

## **Are We Listening? Using Student Stories as a Framework for Persistence**

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*Although the success and persistence of college students is critical to the reputation and stability of institutions across the United States, institutions may lack an understanding of why their students persist. Prior research suggests that students persist due to a variety of factors ranging from their pre-college educational experiences, academic goals, and sense of belonging at the college. Qualitative data from narrative interviews supported previous research about the college student experience regarding connection, academics, and engagement. The findings of this study are being used to develop tools for practitioners regarding persistence.*

*Keywords: college student, persistence, narrative, belonging, connection*

### **INTRODUCTION**

As the cost of higher education increases, institutions face increased scrutiny from parents of prospective students, boards of trustees, and policy makers in order to ensure that students are receiving a quality education and all monies are being used appropriately (Gansemer-Topf & Schuh, 2006). One metric used to evaluate institutions is retention, the percentage of students who return to the same institution for their second year. According to the National Student Clearinghouse (2015), the average retention rate has hovered around 60% for full and part time students. Numerous studies unpack the impact of student background, experiences, financial need, and academic preparation on retention and attrition (Gansemer-Topf & Schuh, 2006; Reason, Terrenzini, & Domingo, 2007; Tinto, 1999; Truell & Woolsey, 2008; Whalen, Saunders, & Shelly, 2009). Institutions want to better predict which students from their applicant pool are most likely to persist in order to increase their retention rate.

Increasingly, institutions are focusing attention on the transition to college because the first few weeks of that experience can impact students' decision to stay (Tinto, 2006; Tinto, 2010; Upcraft & Gardner, 1991; Woosley, 2003; Woosley & Miller, 2009). College and universities use high impact practices, such as learning communities and first-year seminar courses, to provide students with a framework for their transition and to encourage student success at the institution (Gonyea, Kinzie, Kuh, & Laird, 2008; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2011). It is important for colleges and universities to understand the impact of these frameworks and gain a sense of what is working for students and how students are experiencing these interventions.

There is a call for researchers to locate the connections between institutional actions, policies, practices, and student behavior (Berger, 2001; Reason, 2009). Reason (2009) encourages researchers to answer this question: “Which institutional policies/practices can create environments that encourage student persistence?” (Reason, 2009, p. 677). Much of the research around retention is quantitative (Caison, 2007). While quantitative research gives practitioners an understanding of the issues, this type of research utilizes large numbers from a variety of institutional types and may not offer a model to follow or suggestions on interventions for a particular campus or for unique groups of students. Attinasi, (as cited by Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2011) suggests that theories of student departure should be informed by the student experience. Missing from previous research are the student reflections on their transition into and persistence at an institution.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to address the gap in the literature regarding the reflective narrative of students on their transition and persistence at an institution. Moreover, this research responds to Reason’s call to action for the scholar-practitioner. These narratives were used to better understand students’ perspectives on the structures that the college provided that helped them negotiate their transition to college and the barriers that challenged their transition. The narratives of their transition provided a context for their persistence at the institution.

### **Research Questions**

Six and seven semesters after entry, what stories do the students who persisted tell of their transition to college? Do they talk about feelings of connection, belonging, or marginality? Were there institutional support structures or barriers that impacted their transition?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of this literature review was to provide background on the concepts of importance to this research. Although these terms: persistence, belonging, transition, mattering and marginality are used by scholars and practitioners alike, it is important to develop a shared understanding of the meanings of these concepts.

### **Persistence**

Persistence is the decision by students to continue their enrollment at a specific institution. Tinto noted that “Students, however, do not seek to be retained. They seek to persist” (Tinto, 2016, paragraph 1). In his article, *Through the Eyes of Students*, Tinto (2015) highlights areas that are within the purview of institutions to influence the motivation (and thus the persistence) of students. The sense of belonging and community that tie students to an institution are also a factor in their motivation; students must feel like they belong to/at the institution, not only to a specific club or group (Tinto, 2015). Institutional identity and belonging are what impact persistence (Tinto, 2015).

Stage & Hossler (2000) developed a student-centered theory of persistence. In this model, much of a student’s decision to stay is impacted by their family background, school experiences, academic preparation, and commitment to the college experience (Stage & Hossler, 2000). The Stage-Hossler Model (2000) posits that students’ background, i.e. their family socio-economic status, or parental educational level, impacts their high school experiences and the process of the college search. Thus, while acknowledging that students have control over their decisions and actions that will lead to their success in college, their actions can be influenced by past experiences, social cues, and expectations (Stage & Hossler, 2000).

### **Transitions**

In the United States, there is a general acceptance that a student’s transition into the college environment is critical to their persistence (Nelson, Smith, & Clarke, 2011; Tinto, 2013, 2016). While regarded as

positive for new students, this experience involves a change in routines, people and location (Fisher & Hood, 1987). It is generally considered the job of the institution to create conditions that lead to successful transitions (Hussey & Smith, 2010). These conditions are typically limited by time, mandated information, and budget (Hussey & Smith, 2010).

Transition into college is typically viewed as a process that has a beginning, a middle, and end and creates a change in relationships, routines, opinions, and roles (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2011; Gale & Parker, 2014; Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). Through this traditional lens, transitions are a linear process in which people progress from one stage to the next, shedding old roles and taking on new ones (Anderson et al., 2011). Having a successful transition depends on the individual's coping skills and support systems (Anderson et al., 2011). Within this framework, a student enters college, moves into a new environment, perhaps away from home, meets new people, takes new classes, and transforms into a college student.

Viewing transitions through the connectionist lens (Gale & Parker, 2014), encourages the perception that transitions are a "complex, sometimes confusing whirlwind of emotions, spaces ... people, relationships, histories, affects, responses, demands, and expectations" (Taylor & Harris-Evans, 2016, p.6). This point of view enables one to engage the whole student, as it acknowledges that students will bring roles, history, and needs with them to campus (Tett, Cree, Christie, 2017). Transitions involve beginnings, new roles, and, for some students, new locations. It is not a lock-step march from college acceptance to the first semester to commencement. Metaphorically speaking, the college experience resembles a somewhat twisted path, full of stops and starts, ups and down, heartache and triumph.

### **Belonging**

Students may joke about being just a number at an institution, but even at the largest of institutions, students still look for places to develop feelings of belong. Belonging has its roots in feelings of safety and security; it involves the perception that one has social support, connections to others, and feels important to others (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012; Pittman and Richmond, 2008; Poston, 2009; Strayhorn, 2012). Students want to find people with whom they can form a sense of connection and commitment. Students' have a need to feel like they belong on and to the college campus in order for them to find success academically (Strayhorn, 2012). Tinto (2015) noted "...developing a sense of academic and social belonging early in the first-year facilitates other forms of engagement that enhance student learning in that year and persistence to completion in the years that follow" (p 9).

The perceptions that student have after interactions with peers, faculty, and staff impacts their sense of belonging. If a student perceives most of the interactions with others to be negative, they will feel out of place and withdraw from any type of contact which could lead to a lack of persistence (Tinto, 2016). In addition, belonging is context dependent; students can feel as if they belong in one setting yet not in another (Strayhorn, 2012; Reay, Davies, David, & Balls, 2001). Students in an underrepresented group may feel like outsiders in a classroom environment yet feel a sense of belonging within their residential community (Strayhorn, 2012; Reay et al., 2001). Belongingness is a sense of ease with yourself and your surroundings; a sense of familiarity with the spaces you occupy (May, 2011). The greater the sense that one belongs at college, the more at ease one feels in the campus environment. This ease translates to familiarity with campus spaces, activities, and faculty and staff, which will lead to an increased likelihood of success and persistence (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; May, 2011; Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Belonging is a multilayered concept that involves connection, institutional commitment and identity, and feelings of mattering.

### **Mattering and Marginality**

The definition of mattering, put forward by Schlossberg (1989), is very similar to the definition of belonging in that it involves students' beliefs that they are important to someone at the institution and that their successes will be noticed and celebrated (Schlossberg, 1989; Strayhorn, 2012). Students want to feel cared about and valued as individuals, not as numbers. They want to feel at home at their college or university (Cheng, 2004).

According to Schlossberg (1989), the flip side of mattering is marginality, the feeling that one does not matter, or belong, to anyone or anywhere, that one is not seen or heard, and that if one left the institution, one would not be missed (Schlossberg, 1989). Marginality can lead to feelings of self-consciousness and/or depression (Patton et al, 2016).

When looking at the transition experience of new college students, Schlossberg (1989) highlighted the importance of the concepts of mattering and marginality. It is important to note that some groups experience feelings of marginality on a fairly regularly basis based on their race, ethnicity, and/or sexual orientation.

### **Institutional Climate and Actions**

There are numerous studies that note the impact of institutional climate, actions, and conditions on student sense of belonging and persistence, (Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017). The National School Climate Council indicates that school climate has to do with “patterns of people’s experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures” (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2013, p358). Hurtado, Clayton-Pederson, Allen, & Milem, (1999) proposed that institutional climate is formed by the historical legacy of the college, student enrollments at the college, and the perception of the college by others. Institutional climate is impacted by the make-up of the faculty, staff, and students, the size of the institution, and the cues that we, as humans, respond to, which inform our perception of the campus climate (Baird, 2000).

Colleges should create a climate of care that enriches students’ lives through programs and activities that reflect the cultural make-up of the student population (Cheng, 2004). For instance, having a Latinx comedian one week as the spotlight performance and a speaker on Autism the next week. Having comfort foods in the college dining halls also speaks to enriching students’ lives. For some, the food may bring a sense of home and for others it might be a new taste to experience.

### **Organizational Identity**

Organization identification is a cognitive construct an individual holds regarding themselves as intertwined with the success or failure of their group and the extent to which they define themselves as part of that group (e.g. “I am a Tarheel” or “I am a UNH student”) (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). This identification with the campus is linked to feelings of belonging. Students who feel like they belong at a particular institution, to a particular residence hall, or to a specific student club feel connected to something bigger than themselves. These positive feelings impact student persistence and student success (Angelo-Ruiz & Pergelova, 2013; Hausmann et al., 2007; Zea, Reisen, Beil, & Caplan, 2010). School pride can be a powerful emotion; reflected in everything from setting up football rivalries at Big Ten institutions to competitions between residence halls at smaller institutions.

## **METHOD**

The original study took a mixed methods approach to these research questions allowed for the opportunity to look at data from the student’s first semester, as well as listen to their lived experiences over the course of six semesters. This article focuses on the narrative piece of that research. Narrative research allows the researcher to listen to and understand how participants make sense of a time in their lives (Riessman, 1993). Reason (2009) calls for action regarding student persistence,

*Stop searching for the silver bullet- the panacea- to solve our institutions’ retention problems. Rather we must approach the study and practice of student persistence as a multidimensional problem, heeding the admonition of Pascarella and Terrenzini (2005) by addressing the multiple forces operating in multiple settings that influence persistence. Influences on student persistence decisions are NOT uni-dimensional; our solutions cannot be either. (emphasis mine) (p. 675)*

This call to action requires the practicality of action research in order to learn what is successful on specific campuses. Practitioner-Scholars should understand how both the theoretical and empirical could support individual institutional action (Goodman & Cole, 2017). Action research not only transforms an organization or a community, it also transforms the practitioner into a researcher (Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman, & Vallejo, 2004; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). This type of research engages the dynamic, real-life situations of a practitioner's world and hopes to identify pathways to improve the quality of the student experience (Gardner, 2013).

### **Participants**

The participants were drawn from the new students who matriculated to a four-year, comprehensive, public institution in the fall of 2015 who were still enrolled at the college six and seven semesters later. The qualitative methodology focused on the narratives from students regarding their journey as college students. Collecting narratives from students who were still immersed in the college experience, yet removed from the initial transition to campus, provided enough distance for students to think critically about this time of their lives and reduce the haloing effect that one finds in alumni recalling their collegiate experience (Campbell & Misley, 2013; Koenig-Lewis, Assad, Palmer, & Peterson, 2016). This study used student narratives to illustrate their transition to and persistence at this institution, to add depth and voice to the numeric data collected via the survey. Although there is a tradition of using narrative in educational research (Kim, 2016), there is little research using the voices of experienced students reflecting on their college experiences.

Using a random number generator in order to select participants provided a pool of representative participants who might participate in an interview (Glesne, 2011). This approach established a collection of students to interview who were representative of the entering group of students in terms of gender and race/ethnicity. The sample size was not predetermined because it was important to have theoretical saturation in themes (Creswell, 2008). The data in action research is primarily gathered from interviews (Stringer, 2007) and can be a guided reflection. This type of reflection is what I used in the student interviews. The students who were selected to receive an invitation to participate in an interview were contacted via email. The first email was too long and failed to engage any respondents. A second email was sent to the initial group as well as second group that was identified using the random number generator. The second email was shorter and focused on the opportunity to tell their story. In addition, the PI was able to connect with faculty and staff who were connected with the sample population and who informed students that this was a legitimate study. They did not offer any extra credit for participation for students who elected to respond.

The action research model is highly personable and collaborative (Creswell, 2008). Students were asked to share their stories with the PI. In the email confirming the location and time, each student was asked to think about their transition from high school to college and their path at the institution. A semi-structured interview format was used so that students would tell their own story in their own way, (Roulston, 2014). Realizing it is sometimes it is hard to get students to start talking, a list of questions was available for use if students had difficulty finding a starting point, needed guidance, or a framework. The students were asked to sign the release, which collected limited demographic data and asked them to provide a pseudonym for use when referring to them in publications and presentations. This release noted that they could withdraw from this study at any time with no penalty. Participants were assured that the PI would do everything possible to keep their identities safe by redacting identifying names, clubs, and other very individualized details. The interview started with a very broad request for students to tell about their experience transitioning from high school to college (Stringer, 2007). The questions/prompts used were:

Tell me about your freshman year- what is your recollection of it?

How would you characterize your freshman year?

Were there specific people, activities, or classes that made you feel like you were cared about or that made you feel invisible during your transition to college?

What have been some of the biggest challenges during your freshman year?

How have you changed since starting college?  
How would you characterize your experience?

At the end of the interview, in order to bring a sense of closure to the interview for the student participant the PI asked: “How was it for you to reflect on your first semester/year and talk to me about your transition to college?” (Crossley, 2000; Josselson, 2007). This invited participants to debrief and reflect on what they thought about talking about their lived experience. Since the student participants were giving of their time and stories, they were thanked both in word and with the gift card (Josselson, 2007). The PI explained how the information collected would be used. The PI reiterated that the stories of their lives would be treated with care and that she hoped to use what she found to offer recommendations to the institution that might impact new students. She wanted students to feel invested in this work; that their stories could help the institution enhance the transition experience and persistence of new students. The PI ended the interview by asking which type of gift card the participant would prefer. Students who choose to participate received a \$25 gift card from Starbucks, the school store, or Amazon. After each interview was complete, it was transcribed into a usable format using the RevTM application from the iTunes store. Accurate transcription is key to keep a focus on data quality and interpretive rigor (Crossley, 2000; O’Cathaian, 2010; Riessman, 1993). After receiving the transcription, the PI listened to the recording to review the transcription and correct any errors. The first review of the transcripts was only used to identify issues and listen to the voices of the students.

### **Narrative Analysis**

Both structural and performance analyses of the students’ narratives were completed. A structural approach was used to determine if there were themes common to the narratives (Grbich, 2013). ATLAS TI cloud software was used for coding of the narratives. The cloud-based version of ATLAS TI offered the opportunity to see the codes in the order they were entered. The PI also kept the codes in an excel document that could be alphabetized. In effect, these were the codebooks as referenced by Glesne (2011). During the initial coding phase, the PI read through each transcript three times to verify the coding identifications. New data or meanings became clear each time the document was reviewed. Careful notations were made when deciding to combine some codes into themes while reviewing the emerging framework. The PI also handwrote notes of her reflections of the codes and transcripts. Although there is functionality within the ATLAS-TI cloud version for on-line notes and reflections, the PI found it much more rewarding to jot down thoughts, feelings, and drawings (Glesne, 2011). These handwritten notes enabled her to identify the pathways of the students, which informed the results. Several themes emerged on the first read through, while others took time to reveal themselves. Patience with the process was critical.

Eventually identifying information was redacted. The student’s name was changed to their chosen pseudonym, as well as the names of friends. The key matching each name with their alternate name was kept in password protected file on a password protected external hard drive. Faculty/staff names, as well as clubs and organizations, were also redacted as those could be used to identify a specific student at this medium sized institution.

The PI listened to the recordings of the conversations a second time during the reading and coding process in order to refocus on the telling of the story and the way each student chose to answer the prompts. In a performative analysis, researchers are focused on the way telling of the story and the way events occur through a period of time (Glesne, 2011; Grbich, 2013). The PI was interested in learning when participants chose to start their narrative and when they believed their transition to the institution began. She wanted to learn who the important people were in their stories and what examples of their experiences they were willing to share.

After coding, the differences between meanings of certain words practitioners use versus how students use them were considered. This framed how results were organized. Variables were eventually redefined within the emerging framework for persistence. Additionally, several codes were combined to create themes that aligned with the emerging framework. Through this process, patterns emerged (Kim, 2016) which assisted the PI in the formulation of the practitioner tools, i.e. the survey and the worksheet.

## RESULTS

This study examined the students' lived realities that impacted, both positively and negatively, their ability to persist at the institution. These lived realities reflected privilege, marginalization, loneliness, belonging, need, want, and educational goals. For some students, it required courage to share their story. The seventy (70) codes were collapsed into themes based on PI memos regarding language and meaning. The following themes were deemed critical to the persistence of the students involved in this study at this institution.

### **Belonging at College**

In Student Affairs practice, the concept of belonging encompasses numerous aspects of a student's college experience but focuses on feelings of connections (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012; Pittman and Richmond, 2008; Poston, B, 209; Strayhorn, 2012). However, students did not use belonging in that way. They used that word in terms of belonging at, or to, the institution; that they had the right or deserved to be at the institution. Brooke noted,

I mean, after the first couple weeks I felt like this is just, this was where I'm living. This is where I belong. I kind of got to the grind of things. I didn't feel like I was away. I felt like this is where I was supposed to be.

Raven spoke of the moment she knew she belonged at the college,

Then, I think the first week of school started and we were about to do pass all the pillars and we had our red T-shirts on and we walked all the way up from [residence hall] to, where is it? The top of the hill for pass all the pillars, and we walked through the pillars together. We were like, "Oh my God, we're really [school mascots]!" After that experience we were like it's legit now, we are ingrained into this school. So, after we passed to the pillars, our first week of school started.

The event to which Raven referenced was an event sponsored by multiple campus offices. This event, which could be considered an institutional action, gathered all the new students together for a group photo. Following the photo, the group walked through campus together, signaling their entrance into the college community. The students did not discuss belonging in relation to others; it was the sense that they had earned the right or privilege to be here, that they were part of something bigger, and identifying with college life or the college itself.

### **Connecting to Others**

Woven through the narratives were themes of connection and friendships, or lack thereof. Originally, these began as separate concepts but ultimately were collapsed into the single theme of "Connection to Others" after reflecting about the students' narratives and the meaning of the codes. Theodore shared,

It was a really good time and my freshman year my door was always open. Me and my roommate were always hanging out. We were always having people coming and going... we wanted people to come and talk to us.

Catherine noted that she did not feel as though she had a friend group and this lack of connection to others was difficult during her freshmen year. Catherine noted that she noticed other students settling in with their friend groups,

I think just that I felt like I wasn't doing as well as other freshmen in this situation. So, knowing that the girls who lived next to me were best friends with the girls across the hall.

And they always went to meals together, or whatever. And my roommate didn't do anything. Just, I kind of felt lost in the situation. Because you do look around and you see everyone having their ... groups of people are doing, and always being happy, or always going out, or staying up late, or whatever. And I didn't. So, I think that's what hurt me for a while.

### **Mattering and Marginality**

Mattering and marginality were also themes that arose in the narratives. The feeling of being seen, appreciated, and important to others drew a variety of responses from the student participants. Students felt they mattered when they felt others cared or when they felt important to people affiliated with the institution. Mattering is less about friendship and more about feeling noticed. Brooke said,

All of the Biology faculty are very supportive... That's one of the reasons I decided to stay. I feel like they're just so approachable. They really want you to succeed. I felt that because [the college] is the size that it is, you're allowed to have that, which I found to be really, really, really, important throughout my years here honestly.

Jessica B mentioned

Because the [staff members] would be the ones who would teach it and run it so that made us aware that they actually care about us, a lot more. And then also with one of the classes I took there was a professor who said "if you ever need help just come talk to me", the professors saying that shows that they care... Yeah, I went and was like, "hey I'm struggling can you help me?" And then she told me about extra credit that I could do and I was like, "oh thank goodness."

CJ shared

I love faculty members who leave their office and say hi, how are you? What are you doing? And they come to events and they email you and they do stuff and not just, oh, I have office hours from 12 to three. Come see me and so on. So there's faculty here who do more than what they're paid for. And I appreciate that there's faculty here that could be teaching at an institution more accredited than this, and they're here.

Maggie said

[staff member name redacted]. He's always been there. He'll ask me questions and just really ... Sometimes I've got phone calls. He's just checking in. He's really showed that he cares. He's definitely made that impact in my college career. If I was ever unsure of how to do something or who to get in contact with for school, I would call him.

Similarly, Gabriella shared,

I feel like [staff member name] helped me a lot like a mom and I technically feel so comfortable with her- I don't look at her as a boss. I look at her more like a mom.

### **Marginality**

There were students who spoke about their feelings of not feel seen, heard, or cared about at the institution. CJ, Jess and Catherine shared:

[freshman year was] a desert, isolated. I was very, very isolated both by choice and socially. And just uncomfortable but in a good way because I, I think I didn't have a community freshman year. (CJ)

One thing that also made me feel isolated was going into town there used to be a good amount of confederate flags on the back of cars and just like... even now with all the Trump stuff but specifically the confederate flags, all I knew about that. I associated with the KKK, with racists, anti-this, anti-that, when it can mean something else to other people which I understand now. But coming in as a freshman and seeing that I was like, "Whoa, they don't want me here" so that's how I felt. (Jess)

I changed floors when I got a new roommate, so I had two different RAs. My first RA, completely hands-off. Like, he was great, and he meant well, he just was not meant for the position. He never really built community or reached out to you. And I just remember, the one time I was like ... I went back to my room; my roommate had moved out without telling me. Which was my real breaking point. So I go and I knock on his door, and he's like, "What's wrong?" And I'm ... at this point, it's finals week, I just want to go home. I'm having a panic attack, tears coming out, and he goes, "Can I help you?" (*said in an annoyed voice*) And I was like, "All right. So that kind of really pushed me to be an RA, so no one else would have the experience that I had with him and his style. (Catherine)

When Becca was speaking about her residential experience, she noted that although her Resident Advisor made really cute door tags, she [the RA] did not acknowledge her or her friends, who were also Students of Color, on the floor. She indicated that her experience could have been better in the residence halls.

These statements support previous research that found that feeling marginalized can lead to depression and self-consciousness (Patton et al, 2016). In order for students to feel as if they matter, they must feel needed, appreciated, and noticed within their community (Cheng, 2004; Patton et al, 2016; Schlossberg, 1989). Providing opportunities where students can create connections and form support systems will aid them in feeling like they matter at the institution. As Catherine noted above, an RA who is not engaged with their new students can lead to a less than positive experience; thus, it is imperative that we hire and appropriately train staff who work with new students as those interactions can be impactful. Many of the student who had stories of feeling marginalized were students of color and /or identified as women.

### **Campus Climate**

The students of color were the only ones who discussed how the campus climate impacted their experience. CJ, a male African - American student remembered feeling isolated and yet the center of attention,

I just felt like when I walked around campus, especially the residence halls, I felt like Shamu in the sense of like I was this big, black whale, and I had a bunch of white people watching me from a stadium. And it felt like this, and it's really hard going to the bathroom and trying to put in leave-in conditioner and then all this other stuff, like wearing my do-rag and this, and talking about certain experiences from living in my neighborhood and feeling very ... with the RA situation, feeling like ... I think one common experience unfortunately here is being in a situation, talking with someone and within the first five seconds I think to myself oh, they don't know how to talk to black people in a sense that they're hesitant or I can see the intimidation or the fear.

One afternoon, there was an interesting juxtaposition. The PI interviewed Jess, an African - American woman. She was very emotional during the recounting of some of her experiences. Her body language was

curled into herself – she was hugging herself. It appeared as though she was trying to comfort herself. She talked about feeling like an outsider,

With my hair, my clothes, certain things that I say. I notice that ... I don't know why but I was always getting called sassy. I'm like, "Is that supposed to mean something else?" Those are the little things that I was noticing that never happened to me back home because, you know, back home everybody has similar hairstyles and stuff like that. I think that comes with adjusting and that can happen to anybody who steps into a crowd that's different, but it really made me feel like this is not something that they see a lot around here. I am ... I don't know, something in a museum to be examined." (Jess)

During our conversation, Jess noted that her excitement about school quickly wore off; she was placed in a triple with two other women, both white, who quickly became friends.

I remember this one time, I had friends come over and after they left, [her roommates] did a deep-cleaning of the room as if we some pest. So, I'm like, "Wow, I guess we made the room that dirty. That was another thing that kind of transitioned my thinking and made me feel more isolated. (Jess)

Later that day, the PI interviewed John T, a white male. He met his best friends during move-in day in the residence halls and they have been together ever since. He noted that, as he reflected about his freshman year, he thought it was perfect, that everything was great and that he found a home, "I've just found a really great group of friends that I became close to right off the bat and those have been my friends all through school. It has stayed pretty much the same." His body language was sprawled in the chair with his hands behind his head. He appeared very relaxed and engaged in the conversation.

### **Academic Experience**

The following codes were combined for this theme: academic success, academics, adjusting to academic expectations, importance of liberal arts education, major related confusion, positive academic experience, and struggling academically. Developing a sense of what the academic expectations were at college and selecting a major were points that the students shared in their narratives. Becca, John T, and Ray shared the following:

I did struggle the first year. That was difficult cause for me like I came in with the same thought I had in high school. Like the high school mentality and like for me that was just being able to BS and goof off all the time but yet still maintain good grades. So that's what I thought I would be able to do, so like I come in and I'm all like ugh, no, no, no I cannot do that. (Becca)

In high school, I probably in retrospect probably could have done better if I had applied myself more. But I was kinda more focused on baseball and that was all I cared about in high school. I cruised by in high school didn't really ever put in too much effort, but I still got good grades like high 80s low 90s. Then once I got to college, I sort of realized that now I'm paying for my education, at this point this is what I'm going to do with my life. So, I gotta make the most of it, so I just really buckled down and applied myself and ended up doing really well. I've maintained like a 3.68 GPA right now, and I've been pretty consistent with it through my college career. (John T.)

I took audio arts production one and hated it. I was like ... And that was one of the reasons probably that I was just a mess. I was like, "I thought I knew what I wanted to do, and now I just don't, and this is awful." It was mostly because of Pro Tools and whatever, but that's

a completely different animal. I was just like, "This is really not good," so I dropped that whole minor, idea of the minor, done, whatever. But I had found out through being a member at [specific club] and just my really good friend from home, he was a mass comm minor a mass comm major. I was like, "Maybe I can take up the mass comm minor," and I started taking some of those classes. I realized I really, really liked it, so I dropped the mass comm minor and I took up the mass comm major. So now, I'm a double major starting last year, so my sophomore year. (Ray)

Based on several participant stories, the experience of finding an academic home and setting goals created positive feelings in the students, which corresponds to previous research that speaks to the need for academic engagement and goals (Kuh et al., 2011; Tinto, 2017).

### **Transitions**

Having students in their 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> semesters at the institution reflect on their college experience provided insight into how they define their transition into the institution. These students spoke of the good times as well as some of the struggles they faced. The PI tracked the arcs of the narratives in an effort to conceptualize transitions through a constructionist lens (Gale & Parker, 2014). However, the paths of the narratives fit with W-Curve Hypotheses Model (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Hoffenberger, Mosier, & Stokes, 1999; Mosier, 1996). This model was originally developed for students studying internationally and the culture shock they experience but has been used in some literature regarding the transition of new students (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Hoffenberger, Mosier, & Stokers, 1999; Mosier, 1996). Although linear in nature, it comes the closest to representing the lived experiences of students. This model was not included in the literature review done prior to the interviews as the arcs of students' narratives was not known at that time.

The first stage of the W-Curve is the "honeymoon phase" which is characterized by over-interest, excitement, and a romanticized view of what college is going to be like once they arrive on campus (Hoffenberger, Mosier, & Stokes, 1999; Mosier, 1996). The following students shared

I was really excited at the beginning because I was like, "oh this is a new place, new time." It was so much different than home so it was exciting but at the same time was also nervous, so it was nerve-wracking a little. (Jessica B.)

I was happy, I was excited, I had everything packed, I was ready like a week in advance. (Kim)

I would have to say I definitely came into college very excited and very ... I really wanted to make friends. I wanted to have the college experience and everything. I came in with a lot of friendships that came from the Facebook page. They have a Facebook page. Then people try to find roommates and things like that. I had already found my roommate. We were friends. We had actually seen each other before we came to college. When I started out I felt like I had a friend. It was really, that was really nice. But then it ended up that in person, when we lived together, it wasn't the best situation. (Brooke)

After the excitement wears off and the lived experiences reveal the differences between the new culture and home culture, people experience culture shock (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). According to Winkelman (1994), culture shock occurs as a result of losing of a familiar (home) environment while coping with the challenges of learning about a new environment. This is when things go wrong, fail to live up to the hype, and/or the values of their peers at college may clash with those learned at home (Hoffenberger, Mosier, & Stokers, 1999; Winkelman, 1994). For college students, this may start when a roommate, on a residential campus, begins to leave dirty dishes on the desk, they get a "C" on their first test, or they feel lost and alone. There are also hidden expectations, languages, and assumptions that new students may not

know or understand, particularly our first-generation population. Acronyms are particularly troublesome for new students; for instance, FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) and DAC (Degree Applicable Credit). Student Affairs staff can assist new students, both freshman and transfer, in learning the lingo, norms, and resources paramount to student success.

Catherine said,

So I cried almost every day of my freshman year. I had a horrible first semester. But luckily, second semester it got better... kind of found my friend group and I really didn't love here and feel like I fit in and belonged here until my sophomore year.

Kim noted,

I see that my parents, my sister, and my brother they're leaving me. That's when I started getting the breakdown. I started crying and crying and then there was a point that my parents left already and then I even had to call them back like, oh my God, please come back, like I don't want you guys to have to leave.

Jess shared a similar sentiment,

So I guess my excitement really died when I first got on campus and I was in a forced triple...and my two roommates they really just hit off so I was just like in the room. That was the first thing that turned me off. I was like, "Okay great, I don't speak to my roommates.

Oliver also shared his struggles,

That first week, it was kind of not horrible, I would say, but it just sucked because I felt like there was no home cooked meals, you know what I mean? Like, there was no ... I don't know, it just felt like there was no-one out there specifically looking over me. You know what I mean? Which is ... It teaches you a lot of independence doing that. But, it also feels so weird moving from that. And it's funny, because people that I went to high school with that I still talk to obviously, some of them went to the local community college, which is still a great option. But, it means that they stay at home and just commute. A lot of them were like, "What's the weirdest part about going to college?" I was like, "Honestly, it's the independence." There is no-one holding your hand. There is no ... Which is a good and bad thing. When you want to be left alone, you can easily just sink into your bed and be left alone. But it's also bad sometimes when you're feeling like crap, sometimes it just feels like no-one cares. You know what I mean?

Becca shared her tearful classroom moment,

It was like, difficult. I remember this one time when I was sitting in class, like before class even started like before a professor got here. Like I cried, because I sat there and I was like what am I doing here. Sorry... [student was teary] But I sat there I was like honestly what am I doing here cause like the thing is I was like struggling and like I felt like I took someone else's position.

In the adjustment phase, students learn about the campus and rebound from that initial shock (Mosier, 1996). Mosier (1996) notes that while students begin to feel more connected to their institution, many students experience a second wave of culture shock, called mental isolation, after their first trip home. Students are learning to negotiate both the home culture and the campus culture. Most of the students in the

study did not focus on the second wave of adaptation, perhaps those who experienced severe initial culture shock thought this was just another “blip” in their transition to college. In addition, students in their sixth or seventh semester at college have traditionally traveled home multiple times. They might have grown accustomed to the differing atmospheres and roles they play within both environments and have adjusted to them. This might be a pitfall of speaking with students late in their college career, as they are reflecting on their experiences through the lens of already completing several semesters.

Integration into both cultures is the final stage of the W-Curve model (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). Students may find ways to connect with faculty, staff, and peers and/or support services through classes, activities, or office hours (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Hoffenberger et al., 1999; Mosier, 1996). While their problems may not have disappeared, students are adapting and thriving.

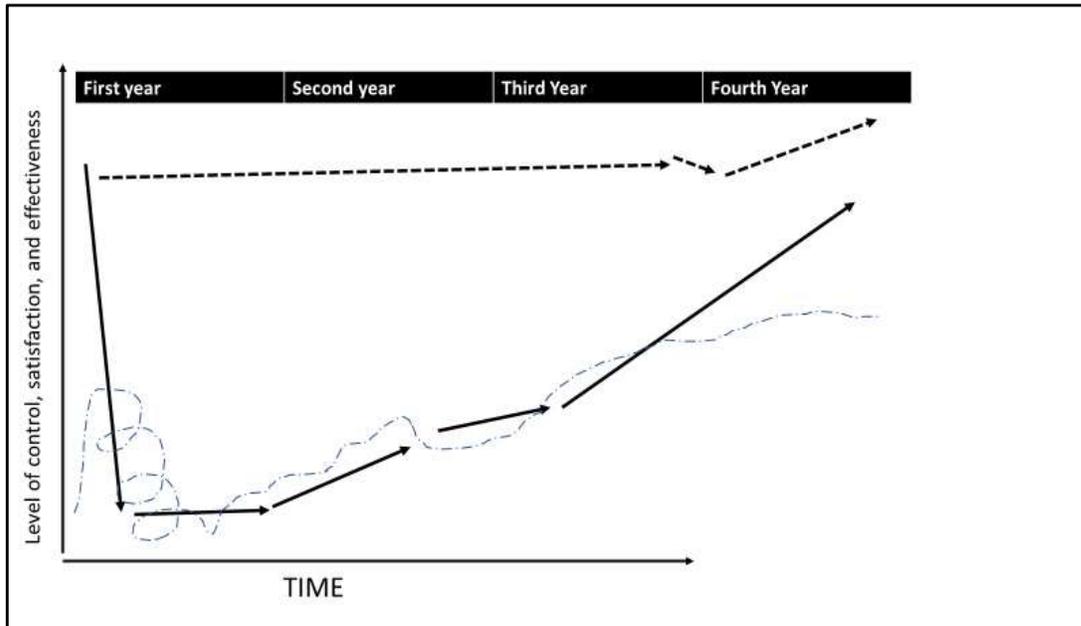
My second semester freshman year because I was to biological seminar.... Dr. “Smith” was doing a presentation on his research... I was about to walk out the double doors and then I see his office there and I’m like, “you know what Jess, you just need to go in there and talk to him.” And then I did and I said, “I really like your work.”... and he was like, “Well I do research. Do you wanna join?” Then sophomore year, I was doing research. (Jess)

Like, I’m like, who’s going to wake me up now? So that’s when I started using alarms on my phone... I bought like a big alarm clock because I was like, who’s going to wake me up? Like I said, I’m missing class. I’m like, I need to do it myself because my mom is not here no more. Doing the whole laundry thing was new... I never knew where to put the soap... College has helped by grow a lot. (Kim)

Figure 1 illustrates three different stories. John T’s story (thick dashes) indicated that his transition started off strong and remained relatively positive. Catherine’s story (solid line) begins well but quickly becomes negative and remains that way for quite a while. In her narrative, she indicated she felt alone until her sophomore year when she became a Resident Advisor (RA). That was when she felt as though she found her people. From that point on, Catherine found more ways to connect with others, engage in her new major, and join clubs for people with interests similar to her own. Kim’s story (thin dash and dot line) had a combination of excitement, shock and recovery. Kim discussed her disconnection at the summer program and being drawn into the mix by a professional staff member. She became more outgoing, yet still suffered from a rocky freshman year as she negotiated being away from home and living with a roommate.

Although the W-Curve provides a framework for students’ transition to and through college, by itself, it does not highlight the impact that belonging, connections, campus climate, and academic successes have on the students who persisted.

**FIGURE 1**  
**THE TRANSITION OF THREE STUDENTS USING THE W-CURVE**



### **Summary**

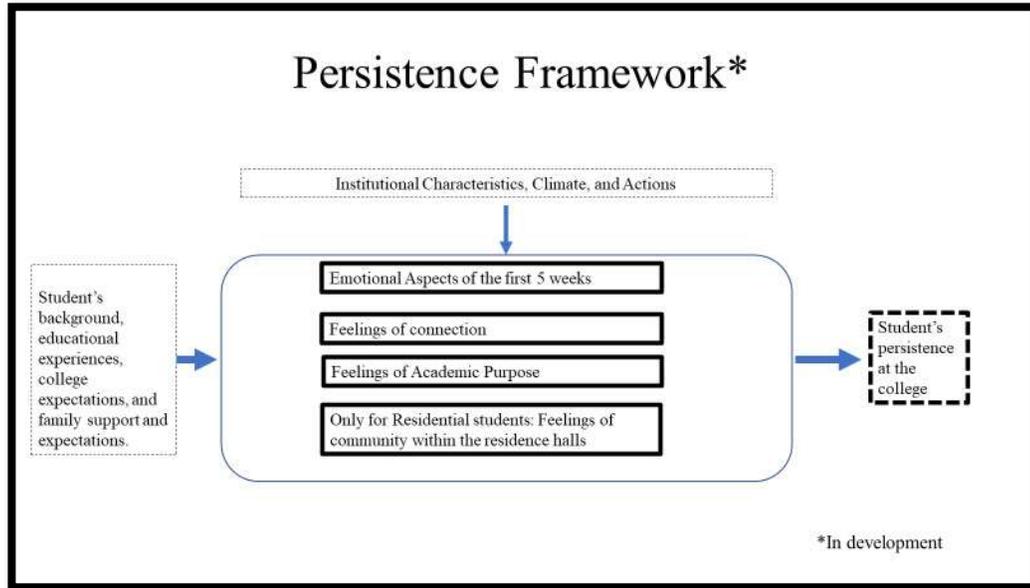
Twenty-two students responded to the opportunity to share their story with the interviewer during their sixth and seventh semester at the institution. There were 70 codes identified within their narratives. Even though each of the 22 stories were different, the students discussed the connections they made with peers, faculty, and staff. Some students shared the struggles they faced as new students, while others only shared the experiences that were positive. Additionally, students talked about their academic experiences as well as the clubs, organizations, and leadership roles that were important to their development.

### **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

#### **A Developing Framework for Practitioners**

Based on the study and the information gathered, a framework for understanding persistence is emerging that practitioners can use in their own practice. This framework in development acknowledges that student's background, experiences in education, anticipation about college, and support and expectations from family impact their college experience. Additionally, this framework acknowledges that the institution has a role in how and why students persist.

**FIGURE 2**  
**GRAU'S FRAMEWORK FOR STUDENT PERSISTENCE**



This model highlights the key pieces of the persistence puzzle: the transition experience, students' feelings of satisfaction, mattering or marginality, and sense of belonging and connection. Those are impacted by the student's background and institutional characteristics, climate, and actions. As a practitioner-scholar, it is important to utilize research and theory development in ways that will not only add to the research knowledge base around persistence and student success but also improve our practice.

The updated framework considers the transition from home environment to campus environment and the impact it can have on students' mental health. In addition, feelings of connection and academic purpose are also critical to student persistence. For residential students, particularly first-year students, the residential experience has an impact on persistence. The SPPS questions reflect the updated framework.

For practitioners to use this framework in their practice, the PI is in the first stage of developing two tools for practitioners: a survey and a worksheet.

### **The Student Perception and Persistence Survey**

The survey, the Student Perception and Persistence Survey (SPPS), is developing from information gathered in the narratives from the student participants. The questions in the emerging survey ask students to self-report their feelings regarding different aspects of their college experience. The Likert scale should be a four-point scale to avoid neutral scores; students will have to agree or disagree. The Likert scale categories would range from *does not reflect my feeling* to *clearly reflects my feelings*. The areas the survey will cover include the academic experience, the social experience, feelings of engagement in campus life, and the emotional aspect of the transition to college. For colleges with residence halls, the survey has the option for questions focused residential living.

The PI has identified items for the survey based on the emerging framework (Mertens, 2015). Once the item pool is complete, the developing survey will require pilot testing by both professional experts and members of a sample population (Mertens, 2015). Following that, item analysis and revisions are critical in the validation process (Mertens, 2015).

### **Practitioner Worksheet**

The worksheet utilizes the W-Curve of transition along with the knowledge that transitions are not linear, they are swirling and multi-layered (Gale & Parker, 2014). Using the W-curve to illustrate how students transition to college can provide a way to assist student affairs practitioners in understanding what students may need or want at different times during the semester (Hoffenberger et al., 1999). Practitioners are encouraged to use the W-curve when training student staff members who work with new students. No two stories were the same, so practitioners must be careful about overgeneralizing. The W-Curve is a great visual that student staff members easily understand. Moreover, it could be useful when speaking with new students during their first year to better understand how they perceive their journey thus far. This model could also serve to normalize homesickness and other college struggles. Thurber and Walton (2012) include normalizing feelings of missing home in their list of how to alleviate homesickness so that students do not feel as though they are the only ones who miss home. Showing students iterations of the curve could reinforce the notion to students that everyone adjusts to college at their own pace. Sharing this could lead to students' understanding that each person's transitions to new spaces and routines is unique and each student will create a unique path at the institution using their own coping skills, various campus resources, and college experiences (Anderson et al, 2012; Christie, Tett, Cree, & McCune, 2016).

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

This study has several suggestions for future research. The emerging framework, the SPPS, and the Practitioner Worksheet must be further developed and validated, as noted earlier.

Additionally, future inquiries should seek to examine the experiences of transfer students and students who left the institution; these were two significant groups whose voices are not part of this research project. Those transfer students in the original group of new students in fall 2015 had graduated by the time of the study. Transfer students might bring their prior higher education experiences and expectations into the new setting. This information could result in transfer specific modifications to the framework. The voice of students who left the institution are notably missing from the narratives and a method needs to be devised to engage with that population. Letting the voices of those students who did not persist at this institution or within the system of higher education could provide other information that would inform the emerging framework and emerging survey.

### **Broader Implications for Practice and Conclusion**

Throughout the narratives, the notions of belonging to this institution, connection with others, campus climate, and academic success remained at the forefront of the PI's reflections on the student narratives. Students' need for a sense of belonging to the institution, as well as for a connection with their peers, faculty and staff, is similar to what was found in prior research (Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 2016). Sense of belonging and connection are areas where student affairs professional staff, peer mentors, and faculty could have the greatest impact. Providing new students with structured programs and events in order to meet peers, connect with mentors, and interact with faculty and professional staff may help both the students who feel alone and lonely as well as those who are more secure in their college experience. These programs could take many different forms, a video of a current student sharing their experience, a poster illustrating the different paths students choose, or a checklist of tips for success from other students. It may also be a mentor talking to their mentees about their experiences and suggesting examples of how to connect and find spaces for themselves. As practitioner-scholars in higher education, it is our responsibility to assist students in finding their "families" or the places where they feel as though they belong. In the interviews, it became apparent that some of the students felt as though they had multiple groups they belonged to across campus. However, to find those spaces, they all started with finding the first one. Some fell into their first group of friends and others took a circuitous path.

Students of color discussed campus climate, shared their struggles of having to negotiate white spaces and feeling different. It sounded as though most participants eventually found their homes on campus, as well as their voices. They were determined to leave this campus better than they found it. At least one participant noted that the campus was making strides in creating a more diverse and inclusive community.

By ensuring institutions hire faculty, professional staff, and student staff that represent the student population, students can see themselves in the peer assistants, tutors, advisors, faculty and staff. This provides cues to success and creates a more inclusive space for all students. Higher education professionals can educate themselves on micro-aggression and inclusion in order to support students. Every interaction impacts students. A negative interaction, such as a microaggression, can reverberate and impact students' sense of community and belonging (Tinto, 2015). Using the campus physical spaces, programs, courses to empower students across all identities, cultural integration is how higher education professionals can create conditions for students to succeed (Museus, Yi, & Saelau, 2017).

Creating a campus community where students feel noticed and valued should be the responsibility of all employees of the institution, from the president's office to the dining hall staff to student support services.

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