and graduate from the university where they began their education. This opportunity was a major motivator driving them to succeed and not fail a second time.
By design, only students who had successfully completed the Reclaim the W program were studied. They were part of the 50% of the students admitted to the program who were successful and continued their education. This data support the earlier studies which found significant differences in success rates.

RQ #4) How do the experiences in the Reclaim the W program shape students’ future plans?

Experience in Reclaim the W allowed the students to develop a number of skills and techniques of which they previously only had rudimentary, if any, knowledge. These are shown as the themes identified from this research question. These include improved relationships, factors contributing to subsequent success, and increased motivation and determination.

One of the ways students experienced improved relationships was with their classmates as they all shared the common experience of dismissal and need for reassurance. The sense of community and commonality was a strong force in increasing their self-confidence and drive. By helping the students understand that they were not alone in their challenges, this sense of community helped them to feel less isolated and alone in what they were experiencing.

Expanding on the connections the students made with other students, Reclaim the W required that they make connections with their instructors from other classes. In his seminal work, Tinto (1993) wrote of students’ connectivity with the university as critical to student success and retention. This connectivity could be with an advisor or staff member, but typically with faculty since students have the most direct contact with faculty. One of the assignments as part of the support class was to interview a faculty member who was not part of the program. Typically, this involved visiting the faculty member during their posted office hours. For some of the students, this was the first time they had met or talked with an instructor outside of the classroom. This initial interview allowed the students to develop a level of comfort with the instructor which they did not always feel in the classroom. In some cases, this interview led to
the students regularly attending office hours. Once they felt comfortable meeting and talking with one instructor, they began to meet with other instructors. This became one more positive experience increasing their comfort level and confidence as they were more willing to approach instructors and ask for help when they felt it was necessary.

A second theme was the development of skills leading to subsequent success such as an increased focus on academics and the application of skills necessary to succeed. Current knowledge in this area recognizes that increasing numbers of students are entering college either under- or unprepared for the rigors expected of college students which can have an adverse effect on their academics (Bailey, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This lack of preparedness includes lack of adequate study skills and could also mean many students entering college for the first time are required to attend developmental classes to improve their knowledge of basic reading, writing, and math to a level necessary to be successful in college (Bailey, 2009; Tierney & Garcia, 2011).

Each of the students in this study originally chose to attend college because that seemed “to be the thing to do” without having a true goal or purpose. But a number of their experiences created a new mindset leading to their subsequent success. Better study skills, such as increased use of the library, goal setting, and organizational and time management skills taught as part of the Reclaim the W program also improved their confidence in their ability to succeed in the support class and, more importantly, they found these same skills beneficial in other classes.

The improved connections and the skills taught in the support class added to the mindset of success and led to a new confidence and determination to not only succeed in school, but beyond. Collectively, these experiences gave the students confidence to prevail in school and to set goals beyond school which became clearer and more focused. In place of their original thoughts of attending school because it was the thing to do, and simply getting a job afterward,
the students realized the benefit of setting clear, specific goals which gave them detailed targets for which to aim. Each student identified their own goals and targets. The goals varied from attending class every day to going to the library on a regular basis and keeping a calendar or planner of assignments and exams. Their targets varied from short-term targets such as passing the next exam to mid-term targets frequently identified as passing their classes in the current semester, which lead to long-term targets of graduation and employment.

**Observations About the Reclaim the W program from Students**

During the interview process, the students made a number of insightful observations about their fellow students and the program in general. These comments were not presented as complaints but were offered as observations or suggestions intended to help improve the Reclaim the W program. While they had positive feeling for the program overall, the students felt there were some areas which did not necessarily contribute to the program. In some cases, these areas were viewed as being negative and demotivators.

First, they were surprised by the lack of drive shown by some of their fellow students, with absenteeism and skipping class as the most noticeable symptoms. The students in this study felt so relieved and appreciative to be accepted into the program they could not understand how students could waste this second opportunity to succeed. This led them to provide the first consideration for the program. Their recommendation was to increase student accountability. They felt students who were given a second opportunity to succeed, should be encouraged to succeed or they should be dropped from the class which would, in effect, mean they were dropped from school for not showing satisfactory academic progress. Removing those students would increase the instructor’s ability to focus and assist those students who want to succeed and not force them to waste their time trying to assist students who don’t care.
One way these students generally connected to the university was through the friendship or connection of another student. So, it shouldn’t be surprising they felt that additional group activities, during and/or after class and even follow-up after the term, would be extremely beneficial. Few of the activities in the class required students to meet or talk with other students one-on-one. Most of the activities were either individual activities, group activities or required them to meet with their instructor, co-instructor, advisor or an instructor from one of their other classes. The activities where they were with the other students outside of the regular class environment, helped them to develop an additional connection due to common experiences and a feeling of mutual support.

All of the students attribute a significant portion of their success after returning to the use of a calendar/planning tool. The most frequent use was to record assignment due dates, test dates and similar critical dates for the students. But they also expanded their usage by the addition of start dates for those assignments instead of just listing the due date. Their increased knowledge of time management helped them to realize that simply knowing the due date would not change their habits of waiting until the last minute. But flagging a potential start date on when they should began writing a paper or studying for an exam, would give them adequate time to complete their assignments or to properly study for a test. Their suggestion was for the planner to be incorporated more into the class with its use being tied to their grade. Even though the students made observations and recommendations, they were all quick to say they felt the entire experience was positive.

**Recommendations for Practice**

**Recommendations for Student Support Processes**

Like most institutions of higher education, the university where this study was conducted has multiple policies and programs in place to address student success under the umbrella of the
Center for Academic Success Programs [CASP]. Also like many other institutions, these programs and processes typically are student-initiated requiring students to take the first step. For current students, that step could be something as simple as speaking with an instructor during office hours, stopping at a writing center, or talking to an advisor. For any of these steps to happen, the student must be aware of the various support processes or services available. They must also be willing to admit they need and must ask for assistance.

For students who have been dismissed, the first step can be more difficult. The shame or embarrassment from their dismissal may prevent them from contacting the dismissing institution, or any institution. This program eliminates the need for the student to take the “first step” by inviting the student to apply for readmission. This invitation may overcome any shame or doubts the student has about returning or even continuing their education. This invitation may also show the student that there is a level of confidence from the institution that they can still succeed.

Many colleges and universities currently have institution-initiated programs which invite limited numbers of incoming freshmen to attend summer bridge classes prior to attending regular classes. These classes are intended to help the students become familiar with the college, the campus and the rigors of higher educations. Other institutions will invite limited numbers of dismissed students who have applied for readmission to attend summer study skills classes. But these invitations are only offered after the students have taken the first step by re-applying.

The advantage of this program is the unexpected invitation and the vote of confidence on the part of the university. The invitation adds a new layer of support which is currently unavailable elsewhere. Since this program is university-initiated, it differs considerably from other support programs and implies a trust which is apparent to the students and which has increased their motivation to succeed and persist. It also differs in that students who are accepted into the program must take the support class and meet other program requirements during the
term. But since it is not offered during the summer, students can also enroll in regular classes at the same time.

With a success rate of 50 percent, a minimal cost to run, and with a number of students from this program having persisted to graduation, the Reclaim the W program has been considered a qualified success. As a direct reflection of this success, the student population who is considered for invitations has been expanded since this study was completed. The original target population was traditional students who had been academically dismissed at the end of their first year, second semester. The expanded population now also includes students who were dismissed after two years or four semesters, and transfer students dismissed after two semesters at the university. Like the original student population, the students from the expanded population must also have a CGPA between 1.0 and 1.99 to be considered. The findings of this study indicate that similar programs could be beneficial to students who have been dismissed from other institutions.

**Recommendations for the Reclaim the W Program**

Despite the success of Reclaim the W, there are a number of recommendations which could enhance the program and increase student success. Two of the recommendations are for events prior to the students attending the support class. The first recommendation would be to revise or enhance the essay review process. By analyzing student essays to identify key words or phrases used by prior unsuccessful students, the process may be able to identify students who will not put forth the effort to succeed so those students could be interviewed prior to acceptance. Applying attribution theory would be valuable here looking for causes where students attribute their academic dismissal. A face-to-face, one-on-one interview, after the student has submitted the re-entry essay, could provide the opportunity to flag a potentially unsuccessful student or to offer extra guidance prior to acceptance into the program.
The second recommendation is based on the students’ belief that everyone who applies to the Reclaim the W program is accepted. This was a common statement during the interview. One way this could be addressed is to describe the acceptance process at a high level, pointing out that the students went through a rigorous vetting process before being accepted and not all students survived the process and they were not accepted into the program. This could be implemented either in the acceptance letter or in the pre-semester meetings students are required to attend, or both. This would increase their feeling of being “special” and add another positive motivator.

The in-class recommendations are based on the students’ perceptions and observations. These may already be in place but are not stressed or presented in such a way that it is noticeable by the students. The first is to make it clear that some behaviors, such as not attending class or not participating in class, are not acceptable and will have consequences. The students in this study recognized that these behaviors are typical signs of problems which may have originally led to probation and dismissal. They noted that some students in the class missed multiple classes or did not participate during class on multiple occasions without any apparent consequences. This could be difficult as grades and discipline cannot be discussed in class. But general comments reiterating that there will be consequences to these behaviors would stress that they are not acceptable.

An additional suggestion was to incorporate the planner into the class to a greater degree. Use of the planner was one of the major changes these students credited for their success. One possibility would be to have regular planner checks along with the current study time sheet checks. This would force the students to use the planner on a regular basis, but also reinforce the importance of time management and that management is an active process, not a one-time event.
The last recommendation is the most critical. It is to continue to build a sense of community in the classroom. This will reinforce the idea that students are not alone in facing their challenges but have a community to help. This will help them feel less isolated and alone knowing that everyone else in the class had the same experiences and understand the problems and issues of trying to return after dismissal. This can be strengthened by continuing to stress the concept of the classroom being a ‘safe space’ where open discussions can occur without the students being embarrassed or having those discussions extend beyond the classroom.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

One of the intentions of this study was to give a voice to students who had been academically dismissed. Although there have been an increased number of studies in this area, most focus on these students collectively. Given the individual responses identified by this study, one recommendation would be for additional studies focusing on the individual students, their experiences and their response. This would be especially useful as qualitative studies like this that focus on a finite student population cannot be generalized to other groups of students or institutions.

One obvious group to study would be students who were invited to re-apply but chose not to accept the invitation. Of course, a number of dismissed students may have decided to leave higher education altogether or decided they needed the semester off to address whatever issues were part of the reason for their dismissal. But others may have chosen to move on to a new institution. Potential studies could look at the reasons for their decisions.

A second apparent group would be students who did not enroll after being accepted into the program. Although this group would be extremely limited, why did they accept the invitation to re-apply and write the essay. What caused them to decide not to return after being accepted?
Were the requirements more than they expected? Were they considering two options and chose a
different path? Knowing the answers could prove to be a benefit for the program.

Students who participated in the program and were academically dismissed a second time
would be a particularly fruitful group to study. Why did they fail? The program itself and the
support class which is a critical piece of the program are designed to give students the skills and
support to allow them to succeed and continue their education. Was there something in the
process or was it the individual student?

A fourth possible study would be an analysis of these students’ essays applying
Attribution Theory. Would a deeper evaluation of the essays themselves focusing on students’
attributions, give indications which would help in the vetting process? Are there terms or key
words in the essays that could suggest a student is not really ready to return, or that they are not
fully invested in the Reclaim the W program? Answers could provide useful information giving
the program additional insights to the students’ possible second dismissal, thus helping both the
student by preventing their second failure and the university by focusing on students who truly
wish to return and succeed.

Since the program was expanded, students from the expanded population would be a rich
population for study. Are the causes for their dismissal similar to the traditional students or are
there new issues which would need to be addressed? Would the results be similar to those of the
traditional students?

The Program has only been in existence since the fall semester of 2014. Four of the
students in this study were interviewed within one or two terms after they completed the
program. Only one student was interview beyond that time frame. Therefore, a longitudinal study
following the students in this study looking at them 2-5 years or 5 or more years out could
identify long-term effects of the Reclaim the W program or show if they fade over that time.
Since results of this type of study are not generalizable to a larger populations or other types of institutions, the last recommendation for future research would be to investigate the possibility of similar programs at a wider range of institutions such as private universities, open-enrollment colleges or highly selective universities. The results of this study show the positive experiences of the students can help with student retention rates.

**Conclusions**

These students experienced multiple positive and negative experiences during their first few semesters in college. The low points being when they were placed on probation and then when they were academically dismissed. The reasons for their probation and dismissal were consistent with current knowledge. The primary causes were being under- or unprepared for the rigors of college, poor or missing time management skills, poor study skills and the influence of outside activities.

Consistent with the three dimensions of attribution theory identified as being typical of successful students, causality, stability, and controllability, these students accepted the responsibility for their problems. They did not attempt to place the blame on external forces such as their instructors. They identified the causes as being internal. While they may have felt underprepared, they also realized that they controlled their efforts, and each felt they could have put forth more effort especially in regard to studying and attending classes. They also felt that returning would be returning to a known stable environment which they had experienced during their first year.

Positive experiences came after they had been dismissed. Receiving the invitation to re-apply without having to sit-out a semester, being accepted into the program and being able to enroll in regular classes while taking the support class were all viewed as beneficial by the students. The confidence and trust they felt by being invited back gave them confidence they had
been lacking after their dismissal and helped them decide to reapply. This was in addition to the support they received from family and friends encouraging them to continue their education.

Once they were in the class, the positive experiences continued as they learned time management and study skills which they were able to use in the support class as well as their other classes. The support of their classmates added to their confidence and motivation. The new or improved connections they felt after meeting with their advisors and other instructors helped increase that confidence while helping to increase their connection to the university.

There is strong evidence that student success programs like this can succeed. This model can work as shown by the 50% success rate in the first three years of the Reclaim the W program. Key elements in this program were trust, where students felt comfortable being able to be open without fear of shame or embarrassment, and a sense of community where each student realized that they weren’t alone in this. The entire class had the same experience. Any programs like this should consider elements like this for student success and retention.

Individually, these experiences may not have been sufficient to provide the improved motivation and confidence needed to succeed. But, collectively, they provided the necessary foundation on which the students could build their new educational careers.
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Appendix A

Recruitment Letter

Dear previous Reclaim the W student,

My name is Gary Versalle, and I am doctoral student here at Western Michigan University completing my PhD studies in Educational Leadership and would like to invite you to participate in a research project that is part of the requirements for the degree.

Specifically, you are invited to share your personal experiences transitioning from academic dismissal to completion of the Reclaim the W program. You are one of a limited number of students who has successfully completed the program, so we are asking you to consider being a participant in our study. I believe this study will benefit all students who have struggled in college and will give voice to students about their own personal experience of being invited to apply for re-admission and participate in the Reclaim the W program.

You are receiving this invitation to participate because you successfully completed UNIV 1030 RTW and enrolled in classes for this Spring term. This is not an evaluation of the Reclaim the W program; rather we are interested in how you experienced the change from academic probation and dismissal to successful completion of the RTW program.

Participants in this study will be asked to complete two one-on-one confidential 60-minute interviews with me. The interviews will take place in a comfortable and confidential setting on campus. To ensure the accuracy of your replies, I will be recording the interviews. After each interview, you will be asked to review a transcript of the interview to add or expand upon what you said in the interview. Both the audio recording and transcript of the interviews will use a code name and any potentially identifying information about you will be redacted. Only I will know the names of the actual participants.

As a student who has successfully completed the RTW support class, I want to be sure that your experiences are heard and understood. You will be contributing to an important new view of research if you decide to participate.

Of course, I expect that you will need more information to make your decision. Please contact me at either this email address (gary.l.versalle@wmich.edu) or this phone number (231 750-3921) and I will answer any questions and make sure you have all the information you need. By contacting me, you are making no commitment unless you decide to complete the informed consent form to participate after we talk.

Thank you for your consideration of this request to be part of an important study. I would appreciate a response to this email, so I know that I have a valid email address, and that you received it. You may call me directly or email me with a contact number, date, and time for me to call you.

Sincerely,

Gary Versalle
Appendix B

Informed Consent Form
Western Michigan University
Department of Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology

Principal Investigator:  
Dr. Andrea Beach

Student Investigator:  
Gary Versalle

Title of Study:  
Understanding The Experiences of Students Re-Admitted After Academic Suspension As Part of A University-Initiated Process – A Qualitative Study

You have been invited to participate in a research project titled "Understanding The Experiences Of Students Re-Admitted After Academic Suspension As Part Of A University-Initiated Process – A Qualitative Study." This project will serve as Gary Versalle’s dissertation for the requirements of the PhD in Education Leadership. This consent document will explain the purpose of this research project and will go over all the time commitments, the procedures used in the study, and the risks and benefits of participating in this research project. Please read this consent form carefully and completely and please ask any questions if you need more clarification.

What are we trying to find out in this study?
The purpose of this study is to understand how students who had been academically dismissed, interpret the impact of an invitation to immediately re-apply. By interviewing a number of students who have successfully completed the RTW support program, we hope to learn how students, like yourself, describe your experience in the program and the impact of those experiences on your future educational plans.

Who can participate in this study?
You can participate in this study if you are a student who successfully completed UNIV 1030 RTW. No other students will be considered.

Where will this study take place?
All interviews will take place on the WMU Main Campus. Interviews will be conducted in a private, safe and comfortable location for both you and the researcher.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?
Your total time commitment to the study will be approximately 180 minutes.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?
If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in two 60-minute in-depth interviews with the researcher. During the interviews, you will be asked a series of questions related to your experiences with the Reclaim the W program. The interviews will be audio taped and later transcribed. You will receive a copy of the transcript with an invitation to review and clarify anything. This process may take anywhere from 10 - 30 minutes, depending upon whether you decide to add to the interview transcript.
**What information is being measured during the study?**
The interview will contain a few demographic questions to assist the researcher in profiling the participants of the study. This information will not include your name or other personally identifying information. The focus of the interview will be about your experience with academic probation, academic dismissal, being invited to re-apply, and your participation in the RTW program. You will be asked to describe your experiences and the meaning those experiences hold for you. Your descriptions will be compared with those of other study participants to identify common themes and/or ways in which student experiences differ from one another.

**What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?**
There are no known physical risks for your participation in this study. Since you will be confidential, and known only to the researcher, there is a risk that personally identifiable data could become known. To offset that risk, recordings of all interviews will be encrypted and remain in a locked location until the interviews are transcribed. At that point, each recording will be destroyed and all written materials will be kept in a locked location.

To further ensure your confidentiality, you will be issued a code name so your true name will not appear anywhere. Any quotes used in the dissertation and oral defense will be attributed to the student’s code name. Only the principal investigator and the student investigator will be aware of your real name and code name.

**What are the benefits of participating in this study?**
There are no known benefits for participants in this study. However, you may experience some emotional benefit from being afforded the opportunity to express your personal experience with the program. Also, you may experience a feeling of benefit from contributing to a study that gives students a voice in how they are experiencing a highly emotional situation.

**Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?**
There are no known monetary costs to the participants for participating in this study.

**Is there any compensation for participating in this study?**
Each student completing the interviews will receive a $10 gas/gift card at the end of the first interview and a $20 card at the end of the second interview.

**Who will have access to the information collected during this study?**
Only the principal investigator and student investigator will have access to your name and data collected as part of this study. Once transcribed, the digital recordings of the interviews will be deleted. Data from the study will be maintained on an encrypted and password-protected electronic storage device and stored in a locked file or cabinet in the researcher’s office until the conclusion of the study when the data will be transferred to and maintained by the Western Michigan University research archives for a minimum of three years, then destroyed. All information will be treated with complete confidentiality. You will be assigned a specific participant code name to protect your identity and ensure confidentiality of your responses. De-identified research findings will be published as part of the student researcher’s dissertation and may also be utilized by the researchers in future publications or presentations.
What if you want to stop participating in this study?

*You can choose to stop participating in the study at any time for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. You will experience NO consequences either academically or personally if you choose to withdraw from this study.*

*The investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.*

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the primary investigator, Dr. Andrea Beach [redacted] or [redacted]. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

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

I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

Please Print Your Name

___________________________________  ____________________

Participant’s signature                                      Date
Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Project: Understanding The Experiences of Students Re-Admitted After Academic Suspension As Part of A University-Initiated Process – A Qualitative Study

Start Time of Interview: ________________________________

End Time of Interview: ________________________________

Date of Interview: ________________________________

Location: ____________________________________

Interviewer: ____________________________________

Participant: ________________________________

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 recorder be turned off at any point of the interview. This interview will take approximately 60 minutes to complete.

Lead-in: Today, we are going to explore your experiences with your academic probation, academic dismissal, invitation to re-apply, and your experiences with Reclaim the W. I would like to understand the nature of your experience both before, during and after the RTW class. I am most interested in giving you an opportunity to describe what you have experienced under Reclaim The W.

Participant Profile Questions

Age _____ Gender Male _____ Female _____

Ethnicity African-American _____ Asian _____ Caucasian _____

Hispanic _____ Native American _____

Program ____________________________________

Interview #1
1. Describe your experiences with the RTW program?
2. What was going through your mind when you found out you were placed on probation?
3. Who did you talk to about being on probation?
4. How did those discussions make you feel?
5. What changes did you consider making the next semester?
6. How did you feel being academically dismissed?
7. Who did you talk to about being dismissed?
8. How did those discussions make you feel?
9. What options did you consider after you read the dismissal letter?
10. What made you consider those options?
11. When you first learned about RTW – what were your thoughts?
12. Who did you talk to about being accepted into RTW?
13. How did that/those discussion(s) make you feel?
14. In the original dismissal letter from the university, it stated that the normal process for academic dismissal involves having to wait at least one academic semester (Fall or Spring) before you could reapply. Then, in the RTW invitation letter, it stated you could reapply and, if accepted, be readmitted in the fall, without waiting. What did that mean to you?
15. When you were accepted into the program, what were your expectations of yourself?
16. Of RTW?
Interview #2

Now that we’ve talked about your experiences leading up to the RTW program and the class, let’s talk about them a little deeper.

17. Can you describe your experiences with the RTW support class – UNIV 1030?
18. How did your thoughts change during the class?
19. You passed all your classes that semester. What did you do differently from your previous semesters?
20. What made you decide to make those changes?
21. Can you describe the most important academic success you had during that semester?
22. How did you feel when that happened?
23. Now, tell me about one academic challenge you faced during that semester?
24. How did you deal with that challenge?
25. What could the university have done differently to help others return from academic dismissal?
26. Given what you have reconstructed about the program and your life, where do you see yourself going from here?
27. What do you wish I would have asked you about the RTW that I didn’t?
28. Is there anything else you want to tell me about the RTW program?
Thank you for your time today. I appreciate your willingness to participate in our study. The information you shared is valuable and will be treated with complete confidentiality. The next step will be for the recording to be transcribed by me. Once the recording of your interview is transcribed, I will contact you so you may review the transcript to ensure that it is accurate and reflects what you said. When you receive the transcript, it will have only your code name, and any information that identifies you will be redacted.

Your review of the transcript is completely voluntary. If you choose to review and edit where you see fit, it will help me validate the research and make it more credible and reliable. It may take me a week or so to get the transcript of your interview back to you and it could take about 30 minutes for you to read it and respond.

Specifically, I will ask you to:

1. Read for accuracy. The transcription will be verbatim, but you may want to elaborate upon, correct, or add to one or more areas of your responses.
2. Reflect on how well the transcript tells your story. Feel free to fill in any gaps.
3. Be sure that the transcript accurately captures both how you experienced things and how you make sense of your experiences. Again, feel free to fill in the gaps.

I will send you these same prompts when I send you the transcript. You will receive it as a Word attachment to an email. So please provide me with a private email address, if you wish me to send it there rather than to your school account. I suggest you download the electronic Word file of your interview transcript and use “Track Changes” (if you are comfortable with process) to make your edits and revisions. If you would rather use a different process to highlight any changes or additions you make to the transcript, just let me know at the time, so I am clear on how I will get your feedback.

Do you have any questions?

Again, thank you for giving your time and voice to this study.

Gary Versalle

Gift card ______________________ Received ______________________
Appendix D

HSIRB Approval Letter

Date: April 11, 2017
To: Andrea Beach, Principal Investigator
    Gary Versalle, Student Investigator for dissertation
From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair
Re: HSIRB Project Number 17-04-12

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “Understanding the Experiences of Students Re-Admitted after Academic Suspension as Part of a University Initiated Process - A Qualitative Study” 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: This research may only be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under “Number of subjects you want to complete the study”). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. 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.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.

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

Approval Termination: April 10, 2018
Appendix E

Author Approval

Thursday, December 13, 2018 at 4:58:51 PM Eastern Standard Time

Subject: RE: SPN Profile Message: Chart on attribution theory
Date: Thursday, December 1, 2016 at 20:20:53 Eastern Standard Time
From: Weiner, Bernie
To: Gary Lee Versalle

Of course. Pleased that you are using attribution theory. I have attached some other articles.

From: Gary L Versalle [gary.l.versalle@wmich.edu]
Sent: Thursday, December 01, 2016 2:29 PM
To: Weiner, Bernie
Subject: SPN Profile Message: Chart on attribution theory

Dr. Weiner,

My name is Gary Versalle and I am a doctoral student at Western Michigan University. The topic for my dissertation is motivation of students who had been academically dismissed and "invited" to return by the institution without a mandatory waiting period. This will be framed using attribution theory.

During the course of my research, I discovered an article you wrote in 1979 for the Journal of Educational Psychology, "A Theory of Motivation for Some Classroom Experiences". On page 7 of that article, you included a table, labelled "Causes of Success and Failure, Classified According to Locus, Stability, and Controllability." It presented a very clear picture; clearer than any of my attempts have been, to present the information.

All of this is a long, round-about way to ask your permission to use that chart (properly cited, of course) as you presented it, in my dissertation.

Whatever your response, I thank you, in advance, for any consideration you give my request.

Best regards,

Gary L Versalle
Western Michigan University