UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT PERCEPTION OF SUCCESS
BEYOND TRADITIONAL MEASURES OF PERSISTENCE AND DEGREE ATTAINMENT

by

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Education
in the Department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Technology Studies
in the Graduate School of
The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

2019
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand community college student success from the student perspective. Research questions included: (1) How do community college students define success? (2) What are student expectations facilitating success? (3) How do student perceptions of success, expectations facilitating success, and overall college experience influence student success, as perceived by students? Expansive research has provided insights into the contextual complexity of community college students served, varying missions of community college, and the pivotal role of engagement in serving underprepared and underserved students. This study utilized semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth data, guided by the psychology contract theory, to better understand how students perceived success, student expectations of the institution facilitating success, and how fulfillment of these expectations influenced student experience and overall success. Data provided insights regarding the varying goals of students and noteworthy impact of relational contexts of institutional agreements and fulfillment of expectations that are influential to success. Students articulated expectations, however, institutional agents’ understanding of students and expectations proved to be more influential on success than fulfillment. Student success remains complex and varies based on individual student goals. Students enroll with expectations of agreement with the institution, explicit and implicit, which influences success. The understanding of student needs and expectations and relational aspects of agreement proved most influential in student success.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my loving husband, Daniel, and beautiful children: Parker, Sophie, and Daxton. Life is a journey, full of detours along the way. I would not have found my way through this treacherous path without you all carrying me along the way. I love you!
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support of the University of Alabama Executive Doctoral Program in Higher Education Administration. I am especially appreciative of my dissertation chair, Dr. Karri Holley. You have been a teacher and mentor, and more importantly, a pillar of support every step of the way. You never wavered in your belief in me. My dissertation committee provided me widespread academic support ensuring this research study came to fruition. To Cohort X, my dear friends and X family for life. I am especially indebted to LaKiesha Armstrong, Albertha Barrett, Tava Bingham, DJ Cervino, Tina DeNeen, Harold Goss, Kristalyn Lee, Tanta Myles, Cedric Norman, Tim Sceggel, Allen Sutton, and Mike Wallace. Thirteen in and thirteen out! My family, there is no support greater support than that of yours. I would like to thank my family who has always surrounded me with love and support. I would especially like to thank my parents for your love and guidance, always believing in me, cheering for me, dusting me off when I want to give up, and holding my hand along the way. Most importantly, I would like to thank my loving and supportive husband, Daniel, and three amazing children, Parker, Sophie, and Daxton, who give me unrelenting inspiration. Daniel, you have literally been by my side every step of this journey. I would not have survived this roller coaster ride without you. Parker, you and I started this journey eighteen years ago, I would not have done this without you. Sophie, you are a UA alumni and began your doctoral journey before you had breath of life. Daxton, you defended your first dissertation before we even met. You three have given me the drive to accomplish more than I believed I could. My inspiration has always remained my prayer that you too with always strive to believe in yourself. I love you!
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The overarching mission of community colleges is to provide access to all students through an open admissions application process. Through this mission of access, community colleges serve a diverse group of students without discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion, sex, academic preparedness, and socioeconomic status. Community colleges afford equal opportunity for all students to attain academic and occupational preparation including degree attainment, four-year transfer, and workforce development/training. While the open access and broad ranging mission yields alternative advantages for students, workforce, higher education, and institutions, accommodating this vast array of variance in missions and student demographics does not come without unique challenges.

Further complicating the community college mission, this sector of higher education has gained interest due to the dramatic increase in the number of high school students seeking a college education with limited funding. Community colleges are able to offer affordability as compared to other avenues of higher education. Student interest has amplified demands on community college accountability in terms of success as measured by outcomes of degree attainment and transfer, both traditionally low (Dougherty & Townsend, 2006). While student success is broadly defined in higher education, rates of retention, graduation, and transfer are frequently used by policymakers, administrators, and practitioners as quantitative measures of success. As an outcome measure, success as defined above is and will remain imperative to decision makers in higher education for informing community college policies and procedures.
Stakeholders of community colleges are faced with funding dilemmas: specifically, how to utilize resources to fund varying missions. Further complicating the complexities of community college success with varying missions, student success outcomes and outputs do not provide sufficient insight into the multi-contextual complexities of student inputs, student experience, barriers, and influence on success. Therefore, qualitative research seeking the student perspective of success beyond traditional measures, such as rates of retention, graduation, and transfer, is necessary to inform policymakers as well as higher education administrators and practitioners who serve the diverse community college student population of the unique challenges and varying definitions of success and goals of attaining success.

**Background**

Addressing the definition of student success has become a broad interest among policymakers, practitioners, administrators, and students. Traditional definitions of student and institutional success utilize graduation and retention rates; however, this is only one set of outcomes or measures of success. Beyond these traditional metrics, specifically community college student success, the community college mission must be considered. Notably, the hallmark of community colleges is based on an open admissions policy that provides educational opportunity to all students irrespective of age, sex, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, academic ability, or geographic location. The contextual complexities of the community college mission, definition of success, and student demographics cannot be overlooked when considering outcomes and measures of community college success. There has been a shift in the higher education agenda away from solely affording access to students to a shared mission of establishing outcomes of improved success. Amplified awareness of community college student success promotes provision of access to all students, with emphasis on degree persistence and
attainment, “success,” through completion with degree or certificate attainment. Exploring the student perspective of success will provide community college stakeholders additional perspective in decision making with consideration of the complexity of student success beyond traditional outcome measures.

The traditional definition of success, the national measure as a quantitative outcome, utilizes institutional graduation rates, which are reported annually to the federal government. This national measure of graduation and completion rates, as required by the 1990 Student Right to Know Act, 34 C.F.R. 668, mandates calculation and disclosure of graduation and completion information by any institution receiving Title IV funding (U.S. Department of Education, Institute for Education Sciences, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

IPEDS facilitates this right to know mandate by assisting institutions in tracking and full-time, first time students seeking degree and/or certificate attainment. IPEDS tracks those students completing within 150% normal time to graduation. Normal time, or the amount of time it should take a student to graduate when enrolled full-time on continual basis, is four years for a bachelor’s degree and two years for an associate’s degree. Time to completion, within 150% of normal time for a bachelor’s degree is six years, and three years for an associate’s degree.

Considering student completion as a sole outcome measure, as outlined by completion and graduation of community college students, fails to consider the contextual complexities that community college students face when enrolling. Student completion disregards the inputs, perspectives, and challenges of these students in their pursuit of success. Omitting community college contextual complexities in the national conversation of success, when quantifying completion timeframes to graduation may distort the attainability of success within the normal timeframe. While the normal time may quantitatively simplify the realistic attainability of
college students enrolling full-time on a continual basis, it is an incomplete metric. Therefore, it is necessary to report considerations of the student perspective of success beyond the national measure to offer a realistic picture of community college student success.

Student calculation of normal time to graduation is based on continual, full-time enrollment and calculated based on 150% or even 200% of normal time to gauge student success beyond normal time. According to Achieving the Dream initiative (2009), reporting normal time to graduation poses accountability discrepancies, with recommendations of reporting graduation rates beyond six years, in an attempt to better serve community colleges in deciphering student success between those who persisted and those who failed to persist (Miller, 2009). Institutions which are eligible for Title IV federal aid are required to provide reports of each annual cohort of students. These cohorts of students include those students which enroll as first time college students, enrolled full-time, and degree seeking. This calculation determines which students graduate within 150% of normal time which is then divided by the cohort (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2018). This calculation affords reporting of students at four-year institutions to graduate within six years, while students at two-year institutions graduate within three years. Students completing within this timeframe, with a college degree or certificate, have successfully completed.

While these measures of success provide an outcome of student completion, this quantitative measure does not adequately articulate the intricacies of community college settings and pathways to student success. Community college students face barriers that often prohibit full-time and continuous enrollment, complicating traditional pathways to completion; therefore, “normal” becomes improbable if not impossible. Furthermore, lack of understanding into student
perceptions of success may further exclude community college students from goal attainment measured solely based on graduation within 150% of normal time. Not only do these measures often slight community college students, but those enrolled in occupational and technical programs seeking certificate attainment will most likely fall short of traditional standards of success (Dougherty & Townsend, 2006). While many community college students enroll to attain occupational training, not all aspire to attain a certificate. For these students, accomplishing personal enrollment goals that benefit student and workforce would be eliminated from traditional measures of student success. Based solely on quantitative measures of success, without additional perspective into the landscape of community college mission and success, paints an incomplete picture. Supplementing traditional measures of success with alternative insight and perspective will dramatically change the community college student success conversation and provide invaluable insight for decision makers.

Student retention, commonly included in research regarding student success, considers the retention of students enrolled, continuously on a full-time basis for one full academic year. For example, a first year freshman student enrolled full-time in the fall semester who persists through to the fall semester of the following year with the same institution in which he or she initially enrolled has essentially been retained. This rate of retention is important for administrators, practitioners, and policymakers who are interested in seeing students persist for one full year and continue to graduation. This measure of retention provides data of students who persists as well as students who fail to persist beyond one full year. This measure allows administrators, policymakers, and practitioners to assess the point at which students stop out or drop out during their college tenure. For those students who did not persist a full year, data include the number of students dropping off before one full year and not graduating and those
who dropped out after one full year and did not graduate. Student retention remains an influential topic in higher education due to the necessity of retaining students who meet the ultimate benchmark: the traditional measure of success which is graduation through degree completion (FAFSA, n.d.).

**Statement of Problem**

National accountability measures of outcome, student retention and graduation rates at the community college level, do not adequately express valuable insight into the community college student perspective of success with consideration to community college student challenges, expectations, and overall experience influencing student success. When observing accountability measures of outcome, unaccompanied by supplemental information, the percentage of full-time degree seeking first time students for 2014-2015 was 81% of four-year university students retained and 61% of community college students retained (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2015). The graduation rate within 150% of normal time (six years) for four-year universities in fall of 2009 was 59% (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2009). The graduation rate within 150% of normal time (three years) for community college student was 29% of first time, full-time undergraduate students who began seeking a certificate or associate's degree in fall 2012 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2012).

These measures of student success through accountability outcomes of student retention and graduation reveal a vast difference in terms of success, when observing quantitative data solely, while providing access to 6 million students at the community college level (U.S.
Increased interest in accountability outcomes heightens an awareness of student success measures of outcome and the need to increase the number of United States college graduates persisting and attaining a degree in higher education beyond enrollment numbers. In light of this student success movement, President Obama called for an initiative to increase the number of community college graduates attaining a degree, by 5 million graduates, through the year 2020 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2014). Not only do students and institutions of higher education benefit from community college student success, but economic development in the United States is also a measure of success through workforce development, business development, and community development (Cohen & Laanan, 1997). While community college open admissions afford educational access to students, this drastic increase in student success outcomes and goals has shifted the emphasis of community college access to a national conversation about student success.

Policymakers, practitioners, and administrators strive to provide access and avenues to achieve student success. The harsh reality, however, when evaluating the quantitative measures of student success, is that higher education is affording access to students while there remains a deficit in student success based solely on traditional measures of success through degree persistence and attainment. Community college student enrollment has increased tremendously from the inception of community colleges through today. In 2015, community colleges served 6.5 million students, 38% of the total higher education undergraduate enrollment. This is a 29% increase from 2000 through 2010 with projected community college student enrollment increases

Policymakers rely on graduation rates to evaluate the viability of programs and to leverage legislation. Graduation rates provide a measure of performance at the state level which is tied to funding decisions. Administrators face tensions of mediating between policymakers and practitioners, with the most influential voice in advocacy of student success (Duncan & Ball, 2011). Administrators utilize graduation rates to assess attainment of success, as well as improve policies and procedures necessary for facilitating student success. Students rely on these rates of success when evaluating the success of a college when making a decision about which college is the best fit for them to attain success. While there are multiple stakeholders impacted by measures of student success, hence importance of student success remains.

Graduation rates of completion indicate student success as a quantitative measure of outcome for policy makers. However, this measure does not adequately portray the landscape of community college students, challenges, expectations facilitating success, and perceptions of college experiences that influence student success beyond these traditional measures. Student success, as defined by degree persistence and attainment, remains a benchmark for administrators, practitioners, and students despite the external challenges that impede traditional student success. Student success is a multi-faceted problem that must not be simplified to a single quantitative metric. While quantitatively measuring student success is pertinent to higher education, this should not serve as the sole means of defining success nationally.

While external barriers and challenges are frequently beyond the control of administrators, policy makers, practitioners, and students, understanding influences on student
success from the student perspective is vital. Therefore, community colleges must seek to understand student perspectives regarding student success, expectations facilitating success, and influences of success, while also fostering alternatives for evaluating degree persistence and attainment. Emphasizing student perceptions of success, expectations of success, experiences, and influences on success is essential in providing a realistic landscape of success beyond the traditional measures of degree persistence and degree attainment.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand student perceptions of success and expectations influencing success beyond traditional definitions of degree persistence and attainment. Student success is a multi-faceted phenomenon in which traditional definitions of degree persistence and attainment do not adequately represent the context of community college students. Context, which varies based on students, has a tremendous impact on student motivation, behaviors, expectations, and overall success in school. Without consideration of student success and expectations supporting success from the student perspective, the measure of degree persistence and attainment reveals an incomplete reality with sole emphasis on quantitative measures. While higher education strives to provide access to all students, community colleges have an obligation to delve into alternative perspectives that influence existing policies and procedures to facilitate improved outcomes of students as measured by degree persistence and attainment for all students.

In fall 2015, public institutions of higher education in the United States enrolled 10.5 million students. Of these students, 62% attended four-year institutions, while 38% attended community colleges. Enrollments are projected to increase by 21% percent for community colleges and 9% for four-year universities between 2015 through 2026 (U.S. Department of
Despite rising enrollment projections over the next decade, student success is not consistently tracked with projected increases based on current trends of retention and graduation rates. Thus, an understanding of student success from the perspective of students, beyond measures of degree persistence and attainment is critical to the future of higher education and student success (U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

In fall 2014, higher education served over 6 million students at the community college level (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2014). The graduation rate of two-year public institutions within three years is a mere 29%, while the retention rate of students enrolling in fall semester and returning the following fall semester, remains roughly 61% (U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). While these rates are low, they do not fully capture the perspective of community college student success and expectations from the students’ perceptions.

Performance funding models are becoming increasingly prevalent. This type of funding is by varying standards and formulae of accountability including enrollment, graduation rates and retention rates. These accountability outcomes of two-year public institutions accountability outcomes utilized by revenue funding sources (St. John & Parsons, 2005). Without improved outcomes among two-year public institutions, funding may be negatively affected. Community college outcomes demand innovative alternatives to reveal the complexities of student success beyond a quantitative measure: specifically, student perspectives of expectations and success.

Based on heightened scrutiny of student success measures of outcome and increased student success initiatives, community colleges must respond to pressure to not only provide
access, but also opportunity to attain success to all enrolled students enrolled. Community 
colleges are currently retaining first time, full-time students for a full year at a rate of 60%; 
however, less than half of these retained students will graduate. According to traditional metrics 
of student success, degree persistence and attainment, these latter students have not been 
successfully retained (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 
Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2017). While they may pursue degree 
attainment at other institutions, these “successes” are not adequately captured. Students’ 
perspectives of success, expectations of success, experiences, and influences of success will 
provide an understanding, beyond traditional quantitative measures of outcome, regarding why 
these students are not graduating at the institution of admission. Observing student success from 
the perspectives of community college students retained for one full year, will provide greater 
understanding of how community college students perceive success and expectations that 
facilitate success.

Increased efforts to facilitate access to all students, while also striving to meet graduation 
and completion rates by 5 million by the year 2020 has added a sense of urgency to negotiate 
change in higher education in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, National Center 
opportunities for college success while preserving the mission of access have been the twin goals 
program efforts that disassociate access from outcomes, failing to recognize that equity 
necessitates linking access and outcomes, have the potential to lead to even less equality among 
diverse students in higher education that occurs today” (p. 120). Therefore, policy makers, 
administrators, and practitioners have a responsibility to approach the twin missions of access
and success from informed perspectives which include considerations of student success, expectations that facilitate success, student experiences, and overall influences on success.

There is an imminent need to understand student perceptions of success and expectations influencing success in higher education (U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). The community college has a heightened obligation to respond to student success initiatives. Discussions in higher education encourage student choice regarding student services, their rights as consumers, and satisfaction. Increased efforts to boost enrollment through marketing efforts has made students highly sought after consumers of higher education (U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. (NCES), 2007). A student’s agreement with college, begins with the initial contact through admissions marketing and recruiting. According to Ewell and Wellman (2007), increased efforts seeking more in-depth information from perspective of consumer, student, would be advantageous in understanding consequences of institutional performance and student success. However, the business model of seeking students through admissions subsides upon enrollment and students become treated as merely students rather than the highly sought after consumers they were prior to enrollment.

**Student Consumer**

Consideration of students as consumers is gaining momentum in higher education. Research studies have outlined the pros and cons of positioning students as consumers in higher education, citing diminished learning to increasing value in college experiences. Regardless of the position, students are consumers of education and consideration of student perspectives is valuable. When looking at attracting students through marketing and recruiting, as a salesperson would approach a customer, the idea of students as consumers of education cannot be denied.
While research of four-year institutions has begun to explore the notion of students as consumers of higher education, there is a paucity of literature at the community college level.

Students who are satisfied with their college experience are more likely to persist than those who are dissatisfied (Jameson & Fusco, 2014). While higher education seeks to provide educational opportunities to students, questions remain: Are students being treated as consumers? Are their expectations being fulfilled? Labeling students as consumers or not is not as imperative as understanding the experiences of the consumer: namely, college students seeking success, expectations of success, and influences on success. An understanding of student success, expectations of students as consumers, and influence of student success can provide invaluable insights regarding student success beyond the traditional metrics of degree persistence and degree attainment. Exploring student perspectives of success and expectations for support from inception and throughout the college experience can provide essential knowledge for policymakers, administrators, and practitioners.

Psychology Contract Theory

Psychology contract theory, a popular theory in human resources management, serves as a framework for outlining employee and employer relationships based on expectations and how these factors influence the nature of the relationship, positive or negative. Businesses and industries remain competitive by striving to retain and motivate employees. Similarly, institutions of higher education must retain and motivate students. The psychology contract theory, while adopted for purposes of defining both spoken/unspoken and written/unwritten agreements between employers and employees, may also serve as an appropriate framework for understanding the relationship between stakeholders in higher education including administrators, practitioners, and students served. Similar to relationships, which consist of
beliefs of individuals based on give-and-take between people in relationships, psychology contracts also assume an expectation of give-and-take. Expectations may be spoken or unspoken, and, whether or not these terms are fulfilled, will influence outcomes for higher education administrators, policy makers, and students. Students enrolling in higher education enter into agreements with stakeholders assuming an expectation of partnership, both written and unwritten.

Higher education research has become inundated with student success measures of outcome, engagement, and impact practices fostering student engagement, yet community colleges continue to lag behind in fostering student success through quantitative measures, traditionally defined as degree persistence and attainment. Higher education alternatives of student success, beyond traditional metrics, must incorporate student perspectives of success, expectations of students, and effective practices and policies that foster student success.

Similar to businesses, colleges and universities, both competitive in nature, constantly seek new ways to facilitate profitable relationships through recruitment and enrollment of students. Businesses strive to work with employees, establishing agreements as outlined by the psychology contract in give-and-take relationships, while higher education similarly strives to retain and motivate students through give-and-take agreements. Psychology contract theory provided a framework for this study of student success from the student perspective by highlighting relational contracts between students and college stakeholders from student recruitment through the continuum of the student experience.

Upon admission to an institution, students enter into a partnership with institutional agents. These partnerships, like relationships, may be transactional and/or relational in nature with written and unwritten expectations. The way in which this contract is navigated will have
tremendous impact on the perceived relationship, partnership, and/or outcomes. Rousseau (1995) summarized contentment in relationships based on the principles of mutuality, alignment, and reciprocity. Mutuality implies mutual beliefs among partners; alignment infers adequate balance of agreement in partnership; while reciprocity signifies balance in partnership of meeting expectations of the agreement. When these attributes: mutuality, alignment, and reciprocity are preserved, the relationship is assumptively fulfilled.

Fulfillment gives rise to positive outcomes, whereas lack thereof leads to negative outcomes. The lack of balance in agreement between parties could potentially jeopardize relational contracts and ultimately compromise the partnership. Lack of fulfillment risks violation which may lead to poor performance, marginality, withdrawal, or leaving. Rousseau defined these terms between employer and employee; however, this framework may be applied to any partnership or relationship. Breach or violation of agreement/contract may be costly to either or both parties of a contract agreement.

If there is violation or breach of contract in higher education, institutions risk students potentially stopping out or dropping out which would accordingly jeopardize student success, as defined by traditional measures of degree persistence and attainment. Therefore, student perceptions of success and expectations, guided by the psychology contract theory framework, is powerful and would provide direction in higher education, especially to community colleges in understanding student success beyond traditional metrics.

Community colleges, like businesses, are growing in competitiveness and face heightened pressures for student outcomes. Community colleges strive to increase student enrollment, provide access to all students, and retain students, while simultaneously enhancing success as a quantifiable measure of outcome. This competitive climate is occurring at a
challenging economic time, when resources in higher education are not readily available and community colleges are must satisfy multiple missions of access, retention, and success.

Therefore, it would greatly benefit higher education policy makers, practitioners, and administrators to utilize the psychology contract theory in striving to understand student perspectives of success and expectations that facilitate success beyond traditional metrics. In order to effectively understand student success from student perspectives, the psychology contract theory was instrumental in providing a framework for this study. Understanding student success, expectations of success, and experiences from student perspectives utilizing the psychology theory framework will add to the extant literature regarding community college student success beyond traditional measures of outcome.

The psychology contract theory, a popular business theory, outlines the relationship between employer and employee (Rousseau, 1995). The defining aspect of this agreement is the importance of the exchange between the employee and employer organization with consideration to the perceived agreements or promises made to one another, implicit or explicit. Breach of this contract by either party may impede progress and productivity influenced by employee behavior resulting in withdrawal, leaving, or quitting. To the author’s knowledge, this theory has not been previously utilized in research of higher education, specifically related to community colleges. Higher education would benefit from seeking an understanding of the agreement between students and institutions, as outlined by the psychology contract, to better serve students.

Students apply to college through admissions and gain acceptance upon enrollment. Based on this process, there is an explicit agreement between the student and institution with written expectations for both parties. A partnership has been formed with agreements assumed, written and unwritten. The student will attend and abide by college rules, while the college will
offer educational opportunities based on class and degree offerings. However, there is scant research on the implicit agreement between students and the institution. Upon acceptance to higher education there are assumptions that will not be explicitly written or spoken, however these expectations exist. This implicit agreement, outlined by the psychology contract, is critical to both the student and institution with expectations that may support or impede success outcomes. While the psychology contract theory has not been widely researched in higher education, I find there is a significant demand to understand the exchange between institutions and students beyond the explicit agreement, from student perspectives of success.

While administrators, practitioners, policy makers, and students strive for success, goals of attainment, or outcomes of measure, do not always align. Additionally, the context of and influence on student success may not parallel those ideal for fostering student success. Community college student success is in dire need of a paradigm shift in order to increase degree persistence and attainment by taking inventory of student perceptions in seeking alternatives to navigate measures of success (Brock, 2010). The complexity of student success is critical to understanding the existing quantitative measure of outcome. This matter is further complicated by student context thereby necessitating an understanding based on student perceptions of success and expectations.

While student success continues to gain momentum in higher education, recognizing student perceptions of success is imperative. For the purpose of this research, the traditional definition of student success was defined by degree persistence and attainment. Student input provided an understanding of how students perceived success, expectations facilitating success, and student experiences with influence on success.
An understanding of student perspectives and expectations influencing success is critical in obtaining valuable insights, which may provide direction for community colleges to establish new policies and procedures or improve existing ones related to student success. Based on Community College Survey Student Engagement and Community College Faculty Survey Student Engagement data (2006), faculty identified the following deterrents to student persistence in a single course: working full-time (81%), caring for dependents (73%), academically underprepared (78%), and financial burdens (73%) (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012). Student perspectives of the same question revealed the following deterrents: working full-time (38%), dependents (28%), academically underprepared (19%), and financial burdens (49%). These data reveal a disassociation between perceptions of faculty and students regarding deterrents to success. A lack of understanding of student perceptions may be problematic in striving to meet the needs of these students.

This study does not negate the powerful influence of existing literature on student success, but rather seeks to add student perceptions of success with contextual considerations of student perspectives of success, expectations facilitating success, experiences, and influence on success beyond traditional metrics. This study does stand alone in seeking alternative implications to understanding student perspectives of success and expectations supporting student success utilizing the psychology contract theory. Qualitative research is necessary to understand how students perceive success and expectations that facilitate success, student experience, and holistic influence on student success as outlined by the psychology contract theory.

The primary research question was: How do community college students perceive success? Sub-questions provided further understanding of students’ perceptions of success,
expectations facilitating success, student experience, and influence on student success utilizing the psychology contract. This exploration of students’ perceptions of success, expectations facilitating success, experience, and influence of success provides a well-rounded understanding of student experiences and satisfaction in seeking success, as defined by students, beyond traditional metrics. Open-ended questions addressed the following domains:

- How do community college students define success?
- What are student expectations facilitating success?
- How do students perceive overall student experience?
- How does student perception of success, expectations facilitating success, and overall college experience influence student success, as perceived by the student?

**Significance of the Study**

This study will provide essential insight into community college student success beyond the traditional measures of degree persistence and attainment with consideration to student perceptions of success and expectations facilitating success utilizing the psychology contract theory. This research on community college student success encompasses student perspectives and provides a vital supplemental perspective to the existing literature of student success. Graduation and retention rates of students in higher education will continue to be predominant measure of student success; however, the demand for alternative ways to improve these measures remains imperative, especially at the community college level. Alternative concepts for understanding and improving student success have become a requisite in higher education. Awareness of student success, beyond a quantitative measure of outcome, with contextual consideration of students, providing alternative insights valuable in identifying alternative concepts will require input from students. The psychology contract theory will provide useful
direction in seeking valuable alternatives perspectives of students in understanding student success beyond quantitative measure of outcome. Moreover, alternative perspectives will reframe conversations on student success research and reshape perspectives of higher education stakeholders including policymakers, administrators, practitioners, and students.

The repositioning of student success research, from traditional quantitative measures of outcome to include contextual consideration of students, is worthwhile to stakeholders in higher education who influence decision making. Policymakers must take into account varying aspects of community college student success beyond quantitative measures of degree persistence and attainment. Research and insight into student inputs, environment, and outputs by notable theorists including Tinto (2005) and Astin et al. (1993) have enlightened higher education and acknowledged the complexities of success beyond traditional metrics. While student characteristics and influence on student success have been brought to the attention of policy makers, these stakeholders have been inundated with quantitative measures of student success. While policy makers are aware of the complexities of community college student success, accountability and measures of outcome remain persistent. Higher education policy makers, specifically those at the community college level, will benefit from the perspective of students in defining success, barriers impeding success, supports of success, expectations facilitating success, student experience, and holistic influence on student success. Student perspectives will afford policy makers greater comprehension of student success and complexities regarding students served, with an understanding of student perception of success, expectations of success, experience, and influence on success.

Higher education administrators drive organizational policies and procedures at the institutional level. Enforcement of policies and procedures requires adequate understanding of
students to accommodate their needs and help them attain goals and achieve outcomes. Funding sources present challenges for administrators based solely on student success measures of outcome. Therefore, dynamic articulation of student success, beyond traditional metrics is important in conveying student perceptions to influence current policies and procedures. Administrators not only strive to identify the issues impeding graduation and retention rates, but improvise policies and procedures to facilitate quantitative measures of outcome and implement alternatives to facilitate success. Student perceptions may be invaluable to administrators to implement psychology contracts beyond traditional metrics. This alternative provides relevance to shaping current policies and procedures, is sensitive to the agreement and exchanges between students and the institution, and will facilitate revisions in progressing student success beyond traditional measures of outcome. As previously stated, this research does not seek to minimize current policies and procedures of community colleges, but rather to stimulate conversation and shift focus away from solely quantitative measure of outcome.

Policy makers and administrators hold influential roles in higher education, as do practitioners who spend the vast majority of their time with students on a daily basis. Therefore, understanding student perceptions of success and expectations of supporting success will also prove vital to the student success model for practitioners. This study will provide practitioners with knowledge that parallels student reality and perception. What practitioners intend to relay to students and what is actually perceived by students may or may not align. The psychology contract theory will allow practitioners to understand exchanges with students beyond the explicit contractual agreement to further consider implicit agreements and shape future student success practices.
Community colleges serve students as consumers of educational opportunity, and students are key stakeholders. As outlined by the psychology contract exchange, students enter into an agreement with the institution upon admission. Higher education stakeholders and students avail when these agreements align and ultimately achieve mutual balance with consideration to both parties. This mutual balance cannot be assumed without realistic perceptions of the institution and the student Understanding both of these parties is vital to policy makers, practitioners, administrators, and students. Obtaining this alternative perspective of student success beyond traditional definitions of degree persistence and attainment and informing higher education of student expectations regarding influence on success is critical in shaping current and future policies and procedures. Research utilizing the psychology contract theory seeks to consider the student perspective of success and expectations facilitating success and will provide valuable insight into student success for all higher education student success stakeholders: administrators, policy makers, practitioners, and students.

**Limitations of Study**

An assumption of this study was that all participants answered all questions honestly. Confidentiality of interviews was ensured through a contractual agreement. Encouraging student participation in interviews, through an open and honest exploration of student success, was fostered by building rapport and establishing confidentiality. This contract as well as interviews fostered confidentiality, encouraged honest responses to interview questions, and provided valuable student feedback. This contract was signed by the interviewer and interviewee ensuring full confidentiality from the inception to the completion of the study.

The limitations for this case study included the potential for students to refrain from open and honest feedback in answering interview questions. Hesitation may have been heightened
when student responses contradicted those of traditional quantitative measures of student success outcomes. The site for this study was Rural Ridge Community College, which serves 10,000 students over 15 campuses. Rural Ridge Community College serves a largely urban student population in Mobile, Alabama. A second limitation to this study was utilizing a single, northwest district. Rural Ridge Community College serves, three campuses of which the Northwest district serves approximately 1,500 students residing in rural counties of southwest Alabama.

While this study was limited to three campuses, this necessitated a rural case with unique student demographics. Inclusion of each campus within Rural Ridge Community College would have blurred the student demographics profile by including urban campuses with the rural northwest district. A third limitation of this study arose from the intimate campus environment, in which students may have known the interviewer. This relationship may have further fostered rapport rather than serve as a research limitation, but it should be noted nonetheless. The interviewer was not in a position of authority over students which may have moderated concerns and fostered open dialogue through rapport and confidentiality during the interview process.

**Conclusion**

Chapter 1 provided the background of this study with importance of understanding student success beyond traditional definitions of degree persistence and attainments. The importance of this study is identified by vast community college student enrollments which provide access to nearly half of the undergraduate students in the United States through open admissions. The importance of this study is amplified by initiatives developed to enhance student success through degree persistence in attaining enrollment and completions goals by 2020, as initiated by the Obama administration. This chapter acknowledged notable theorists who
emphasized student retention, engagement, and persistence with consideration to inputs, environment, and outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This chapter highlighted the significance of understanding student success from the student perspective with consideration of the psychology contract theory in either supporting or impeding success. This case study sought to identify student perceptions of success, beyond degree persistence and attainment, and expectations influencing success.

Definition of Terms

**Student Success** (traditional): The traditional definition, the national measure of student success, utilizes graduation rates of institutions which are reported annually to the federal government, as mandated by the 1990 Student Right-to-Know Act.

**Retention**: Retention considers the retaining of a student’s full-time and continuous enrollment through the following academic year. For example, a first year freshman student enrolled full-time in the fall semester who persists through to the fall semester of the following year with the same institution in which he or she is initially enrolled would be considered retained.

**Persistence**: This term is often used interchangeably with retention with reference to student persistence from fall semester of one year and continuous enrollment through fall semester of the following year.

**Normal time**: Normal time to graduation takes into consideration the normal amount of time it should take a student to graduate, enrolled full-time with continuous attendance, which is four years for a bachelor’s degree and two years for an associate’s degree.

**150% of normal time**: First time college students enrolled full-time and degree seeking, must be calculated on this 150% of normal time which is then a divided by the cohort. This calculation
includes reporting of students enrolled in four-year institutions that graduate within six years, while students enrolled in two-year institutions are included that graduate within 3 years.

**Psychology Contract:** Psychology contract describes an exchange between institutions and students beyond the explicit agreement.

**Exchange:** Exchange describes an interchange between parties in contractual agreement.

**Agents:** Agents define the parties engaged in a psychology contract agreement.

**Implicit Agreement:** An implicit agreement is an unspoken understanding with a psychology contract.

**Explicit Agreement:** An explicit agreement describes an obvious and oftentimes written psychology contract agreement.

**Traditional student:** A traditional student, one that enrolls in college as a first time, full time student enrolling immediately following high school.

**Non-traditional student:** A non-traditional student, any student that does not enroll immediately following high school and often has external responsibilities limiting enrollment status to part time.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

History of Community College

Higher education in the United States, education beyond high school, is comprised of colleges and universities. While the individual missions of community colleges vary, the collective mission is to provide educational opportunity to students. The importance of higher education throughout U.S. history is evident in the benefits to individuals and the public. Individuals with a college certificate or degree have career opportunities and increased opportunities to earn an income. This not only benefits students, but the local economy is strengthened by increased employment and society benefits from gainful income of citizens infused back into the local economy. Beyond financial gain, college graduates grow and develop through knowledge. Knowledgeable, informed citizens who become socially aware may result in decreased poverty. Through higher education, students grow and experience the benefits of freedom, culture, and diversity. Not only does higher education benefit the student as an individual, but society as a whole. Historically, higher education was exclusive to elite white males in America providing a select few the opportunity to attain an education.

Community colleges, initially referred to as junior colleges, gained a foothold during the industrial revolution offering curriculum in liberal arts and granting associates degrees in which the majority of students graduated and then transferred to four-year institutions. By the 1930s the curriculum shifted away from a focus on liberal arts to vocational and technical programs (Thelin, 2011). The GI Bill of Rights of 1944 generated rapid expansion of community colleges
across the United States with rapid growth in student enrollment. Student demographics became more diverse after the Civil Rights movement. This influx of new students without college preparation initiated developmental education in community colleges.

**Community College Mission**

In the 21st century, community colleges provide access to students through open admissions policies. Open admissions afford students educational opportunities without discrimination based on academic preparedness, race, sex, or socioeconomic status. Through open enrollment processes, community colleges allow students who are academically underprepared and underrepresented to enroll, individuals who might not otherwise gain access to selective institutions in higher education. Community colleges serve a complex mission to accommodate the varying needs of students.

The mission of community colleges is to provide academic and occupational programs to facilitate degree attainment, four-year transfer, and/or workforce development/training. General studies programs provide students the academic curriculum in preparation for degree attainment and/or transfer. In addition to educating students academically, community colleges are now tasked to provide career training and workforce development (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). In addition to providing access to students who are unable to attain an education at a selective university, community colleges offer dual enrollment courses to academically prepared high school students. The varying needs of students and the complexity of community college missions provide unique challenges to community colleges. Striving to address the unique needs of students including those who are academically underprepared and high school students who are academically well-prepared, community colleges today face increased complexity in providing services and facilitating these complexities in the face of decreased funding.
Access

Two-year institutions provide access to nearly half of the undergraduate student population in higher education in the United States. Through an open access admissions process, community colleges served over 6 million students in fall of 2014 (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2014). Community colleges provide access through open admissions allowing students to enroll with no restrictions based on age, race, sex, socioeconomic statue, geographic location, or academic ability. Historically, the dominant role of the community college was to provide access to all students without exclusivity.

Affordability

Affordability of tuition appeals to two-year community college students who otherwise would not be able to afford postsecondary education. The average annual tuition and fees for public two-year institutions for 2015-2016 was $3,340 compared to public four-year institutions at $9,410 (U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. (NCES), 2015). Furthermore, the majority of community college students receive financial aid (NCES, 2018). Of students who received financial aid in 2013-2014, aid packages were as follows: Pell grants (36%), work study (18%), and Federal supplemental educational opportunity grants (23%) (U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. (NCES), 2015). Tuition accounted for 29.5% of the revenue for two-year institutions. The remainder of funding for two-year institutions included the following: 14.1% federal, 29.8% state, 18.1% local, and 8.4% from other sources (U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. (NCES), 2015). While tuition has increased with students bearing more financial burden today than in the past, access and affordability remain significant tenets of the mission of
community colleges. The majority of students attending community college receive financial aid, which is essential to understanding these students.

**Academic Preparedness**

Not only does the community college mission provide affordability and access, but it also provides opportunities for students least likely to attain a college education at more selective universities based on academic ability. Community colleges provide access through open admissions policies allowing students to enroll at the community college with no limitation of pre admission testing scores, or high school gpa. Therefore, students unable to attend 4 year institutions may enroll in community college underprepared. These students are required developmental education to get them ready for courses within the degree plan. Study findings on student demographics based on race and sex indicate greater significance in success with academic preparation (Perrakis, 2008). Adequate academic preparation of students is integral to student success.

Students enrolled through open admissions, nearly 70%, will require remediation when beginning college (BPS, 2009). Forty-eight percent of these students will require remediation in two subjects, and 26% in more than two subjects (U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. (NCES), 2004). The academic remediation of community college students adds another layer of challenge for these students. Data indicative of lack of academic preparedness is vast, however, addressing the issues of remediating community college students has historically been a challenge, one that remains today (Ahrendt, 1987).

While serving academically underprepared students, community colleges simultaneously serve students who are academically excelling and adequately prepared for college-level course
work. Community colleges provide academic scholarships, advanced degree paths, and Phi Theta Kappa honors programs for students who are excelling academically. Through dual enrollment, community colleges offer high school students the opportunity to enroll in college coursework to obtain credit-bearing college courses. The mission of community colleges is to provide educational opportunities to all students, including those academically prepared academically to enroll in college-level coursework.

**Student Demographics**

This mission of the community college to provide access to all students through an open admissions process has fostered diversity of student demographics in higher education. The community college mission aims to provide access, affordability, flexibility, and locality to a diverse student population with diverse needs, needs that are frequently different among students who attend four-year institutions. The majority of students enrolled in community colleges come from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds with lower socioeconomic status as compared to students in university settings (Cohen et al., 2014). This is an important consideration when reviewing the success research. Researchers have found that institutional attributes impact student outcomes, however, community colleges with a higher percentage of minority students have a lower percentage of degree completion (Goble, Rosenbaum, & Stephan, 2008).

Among undergraduate students in higher education served by public two-year institutions, the racial/ethnic composition includes the following: White (51%), Black (14%), Hispanic (24%), and Asian/Pacific Islander (6%) (U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. (NCES), 2015). Community colleges serve non-traditional students, with nearly half over the age of 24. According to the American Association of Community Colleges, (2015) students enrolled in two-year institutions
reflect the following characteristics: first generation college students (36%), single parents (17%), non U.S. citizens (7%), veterans (4%), and students with disabilities (12%) (U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. (NCES), 2015).

Historically, the community college sector of higher education has focused on providing access and affordability to all students without regard to age, race, ethnicity, sex, academic ability, socioeconomic status, and geographic location. Community college statistics reveal success in fulfilling this mission as demonstrated by increased enrollments serving approximately 29% of the entire undergraduate population in 2015 (U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. (NCES), 2016). Moving forward, the national focus in higher education has been on improving student success. In addition to providing access and opportunity to all students, higher education strives to foster success among students through the attainment of a certificate or degree.

**Challenges**

While higher education seeks to provide educational opportunities for students, four-year institutions maintain admissions policies that frequently exclude community college student populations. For community colleges, providing access creates a non-selective and diverse student population, these are characteristics that should be carefully considered. Underrepresented students, minority, lower socioeconomic status, and students with varying levels of academic preparation presents challenges that are frequently not present in the four-year selective admissions process. Despite the dissimilarity in student demographics and characteristics between two- and four-year institutions, there are no modifications in measures of success based on traditional definitions of completion and graduation rates.
While the mission of the community college is to provide access, affordability, and flexibility to a diverse group of students with unique needs, earning an education comes with challenges for these students. The majority of community college students have racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds, and many of them are of low socioeconomic status (Cohen et al., 2014). Many of these student enroll as first generation college students, and some are single parents, veterans, non-citizens, and/or have disabilities.

**Outside responsibilities.** Diverse student demographics, ethnically and socioeconomically, similarly impact by student enrollment patterns. The majority of community college students enroll part-time while the majority of four-year university students enroll full-time (Cohen et al., 2014). Of students enrolled in two-year institutions from 2011-2012, the majority were currently working. Of those enrolled on a full-time basis: 22% of full-time students were working full-time while 40% were working part-time. Of those enrolled on a part-time basis, 41% of part-time students were working full-time while 32% were working part-time (U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. (NCES), 2015).

A significant challenge of community colleges is the increased complexity in serving a diverse student population with unique inputs as they enroll in college. Not only do community colleges seek to maintain access, they are expected to serve these varying missions and diverse student population with limited funding. Policy makers, higher education officials, and administrators must accommodate the missions and students with funding offered at the state level. Inevitably, programs within the college compete for funding. This dilemma, of which mission deserves priority, becomes an internal impasse while maintaining all programs necessary to fulfill the community college mission.
**Student Success**

Student success is an essential term at the center of the mission of community colleges and institutional effectiveness. The definition of student success in higher education among policy makers, administrators, practitioners, and students remains complex and problematic (Baldwin, Bensimon, Dowd, & Kleiman, 2011). Student success is a multifaceted topic which becomes more complex with consideration to the community college population. The most commonly associated definition of student success is measured by the graduation of students through the attainment of a degree or certificate. Mandatory reporting of annual institutional graduation rates to the federal government have made this accountability measure readily accessible. Policy makers, administrators, practitioners, and students utilize success rates for various purposes depending on their role.

While there are commonalities among definitions, there is no single definition of student success, and terms are often used interchangeably. Commonly used terms include retention, graduation, attrition, and persistence. Institutions, administrators, and policy makers identify student success through quantitative measures of outcome, while students may identify success through personal goals. Student perceptions of success is important for conveying complexity beyond the control of the institution.

Identifying the success of students from the institutional perspective, administrators and policy makers rely on outcomes such as rates of retention, graduation, and persistence. Retention rates refer to students enrolling fall semester and remaining continuously enrolled through the fall semester of the following year. Persistence, another term for retention, and retention, often used interchangeably, refer to students enrolling fall semester and persisting through the year and enrolling in fall semester of following year. The Department of Education Statistics (2003)
differentiates retention as an institutional measure as institutions retain students, persistence is a measure of student persistence (U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. 2003).

Policy makers hold institutions accountable for completion rates of graduating students by utilizing the national standard: graduation rates to determine institutional success. Graduation rates identify the point at which students graduate with certificates or degrees from community college within three years and four-year institutions within six years after enrollment. These traditional measures of student success, degree persistence and attainment, provide quantitative measures of institutional accountability. They do not, however, reveal the complexity of community college mission, diverse demographics of students, and challenges students face in striving to achieve success. Furthermore, these measures of accountability assume that students enroll with the same goals and perceptions of success: to graduate. While graduation rates indicate the number of students graduating from an institution, this number may not effectively reflect student success from the perspective of administration, practitioners, and students.

Administrators, like policy makers, focus on success and face pressure from higher education decision makers to demonstrate outcomes that validate the mission of community colleges. However, these administrators face a nearly impossible feat: to institutionally retain students from fall semester with continuous enrollment to the following fall semester. This retention rate serves as a measure of the percentage of first time full-time freshman who have persisted for one full year without stopping out or dropping out. While retention serves as a benchmark, administrators must also consider the supports for and barriers to community college success while also striving to improve policies and procedures to attain further success.
Administrators focus on retaining students with a long-term goal of graduation, in an attempt to increase the student success rate as a traditional measure of degree persistence and attainment. The daily priority of administrators is to seek and implement policies, programs, and practices that facilitate retention and success while considering the complex missions of community colleges and diverse student demographics. Practitioners, including faculty and support staff, must implement everyday practices to foster success despite student challenges.

While striving to attain institutional measures of success, practitioners support the practices enforced by administrators, fueled by policy makers, while dealing with the reality of student demographics and challenges that impede success. Student success is further complicated when considering key stakeholder perspectives, especially perspectives of students served. Student success and expectations, complex and lacking clarity among policy makers, administrators, and practitioners, reveals that student perceptions of success are also equivocal (Bueschel, 2009).

Students enroll with aspirations to success, however, success is relative to the individual student. In a study seeking aspirations of traditional community college students, findings indicated that 69.2% of non-White students and 71.2% of White students desired to attain an associate’s degree or beyond (Laanan, 2000). Serving over half of the student population of non-traditional students, many of whom are first generation and low income, student aspirations may vary greatly. This study revealed that many students enrolled in community college desired to obtain a degree; however, not all students enroll with the intent to graduate. Additionally, not all students who aspire to obtain a degree will achieve this goal.

Community colleges serve diverse student bodies with unique needs. These students enroll in college with varying goals and aspirations of success, from continuing education,
workforce/career development, attaining a degree, attaining a certificate, dual enrollment, intentions to transfer, and more. Consideration of student demographics, unique needs of students, and student perceptions further complicate the student success picture beyond traditional measures of success thereby necessitating student perceptions of success. Institutional goals focus on outcome measures of persistence, retention, and graduation rates of students enrolled. Student goals upon enrollment, however, may not parallel institutional goals. The driving force of success, as determined by the outcome of the student, is highly complex with unique student needs, incentives for enrollment, various community college missions, and expectations facilitating success.

The student perspective of student success, beyond traditional metrics, and consideration of student expectations that facilitate success is necessary in providing higher education with an understanding of students’ personal education goals beyond measures of retention, persistence, and graduation. Some students enroll in college with the goal to graduate and transfer to a four-year university while others enroll to obtain a skill or trade. Students frequently enroll with the goal to acquire knowledge in a trade or subject area which may benefit the student in the workforce or lead to job advancement. Other students enroll with the intention of taking one or more courses before transferring to a four-year university with no intention of finishing at the two-year institution.

Students who are unsure of next steps following high school graduation may find clarity while enrolled at a two-year institution. Enrollment may not equate to degree attainment. Other students may be deterred from obtaining a degree in higher education due to military deployment or transfer. Traditional measures of success may indicate that one student was successful while others were unsuccessful based solely on degree persistence and attainment. Student success,
from the student perspective, can be more clearly defined by personal educational goals set by the student upon enrollment; these goals may translate as deficits in quantitative, traditional measures of student success.

According to the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCSSE, 2009), when students were asked about their plans beyond the current semester enrolled, responses indicated the following no intent to return (5%), uncertain (17%), Not return after current semester (12%), and return within a year (66%) (ccsse.org). These numbers do not reflect supports necessary to facilitate goal achievement or challenges to success. Community college students have unique aspirations and goals. Utilizing a quantitative measure of completion, the intention to graduate, may not be fully accurate. An understanding of student success from the student perspective is imperative for understanding student expectations that influence success.

Student enroll with aspirational differences. Understanding the individual aspirations of student is vital in deciphering achievement. Assuming all student enroll to obtain a degree is deceiving in understanding quantitative measures of success. While many non-traditional students strive to attain a degree, study findings of non-traditional students indicate that one-third do not aspire to attain a degree (Laanan, 2003). Non-traditional students often seek workforce training to earn a certificate or a course-enhancing skills. Transfer students may earn one or more courses before transferring to another school. Many community college students enroll part-time, and there may not be a time limit on personal goals, yet success outcomes only measure success based on three-year graduation rate. Understanding goals and aspirations of students is critical for better understanding student success and expectations supporting success beyond traditional measures.
Student inputs and external challenges often limit the ability of students enrolled in two-year institutions to persist and succeed based on traditional measures of success. Barriers may include, but are not limited to, financial burdens, job responsibilities, family responsibilities, lack of academic preparation, and school responsibilities. For students who work part-time or full-time jobs, a full-time course load can be challenging. Students with children have the additional responsibility of supporting families financially while maintaining the responsibilities of work and school. These burdens of responsibility may influence the goals and aspirations of community college students. Previous research has considered barriers to student success, however, the literature would benefit from an understanding of student perspectives of success with consideration of expectations facilitating success. In order for community colleges to better serve students and shape effective policies and procedures to foster student success, it is imperative to record student perspectives beyond traditional measures of outcome. While barriers of student success will remain, insight into student perspectives of expectations facilitating success may provide alternative practices to more effectively support these students.

**Student Success and Theory**

Increased enrollment and student success outcomes remain top priorities in higher education, and the significant focus on retention and success has resulted in expansive research on student retention and development. Student retention and development research thematically addresses individual student characteristics and behaviors, engagement, and institutional practices. In considering student development, contextual complexities remain evident as outlined by research. Astin’s (1999) theory of student involvement is extensively used to support research on college student retention, success, and departure. This theory of involvement addresses the complexity of student development with consideration of individual level,
institutional level, and external characteristics in a student’s life, outlined by acronym I-E-O: Inputs-Environment-Outputs (Evans, 2010.)

Inputs address the individual characteristics in which a student enters college including student demographics, academic preparation, social and academic influences, and external influences of family and/or culture. As pre-college characteristics, inputs are determined prior to students entering college and will not change, however, they are critical to understanding the conditions in which students enter college. Environment refers to any influences in student experience while in college, such as academic and social environments both on and off campus. According to Astin, the college environment plays a critical role in shaping the student experience. Student characteristics, outputs, are shaped by inputs and experience and include post-college attitudes and beliefs.

**Engagement**

Extensive research has revealed student engagement is vital in fostering student retention and success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). According to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), compilations of research reveal valuable insights regarding the roles of social and academic engagement, involvement, and integration on persistence. However, high levels of social engagement by students may compensate for low levels of academic engagement as high levels of academic engagement may overcome low levels of social engagement. Engagement has been seen as advantageous for all students; those with pre-college characteristics of first generation college student will benefit to a greater degree from engagement than those raised by college graduates. Social integration may positively influence the attitudes and satisfaction of college students, and these interactions may be more beneficial to students entering with lower educational goals than those with higher level aspirations (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).
Engagement research focuses on student engagement, integration, and involvement both inside and outside of the classroom (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Engagement outside of the classroom emphasizes interactions between peers. Peer interactions among students comprise the majority of student engagement. Interactions between social groups have been shown to have both positive and negative effects on students’ academic performance. Weidman’s (1989) conceptual model of undergraduate socialization identifies four major areas that influence the college student experience: student characteristics, socialization influences of students prior to college, socialization outcomes, and associations outside of college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

**Belonging**

Engagement is notably imperative to student integration. Research also indicates that students’ sense of belonging beyond engagement is equally advantageous to student success. According to Miranda (2014), a student’s personal beliefs about him or herself to be one of the greatest influences to student success. The mission of community colleges is to provide access and education to all students, student connectedness matters and is undeniably an important piece of the student success puzzle. Characteristics of community college students enrolling with preconceived notions of self and college success inevitably influences success. Consideration of these students beyond degree persistence and attainment with regards to perceptions of success and expectations facilitating a sense of belonging is important.

**Mattering**

College students enroll during a transitional stage in life marked by drastic changes and uncertainty. A community college in rural Kentucky studied the conflict and impact on student success and identified a need for individualized attention and support (Hlinka, Mobelini, &
Giltner, 2015). Nancy Schlossberg expanded on this notion of engagement and the importance of individual students to feel a sense of mattering. Schlossberg’s (1989) mattering theory articulated the feeling that one matters, simplifying student aspects of a need to matter to someone who requires attention, importance, ego-extension, dependence, and appreciation. If these five aspects are not fulfilled or attained, then one can feel less than or marginalized (Schlossberg, 1989).

Community college students, underserved and underrepresented who have additional challenges to educational attainment, are highly sensitive to feelings of mattering and marginality. Studies on college students’ stress and depression have been related to feelings of mattering and self-esteem (Dixon & Robinson Kurpius, 2008). The awareness of practitioners to student challenges and engaging students provides students with a sense of mattering to the institution (Dixon & Tucker, 2008). Feelings of marginalization may lead to one giving up on his or her environment (Schlossberg, 1989). Student perceptions of success and expectations facilitating success through mattering provide opportunities for community colleges to better serve students.

Some of the most widely referenced theories in higher education on retention and student departure address the topics of academic and social integration, involvement, or engagement of students. The common perception in higher education is that student engagement increases student satisfaction and therefore their likelihood to persist (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The literature on student retention demonstrates the importance of engagement, integration, inclusive of individual student development and its influences on student behaviors and aspirations. These theories highlight individual needs of students, but become complicated in light of the complexity of community college student demographics and external influences.
Psychosocial and Cognitive Development

In terms of student success, exploring student departure is important to understanding why students leave before graduating. A widely researched theory, Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure seeks to understand from a sociological perspective why students do not persist and complete. Tinto’s work considers the external influences of students, with emphasis on the quality of institutional opportunities for students to interact academically and socially in their college environment. Tinto’s theory of social and academic integration seeks to explain student persistence and departure, but still receive scrutiny from renowned theorists including Tierney, Bean and Eaton, and Renn and Reason (Pascarella &Terenzini, 2005).

In order to engage students and promote educational achievement requires consideration of psychosocial and cognitive development of individual student outlined by theorists including Erickson, Marcia, Josselson, and Chickering (Guido-DiBrito, F. Patton, L. D., Quave, S. J., & Renn, K. A., 2016). Understanding students individually, rather than collectively, is necessary in understanding individual student development. Student development varies based on the unique needs of students. The community college student population presents complexity beyond traditional college students.

College student identity, as described by Chickering’s (1969) seven vectors, is a widely used theory in student development (Renn & Reason, 2013). Chickering emphasized the importance of understanding the unique needs of both traditional and non-traditional students. The seven vectors account for the following: developing competence, managing emotions, autonomy to interdependence, interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, purpose, integrity. Environmental factors comprise the institutional aims, institutional size, faculty-student interaction, teaching, curriculum, social networks, and student services. Student development of
community college students looks significantly different than it does for students enrolled in selective four-year institutions. Understanding students with consideration of the aforementioned vectors remains in higher education with consideration of student development and success.

Integration

Integration refers to the sharing of attitudes and beliefs of individuals within a group or organization. The more integrated a student is with the mission and values of the institution, the more likely he or she is to persist. Negative interactions have an inverse relationship and negatively impact persistence in the organization (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). According to Tinto (2012), the inclusiveness of students on campus and in the classroom and the extent to which students integrate with their academic and social environments highly influences their decision to persist or depart (Evans, 2010). Notably, engagement involves more than students simply going through the motions of participating in activities and practices, but rather seeking to integrate in order to succeed. The individual characteristics a student brings to college in concert with the institutional environment shape student experience. Therefore, in understanding students and how to effectively engage students requires consideration of external factors in a student’s life further complicate the community college landscape in understanding individual students.

Intergenerational influences on college degree attainment must also be considered in fully understanding student success, student retention, and student departure. Tierney (2008) highlighted the importance of students maintaining cultural identity with focus on student influences of institutional and organizational culture (Hagedorn & Tierney, 2002). Cultural identity, even in instances of rejection, pose a more positive influence on students than if they completely abandon culture in an attempt to assimilate. According to Kuh and Love (2000),
cultural theory in the integration of students suggests that maintaining relationships with family and culture leads to isolation and student departure rather than facilitating social and academic integration (Renn & Reason, 2013).

**Social Class and Identity**

These external influence of family interaction and cultural influences in a student’s life prior to college remain influential for the student while enrolled in college. According to Bourdieu, culture beyond traditional is vital in student experience and overwhelmingly influenced by social and cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). The social and external levels of student engagement and experiences rely on faculty/student interaction outside of class, family interaction, cultural influence, and sense of belonging in the external environment. Yosso identifies aspects of cultural capital in theory, going further to explore utilizing as a tool of empowerment in practice facilitating student success rather than a means of outlining a deficit (Guido-DiBrito et. al, 2016). Community college student characteristics require careful consideration to understand student engagement and experiences beyond the traditional college student.

**Theory to Practice**

Student success and retention fostered through engagement is critical, however connecting theory to student application is vital. The Center for Community College Student Engagement provides research through an initiative that connects policy makers and community colleges across the United States. This research center supports the mission of the community college by providing research on educational best practices to foster and facilitate student engagement, retention, and success. By conducting national surveys, the CCSSE strives to support student learning and persistence to better understand community college institutional
practices and student needs as well as assess the climate for achieving these goals. The national surveys developed and distributed by the center include: Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (CCFSSE), and Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE) (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012).

CCSSE surveys not only identify institutional practices, but focus on the community college student experience by utilizing quantitative and qualitative data. This initiative strives to narrow the gap in institutional and student perspectives to achieve the community college mission. The CCSSE features focus items, annually, addressing practices effective in promotion of completion outcomes of success (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012).

**Institutional Practices**

Upon college acceptance, the college makes an institutional commitment to provide students educational opportunities. Researchers have noted that engagement is critical to the success of students; institutional practices are implemented to facilitate academic and social engagement of students. This commitment ensures student services will be provided to facilitate student success, including support services, programs, policies, curricula, and facilities (Renn & Reason, 2013). According to the National Survey of Student Engagement, student engagement in positive campus cultures through educationally purposeful activities will positively influence outcomes (Renn & Reason, 2013). This proposition becomes challenging on community college campuses when students have external responsibilities that limit engagement on campus due to time constraints.

Kuh (2008) emphasized high impact practices in fostering engagement and facilitating student success in college. High impact practices aim to improve outcomes by engaging students
both academically and socially in the community college environment. High impact practices include learning communities, service learning, and freshman orientation. These practices are widely accepted and popular among colleges in the United States, and many of them are embraced at the community college level. Institutions implement these high impact practices to facilitate student engagement, both socially and academically, with the intent to boost persistence and retention.

Institutional Student Success Strategies are implemented to alleviate barriers which may impede success and to foster engagement which may facilitate success. Themes surrounding community college student success include terms such as retention, persistence, and graduation. Theories associated with student retention of community college students outline student persistence based on an individual’s academic ability as well as his or her goals, aspirations, and satisfaction with the educational experience. In order to examine student retention, a deeper understanding of the definitions, theories, and themes of student retention is salient to this discussion.

Practices implemented to foster student engagement from an institutional level include social and academic engagement. The environment of the community college is within the realm of institutional control for higher education administrators through organizational characteristics and cultures, student cultures on campus, and individual student experiences through implementation of practices. The Center for Community College Student Engagement identifies high impact educational practices to overcome challenges and improve course completion as well as rates of retention and graduation. These practices include orientation, academic goal setting and planning, registration before classes begin, accelerated or fast track developmental education, first year experiences, student success courses, learning communities, structured
group learning experiences, class attendance, alerts and interventions, experiential learning beyond the classroom, tutoring, and supplemental instruction.

**Developmental Education**

Remediation in higher education remains a pillar of community college education providing developmental education to students who are academically underprepared. This topic in higher education is both timely and controversial. Students enroll in community college without selectivity based on academic preparation, therefore students are frequently underprepared academically. In order for these students to succeed, development of student academic preparedness is imperative. According to Goudas and Boylan (2012), preparing individual students through developmental education is not enough, rather students should be afforded equal academic standing with students enrolling in college prepared.

While some researchers indicate the necessity of remediation, others suggest that remediation is a trap. Complete College America went as far to recommend complete termination of remedial coursework (Wyner, 2014). Remediation involves non-credit bearing courses and thereby provides additional deterrents to student persistence beyond existing challenges of external influences and responsibilities. Arguments for and against remedial and developmental education have yet to be resolved.

Studies have addressed alternatives to traditional sequential developmental education, recognizing that the lack of alternatives is not conducive to student success. Studies have included fast track remediation as well as engagement. Fast track developmental studies have proven to facilitate faster access to credit bearing courses through a sequence of developmental strategies provided in credit bearing courses, however, findings do indicate long-term success in credit bearing courses (Hodara & Jaggars, 2014). Additional studies on accelerated
developmental education emphasize the necessity in providing additional student support for this acceleration to be successful (Jaggars, Hodara, Cho, & Xu, 2015). There is consensus among researchers that developmental education is a both stepping stone and a deterrent. Developmental math is a major deterrent of educational remediation, and the reality is that the majority of students frequently require remediation is more than one course (Clyburn, 2013). However, eliminating developmental education in subjects like math will set students up for failure in credit bearing courses and beyond.

Additional research reveals that student engagement through learning communities aid in developing students academically. Studies of faculty perceptions of developmental course success identified academic and social barriers to course completion (Zientek, Schneider, & Onwueggbuzie, 2014). There have also been attempts to bridge academic and social barriers through developmental education. At Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York, faculty incorporated the engagement of learning communities in cohorts of students in developmental education which resulted in students who were more likely to attend class and persist than those who were attempting to navigate developmental courses without engagement (Bonet & Walters, 2016). One study identified the following four aspects that determined student success or failure in development courses: student needs, instructor approach, course content, and institutional setting. In order for developmental courses to succeed, all four of these elements must be aligned. (Grubb & Cox, 2005).

While developmental education remains a standard and significant practice in community college education, the effectiveness remains a source of evaluation and restructuring of traditional remediation. According to (NCES, 2009), 16 percent of students will not complete, 35 percent will complete some courses, while less than half, 49 percent will complete all courses. In
spite of these course completion rates, developmental education in supporting academically underprepared students in success remains the main source of preparing students for college level courses. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003/04 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Second Follow-up (BPS:04/09) and Postsecondary Education Transcript Study of 2009 (PETS:09).

**Early alert and intervention.** Community college students, underrepresented and underprepared, require oversight to ensure academic progress. This is frequently accomplished through early alert and intervention strategies by faculty in identifying students at risk. Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York, which incorporated learning communities and developmental education, also found that students were more likely to complete courses and maintain grades when absences were regulated in these learning communities (Bonet & Walters, 2016). Students who struggle academically have a greater likelihood of successfully completing courses when early alert, intervention, and awareness strategies are in place. Community college early alert and intervention is a vital resource for identifying and intervening with students in jeopardy of dropping out.

Intrusive advising contributes an additional layer of early alert, filling the gap due to faculty time constraints of teaching an overload of courses, maintaining grades, and professional development. As such, the intervention process may a lower priority for faculty as compared to other tasks. Intrusive advising provides an avenue for practitioner to track early alert and intervention among community college students being advised. The Center for Community College Engagement (2012) revealed the following among member institutions: 77% of institutions reported utilizing an early alert and intervention program, however, only 14% of students reported receiving notice by this type of program. While discrepancies exist in
institutional implementation of practices and reception of these interventions by students, the necessity of early alert practices remains important. The process of identifying students academically at risk, contacting these students, and communicating with students is critical to the completion of course work.

**Tutoring and supplemental instruction.** Tutoring and supplemental instruction engage students academically and socially outside of traditional classroom instruction. Student success centers often provide a range of services including tutoring, supplemental instruction, and student workshops for educational success. Tutoring promotes the engagement of students with subject matter through one-on-one sessions between tutors and tutees. Studies have indicated that students utilizing these centers and services are three times more likely to persist in a course than those who do not (Wurtz, 2015). Moreover, tutoring services have been associated with student success beyond developmental education (Bremer et al., 2013). Group tutoring sessions engage groups of students with material while also promoting engagement among tutees. Studies have demonstrated positive results from financial investments in tutoring programs. For example, tutoring at Seminole State College in Sanford, Florida, resulted in a 15.5% increase in course completion in developmental courses (Gallard, Albritton, & Morgan, 2010). Community colleges facing financial challenges often limit financial resources to practitioners, with limited time, to provide tutoring services with little or no additional investment in the program. While resources limit programs such as tutoring, the need still exist.

Supplemental instruction is provided to students who are enrolled in a course that provides additional resources outside of class to further supplement the material covered in class. Tutoring centers offer optional academic instruction by instructors or students who successfully completed the course to students who need supplements to class material. Student-led
supplemental instruction, by students who have successfully passed the course, offer methods to peers on how to succeed in the course from a student perspective. Students who engage in supplemental instruction frequently demonstrate and enhanced understanding of the material.

Tutoring and supplemental instruction has been shown to be instrumental in student success; participation in these services would benefit from greater student utilization of services. While 38% of faculty reported referring students to tutoring services, 76% of students reported never utilizing the service. While these figures do not indicate why students did not utilize services, underutilization may reflect barriers in students’ lives. While 87% of colleges offer supplemental instruction, only 1% of colleges require supplemental instruction for students (2011 CCIS data). While tutoring and supplemental instruction reflect best policies and practices, they may not account for barriers that affect student success, such as time limitations. Students who strive to balance outside responsibilities and maintain academic schedules may not be able to dedicate additional time to out of class instruction.

**Orientation.** A common practice in higher education includes orienting incoming freshman students in a single session or credit bearing course. These courses serve multiple missions, such as providing awareness of campus resources and student services and fostering engagement of a cohort among freshmen in the course. Students engage with fellow classmates in a learning community among peers. Studies have suggested that students who enroll in student success/orientation courses are more likely to persist from first to second year in college credit courses (Cho & Karp, 2013). At some institutions, freshman orientation seminar courses are a mandatory graduation requirement; others allow voluntary enrollment.

Community college students, especially students who are academically underprepared, benefit from college preparation or student success courses. These courses provide advice to
incoming students on topics of organization, time management, attendance, learning styles, utilizing resources, and faculty interaction (Commander & Valeri-Gold, 2003). Research has demonstrated that student success courses and orientation support student persistence and address important topics for students who lack basic skills of college preparation (Daiek, Dixon, & Talbert, 2012). While this practice of familiarizing students to the institution benefits students, the reality of student responsibilities cannot be ignored. These students frequently struggle to attend credit bearing courses, and this course alone is not sufficient in sustaining student success.

**Academic advising.** Academic advisors play important roles in activating early alerts and interventions, assisting with academic goal setting, and constructing course plans. Intrusive advising encourages rapport between advisors and students and is more effective than providing basic course selection advice (O'Gara, Mechur Karp, & Hughes, 2009). Rapport is critical to providing academic goal setting and planning advice throughout the duration of the community college student’s enrollment. As previously noted, students enroll with various goals, which may be to take one course, take several courses, attain a certificate, attain a degree, or attain a degree and transfer. Understanding individual student goals is critical to establishing student outcomes and institutional outcomes.

According to the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2010), 46% of students had never utilized academic advising. Intrusive advising may be an additional burden for students who are overwhelmed with responsibility, in addition to early alerts, supplemental instruction, orientation, and tutoring. Additionally, community colleges frequently utilize adjunct faculty for the sole purpose of teaching which limits interaction with students to the classroom which further diminishes the ability to establish rapport due to adjunct faculty’s lack of availability for advising. While there are a host benefits for intrusive advising in facilitating
success, understanding its limitations is necessary in fostering effective advising practices (Donaldson, McKinney, Lee, & Pino, 2016).

While controversy in how to remediate underprepared students effectively, developmental education and student services remain necessary in higher education (Wyner, 2014). While high impact practices facilitate student engagement and encourage persistence, more must be done to facilitate improved success, especially among non-traditional and underprepared community college students (Brock, 2010). Challenging student inputs are inevitable, therefore higher education administrators are faced with challenges in creatively engaging these students at the institutional level.

Traditional practices that address social and academic engagement through high impact practices, faculty/staff engagement on campus, faculty interaction inside of class, advising, and social engagement on campus may not be enough for non-traditional students with time limitations outside of class. Institutions vary as do dimensions of student success based on students served (Clotfelter, Ladd, Muschkin, & Vigdor, 2013). Understanding student perceptions and expectations is key to providing effective high impact practices that facilitate success.

Faculty interactions with students are integral to student success. However, outside responsibilities and challenges, may limit opportunities for faculty to engage students outside of the classroom. Research indicates that faculty interactions and fostering student engagement in the classroom is vital. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) stated:

When student pre-college traits were controlled statistically, only three variables had statistically significant, positive associations with standardized measures of achievement.
across at least two independent samples: frequency of student-faculty interaction, degree of curricular flexibility, and faculty member’s formal educational level. (p. 76)

Classroom interactions allow students to engage during classroom sessions, which are vital to student success. Faculty-student interactions, both inside and outside of class, have been identified in theories of student engagement as imperative to retention and success.

**Psychology Contract Theory**

Research indicates various influences on student success, however, student perceptions of success are imperative in understanding the students served and expectations facilitating success. There have been extensive student success studies regarding perspectives of stakeholders in higher education. Study findings, based on faculty perceptions, associated the following benefits to learning communities: empathy and awareness, authenticity of relationships, engagement, and active collaboration with students (Jackson, Stebleton, & Laanan, 2013). Studies have also revealed that student perceptions of mattering to faculty is significant to student retention (Nitecki, 2011). While stakeholders of community colleges in higher education remain vital to providing insight and perspective, student perspective of success and expectations facilitating success remain vital to the integrity of serving students enrolled.

Psychology contract theory was the framework used to explore student perceptions of success and expectations facilitating success. The core concept of this theory is the mutual agreement and understanding between parties in an exchange or relationship (Rousseau, 1995). Positive and mutual exchange fosters satisfaction of parties, while breach of exchange results in withdrawal, leaving, or quitting. This theory has been widely used in business, specifically human resources management. This psychological concept focuses on the exchange between employer and employee. Psychology contract theory for this single case study focused on the
exchange between the student and the institution as related to student perceptions of success and expectations facilitating success.

When parties enter an exchange, relationship, or agreement there are explicit contracts. The psychology contract theory emphasizes the significance of the implicit or unspoken contract between parties (Rousseau, 1995). In business, the explicit contract between employer and employee is outlined by the hiring process, job expectations, and employee payment for exchange. However, businesses are now giving more consideration to the implicit agreements and feelings of employees. Studies have identified an expectation of employees hired by organizations in which employees perceive the practices of human resources as a commitment by the organization influential on productivity (Aggarwal & Bhargava, 2009). This consideration fosters mutual agreement and respect between parties and fosters employee satisfaction which leads to increased job performance, commitment to the company, and mutual benefits for employee and employer as a result of intentional efforts.

In understanding success from students beyond traditional measures, this study sought to understand the explicit and implicit agreements, upon community college admission, between students and the institution in terms of student success. The guiding principle of the psychology contract theory is the significance of the implicit and explicit contracts between parties. The framework underscored the implied student perception of success and expectations of agents with consideration of success.

**Institutional Agents**

The psychology contract theory outlines agents, or parties, within the agreement. The student perspective and expectations of success were guided in study by the psychology contract theory. This theory takes considers student perceptions of the unspoken contract with
institutional agents. Effectively engaging community college students requires the employment of all college resources beyond the classroom and extra-curricular activities (Keeling, 2004). Students engage with support staff, faculty, and the institution on a regular basis. These institutional interactions have been less notably researched. However, the psychology contract theory indicates co-collaboration through the Strategic Enrollment Management continuation of services and agents is a best practice of success (Dale & Drake, 2005, Ender & Others, 1996).

In the wake of increased scrutiny of student success outcomes in higher education, student affairs may also be scrutinized due to lacking cultures of evidence (Culp, 2005). Gaining student perspectives of success and expectations facilitating success, outlined by agreements between student and institutional agents, will not only benefit practitioners in better serving students, but foster a culture of evidence despite the culture of change (Person, Ellis, Plum, & Boudreau, 2005). Knowledge of students’ changing needs and expectations was further noted in studies supporting learning and success (Williams, 2002). The importance of student affairs in the heightened culture of success cannot be negated. Study implications recommend student affairs professionals become trained in methodology to conduct research and utilize findings (Dungy, 1999). Student affairs stands vital in community college processes; student perceptions of expectations will relay valuable insights of services received.

Specifying institutional agents is important for research, as studies have indicated that general mattering of a student is different than university mattering (France & Finney, 2010). Equally important is the differentiation of partners of agreements between the business sector and higher education. For the purposes of this study, the SEM continuum agents were identified as a guide for the study to navigate relationships from inception of college, which has been found central in student service effectiveness (Shugart & Romano, 2008). Providing a landscape of
agents and services is important, as no one resource or practitioner can meet all needs of all students (Culp, 2005).

This continuum, as a guide, provided a valuable aerial view of institutional agents and services include recruiting and marketing, orientation/student success course, classroom experience/faculty, and co-curricular support. The continuum addresses the administrative side of admissions, financial aid, learning support, campus life, and inclusion. The student enrollment management handbook provided a perspective of the continuum that students navigate through the educational experience. Understanding student perceptions of success and expectations of these services will provide insight for practitioners beyond the classroom for improved practices.

Some of the most widely referenced theories in higher education on retention and student departure address academic and social integration, involvement, and engagement of students. While research and findings are explicit on student engagement, research is less clear regarding alternative avenues for fostering this engagement with influence on student success (Friedlander & MacDougall, 1992). While these theories have proven influential in aiding retention, further consideration of community college student perceptions of success and expectations facilitating success remain vital.

Students interact with various campus departments while on campus, yet research lacks in understanding the student perception of these interactions with consideration of perceptions of student success and expectations facilitating student success. Understanding student perceptions of success and expectations throughout the continuum from recruitment through graduation is necessary in understanding influencing supports and impediments of student success in order to effectively shape policies and practices to better serve community college students.
Theories of student success address a range of influences on student experience, however, an understanding of community college student success from the student perspective throughout the college experience with consideration of expectations facilitating success is imperative to establishing alternative policies and practices to foster success for community college students. The student perspective of success is necessary in gaining a deeper understanding of the student’s perspective guided by the psychological contract theory throughout the college experience in order to understand the influence on success. A deeper understanding of student perceptions of community college student success, expectations, and experience is necessary to understand student success beyond traditional measures of degree persistence and inform expectations of support, policies, and procedures of the institution.

While research has thoroughly explored individual student attributes, institutional practices, and external influences which impede or facilitate student success, there is a deficit in research understanding student perceptions of success with consideration of student expectations facilitating success and how perceptions and expectations influence success. While quantitative data reveal the quantifiable percentage of students succeeding or dropping out, these numbers do not provide the necessary landscape or describe reasons for graduating or dropping out. Academic and social engagement of students has been widely researched (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, student perceptions of success with consideration of expectations and influence on success is lacking at the community college level. The psychology contract theory will guide an understanding of the student perception of success, institutional relationships, expectations of success, student experience, and influences on student success. Student perceptions will inform an understanding of student perspectives of success with consideration of expectations facilitating success and influences on success.
A deeper understanding of the community college students’ definition of student success, beyond traditional metrics, taking into considerations student expectations facilitating success, experience, and influence of success as outlined by aspects of the psychology contract theory will provide insight into how students perceive the college process or experience and what students need. This study utilized the Psychology Contract Theory to develop a deeper understanding of student agreements with institutional agents, perceptions of success, expectations facilitating success, and college experience, as well as how these factors influence success.

**Conclusion**

This chapter reviewed the literature on the history of community college and shifts in mission from merely access to access and success. This chapter also navigated the complexities faced by community colleges in serving varying missions and addressing broad success measures, and provided further consideration to student demographics, external influences, challenges, and outside responsibilities of students served. Student retention theories, articulated by notable theorists including Tinto, Astin, and Pascerella and Terenzini emphasized the importance of engaging students academically and socially for successful student retention. The psychology contract theory provides literature offering an alternative guide in seeking explanations of student success beyond traditional measures of persistence and degree attainment with focus on student perception of success, institutional agreement with students, expectations facilitating success, student experience, and influences on success.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Student success has been widely researched with emphasis on the national benchmark, utilizing quantitative measures of outcome, the traditional metrics of student success as outlined by graduation and degree attainment. These measures of outcome do not reveal the complexities of community college student inputs and contexts beyond quantitative measures. Research has been extensive regarding practices for fostering engagement, integration, and interactions between students to encourage success through persistence with contextual consideration. Despite the important role of context in research, quantitative metrics of accountability remain traditional measures of outcome as defined by graduation rates. Higher education serves over 6 million students, but only 29% will be successful based on traditional measures of student success (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2014). While this measure of outcome reports the completion rate of community college students, this rate of completion does not delve into the qualitative nature of community college student success. Therefore, it is important to capture student perspectives to reveal the reasons for completion and graduation rates beyond quantitative measures.

The community college mission of providing access through open admissions affords millions of community college students with educational opportunities. This is evident in community college student enrollment; community colleges served 6.2 million students in 2006 or 32% of students served in postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education. Institute
of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. (NCES), 2001-2006). However, the trend in higher education has shifted from simply providing students access to ensuring both access and success. Providing students with access to college alone, without also offering adequate supports to attain success, does not realistically provide students with educational opportunity (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). While institutions strive to implement high impact practices with the intent to increase student success, these practices have not been proven to improve quantitative measures of student success through degree attainment. Further research is necessary to understand student perspectives of success beyond traditional measures of success.

Student perceptions of success with consideration of student expectations facilitating success, student experience, and influences on success have not been previously explored in higher education at the community college level. Utilizing the psychology contract to better understand student perspectives would serve higher education in not only understanding but also serving community college students. The psychology contract theory, a framework which has been widely researched and leveraged in business, has not been utilized in higher education. Additional research necessitates further understanding of the quantitative gap in providing community college student access while ensuring equal opportunity in attaining community college student success. This understanding will require further research, from student perspectives, to supplement existing research of student success. Pre-college characteristics and behavior of students, engagement of students, high impact practices, and other commonly researched themes will remain significant in community college student success literature, however the extant literature will be enhanced by insights of student perspective of success beyond traditional metrics.
This study did not seek to negate significant research of community college student success with attention to pre-college characteristics, engagement, and high impact practices. Rather, this study sought to provide an alternative to understanding student success by gaining student perceptions and expectations influencing success by utilizing the psychology contract theory. This qualitative viewpoint offers an alternative to the quantitative measures of accountability of student success for policy makers, administrators, practitioners, and students in understanding success beyond traditional metrics. Accountability measures have and will continue to remain significant to policy makers, administrators, practitioners, and students, however, this measure does not tell the “why” of student success/lack of success; numbers do not tell a complete story.

This study sought to provide an alternate viewpoint to supplement student success considerations rather than replace existing measures of outcome. In the meantime, higher education faces increased demands to improve success while maintaining access, which will require innovative research of student success (Mullin, 2012). Seeking student discernment into this widely held conversation of success in higher education, with consideration to psychology contract and expectations influencing success, will provide an alternative viewpoint of success, supports of success, barriers of success, and student experience beyond degree persistence and attainment. The psychology contract theory served as a framework for this study and gave consideration to student perceptions of success, expectations of success, student experiences, and overall influences on success.

**Rationale for methods.** Qualitative research methods were used for this study, aiding in sensitivity to the study of relationships in a natural setting (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research was an appropriate approach to discover what had already taken place. Qualitative research
empowered me to remain open to the study taking a different direction than initially planned. Through qualitative research, I sought to promote impartiality and autonomy with sensitivity to subject matter from a diverse group of community college students with unique needs.

Qualitative research was used for this study to discover student perspectives and expectations influencing success. Existing student success research has utilized traditional measures of success, graduation and retention, as a guide to overall student success. This study sought an understanding of student success beyond traditional metrics by seeking student perspectives. Revealing an alternative to traditional outcomes of student success, student perceptions of student success, expectations facilitating success, student experience, and influences on student success provided insight into the student experience beyond existing literature by utilizing the psychology contract theory.

According to the experts, students will be more persistent and successful in college when they are satisfied with their educational experience (Jameson & Fusco, 2014). Student satisfaction is best perceived and relayed by the student. This study utilized the psychology contract theory from the student perspective to holistically understand student success, expectations facilitating success, student experience, and influences on student success. Insight into the student perspective, student success, and expectations provided a standpoint of success beyond traditional measures.

**Professional Background**

As the coordinator of the Student Success Center, I have a strong presence in the college experience of students through daily student interaction. This positionality provided prior to and during the interview process and aided in observations. Additionally, daily interactions helped establish rapport, which contributed quality to the interview process and promoted honest and
open student responses based on an existing foundation of association. As the researcher, I maintained awareness of the acquaintance with students and strived to maintain integrity in the study by setting aside pre-conceived beliefs and experiences with students or outcomes of the study. I maintained balanced participation, engaged in interviews with occasional participation, but focused on listening while students guided the interview. This position of neutrality and balance nurtured sincerity and engagement during student interviews with students while maintaining student perceptions without influence on the interview process or responses. While engaging with occasional participation in the interview process, I observed contextual interactions with students and made notations of both verbal and non-verbal communication.

**Research design.** This qualitative case study sought an understanding of student perceptions of success and expectations of psychology contract influencing success. This study sought an understanding of individual student perspectives; a case study design provided in-depth data through one-on-one interviews. This study utilized alternative methods of evaluation which proved to be useful in obtaining supplemental observations, however qualitative methods provided a deeper understanding of the “why” beyond traditional measures of student success as accountability measures. I attempted to discover meaning of student perspective without assuming meaning but rather seeking explicit meaning as detailed by students.

It is important to acknowledge the characteristics of qualitative research and how a study will address these characteristics (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

1. *Qualitative research emphasizes the perceptions of people with regard to a view, knowledge, or reality.* I sought to understand the community college student perceptions of their individual experiences with consideration of their views, knowledge, and reality regarding success.
2. *Qualitative research studies are subjective.* I had a specific vision for this study to seek student perceptions of success utilizing the psychology contract theory. Utilization of qualitative research provided personal flexibility in the selection of site, participants, research questions, interview process, and the types of information that would be employed during the study. These decisions were important in obtaining a complete understanding of student perspectives of community college student success beyond traditional measures of persistence and degree attainment.

3. *Qualitative research allows multi contextual realities.* I pursued this study with an acceptance that realities of individuals are multi constructed and varied. I wanted this study to explore individual student perceptions.

4. *Qualitative research practices exploration through natural settings of those whose experiences are sought to be understood.* In a quest to understand community college student success from the perspective of students, the natural setting was central in obtaining contextual data collection pertinent to the study.

5. *Qualitative research affords the researcher, me, to be the primary source of data collection and immersed in the setting.* I, currently the standing student success coordinator, assuming the primary role of data collection was of importance to this study. I have both familiarities with students as well as a level of rapport due to the nature of daily student interactions. These attributes provided a foundation upon which to build the data collection process ensuring open and honest student feedback and relaying student experiences and realities.

6. *Qualitative research utilizes multiple sources of data.* The primary source of data collection, one-on-one interviews, provided a deeper understanding of community
college student perceptions of success, expectations, and experience. However, other sources of data collection were critical to this study including observations in setting and program artifacts which included previous student surveys and program goals, objectives, and resources available.

7. *Qualitative research provides a pathway in pursing quality.* The ultimate goal of this study was to convey meaning of student success beyond traditional metrics: providing students a voice in the student success conversation beyond simply quantitative measure of degree persistence and attainment. (p. 12)

Descriptive data were gathered through one-on-one interviews in a natural setting. Conducting interviews provided me an understanding of student perceptions of success beyond traditional measures. The use of interviews provided the students an open platform to answer open-ended questions rather than narrowing the scope of interviews in a closed-ended questionnaire or survey. This process of one-on-one interviewing allowed the interviewer and students to build rapport which encouraged students to offer genuine perceptions of success and expectations of psychology contract influencing success. This study was a single institution case study that utilized one-on-one interviews as well as CCSSE surveys and student success center artifacts and materials.

**Research Questions**

The primary purpose of this research study was to discover community college student perceptions of student success, beyond traditional measures of persistence and degree attainment. The primary research question that guided this investigation was: How do community college students perceive success? Additional questions were asked to provide further understanding of student perceptions of success, expectations facilitating success, student experience, and
influences on student success; questions were informed by the psychology contract as the theoretical framework of study. This exploration of student of success, expectations facilitating success, experience, and influences on success provided a comprehensive understanding of the student experience and satisfaction in seeking success, as defined by students, beyond traditional measures of success. Open-ended questions addressed the following domains:

- How do community college students define success?
- What are student expectations facilitating success?
- How do students perceive overall student experience?
- How do student perceptions of success, expectations facilitating success, and overall college experience influence student success, as perceived by students?

Participants

Purposeful sampling was applied to the selection of student participants for this study. These students were enrolled at Rural Ridge Community College, in the northwest district between 2015 and 2018. Participants were enrolled in the student success center at some point during their college experience. All students were over 18 years of age, and all participated in the study voluntarily. Participant identities remained confidential and protected through the use of pseudonyms.

Site Selection

Rural Ridge Community College resulted from the recent merger of three south Alabama community colleges in 2017. These colleges included Faulkner State Community College, Alabama Southern Community College, and Jefferson Davis Community College. The site selected for this study is the northwest district of Rural Ridge Community College. Prior to the merger, this district was Alabama Southern Community College. The northwest district consists
of the Thomasville, Monroeville, and Gilbertown campuses. While the merged Rural Ridge Community College is one entity, student demographics in each district differ dramatically. The North District of Rural Ridge Community College is a rural district within a large two-year public institution in southern Alabama. This institution was selected due to its open admissions process, student demographics, and high impact practices currently in place. Additionally, this institution has graduation and retention rates below the national average.

**Methodology**

One primary group was source of data for this case study was community college student interviews. Interviews were semi-structured and addressed research questions. Interviews provided opportunities to explore overall student perceptions of success, expectations facilitating success, experience, and influences on success. Transcript data, retrieved from interviews, were supplemented by review of student success artifacts including surveys, program goals and objectives, and annual workshop/event schedules. Survey responses from student success workshops provided evaluation of feedback from students in understanding existing policies and procedures within the college with intention of fostering student success. Student feedback supported transcript data and allowed further assessment of existing practices.

**Data Collection**

Creswell’s (2013) data collection circle was followed to ensure careful data collection. Data collection activities included locating site/individual, gaining access and establishing rapport, random sampling, collecting data, recording information, collecting data, and storing data. Study participants were comprised of a group of students at a rural community college within the northern district. This study included 22 community college students with varying academic needs and demographics including sex, age, and socioeconomic status. Data collection
included full-time and part-time students, degree seeking in General Studies or technical degree/certificate seeking, of North District of Rural Ridge Community College, and three campuses in rural Alabama including Gilbertown, Thomasville, and Monroeville.

Data collection included multiple campuses and utilized Skype technology to accommodate students who were inaccessible for face-to-face interviews. Phone and email were utilized for additional interactions when necessary. A handheld digital recorder was used during each interview to ensure accurate recollection of the interview and responses post-interview. Additionally, I used handwritten notes during and after individual interviews to ensure observations were captured during the interview for future reference.

Open-ended interview questions were established prior to interviews. These questions were used to guide interviews, gather insight, and obtain information regarding student success and expectations of psychology contract from student perspective. Sixty minutes were allotted for each interview. Attentiveness was critical in establishing rapport and gaining meaningful responses from students. The overarching research question was asked followed by open-ended questions to ensure a variety full range of student perceptions of student success and expectations. Open-ended questions provided structure supporting consistency among participants and guided the interviews for this study. Observation notes were handwritten during the interview and analyzed immediately following each interview. The interviewer analyzed notations following interviews and provided additional notes on observations often utilizing analysis and intuition. Interviews were audio-recorded using a handheld recorder, with student permission through a consent form, and stored on a personal laptop with no shared access to these files or electronic or paper documents. Each interview recording was uploaded into O*transcribe software immediately following interview for verbatim transcription. I reviewed
and edited all transcribed interviews for errors. Additionally, interview transcripts were reviewed for identification of themes based on each question throughout the interviews.

**Student Participants**

A study focus group was advertised on campus through word-of-mouth by instructors, student organizations, clubs, and the Student Success Center learning management system (LMS) email distribution. Student organizations and classroom recruitment encouraged participation in the focus group to allow student voices to be heard in a pilot focus group meeting. Students who accepted the invitation attended the informational session where the study was explained in detail to students. This focus group was open to all students and fostered student discussion and feedback among those in attendance. At the end of the pilot focus group, students who qualified for the study were invited to participate through student emails. Students who chose to participate in the study were given a consent form to complete prior to the interview. This form addressed the purpose of the study and length of time of the interview, and encouraged students to voice any questions or concerns. Individual interviews were scheduled at the end of the pilot group based on student availability and schedules.

Students were purposefully selected based on maximum variation sampling to ensure that participants met diverse criteria. Specific identifiers included age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, job status, working full-time/part-time, and traditional and non-traditional student status. Maximum variation sampling was utilized to provide a range of data.

Notably, based on admissions coding criteria, all students enrolled at Rural Ridge Community College must be classified upon admissions as degree seeking or non-degree seeking by the registrar. The only students that fall into the non-degree seeking category are transient students and dual enrollment high school students. All other students are required to declare a
major with the intent to graduate. Study participants were currently enrolled full-time, taking credit bearing courses at Rural Ridge Community College, and had persisted for one full academic year in both technical and general studies with plans to graduate. This purposeful maximum variation sampling strategy allowed identification of a diverse student pool with unique challenges, expectations, and perceptions of community college success thereby adding depth to the study. The sample of students included diverse student demographics, academic needs, and predictive indicators generally identified as barriers to traditional definitions of success. Students included traditional and non-traditional students, first generation college students, low income socioeconomic status, disabled, and working full-time or part-time. This study was not limited to students with predictive indicators, but also included students whose main responsibility and purpose was to attain a degree. This ensured a range of student perceptions of success, expectations facilitating success, experiences, and overall influences on success without bias or discrimination.

**Researcher Positionality**

There is importance in identifying my positionality, as the researcher, in relation to this study. While I strive to remain objective, I currently serve as the student success coordinator at the site in which research study took place. I have a relationship with the majority of participants in this study. I, as the researcher, come with a set of core values and beliefs which I too will share. My belief in the community college mission and serving underprepared and underrepresented students is deeply rooted. I do not merely fulfill a role at a community college, rather I believe in students and their ability to succeed. I recognize the strengths of community college students, as well as recognize the challenges faced by these students. I strive to provide adequate social, emotional, and academic support for students. This passion and belief is not
universal among college coworkers, faculty and staff. Rural, AL is overwhelmed with conservative political and religious views with undeniable racial division. As a white female who was not raised in rural Alabama, I have come to realize there is an assumption that I am politically and religiously conservative and hold prejudices based on my appearance. With that assumption comes a lack of compassion for students utilizing federal assistance to attain an education with lack of regard for challenges faced by these students. As a researcher, I strived to remain objective. However, I have an understanding of the culture of the college and rural area in which this study took place which cannot be negated.

One-on-one interviews were administered by the interviewer with the student. Interviews took place in person in a natural student setting to ensure comfort in surroundings for students without distractions. Face-to-face interviews provided a platform for rapport as well as interviewer observations of tone, mood, and body language. If a student was unavailable, accommodations were made to interview via Skype or phone. Alternatives to face-to-face interview were not ideal and were avoided by making accommodations to reschedule based on student scheduling demands and conflicts as needed. All attempts were made to accommodate face-to-face interviews and were only utilized to accommodate student scheduling demands in extreme scenarios. All accommodations were able to be met, therefore no interviews had to be held via phone or Skype.

*Recording procedures.* Interviews were recorded using a handheld recorder and backed up by a laptop recorder in case the handheld device failed. The interview was held in an interview room that was adequate for one-on-one interviews. A series of open-ended questions were asked to provide insight into student perceptions of student success. Additionally, open-ended research questions were used to explore the psychology contract theory from the
perspective of students with consideration of student expectations facilitating success, student experience, and overall influences on student success. Interview recordings were uploaded to O*transcribe and immediately processed for transcription utilizing O*transcribe software.

**Natural setting.** Interviews were strategically scheduled in the Student Success Center. This setting provided students with an interview location that was secluded, relaxed, and student-friendly within the comfort of a familiar area. This center, utilized by students on a regular if not daily basis, has a presence on each campus and exhibits a student-friendly atmosphere that is professional and confidential yet relaxed and comfortable to students. This natural setting ensured student comfort in surroundings that they frequented and a student-friendly environment on campus.

A consent form to participate in the study was completed by interviewees prior to interviews. This form identified the purpose of the study and length of time of the interview, and offered information and advice about the study. Interview procedures followed the interview protocol to ensure a consistent interview experience for the interviewer and each interviewee. Listening was the main role of the interviewer in order to be courteous and respectful of the interviewee and to gather the most unbiased information from the interviewee. Interview procedures followed the interview protocol strictly to ensure a worthwhile experience for the interviewer and interviewee.

**Interview Questions**

Open-ended questions served to guide the study of student success from the student perspective and expectations influencing success. Open-ended questions permitted general points of information in the following domains:
• How do community college students define success?
• What are student expectations facilitating success?
• How do students perceive overall student experience?
• How do student perceptions of success and expectations facilitating success influence college experience and overall student success, as perceived by students?

Data Analysis

Through the process of data analysis, careful consideration was given to each student interview transcript through in-depth, repeated review and analysis of data provided. I was guided, through immersion of information, in understanding the literal and perceived context of student interview responses to each question which were generally themed after each transcription. This process of immersion further allowed me to reflect and reacquaint herself with material and initially broad thematic schemes and to avoid any hasty analysis. Each participant’s perspective was taken into consideration to avoid generalizations being made on any single participant or group. Through analysis and awareness of student interview data, I utilized literal meanings of themes. However, I utilized intuition to explore material with sensitivity to my positionality.

A diary was kept throughout the process of analysis to record notes observations and interviewer thoughts that arose during interviews as well as those proceeding interviews. Notations proved to be beneficial in revealing thoughts of the interviewer during data collection and data analysis and aided in further revealing themes as well as disparities in the study and beyond. Data analysis was continually deduced through time consuming reflection on materials gathered. The expansive volume of themes identified were deduced through repeated immersion
and analysis of transcription and notations. Careful consideration of interview data was critical in understanding student perspectives of success. I sought brief student feedback following the interviews in informal one-on-one meetings to ensure the information and observations were understood as the student intended. This follow-up feedback provided assurance in the emphasis on participants and findings of this study from the student perspective.

Keyword analysis, constant comparison, content analysis, and thematic analysis were all utilized in the analysis of data in this study (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Keyword analysis was used to find initial themes of context from data collection. Constant comparison was advantageous in categorizing information during the coding and comparison processes to develop themes among interviews. Analysis of the data was time consuming by means of coding and defining themes through the use of thematic analysis, due to the sheer volume of transcript data retrieved through student interviews. As themes were deduced, transcripts were further coded based on a manual coding system which was developed to identify and compare codes based on interview data. This coding system utilized visual charting of categories and was continually compared and deduced based on loose connections of themes.

Thematic findings utilizing thematic coding was narrowed down and utilized major themes, separated by research questions, and further divided into sub-themes to provide clarity in managing the volume of data and presentation of findings. As transcripts were reviewed, connections were made by coding and categorizing information gathered. Reflection of the material, prior to follow-interviews, allowed me to process interviewee responses. Follow-up interviews were scheduled to briefly clarify interpretations of the transcript review for accuracy based on participant perceptions. Follow-up interviews revealed no discrepancies between student validation of my perceptions of interview data.
Observation and analysis of student surveys provided an additional layer of student perspectives of success beyond those provided by study participants. The Center for Community College Student Engagement obtains institutional surveys aiding in research on community colleges educational best practices that foster and facilitate student engagement, retention, and success. This research, obtained by CCSSE, conducts national surveys to support student learning and persistence to better understand community college institutional practices and student needs and to assess the climate of achievement in attaining these goals. These national surveys include: Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (CCFSSE), and Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE) (CCSSE.org).

I utilized prior cohort data obtained by Rural Ridge Community College in participation with CCSSE research to identify institutional practices and focus on the student experience utilizing quantitative and qualitative data. Rural Ridge Community College, North District participated in this study in the CCSSE national survey, which the I utilized to obtain perspectives from other cohorts of students outside of those participating in this study. Additionally, artifacts including student success program outcomes and surveys were reviewed to provide insights into student success-driven processes to better understand programs currently implemented and offered to students of Rural Ridge Community College.

These surveys revealed among benchmarks in active and collaborative learning, student effort, academic challenge, student-faculty interaction, and support for learners are among effective educational practices fostering student engagement. Rural Ridge Community College performed favorably with comparable benchmark scores within cohort. Of aspects of highest student engagement were student faculty interaction outside of coursework, support for learning
to cope with external challenges, social support, career counseling, and student effort were among focus items in which Rural Ridge Community College attained more favorable percentages among cohort. Among aspects of lowest student engagement included academic challenge, student effort outside of mandatory assignments, and student preparation outside of class time. These areas of engagement, Rural Ridge Community College underperformed cohort.

Data from the Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement provided surveys among cohorts on how often faculty refers students for services in academic advising, peer tutoring, and labs. This survey revealed that of cohorts surveyed, less than half and often more than half of faculty do not often refer students for services in academic advising, peer tutoring and skill labs. While these surveys of CCSSE and CCFSSE provide benchmarks of performance of an institution among a cohort of institutions, qualitative insight is vital in supplementing aggregate percentages with qualitative context.

Upon the completion of the study, this research will add to the field of higher education by offering student perceptions of student success beyond traditional metrics. This research, guided by the psychology contract theory as the framework, shed light on student perspectives of success, expectations facilitating student success, student experience, and influences on success. This study was open to exploration of each student perspective throughout the interview process and had no preconceived notions of the impact that student perceptions would have on student success. The psychology contract theory was used as a theoretical framework to guide the interview process throughout the study. This study revealed themes and disparities in student perceptions of student success, expectations facilitating success, student experience of
psychology contract, and influences on success beyond the traditional measures of student success.

**Conclusion**

The methodology for this study provided a platform for understanding student success and expectations influencing success from the perspectives of community college students. This study provided opportunities to hear the perspectives directly from students based on their experience defining success, expectations facilitating success, student experience, and influences on student success. Student perceptions of success and expectations influencing success will provide invaluable information regarding student success beyond traditional metrics.

The site selected serves an underserved and underrepresented student population in rural Alabama in which students face unique barriers to success, external challenges, and responsibilities. The site selected fosters student success policies and procedures despite the challenges students face. Administrators, faculty, and staff are aware of student success and challenges impeding success while also maintaining awareness of the traditional measures of outcome: persistence and degree attainment. This study added student perceptions of success to this awareness in the multi contextual conversation of student success.

Rural Ridge Community College, North District is dedicated to student success, and has a center committed to student success initiatives. Extensive quantitative data have been utilized through student success surveys to enhance student success services and better meet the needs of students. However, this study was qualitative in nature and sought a deeper understanding of success beyond persistence and degree attainment. The focus of this study was student perceptions of success, expectations influencing success, student experience, and influences on success. Findings may provide invaluable insights for policy makers, administrators, and
practitioners. This study allowed students to share their perspectives of success and expectations directly influencing success.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Why students attend community college

Community colleges serve nearly half of the undergraduate student population in higher education, approximately 6.1 million students (IPEDS, 2017). Community colleges have a mission to serve a large, diverse student population and enroll students with a host of goals, objectives, expectations, challenges, and unique personal needs. Community college students have varying goals for enrollment including graduation, transfer, skills training, career development, adult education, and workforce development.

The Rural Ridge Community College, North District site selected for this research provided a platform to better understand community college student perceptions of student success, expectations, and experiences. As previously noted, community colleges serve a diverse student population with varied needs. This study attempted to explore student success beyond traditional measures of degree attainment and persistence through student perceptions of success and expectations influencing student experience. This study concentrated on the experiences of students enrolled full-time with the intent to graduate with a certificate or degree.

Study participants responded to open-ended interview questions regarding definitions of success, expectations, and experiences at Rural Ridge Community College, North District, based on Rousseau’s (1995) psychology contract theory. Individual interviews included a review of five special focus items outlined in the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, key findings of Rural Ridge Community College data, and observation of student success center
offerings. This information provided profound and descriptive insight into community college student experiences, expectations, and perceptions of success beyond traditional measures of persistence and degree attainment.

I sought to understand the following: (1) how community college students perceived success; (2) student expectations facilitating student success, written and unwritten, of psychology contract with institutional agents; and (3) student perceptions of success and expectations influencing holistic student experience and student success. This exploration of student perception and expectation of success provides a meaningful understanding of student experiences and satisfaction on the path to success beyond traditional metrics. In order to complete this study, I generated questions tailored to the constructs of the psychology contract theory to provide a holistic understanding of the student perspective of success. The nature of this study was qualitative; findings were addressed thematically to adequately address the psychology contract theoretical framework of the study.

Student responses offered insight into student perceptions of success, expectations, and experiences influencing success beyond traditional measures. Qualitative data, gathered through in-depth interviews, was coded and divided into themes, as well as sub-themes which are specified accordingly. Participant identities were protected using pseudonyms

**Restatement of Research Questions**

Community college students enrolled at Rural Ridge Community College were interviewed to understand the following research questions:
i. How do community college students perceive student success?

ii. What are student expectations facilitating student success?

iii. How do student perceptions and expectations of success influence holistic experience and student success?

While this study sought to understand the student perception of success, expectations facilitating success, and influence on student success, it was important to gain an understanding of why students study enrolled and attended community college.

**Why Participants Attended Rural Ridge Community College?**

As outlined by the psychology contract theory, individuals enter into agreements with expectations and unspoken agreements, these understandings may be transactional or relational in nature. Therefore, it is important to understand why students enroll in community college and the challenges they face. When asked why students enrolled and attended community college, the overwhelming theme of external responsibilities emerged. While the external challenges of students varied by individual student, study participants universally expressed external challenges as a significant deciding factor in why they chose to enroll in community college. Through exploration of student perceptions of student success and expectations facilitating success, understanding the reasons influencing students to enroll in community college was noteworthy. An understanding of why these students chose to enroll in community college and external challenges was further subdivided. Sub-themes are listed for further clarification of student perspectives. Study participant identities were masked using pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

John attends community college because he has so many responsibilities at home. Attending the local community college is the only way he can take advantage of educational
opportunities. While college is a privilege, one that is not taken lightly, this does not negate the
day-to-day responsibilities in the life of students. Managing children, a full-time job, and school
requires juggling responsibilities, scheduling, and time, which poses an opportunity to take
advantage of college education while at the same time can be an overwhelming undertaking.

**Finances.** More than half of those attending Rural Ridge Community College qualify as
low-income based on socioeconomic status. Therefore, it is not surprising that finances were a
recurring external challenge sub-theme when understanding why students chose to attend
community college. Attending community college provided a viable opportunity to attain a
college degree with affordability as compared to attending a degree granting, four-year college or
university.

An academically strong student, elementary through secondary education, Martin always
understood college to be too expensive for his family. Always encouraged by teachers, he was
still reminded by his family that college was expensive and not realistic. Plan B for Martin was
to enter the workforce until he learned of the local community college through his high school.
Community college afforded Martin the opportunity to attend college and affordability, as he
could attend while living at home without additional expenses. Like Martin, Donnie too
understood finances were the determining factor in his attending community college in his home
town; however, this affordable option did not alleviate all of the financial burden of college.
Donnie stated that he is “on Pell grant and has assistance in school, but that doesn’t begin to
cover all of my expenses. Like books, they are so expensive, almost as much a semester as
tuition.”

Taylor chose to attend college to enter the industrial workforce and attain immediate
income, upward mobility, and increased wages by attaining education in his field of work. While
understanding the value of education on his personal employability and income level long-term, there have been unforeseen challenges. Taylor indicated that he understood that enrolling in college while working full-time, often overtime, on a swing shift schedule while maintaining class attendance and assignments would be a challenge. However, he did not foresee the dilemma in financial burdens of a community college education expressing, “the biggest problem is money. I don’t qualify for any college grants because my parents make too much money, and don’t even receive support from them.”

As frustrating as this was for Taylor, he said that he understood that giving up on his education until he was classified independent based on financial aid statutes would inhibit him in school and work. He had chosen to stay enrolled and overcome these challenges utilizing the local community college.

Students striving to attain an education, in spite of existing personal financial responsibilities, faced the added burden of additional expenses of tuition, books, fees, and codes for online programs, mandatory for some courses. Charity had found that her financial responsibilities and added expenses of college would require her to work more than one job in order to make financial ends meet. While taking on an additional job, Charity had found scheduling conflicts manageable, with the understanding from her instructors and employers, however she continued to struggle financially.

Corey, a student currently receiving an academic scholarship covering full tuition, reiterated the financial weight of a college education. While a scholarship had afforded tremendous relief in the expense of tuition, he continued to face the costs of books, codes, gas, food, and living expenses each semester. Like Charity, Corey also opted to take on two jobs to alleviate the financial tension. Working two jobs did provide the financial stability that he was
seeking, however, the ability to balance school and two jobs became too much, “The school work started piling up, my grades were slipping, and I knew if I didn’t do something I would lose my scholarship.”

Similar to many community college students, Corey faced a difficult decision, work or school. In order to preserve her grades and ultimately her financial security of scholarship and academic GPA, she had to cut back to one job. She continues to struggle financially, however these changes has restored the balance in her work and school schedules. Colby, a full-time student, began college without a job and said she felt she would be more financially comfortable with a job. Like Corey, she realized her grades were being sacrificed and had to make the decision to quit her job in order to maintain good academic standing, however this came with the financial restraints she initially faced.

Study participants universally identified money in personal life along with additional educational expenses as immense challenges they faced while attending community college. While finances have and will remain a challenge for students, this external responsibility was not worth prioritizing second to school for the majority of community college students. Terry is the sole provider for her family and that will always come first to anything in her life: “we have to eat to live and if I’m not making money then we aren’t eating.”

Prioritizing school would be an ideal temporary situation for Terry while finishing school, but the stark reality of putting finances secondary to school would mean the basic needs of her loved ones may not be met. If these needs were not met, her family’s well-being would be at stake, forcing her to completely withdraw and deal with the financial repercussions.

*Family/Childcare.* While financially supporting oneself and one’s family were presented as overwhelming responsibilities and reasons many students enrolled and attended community
college, responsibilities did not end with finances. Family care beyond finances is a responsibility that requires students to take care of family while attending college, which inhibits the scope of time and availability these students are able to dedicate to attending school and coursework. Jasmine, a single mother working to raise three daughters while attending school, not only faced the financial responsibility of providing for her family but also the reality of managing the scheduling for all of her children, her work schedule, and school schedule. Jasmine enrolled in community college to further her education while continuing to raise her daughters as a single mother. Attending community college provided an avenue for Jasmine to be a mom, employee, and student; she was unable to attend full-time each semester due to the lack of childcare. She said that she cannot afford to pay someone to keep her girls while she attends classes and works. The number of hours Jasmine takes depends on the types of course offerings each semester which she said is hard: “because the classes offered at night are not always the classes that I need, so I have had semesters where I only take two classes. I feel like I will never graduate at this rate.”

The responsibilities of taking care of family does not only impact students with children. Joseph, a traditional college student, takes care of his parents who had him later in life and have deteriorating health. The responsibilities of getting his parents to and from doctor appointments and caregiving has fallen solely on him, which he would not be able to do had he not stayed at home and enrolled in community college. While attending community college has afforded him the ability to maintain care for his family, this balance has inevitably interfered with his school schedule and remains a challenge.

**Transportation.** Study participants live in rural Alabama with no public transportation to get to and from college. Surrounding counties extend throughout the desolate counties with one
community college, multi campuses, and serving miles of surrounding areas. Transportation to and from college has been a deciding factor on attending community college, but remains a challenge in spite of close proximity to college. Many students travel distances of two or more hours per day to ensure they attend college; these students would not otherwise have the ability to attend a college away from home. The issue of transportation was significant for many of these students. There are days in which transportation does not work, rides do not show up, there is not enough money for gas, and more. Again, a choice to attend community college to accommodate a transportation issue remains a challenge for these students in attending college, even at the community college level.

Community colleges provide opportunities for students to attend college despite a host of personal challenges. While these external challenges were often the reasons students opted to attend community college, these challenges did not dissipate when students enrolled in community college, but rather remained a challenge. These challenges were noteworthy and frequently the reasons students were currently attending community college. External challenges were a dominant theme for study participants but not unique to these specific students. It is a common experience for many community college students.

Based on an understanding of the student demographics of study participants as well as why these students chose to attend community college, I noted the external challenges and inputs, which were often the deciding determinant in why these students attended community college. While understanding the reasons student participants of the study enrolled in community college and external challenges they faced provided depth of understanding of participants, I sought to understand community college students beyond external challenges and why they enrolled to address the following research questions: How do community college students
perceive success? What are student expectations facilitating success? How do student perceptions of success and expectations facilitate success influence students’ holistic experience and overall student success?

**Student Perceptions of Success**

*How do community college students perceive student success?*

In response to the primary research question, how do community college students perceive student success? Students generally defined success as the achieving of one’s goals. While students collectively recognized that success required goals to be identified by an individual and each individual has unique goals and objectives which will essentially define the outcome of success. Students communicated that setting goals and striving to achieve these goals leads to success. There was a shared acknowledgement among the majority of students that setbacks will be experienced in striving to achieve success. These setbacks do not negate success, however, the reaction to setbacks will define one’s success. While one may face setbacks or even circumstances which force goals to change, one must recalibrate, set new goals, and stay the course. By doing so, one may still achieve success. While students used the term “success” broadly, achieving goals was the dominant and broadly universal theme for students regarding success. Identification of goals is further divided into sub-themes to provide further clarification of student perceptions of success.

**Graduate.** While this study sought to understand student perceptions of success beyond traditional measures of success, persistence and degree attainment, the theme of graduation as a determinant of success did emerge. While the traditional measure of success at the national level utilizes graduation rates of institutions in measuring success for reporting to the federal government (Student Right to Know Act, retrieved from NCES, 2018), some students enrolled
with the intention to graduate. Like many students, Corey perceived student success as getting a degree, “a successful student is a student that graduates.”

Enrolling in college with the intention to declare a major and attain a degree in that major remains a national measure of student success for decision makers in higher education as well as students enrolled in community college. Daniel acknowledged his intention to graduate as success, but further explained, “Student success to me is learning everything in my program, really it’s more than learning what is in my program, but also retaining the information.” While students enrolled with a host of goals, for Daniel it meant fostering development beyond college success.

**Transfer.** Community college students enrolled with a host of unique goals which influenced personal perceptions of success and attainment. Transferring was one goal, which did not always entail graduating before transferring. For some of the participants in this study, there were students who enrolled in college with the intention to take a few courses and transfer to a four-year institution as well as those intending to graduate and then transfer to a four-year institution. Donnie was a traditional student who enrolled with the intention to graduate and transfer. This goal had since changed, leaving him seeking direction from his transfer universities regarding which path would serve him best in his long-term college career with consideration of transfer credits, transfer scholarships, timing with semester calendar, and acceptance in program. While graduation was an initial goal for Donnie, he had since decided that transferring was his main goal. He said that he will have successfully attained his personal goal once he transferred to a four-year university, with or without graduating from community college.

**Giving back.** Observing traditional measures of success and student perceptions of success to graduate and/or transfer, one may assume students enroll to attain something tangible
in the form of a degree. However, for many students, there was more to the value of a degree beyond what the degree would give to the student. Some students said that they sought to attain a degree for the sake of giving back to others. Martin, a traditional college student, serves as a mentor to young boys and girls through his part-time position. For Martin, “success to me is doing what you love and finding a way to make money doing it, for me that is helping and giving back to others.” While this study sought to understand student perceptions of success beyond traditional measures of persistence and degree attainment, the theme of graduation as a determinant of success as perceived by students did emerge.

*Job/Money/Comfort/Lifestyle.* Differing student inputs and challenges often contributed to the reasons students enrolled in college driving forces for why students wanted to achieve goals. Martin, currently struggling financially in his current situation caring for himself and his family, said that he found himself striving to finish college in order to get a job and obtain an income sustainable for the lifestyle he envisioned. Martin stated, “I’ve watched my mom struggle my whole life, living paycheck to paycheck raising a family, and I don’t want that. I want to be able to live comfortably and provide for my family someday.” Martin enrolled in community college as a result of responsibility and struggle, this too shaped his goals, definition of success, and drives him to attain his goal of comfort and stability.

Through observation, Donnie has seen that with an education comes more job opportunity, income, and material lifestyle: “I’ve seen the difference in people with a degree and without a degree and have always known I wanted what educated people have.” Like Donnie, Nolan said that he wanted more than he currently has; he strives to obtain a level of comfort greater than he had prior to college. He said that he was committed to doing whatever was necessary to graduate, but this drive was more that attaining a degree but also a quest for comfort
and enhanced lifestyle. Jeffrey reiterated the quest for money over knowledge, as his success in life would come from his earnings and not the knowledge obtained from a degree on a wall.

**Holistic.** Many students expressed student success as personal goals. Others articulated broad definitions of success that were an evolution throughout one’s life and began with obtaining goals at the community college level that would lead to future successes. Nan reflected on seeking meaning and purpose in life which did not pause while obtaining an education. She perceived success as making “relevant connections between what they are learning in college and their current life or future goals.”

Students enroll with varying goals and objectives to obtain success that is unique to their path, however, there was consensus that success meant achieving one’s goals. These goals may vary in outcome, sometimes even for an individual. Goals may be either tangible or intangible. Nonetheless, success was perceived by students as the outlining of goals, recalibration of goals, not giving up on goals, and leaving the goal different than before setting the goal.

**Student Expectations**

*What are student expectations facilitating student success?*

In seeking an understanding of what participants expected from college, value dominated the conversation. The data retrieved from this research question reverted back to goals. Once goals were obtained, value was added and expectations fulfilled in relation to success. Delving deeper, I sought to understand expectations facilitating success as outlined by the psychology contract theory. Each party enters an agreement with expectations, written and unwritten. Further questioning provided data on student expectations of institutional agents facilitating success providing a better understanding of what students expected from the institutional agreement facilitating value-added success.
**Expectations facilitating success.** Psychology contracts, unspoken agreements between parties which included students and the institution for the purpose of this study, provided a framework for the agreement which included expectations for both parties. This study sought to understand the expectations of students as they strived to succeed in community college. Below are themes from one-on-one interviews regarding student expectations of success.

Study participants articulated unique goals and objectives, however, all students participating in this study were identified by Rural Ridge Community College as degree seeking with the intent to graduate with a degree or certificate. Only those enrolled as transient students and dual enrollment students may have been specified as other in the system upon admissions. This study sought to not only understand student perceptions of success, but also to better understand student expectations facilitating success as outlined by the following themes: Value, Classroom Environment, Support, and Flexibility. The nature of this study was qualitative, student interview data provided a broad scope of student expectations receiving value from college, and is best outlined through sub-themes.

As previously stated, when seeking to understand student expectations, students identified receiving value from the college as utmost importance. Rather than negate this theme of significance by navigating questioning, I maintained direction utilizing value in college to better understand student expectations of obtaining success and value in college. Each student enters college with a set of goals for success unique to that individual student. An agreement is formed with the institution and student, including written and unwritten expectations. The overwhelming theme of value was presented throughout student interviews, however, value was dependent on a student’s perception of success and expectations of success. Value to some students was transactional and relational for others.
I sought to understand student expectations, written and unwritten, of psychology contract with institutional agents. Themes of student expectations facilitating success and fulfilling this value-added experience included classroom environment, support, flexibility, communication, and enthusiasm. Each of these expectations facilitating success and fulfilling value added experience of college was divided into sub-themes to better convey student expectations facilitating success and contributing to value based on individual experiences.

**Classroom environment.** In seeking an understanding of student expectations facilitating success, the classroom environment provided the most distinctive capacity of student expectations to be met. This theme was not surprising, as students frequented the classroom environment when on campus with the majority of time spent in the classroom environment. Due to the vast amount of data provided from student expectations facilitating success, this theme was divided into sub-themes for a manageable representation of student expectations. The theme, classroom environment, has been divided into the following subthemes: organization/management, quality, and communication to provide a more visible representation of student expectation in the classroom environment facilitating student success.

**Organization/Management.** Classroom organization and management underscored an important expectation for students with emphasis on the course syllabus. The course syllabus, generally the first written agreement between student and instructor that is outlined during the first course meeting, provided a popular topic of discussion. Many students expressed an expectation for an instructor to follow this agreement precisely to avoid and future confusion in the classroom. Several students took time to reflect on negative reflections or times when a lack of organization in the classroom led to negative experiences in college. Barrett recalled an experience where lack of classroom organization and management had a negative impact on his
graduation and beyond affecting his GPA and financial aid, detrimental to his financial and academic situation, “I’ve learned that some teachers expect students to just know what is going on, but life is hectic and I need them to communicate with me in the classroom.”

Similar experiences were presented by other students. Joseph recalled a time in which he was provided specific written instructions from an instructor on a paper. While he made all required changes as outlined by the instructor, he received a grade on the final paper with revisions that was essentially an initial rough draft. While Joseph went to his instructor to discuss this discrepancy, he was told to refer to his syllabus. Joseph expected more: “if you are going to make me look at (the) syllabus, then make sure you put rules in (the) syllabus about what you are telling me to find.”

This incident created frustration for Joseph, in that he could not get clarity from the syllabus in regards to discrepancies between rough drafts, final drafts, and grading. Like Joseph, Frances expressed value of the syllabus with expectations of an instructor following what is outlined specifically on day one associated with positive experiences. Frances explained that all teachers provide a syllabus, “I enjoy classes where my instructor provides a syllabus in class, reviews the syllabus, and sticks to the syllabus for the entire semester. This eliminates a lot of confusion for me.”

Although the experiences of instructors referencing syllabi in the classroom varied, Frances and Joseph both communicated value for the syllabus and instructors abiding by the organization and management in the classroom environment as outlined on the first day of class with this document.

**Quality.** Quality, a sub-theme of expectations for the classroom environment, provided valuable insight into the expectations of students and the importance of lectures and discussion in
receiving quality in the classroom environment. Students indicated that they expected instructors to stay on task, illustrate, and provide knowledge. Students communicated an expectation of instructor knowledge. Sophie directly stated that she expected and appreciated knowledge and found interest when lectures were given by knowledgeable instructors. Vic expressed interest in listening to instructors when they provided scenarios outside of the course material that he found to be applicable to his life. This approach of dissecting topics by an instructor, to make information relevant to students, not only required a technique and understanding of the subject matter but an understanding of the students being taught as well.

Instructor knowledge emerged as an important topic that was relevant to providing a quality learning experience in the classroom. Students also emphasized the ways in which instructors relayed this knowledge to students. Students expressed a desire to retain this information beyond the classroom. Learning styles and the incorporation of effective teaching techniques influenced student perceptions of quality learning experiences.

When articulating quality in the classroom environment and expectations facilitating success, learning styles was frequently mentioned in student interviews. Addressing different learning styles was a priority for students. While some students relate better to visual learning, others gravitated toward auditory or kinesthetic styles, which was noticed by students when discussing quality and expectations in the classroom. Students referenced learning styles and their influence on receiving quality. Nan stated: “I love some of my college classes, and some I do not. It just all depends on the instructor and how they teach.” Furthermore, Nan identified visual learning styles as a preference in the classroom environment. For this reason, she navigated her schedule on campus avoiding online courses and instructors that provided the majority of the coursework outside of class.
While Nan related to visual presentations in the classroom, Corey indicated that classes that relied on PowerPoint presentations as main lecture aids were a struggle for him and made it difficult for him to stay awake. He discussed feelings of boredom as the teacher just stands and reads, which is not useful to him in retaining the information presented. While Nan emphasized learning quality visually, the same scenario has the opposite influence on Corey in the classroom environment, with influenced his perceptions of experience, value, and quality.

The expression of quality in learning styles extended beyond lectures and addressed classroom assignments as well. Charity, an introverted student, expressed a love for school, but indicated that group work made her uncomfortable and she avoided attending class when she knew she will have to go beyond just listening to the instructor and completing assignments. While classroom interactions created discomfort for Charity, Donnie described them as a calming influence. When listening to a lecture, even when understanding the subject matter, he often could not understand the information when at home and doing assignments alone. However, interacting with groups allows him to gain memorization tools and study tips that benefitted his post-lecture. Colby also expressed appreciation for interactions in the classroom environment and receiving quality learning when she was able to interact and do hands-on experiments. She said that she thrived in any course with a lab setting, this was where she learned best.

With regard to quality in the classroom environment, students highlighted relevance of material, specifically lectures, coursework, and assignments. Sophie expressed frustration when classroom lectures and discussions got off topic, emphasizing that quality was preserved when instructors stayed on topic and guided student discussions to stay relevant. Similarly, Jasmine expressed appreciation for relevant material emphasizing salience in assignments. Students have
time limitations when on campus and off campus. It was important to students to understand the value of an assignment and how it was relevant to the course offering, rather than assigning busy work which negated classroom quality for students.

Relevance of course material was essential to students in receiving quality in the classroom environment. Relevance of course material applied to not only lectures but also in class and out of class assignments. What was relevant material to one student did not always have the same relevance to all students. Nevertheless, relevance of material was important to providing quality instruction and material in the classroom. For Frances, relevance meant avoiding interferences of external barriers inhibiting completion of her work. Grace, however, preferred to do work outside of class time.

**Communication.** Communication was a key component of student expectations in facilitating quality in the classroom environment. The majority of students articulated communication as a significant expectation, and many discussed communication the classroom environment as related to assignments, classroom expectations, grades, performance in class, and feedback from the instructor. Barrett said that he found communication with the instructor ensured he had an understanding of what was going on in the classroom environment. He expected teachers to initiate this communication; however, he recognized that this does not always take place. Communication is two-way street and sometimes must be student initiated in order for a student to succeed in the classroom.

Joseph also identified communication as a key to success to classroom expectations and overall college success. He placed this expectation for communication on instructors to provide clarity on assignments beyond the syllabus. Joseph indicated that he found it “helpful when assignments are explained in great detail before the due date rather than on the graded paper in
the end when it is too late.” For some, the expectation of communication went beyond physical assignments to also address classroom expectations. As stated previously, in classroom management, the majority of students interviewed preferred clear communication of instructors’ course expectations beyond the written agreement of the syllabus.

Alesia expressed an affinity for strict instructors, noting that they may communicate classroom expectations in an off-putting manner, however, she never had to seek clarity. Grace voiced disapproval of strict instructors and expected all instructors to communicate daily routines and expectations without sacrificing the quality of classroom environment. She said that she preferred a laid back style with flexibility in daily routine. While Grace and Alesia did not agree on communication styles, there was a commonality in expectations of classroom communication.

Grades and course performance were paramount to student expectations in providing quality in the classroom environment. Communication of grades and performance in courses provides students with a roadmap to course completion as well as check points along the way to gauge where they are in course and where they need to go to succeed. Terry explained: “Understanding the grading scale of teachers is a big deal in doing good in a class. If you know how you are doing, then you will be able to do better.” Students expressed expectations of communication to ensure positive experiences in the classroom environment; others recalled negative experiences in which communication may have been lacking which led to negative results in the classroom environment.

Charity recalled a particular instructor who had a philosophy that students should not see their progress in the course which would encourage students to put forth effort the entire semester, rather than slack off when excelling. Charity was in complete disagreement with this
notion, and said that she never knew her performance or progress in the course. She did not know if she was on track to succeed or performing poorly. Students signified quality of communication with instructors as a gauge of progress, measured by grades. Alesia recounted a time when she felt she was performing poorly in a course. She communicated this with her instructor only to discover that she was performing well and above others in the course. Similarly, Nolan sought his advisor to facilitate withdrawal from a course. His advisor would not complete the paperwork until he had communicated with the instructor. As a result of this communication, Nolan stayed in the course and came out with a satisfactory grade. Students said that they expected instructor communication and recognized the importance of student responsibility in fostering a high quality classroom environment by communicating with instructors.

Students expressed an expectation to not only receive communication when verbally seeking answers to questions but also wanted written feedback on assignments. Students voiced an implied expectation that they should not have to explicitly seek out feedback on course assignments. While students associated communication with positive influence on course outcome, lack of communication may frequently lead to negative experiences in classroom expectations and quality.

Alesia said that she valued feedback and gained an understanding of course performance from the grading scale, which she utilized to guide her from one assignment to the next. When she was doing well, she proceeded as she had in previous assignments. However, when her grades were dropping, she made changes to how she was tackling assignments in an attempt to improve her grades. According to Martin, the lack of feedback may cost a student overall course success. Martin described a course in which his instructor did not provide open feedback on
assignments in a timely manner which impeded progress. Assignment feedback would be returned to him after future assignments were already submitted and found that he was repeating the same mistakes. Martin had a negative experience in this course and resentment that his grade suffered due to lack of instructor communication of grades and feedback. While Martin expressed negative association with an instructor due to lack of communication, he acknowledged that he did not address his instructor to communicate these concerns which negatively impacted his grade.

Negative student experiences resulted from lack of communication as well as miscommunication, as expressed by Joseph. An instructor provided a provision to grading in which he would allow all homework assignments to be calculated into the final grade after the final exam. According to Joseph, this grading provision was not clearly communicated. He said that he was unaware of his grade until after the final exam. Corey also shared negative associations that limited his success when he did not know how he was doing in his courses. Not only did lack of feedback influence his grades but his overall GPA and financial aid as well.

While some students described their expectations of communication in terms of course success, others identified this expectation from a customer service perspective. When a student reached out to an instructor, there was an expectation that this student should hear back in a timely manner out of courtesy as a paying student. While Nan expected communication and responses from instructors in a timely manner, she expressed a personal expectation of herself to keep in communication with instructors out of respect and courtesy of their time in the classroom. She said that she expected the same respect and courtesy in return. While instructors have authority in the classroom environment, she articulated as a tuition paying student that she also deserved equal respect and should not fail a course due to their lack of correspondence.
Support

Student expectations, facilitating success, provided a central theme in fostering and facilitating student success through support. Two types of support manifested, transactional and relational, both of which are outlined in Rousseau’s psychology contract theory (Rousseau, 1995). While Rousseau described a transactional contract as written or explicit with expectation, a relational contract is implicit and between parties. Support, as outlined by students, was transactional in nature and referred to tangible resources of support in which a student receives a direct benefit. Relational resources of support included the interactions and implied benefits from relational supports of faculty, staff, and peers.

Tangible student resources, transactional in nature, expected by students in facilitating success included those on campus that support students both inside and outside of the classroom. Technology use and availability were common expectations among students in facilitating success. Whether taking courses on campus or online, students require the use of a learning management system to use institutional technology. Daniel expressed the recent college merger which brought about drastic changes, however, he indicated that the technology resources and helpdesk had provided support that was necessary in facilitating student success in these courses with added resources. Sophie expressed a similar appreciation for technology support, as a non-traditional student with little technology experience. She said that appreciated the technology support services and further suggested that she would not have been successful in courses without this support.

Support services. Support services on campus provided another platform for fulfilling students’ expectations fostering success. While student preferences varied regarding the importance of these services, most students referenced at least one service and resource on
campus that was most beneficial to their day-to-day use. Vic raved about the student success center which had been significant to him as a student: “The student success center has free Wi-Fi and printing, so it’s a favorite place for me to do work. I don’t have Wi-Fi at home, so doing my online work would be impossible without this center.”

Barrett expressed appreciation for the student success center as he did not leave campus during the day. If he did not have this center to go to between classes, he would likely leave campus and not return for late classes. While Barrett and Vic articulated differing benefits they received from the center, both found this service served a purpose facilitated their success.

Job placement/Career. Student goals varied, as did student expectations facilitating achievement of goals, some of which were occupational in nature. Parker emphasized the importance of employment beyond college as critical to his personal success. Job placement and career services available to him on campus had been a tremendous asset. Sophie reiterated the significance of job placement expressing appreciation as a nursing student that her department had been focused on job and career placement beyond graduation.

Not all students who utilized this service sought job and career placement, however, many also found it useful in identifying majors, career paths, job skills, and training valuable to success. Barrett shared his appreciation for these services and said that he utilized these services to declare a major through career assessments. Daniel said that he found these resources superior to others on campus, noting that earning a degree does not always equate to success. He described the application of skills provided by campus support resources as invaluable to success beyond earning a degree. Nolan also indicated that skills he acquired from the job placement facility and services had given him opportunity on campus that fostered success. While subjects in college have provided value for Nolan, he said that he truly found the skills training he
acquired in the career center as something that will benefit him long-term beyond any other resources on campus.

**Peer tutoring.** Academic support and peer tutoring provided a valuable set of supports utilized by students, transactional in nature, across academic majors. Nan indicated that the success center and support resources provided beneficial academic support to maintain academic rigor. Not only had she received tutoring services, Nan also provided tutoring services to other students. Colby said that she found tutoring to be the most beneficial service in facilitating course success. However, she expressed the transactional/tangible resource of academic support services led to relational support, as a friendship had formed with her tutor and remains to this day. The benefits of tangible resources and transactional support were consistent with student expectations facilitating success. These resources often overlapped with relational support in the arrangement between parties which was of value to students.

**Social support and engagement.** Relational support from faculty, staff, and peers provided a central theme in support resources vital to student support, encouragement, and motivation. Students expressed these as integral to student success. Martin enthusiastically spoke of social programs, clubs, organizations, and events on campus conveying a fun energy fostering friendships on campus. He further stated that joining the student government association (SGA) had been pivotal in his social development which kept him involved. He said that he never would have been as engaged on campus without this organization. Colby, who was not an active member of student organizations, voiced feelings of involvement from attending similar events and socials on campus despite her lack of membership. According to Colby, these events made campus life more energetic and fun.
Similarly, Sophie is a non-traditional student who did not intend to have any social involvement while attending college. She stated:

I started college as an older student, older than most of my instructors, too. I never thought I would make friends, I was coming to take classes and get a degree. I now have made forever friends, sisterhoods that are so meaningful since entering the nursing program.

Likewise, Corey had no intention of meeting new friends or engaging on campus. A reserved personality with the tendency to keep to herself, she found that she began meeting others outside of class and actually getting to know other students through social activities and events on campus. Regular social events, through food and fun, translated into relationships on campus for Grace, which she did not anticipate.

**Support: Faculty, staff, advisor.** Expectations facilitating success often led back to the relational facilitators of success, support from faculty and staff prevalent in the community college experience. Noah suggested that faculty engagement was not an expectation of his, but became a pleasant surprise that made the college experience much more enjoyable than high school. He found faculty treatment was that of an equal rather than an authority. Alesia also noted that an unexpected bond had formed with faculty members offering support beyond the classroom. These individuals provided her sincere advice and mentorship on personal and school-related matters.

Students who utilized advising services frequented this partnership of support on campus. In describing a situation in his personal life, Martin said that without his advisor’s support he would have quit school. He quit attending at one point and was contacted by his advisor and encouraged he come in and discuss the situation. Martin suggested that this phone call and his advisor’s concern for him were the only reasons he stayed enrolled. Advisors provide academic advice, supportive listening, and concern, all of which were valued and recognized by students.
Laura, distracted by life’s decisions, attributed advisor support for her persistence in college. She noted that advisors care and get students back on the right track when they are confused about which direction to go both academically and personally. She further observed that when she expressed struggles, her advisor encouraged her. Nolan stated:

I think for the most part; advisors influence my success. I don’t always know what I need to be successful, but they do. I always go to them and they help me. I trust I’m on the right path because of them. Without them, my success would be negatively influenced.

According to Sophie, there were times advisors had a vision for student success even when she did not know the vision. Sophie recalled her first day of school, crying when she met her advisor. This advisor listened to her fears, encouraged her, and remains her advisor today. Relational support of faculty, staff, and advisors provided a meaningful and positive influence on student success as presented by participants.

Flexibility

Students not only expressed an expectation of flexibility in order to achieve student success but also an appreciation of flexibility. The need for flexibility varied, but common sub-themes included assignments, attendance, and rules. Flexibility described why participants enrolled in community college and how they overcame external challenges while striving to succeed. Student participant enrolled in community college to accommodate their lives, responsibilities, and challenges which impeded educational opportunities outside of community college. For many, community college made enrolling in college a possibility while these challenges remained. Despite challenges, student expectations facilitating success involved flexibility based on circumstance.

Assignments. Flexibility of student assignments provided one avenue for facilitating student success, which may have otherwise inhibited persistence. Community college students,
like Jasmine, manage multiple responsibilities including family, finances, job, and school. She identified times when situations arose unexpectedly with her family taking her away from campus and being called into work which interfered with her school attendance and deadlines for assignments. Jasmine said that she took precautions to ensure that this did not happen, however there had been unforeseeable scenarios in the past. There were times that school work may not be submitted on time, but strict deadlines provide a level of expectation that she appreciates. Jasmine recognized that she would not be successful and her assignments would have suffered had she not been afforded flexibility of deadlines. Terry, living outside of town in rural areas with no internet service, made time to attend the success center when Wi-Fi was required. However, he identified instances in which his instructors made provisions to ensure mishaps of online submission that were unforeseeable did not inhibit course success.

**Attendance.** Class Attendance, like course assignments, may not always be feasible when external challenges and responsibilities produce extenuating circumstances. While students recognized flexibility was pertinent to success, not all scenarios made accommodations possible. Frances articulated differentiation between courses and instructors, finding it important to understand which rules applied to each course. Not making necessary accommodations or enrolling in courses that did not afford flexibility may jeopardize student success. Frances recognized the responsibility for student accommodations providing flexibility, rather than focusing on the expectation of instructors.

Attendance policies vary based on instructors, with some requiring attendance in all class meetings while other instructors emphasize assignment completion over course attendance. Aware of his responsibilities outside of school with a full-time job and family, Parker took courses with instructors that were known for flexibility in course attendance to ensure that he
would be able to meet expectations. When unsure of flexibility, he opted to talk with instructors prior to enrolling in a course to prevent jeopardizing his grades due to challenges outside of the classroom. Jeffrey, a full-time employee, recognized that his priority of a full-time work schedule that is not always predictable complicated attaining a college degree. He described an instructor in his program that encouraged employment:

[This instructor] believes having a full-time job and career is important and if we are ever in a situation where there is a problem between work and school he supports us missing school for work. I appreciate that, he understands our life and knows this will affect my job when I leave college.

There was consensus among students that expectations facilitating success included a degree of. While appreciated, student expectations of flexibility were shared between students and instructor, with positive associations when flexibility had been afforded.

**Expectations, Experience, and Influence on Success**

*How do student perceptions and expectation of success influence holistic experience and student success?*

Relational experiences were dominant in perceived value and influenced how student perceptions and expectations influenced the holistic student experience and influence on success. Student perceptions of success and expectations facilitating success influenced students’ college experiences and overall success. These influences were expressed, both positively and negatively, based on how students perceived the agreement and navigating the agreements, as outlined in the psychology contract theory. In reviewing data collected from interview questions related to student perceptions and expectations of success influencing experience and success, the majority of responses addressed relational experiences and influence on value of experience and overall success.
I sought an understanding of how student perceptions of success and expectations influenced experience and overall student success. A tremendous amount of information was gathered from this qualitative study revealing an overwhelmingly positive response to research questions about the overall experience of community college. Sophie provided the following analogy: “Community college for me, has been like buying a perfectly fitting pair of shoes that don’t even need to be broken in, it’s a fit. Everything has just fallen into place.”

According to Donnie, when expectations are met, tension is alleviated and success becomes attainable. His experience has been one of support and expectations that have allowed her to persist, and she knows with certainty he will be successful to his goals. Like Donnie, Noah suggested that success would not be attainable without supports facilitating success and relationships, which have made his experience positive. Barrett recognized that while he has had a wonderful college experience which has positively influenced his success, a negative experience would have easily deterred him on his path to achieving success.

Artifacts

This study sought to understand student perceptions of success, beyond traditional measures of persistence and degree attainment, utilizing data obtained from semi-structured interviews as well as insights through surveys and program evaluations obtained from the Rural Ridge Community College, Northwest District. Rural Ridge Community College, North District, comprised by the Monroeville campus, Thomasville campus, and Gilbertown campus, provided student surveys and student feedback on CCSSE focus items of student engagement with active and collaborative learning, student effort, academic challenge, student faculty interaction, and support for learners.
The findings of this survey provided meaningful insight of benchmarks of educational practices identified as effective. These surveys went further into providing detail of data by analysis of contributors to these benchmarks. Of these aspects of highest student engagement, Rural Ridge Community College performed more favorable in student-faculty interaction outside of coursework. Support for learning addressing external responsibilities, social support, and career counseling also scored favorable with this institution. Student effort and frequency was also favorable among students.

This survey provides a benchmark of educational practice and terms of student engagement among a cohort of institutions. While the depth of understanding is lacking from this survey, there is thematic overlapping of themes with student interviews. Students interviewed outlined value, classroom environment, support and flexibility. Benchmarks of survey, active and collaborative learning were addressed in student interviews under the theme of classroom environment. Student effort, while not directly addressed was implied throughout student interviews especially in areas of identifying why students chose community college and how they define success. Academic challenge surfaced on the survey, as did transcend in student interviews. While surveys express academic challenge as critical, students expressed the support to overcome challenge vital. Student-faculty interaction and support for learning, also benchmarks were prevalent in addressing student expectations. Both resource and relational support were predominant in student interviews.

Another benefit in analyzing this data, reviewing where Rural Ridge Community College ranked among cohort in various areas. For example, a mere 21.9% of students engaged in activities outside of class. I found myself seeking questions as to why more students did not engage, yet was able to see among cohort other institutions had a scant 11.7% of students that
interacted with faculty outside of classroom (CCSSE, 2016). Rural Ridge Community College ranked higher on benchmarks in coping with responsibilities outside of work, social support, career counseling and effort. While these benchmarks revealed Rural Ridge Community College was favorable to peers, the percentages present obvious reality that more than half of students and often far more than half do not utilize service of support.

Based on the data of surveys, Rural Ridge Students continue to express expectations in areas which were identified as key components in student engagement and success. However, these students do not always utilize services which leads to necessity in qualitative understandings of student expectations and fulfillment of these expectations. In overlooking this survey, one would assume students have resources available and choose not to partake. This may or may not be the case, which is better understood in context with qualitative explanations from student perspectives.

The Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (CCFSSE), provided surveys of faculty perception of faculty and frequency of referring students for services. Less than half of faculty surveyed reported students for academic advising/planning, peer tutoring, or labs (CCFSSE, 2016). This survey may appear as though faculty is not referring students, when in actuality this may be part time faculty unaware of services offered.

These surveys, both qualitative and quantitative in nature, revealed more insight aligned with student perspectives of the traditional measures of success, through completion, than insight of student perspectives of success beyond traditional metrics. While the positive influence of engagement on student success completion measure is vital research which aids policy makers, administrators, and practitioners in implementing policies and procedures, review of these data left me seeking more depth. I questioned why students responded the way in which they did
wanting an understanding of student responses beyond a multiple choice survey seeking the fulfillment of traditional measures of persistence and degree attainment.

The Rural Ridge Community College Student Success Center, North District, provides student services facilitating success from the institutional perspective through workshops, seminars, and resources available to students. I observed student participation in the student success center, observed program outcomes, and retrieved artifacts from workshops and seminars to gain insights into the institutional student success platform provided to students. Evaluation of this program revealed the existing student success center is driven by quantitative measures of outcome aligned with traditional measures of success as outline by completion. Workshops and seminars hosted by the center focus on topics driving course completion, graduation, and transfer. In addition to traditional workshops, job skills training was emphasized with emphasis on technical and vocational student participation.

While the student success center provides an array of services that are vital to community college student success, catering to the varying goals of students, the understanding of success beyond traditional measures remains evident in offerings. Students who do not fit the traditional model of degree or certificate completion may not benefit from the services offered. While students utilize these student success services, providing favorable evaluation remarks, a question still remains: What would better serve these students? This question was not asked in any area of the student success program artifacts reviewed. This program would benefit in hosting focus groups to understand what students need to facilitate success and incorporate this input into the program.
Conclusion

When asked, how do college experiences, expectations, and relationships influence success, the overwhelming majority of students articulated positive experiences, met expectations, and success fostered by student relationships with faculty, staff, and advisors on campus, all relational in nature. Negative references and scenarios were present in student interviews, however, when asked to describe holistic experiences positive aspects were valued. Positive relationships and experiences added value to the holistic experience and often negated negative associations which would otherwise deter success. When asked about expectations from college, students articulated value. When asked how college experiences, expectations, and relationships influenced success, students articulated value when overall experiences were positive and success was facilitated.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Chapter 5 presents an interpretation of student perceptions of success beyond traditional measures of persistence and degree attainment, findings of this study, implications of practices, future research, and recommendations.

Summary of the Study

As previously stated, community colleges serve nearly half of all undergraduate students enrolled in higher education in the United States (NCES, 2006). Community colleges strive to serve a diverse student population and maintain its mission, and significant undertaking considering the external challenges faced by many community college students. There is a rich body of literature focused on student success and retention (Tinto, Astin, Bean & Eaton, Pascarella & Terenzini). This study sought to enhance the wealth of research and knowledge on community college student success through the student perspective. The literature research of students, outlined in Chapter 3, was pivotal in guiding the direction of this study on community college student success from the perspective of students. While research takes into account college student success and student experiences, the majority of studies focus on students enrolled in four-year institutions, who are frequently dissimilar to students enrolled in two-year institutions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Even fewer studies focus on college success and experiences from the perspective of students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Community colleges, like four-year institutions, face challenges in serving a vast number of students with diverse demographics and unique needs. Further complexity is added by the
open admissions policy of community colleges serving students without discrimination based on academic aptitude. These open admissions afford access to underserved student populations, but the challenges remain for this demographic of students. The current regulations of student outputs and outcomes, with focus on persistence and degree attainment as measures of student success, do not account for the mission of community colleges to provide accessibility and affordability to all students.

The history of community colleges, student demographics, and challenges students face in seeking to attain educational opportunity naturally shaped this study. While community colleges seek to provide inclusivity to all students, outcomes of student success, such as rates of retention and graduation, reveal dismal numbers that are less indicative of the experiences of these students striving to succeed. Formative research by Tinto, Astin, and Pascarella and Terenzini have outlined areas of research pivotal in student retention and success, including inputs or demographics, student outputs, college environment, and student engagement relative to student persistence and departure (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Twenty-two full-time community college students with the intent to graduate were interviewed to provide qualitative insight into student perceptions of success, expectations, experience, and influences on success. Student responses were obtained in individual interviews and offer insight into student perceptions of success, expectations, and experiences influencing success beyond traditional measures.

To better understand the participants interviewed, it was important to develop an understanding of why these students enrolled in community college. External challenges were one response to why students enrolled and attended Rural Ridge Community College. Each student interviewed revealed unique circumstances, some of which included finances, family,
job, and/or proximity to home. In reality, the majority of students enrolled in community college with inputs and existing responsibilities that did not change as a result of attending college. These student participants chose to enroll in community college close to home to accommodate existing responsibilities and challenges in their life while seeking educational opportunities. Students interviewed may not have otherwise been able to attend college had the local community college not been an option.

I sought to understand (1) how community college students perceived success; (2) student expectations, written and unwritten, of psychology contract with institutional agents; and (3) how perceptions and expectations of success influenced experience and overall student success. This exploration of student perceptions and expectations of success provided a meaningful understanding of student experiences and satisfaction beyond traditional measures. Interview questions allowed open-ended responses from participants and were tailored to address aspects of the psychology contract theory. This study sought to understand student perspectives of student success, expectations of success, and how this influenced overall student success.

This study was qualitative in nature and addressed aspects of the psychology contract theoretical framework in seeking an understanding of community college student perceptions of success and expectations influencing success. The qualitative data gathered were divided into themes and sub-themes. Participant identities were masked using pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality.

**Findings/Thematic Review**

*What is community college student perception of success?*

I sought to understand student perceptions and definitions of success; data revealed that students perceived the setting and striving to attain personal goals as measures of success.
Thematically across interviews, students provided corresponding perceptions of success as setting goals, striving to achieve goals, and progressing when goals deviated. Student recognition of the varying goals of success were associated with the uniqueness of individuals and goals tailored specifically for each student. Each student revealed personal goals of success, but acknowledged that this was not a universal definition or goal of success for all students. Students further suggested that individual goals depended upon life changes. The variance in goals before attainment did not mean one had not been successful, rather the recalibration of goals and staying the course of progress determined success. Students’ individual goals, divided into sub-themes, included graduation, transferring to a four-year university, giving back to others, and attaining a job to earn money and achieve a superior lifestyle in the future.

Student success, as traditionally defined through persistence and degree attainment remains a national standard of quantitative measure of how students are performing. This national definition of success mirrored the definition of success for some students interviewed who were seeking a college degree by transferring to a four-year institution. However, this standard did not fulfill the definition of success for the majority of student participants. Success transcended beyond a degree for those seeking persona growth and development. For some students, this was a life advancement attained through employment and financial gain.

Students sought prosperity from college in the forms of job skills, training, certificate attainment, or degree attainment. Others strived to give back to others, financially, emotionally, physically, or through knowledge transfer. Student growth could be measured through a course, a program, social growth, certificate, or degree. There were also students who were seeking a four-year experience or degree in which a community college education served as a means to an end or a stepping stone that would not end with a degree or certificate. Participants had set paths with
unique goals and were striving for attainment of personal goals through growth and development. These students, not all of whom were seeking a degree, found personal student success in attaining these goals.

*What are community college student expectations facilitating success?*

Participants suggested that students expected value from college. Student expectations facilitating value included classroom environment through organization, management, quality, and communication. Students valued support from tangible resources and student services as well as relational support from faculty, staff, and advisors and social support from peers through social clubs and organizations. Flexibility was highly valued by students in attaining success with consideration of external challenges which would otherwise impede success.

As outlined from psychology contract theory, there is a set of expectations when parties enter an agreement. These expectations may be written or unwritten and exist on behalf of either or both parties in agreement. Students, when enrolling in community college, enter into an agreement with the institution and agents within this institution. When discussing expectations facilitating student success, students indicated that they did indeed have expectations of agreement of institutional agents in facilitating success. Thematically, expectations included: value, classroom environment, support, and flexibility.

Since students enroll in community college to attend courses and spend the majority of their time on campus in the classroom environment, it is not surprising that there were expectations around the classroom environment. Classroom environment was further organized into the following sub-themes: organization/management, quality, and communication. Students expected structure in the classroom through organization and management to foster student success in the course and beyond. Students suggested that quality, provided through varied
learning styles, lectures, and relevance of materials, were integral to value in the classroom environment and fostered both course success and overall student success. Communication was imperative to success, as articulated by students, who outlined the following areas of the classroom environment: assignments, classroom expectations, grades and performance, feedback, and general correspondence.

Students expressed the importance of support in terms of resources and relationships. Student support emphasized expectations in student support services; social supports; and institutional support from faculty, staff, and advisors. Previous research has indicated that student engagement and integration fosters student success and retention; student perceptions and expectations of success were consistent with this research (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Not all students expressed an explicit expectation to engage, however, many implicitly addressed connections, belonging, and engagement as vital to their success.

Flexibility, a central theme in expectations of student success as articulated by students, was expressed as something more than an expectation but rather a need. When discussing student expectations, students identified the reasons they enrolled in community college and discussed external challenges, responsibilities, and barriers to success. Flexibility often provided the only viable way for students to overcome challenges and attain success. Flexibility included understanding and forgiveness when circumstances did not permit students to complete college responsibilities due to extenuating circumstances.

*How do community college student perceptions of success and expectations facilitating success influence experience and overall student success?*

Unequivocally, students expressed that student perceptions of success and expectations of success influenced student experience and overall success. Students each provided explanations,
included in Chapter 4, of how success was fostered and facilitated based on perceptions, expectations, and experience. When solely asked if perceptions and expectations influenced success, students provided a resounding positive response. Many students noted ways in which perceptions, expectations, and experience may positively influence the trajectory of student success, while others acknowledged negative perceptions, expectations, and experience would likely impede student success.

As students navigated answering interview questions, each provided a landscape of success and expectations facilitating success. When asked how perceptions of success and expectations influenced success, the majority of students recalled times in which relational support allowed them to stay the course and overcome a challenging time or situation that otherwise would have led them to give up. Enthusiasm, encouragement, and positivity were recalled more frequently than when expectations were not met a. Student expectations were not always met, however, articulating an understanding from relational pillars of support was more pivotal to persistence and success that receiving what was expected.

**Findings**

The primary purpose of research study was to discover community college student perceptions of student success, beyond the traditional measures of persistence and degree attainment. The primary research question was: How do community college students perceive success? Additional questions were addressed to provide further understanding of student perceptions of success and expectations of psychology contract with institutional agents influencing success. This exploration of student success and expectations influencing success sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of the student experience and satisfaction in
seeking success, as defined by students. Open-ended interview questions made it possible to explore the following domains:

1) How community college students perceive success.

2) Student expectations, written and unwritten, of psychology contract with institutional agents.

3) How student perception and expectations facilitating success influence experience and overall student success.

Meaningful insight was provided through in-depth student interviews revealing thematic schemes guided by student responses. I reflected on the unique student demographics, gravity of external challenges faced by students, depth of student responses, and complexity of student success from the perspectives provided by study participants.

Through reflection of themes provided through meaningful expressive interviews, I was astounded by the psychology contract theory and retrospection of how higher education and students utilized aspects outlined by this theory with sparse literature acknowledging this theory in practice. The psychology contract theory, initially outlined with intended utilization in the business sector, provided a platform for reveling the magnitude of agreement between students and institution upon enrollment in community college. This study not only indicated that students enter into agreements or partnerships with institutions upon enrollment, but also articulated implicit and explicit expectations of the agreement.

Students interviewed provided meaningful insight into their unique perceptions of success, expectations, and experience; these responses and emphasis were not universally corresponding. What was universal through interview data, when identifying student expectations of agreement from institution, there were a definitive expectations students had of
their institution in facilitating student success. These aspects of student expectation varied in theme based on importance from value, classroom environment, support, and flexibility, however all student interviewed articulated expectations. Students not only outlined expectations, also giving examples of positive associations when these expectations were fulfilled, as well as outlining examples when these expectations were not met and led to negative associations.

The majority of students interviewed were fulfilled in many aspects of agreement with institution and expectations being met. Likewise, the majority of students had experienced lack of fulfillment of expectations or even breach of contract. When student expectations were met, positive associations were expressed and when student expectations were compensated due to lack of fulfillment of expectations negative associations were expressed. This is not surprising with regard to the theory of psychology contract which outlines fulfillment when parties of agreement have met expectations (Rousseau, 1995).

The final question in interview process was broader than other questions seeking a holistic student perspective of experience and success with consideration of the psychology contract theory. When reviewing data, relational themes of the psychology contract arose when reviewing the broader student perspective of experience. Each student interviewed outlined at least one example of a relationship which was vital in persisting toward attaining the goal in which they enrolled.

Relational aspects of the psychology contract between the students interviewed and the institution exposed the complexity in this agreement. While students all expressed negative associations, with examples of instances in which expectations were not fulfilled by institutions, since the agreement was formed, no student emphasized these negative associations when asked a broad interview question seeking overall experience and influence on success. Emphasis
remained relational value when students reflected on overall perspective of experience expressing the value of one relationship, and in some instances more than one relationship, in which student established rapport with institutional agent. This relationship with agent was vital enough to negate a negative association of lack of fulfillment of expectation which might otherwise breach contract and jeopardize students leaving institution. Students emphasized institutional relationships as their reasoning for persisting toward student goal of success.

In further analysis relational aspects of psychology contract vital to success, I sought to understand what determinants of these relationships articulated by students were vital enough to foster overall positive associations of experience, as well as overshadow negative associations when expectations were not met. Students often made reference to understanding. Where student expectations may not have been met in certain instances, the relationship with an institutional agent in which expectation was validated and understood was valuable enough in providing fulfillment.

Students went further to voice the value in being understood as a person, beyond a mere student or number in a classroom. Cultural capital and being understood with emphasis on positive attributes of students was emphasized throughout the interviews. Negative associations were articulated in circumstances where students felt looked down on based on who they were, where they came from, and what they looked like. Students valued bonds in which they were understood in spite of challenges rather than these challenges be highlighted as a negative attribute.

Race and culture could not be negated in the overall relation with student experience and building relationships vital to positive associations. Student demographics at this institution and rural area of study exposed that the majority of students interviewed were underrepresented
students of minority, many of which were first generation low income students. Students enrolled in programs highlighting the positive attributes of these students, as well as providing opportunity resounded positive influence in the trajectory of student success. Students held steadfast to these bonds built with one another through these programs, as well as with advisor or institutional agent through the program. These relationships did not always have the same race, gender, or even culture but did exude a genuine and sincere engagement beyond academic and social interactions.

Based on my observations and reflections of data, conclusions have been made that student contracts with institution and student expectations are both complex and vital to student perspective and success. There is importance to recognize the responsibility of practitioners to seek an awareness of individual students served and uncover the unique needs and expectations of these students, both implicit and explicit. Not only are students and the institution viable parties in the agreement upon community college enrollment, so too are other agents and practitioners employed by the college who will come into contact with students, directly and indirectly. Serving this unique student population comes with a host of responsibilities, and adequately meeting student needs and fulfilling job responsibilities may not always align. Therefore, practitioners must be intuitive and strive to understand students holistically, as well as individually.

I comprehended students’ expression of understanding to be of greatest importance in the agreement with the institution and agents as well as communication of this understanding. As students’ needs and expectations may not always be within the realm of possibility, the needs being met were not as predominant in interview reflections as the expression of understanding the needs and expectations. Students expressed a desire for a level of understanding from those
providing services and support at the institutional level, whether or not their need was fulfilled. Practitioners providing understanding and expressing genuine interest seemingly outweighed the need to have students’ expectations fulfilled.

**Implications for Practice**

Vital to student success, relational engagement with institutional agents with enough depth to support the psychology contract and institutional/student agreement through positive experiences in which expectations are fulfilled, as well as negative association in which expectations will not always be fulfilled. This requires institutional recognition of complexity of student agreement with institution with emphasis on relational aspects of student with institutional agents.

Specifying a student-centered institutional culture, in which the student as more than a passive consumer of education, is vital in fostering community college student success. While missions vary from one community college to another, so too will the culture fostering success. There is an urgency that institutions serving student populations become institutionally unified from student affairs to academic affairs. This student centered culture, inclusive of student understanding, is a necessity for community colleges serving a unique demographic of students with varying needs and expectations.

Focusing on faculty is crucial in the quest to provide meaningful student relationships with institution, due to the extensive amount of time spent with students on campus in the classroom. Faculty will be significant in providing the adequate understanding of students, beyond mere engagement. These relationships must foster the inclusiveness of cultural capital and community wealth in the classroom and foster positive attributes of students served, rather than the deficit portrayal of challenges faced by students. In doing this, students will form
relational bonds with one another and faculty which will shape positive associations with overall experience and influence on success.

Institutions should foster this cultural inclusion in the classroom by educating faculty through extensive professional development and training. This approach will allow institutions, through practitioners spending the most time with students on campus, to contextualize student demographics and the unique needs of students with focus on the complexity of the relationship with students served by professionals, which is vital to meeting the needs of students. There is a vast need to provide this enrichment and culture in the classrooms with existing faculty. Faculty is vital in providing quality relationships in the classroom and fostering positive associations and inclusion.

Institutionally, tremendous opportunity occurs in the hiring process to shape the future of fostering cultural capital and enrichment of relational aspects of agreement with the institution. The process of filtering applicants, to ensure future hires of student-oriented faculty and staff, by tailoring interviews to seek an understanding of the values and beliefs of those seeking employment is important. Those with qualified knowledge and skills, yet lacking knowledge of cultural capital and community wealth with passion and understanding of community college students may hinder student success. In screening for new applicants in serving community college students in any capacity, a point system with consideration of cultural awareness and capital may be worthy of including in a point system. While the mission of the community college may be taught, establishing a core value and belief system may be unrealistic. Understanding prospective faculty motivation before hiring them would be vital to the future culture of community college practices serving diverse students with unique needs in the classroom.
The importance of student affairs in the heightened culture of success cannot be negated, study implications suggesting student affairs professionals become trained in methodology to attain research and utilize findings (Dungy, 1999). Customer service training of staff, especially student development professionals, may be another pivotal component in facilitating the needs of students unique to community college. Consideration of students, beyond a deficit due to challenges, fostering a culture of enriched by student’s culture in obtaining success. Departmentally, exploration of engagement with student focus groups would provide meaningful feedback in how student perceive processes and engagement interdepartmentally. This would be advantageous on a regular basis with continual updates based on student suggestions and feedback.

Aligning outcomes with student perception is critical in fulfilling this culture of student-centered understanding of perceptions and expectations facilitating success. There is a demand for institutions to go beyond the traditional measures of persistence and degree attainment in outlining outcomes at the institutional level. This requires ongoing student feedback, deeper than multiple choice questionnaires. A recommendation, host focus groups throughout the year to gain meaningful feedback when identifying outcomes for upcoming year and reviewing outcomes of previous year. While traditional measures remain important, emphasis must be added to include an internal understanding of cultural capital, student diversity, and uniqueness. This necessitates a platform to not only educate those serving students institutionally, but also provide the requisite tools to better understand the unique needs of students to better serve each student beyond quantitative measures. This study recognizes that students enroll with expectations, however, developing an understanding of the student far exceeded the value of expectations being fulfilled. Studies regarding student mattering and marginality are not universal and vary based on race and
sex (Schieferecke, 2013), therefore, recognizing the uniqueness of each student is pivotal in serving this student population.

Professional development must include all institutional employees to ensure a continuum of services fostering a student-centered culture of success, with consideration of complexity of student interactions with institutional agents. This professional development would benefit incorporating cultural capital, community wealth, while managing implicit and explicit student expectations. Often institutions provide additional faculty professional development, enriching practitioners in the classroom. This remains vital, however, must delve deeper into theory and inclusivity of students without emphasizing the deficits of these students. Consideration too, community college students interact with a continuum of employees who influence their experiences, therefore, it is important to educate each employee who interacts with prospective students from college consideration through graduation, transfer, or other goal attainment.

As outlined by the psychology contract theory, students enter into an agreement with expectations, implicit and explicit. This theory, as a notion, cannot be negated and must follow a continuum. Serving college students requires a continuum of support to be effective (Shugart & Romano, 2008). Cohesive experiences would benefit students, and must be understood institutionally, aiding in the flow from inception to graduation or other goal attainment of how students navigate the process and departments of the institution. Institutions would benefit from identifying this continuum, articulating this continuum internally, portraying this to students, and following the landscape.

Additionally, it is necessary to internally critique institutional processes to decipher what students perceive and what realistically exists from inception to graduation or other goal attainment and interdepartmentally to provide consistent services from student affairs to
recruiting and marketing, orientation/student success course, classroom experience/faculty, and co-curricular support. This critique would be best served by an outside source and should incorporate evaluation of the continuum addressing the administrative side of admissions, financial aid, learning support, campus life, and inclusion. Beyond student affairs, academic affairs, and administrative continuums, there should be cohesion and collaboration between all continuums. If this system is not in place, processes must be initiated to work toward cohesion.

There is tremendous motivation for community colleges to encompass a customer satisfaction model which is student-centered. Student references to relational support strongly emphasized the value and expectations of the way students are treated in college. Institutional measures gauging current student satisfaction would be beneficial in providing a baseline to build upon in the customer service category. Institutional customer service training and professional development beyond traditional student service models would aid in providing practitioners the skill set necessary to provide a student/customer-centered experience.

Additionally, an outside resourcing company could come in to assess existing levels of customer service to provide a baseline to begin training. Interdepartmentally, processes have been implemented with the intention of providing services to students. However, institutional intention and student/customer perceptions do not always align, therefore, an objective evaluation would serve the customer service model in providing feedback and recommendations.

Institutional recommendations to provide ongoing support is necessary for professional development, growth, and training opportunities for community college employees. Through professional development, employees are given the knowledge and tools necessary to serve a unique demographic of students with varying needs. Institutional professional development is critical in cultivating a culture of student success and support. The need for follow-through of
practitioners cannot be negated. Practitioners spend the majority of direct contact time with students, and regular student interactions proved to be meaningful, both positive or negative.

The following recommendations address specific themes which surfaced in this study providing further recommendations to foster positive student experiences influencing student success. The classroom environment must provide realistic objectives, realistic representations of course expectations, and realistic outcomes for student enrolled. The majority of student expectations focused on those that may be addressed in the classroom environment. Caution must be executed by those marketing and recruiting on behalf of the institution and within the institution to provide realistic representations of what students may expect. Over selling the classroom environment or setting expectations for students which may not be attainable will negatively influence the student experience in the classroom environment. Setting realistic expectations and seeking to understand students and expectations within the classroom environment, as well as campus wide, is crucial. While classroom environments will vary by instructor, there must be a universal and realistic representation of classroom environments which is deliverable and further expounded upon in the initial classroom meeting by the instructor.

Institutions not only have an obligation to recognize the significance of providing adequate support to students, both resource support and relational support. Responsibility of taking inventory of current supports being offered at the department and institutional levels from students and outside auditors. This inventory of support should take into consideration the tangible resources offered to students, including facility maintenance, technology access, and student support services. Relational levels of support, equally valuable and expected participants, should be also be considered including social engagement support systems as well as
faculty/staff support. Recommendations for institutional practices include both tangible and relational support to meet these student expectations.

An additional recommendation for providing adequate support to meet the expectations and needs of students, practitioners should align programs and levels of support with one another to ensure fluidity. Frequently, administrators and practitioners become engulfed in day-to-day operations and become desensitized to student perceptions. What seems to institutionally work, may not relay as efficiency from student perception. To ensure a true representation of support, institutions should engage outside sources of evaluation with a preference for maintaining confidentiality.

Community colleges would benefit from a critical analysis of current policies, procedures, and deadlines at the institutional level to find ways to be more accommodating of the unique challenges faced by students. Study participants provided insight into the external challenge represented in their lives, many of which were the reasons they chose to attend community college. When inquiring about student challenges, experiences, and expectations, student responses revealed the need for flexibility to overcome challenge and facilitate success. Students expressed the willingness, importance, and necessity of institutions and practitioners extending flexibility both in and out of the classroom to facilitate student success. In addition, departmental oversight of course level instruction, policies, and procedures would be worth exploring for changes that may facilitate greater flexibility for students.

It is important for institutions to provide recurring continued education, through workshops and seminars, to existing practitioners on the unique challenges of community college students and alternative methods of accommodating student expectations. While deadlines are imperative, there is a pressing need to recognize that without flexibility, extenuating external
challenges and responsibilities, with consideration of cultural capital and community wealth may impede success.

**Future Research**

This study sought to understand student perceptions of success beyond traditional measures of persistence and degree attainment. This study was limited to part-time and full-time sophomore students enrolled, according to the university system, with the intent to graduate with a degree or certificate in a general studies or technical program with the North District of Rural Ridge Community College. Future research may benefit in obtaining perspectives from incoming freshmen through graduating sophomores revealing more disparity in student perspectives and student hours obtained.

This study began during the pre-stages of three community colleges merging. While the recent merger of Alabama Southern Community College (North District), Jefferson Davis Community College (East District), and Faulkner State Community College (South District) has combined multiple student demographics, this study sought to include only those from the rural setting of the North District. This study did not intend to seek differences between rural and urban community college student perceptions of success, expectations, and experiences. Rather, this study was intended to understand student perceptions and expectations facilitating student success as well as gain understanding of the influence on overall student experience and success.

This study was piloted in the North District of Rural Ridge Community College, a rural campus setting which exists among a complex system of merged colleges including one urban setting. My recommendation, that additional qualitative research be conducted to include other campus environments including urban colleges. While this study provided in-depth insight into student success, expectations, and experiences from the perspectives of students, the scope of
student perceptions understanding is miniscule in the grand scheme of community college student perceptions. An array of community college research could be conducted to consider all community college students: rural, urban, and suburban. These additional studies would add to holistic community college perceptions, expectations, and experience.

An additional recommendation for future research is to conduct further qualitative research studies seeking the perspectives of community college students who are no longer enrolled in community college and did not attain personal goals of success. This would provide valuable insight into student perceptions of success among student who did not attain the traditional measures of success, persistence and degree attainment. This qualitative insight would also portray a greater understanding of the barriers that impede student success. Understanding the perceptions, expectations, and experiences of students who did not persist may provide an additional layer of perspectives and insights invaluable to understanding student success beyond the traditional role.

Research would not only benefit from understanding the experiences of students currently enrolled and persisting, students no longer enrolled or persisting, but also to include the perceptions, expectations, and experiences of student success among practitioners at the institutional level. While student perceptions provide insights in fostering a culture of student success, the omission one major party, the institutional agents, in the agreement or partnership was lacking. Institutional agents in future research may include administrators, faculty, and staff of the institution. Inclusion of administration would provide a layer of policy and procedure from an aerial perspective, where faculty and staff would provide a ground level perspective of those in the trenches with students striving to attain success.
Additional purposeful sampling in future studies could include isolated student populations based on degree path, through separation of technical and general studies students. This may provide an additional insight into the varying perspectives of students, independent of enrollment status and degree program. Further qualitative research on student perceptions, expectations, and experiences of those enrolled part-time may provide a deeper understanding of those unable to enroll full-time. Further qualitative research on student perceptions, expectations, and experiences of those enrolled in technical programs would enhance the wealth of understanding of technical community college students and perceptions of success.

I, looking beyond the complexity of the thematic schemes revealed, there is a need for community college professionals to reflect on their capacity to serve students and manage student expectations, both implicit and explicit. Students provided personal perceptions and definitions of success, expectations facilitating success, and influences on student experience. While resounding themes were similar in obtaining answers related to research questions on student success, there was also a great deal of variance.

Students, demographics, external challenges, perceptions, and experiences will never be the same, as no single student served is the same. Community college students are different and have differing goals, definitions, and perceptions of success as well as expectations facilitating success. Student experiences are and will remain different from one student to the next. Dissimilarity of students is critical for community college practitioners to recognize, as there is no one-size-fits-all approach to applying theory, practice, policies, and procedures.

Community colleges must seek an understanding of students and the uniqueness of each, striving to serve and meet the needs of students individually rather than as a whole. Serving nearly half of the undergraduates in higher education in the United States at the community
college level, requires and understanding of individual students. Policy makers, higher education officials, administrators, and practitioners must seek alternatives to one-size-fits-all models and strive to accommodate the varying needs of students. Additionally, they must recognize the value of flexibility in meeting the needs of these students beyond quantitative measures of completion as the standard for success.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, community colleges serve a diverse group of students with unique needs. Understanding these student perceptions beyond the traditional measure of degree persistence and attainment is vital to facilitating student in attaining success. Students enroll with contexts facilitating and impeding success. Practitioners, administrators, policy makers strive to accommodate students in attaining success, however the additional perspective is vital is fulfilling the deficit of understanding students served. While research has extensively identified practices implemented fostering engagement and involvement, the student perception of these practices may not be enough to accommodate students. This study reveals students enroll in college, partnering with institution, with expectations which may be implicit and explicit. Understanding student expectations and influence on success is vital in adequately meeting the needs of students and fostering a culture of success. This culture may not be attainable by introducing theories individually, however better served in understanding and serving students holistically. Community colleges continue to improve practices facilitating students, vast growth remains in accommodating students served. This study reveals the tremendous complexity of agreement between students and institution and the impact of student expectations. The relational aspects of agreement were emphasized with significant importance of incorporating
cultural capital and community wealth in the classroom to further enrich, recognize, and accommodate community college students holistically in fostering student success.
REFERENCES


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U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), October 2006, Using research to improve student success: what more could be done?


APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. How did you decide to go to college?
3. What would you like to accomplish in college?
4. How do you define student success?
5. What are some challenges you have faced while striving to achieve your goal?
6. How have you overcome these challenges?
7. Tell me about your college experience.
8. Tell me about your relationships on campus with your institutional agents including administrators, faculty, staff, and advisors.
9. Does your success matter to others?
10. Does your experience align with what you expected it to be?
11. Do your relationships align with what you expected them to be?
12. How does college experience, expectations, and relationships influence success?
APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear [Name]:

We are conducting a study on the experiences of community college students currently enrolled at Rural Ridge Community College. We invite you to participate in our research study. Our research study seeks to better understand the student perception of success, expectations of success, and how these expectations influence success. Your participation in this study will involve a one time, one-hour interview and you are free to discontinue participation at any time.

The structure of this study is outlined in the attached onset form.

Your perspective of success is important to us. Please consider participating in our research study. If you are open to participating, please respond to this email.

Sincerely,

Brooke Head
Student Success Center
Rural Ridge Community College
APPENDIX C

SIGNED PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH STUDY

April 13, 2018

Office of Institutional Research and Student Development

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study at [redacted]. I am currently enrolled in the Higher Education and Administration Executive Doctoral Program at The University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, AL, and am in the process of writing my dissertation. The study is entitled: Community college student perception of success and expectations influencing success, beyond traditional definitions of persistence and degree attainment.

I hope that the school administration will allow me to recruit 25 students, 18 years of age and older, with diversity in gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, from the North district of [redacted] to participate in a one-hour interview. Interested students, who volunteer to participate, will be given a consent form to be signed and returned to the primary researcher at the beginning of the interview process. Student interviews will be kept confidential and participant identity will remain anonymous.

If approval is granted, student participants will complete the interview in a one on one setting in the student success center or other quiet setting on the school site. These interviews will take place during student’s academic scheduling breaks, which will vary to accommodate each student, and will not exceed one hour. The study will be analyzed and findings of this study will be documented. This dissertation project and individual results of this study will remain absolutely confidential and anonymous. Should this study be published, only pooled results will be documented. No costs will be incurred by either [redacted] or the individual participants.

Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. If you have questions or concerns, I would be happy to set up a call to discuss at your convenience. You may contact me at my email address: [redacted] or phone 334-637-3193.

[Signature]

[Redacted]
If you agree, please sign below and return this request to conduct research study which will serve as a letter of permission acknowledging your consent and permission for me to conduct this study at [redacted].

Sincerely,

Brooke Head, Primary Researcher
Student Success Center Specialist
Approved by:

_____ Melissa J. Haab ______

Melissa J. Haab, Ph.D. Signature Date
Dean of Enrollment Management
APPENDIX D

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

May 1, 2018

Brooke Head  
EPTS  
College of Education  
Box 870302  

Re: IRB # 18-OR-168, “Community college student perception of success and expectations influencing success beyond the traditional definitions of persistence and degree attainment”

Dear Ms. Head:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your application will expire on April 30, 2019. If your research will continue beyond this date, please complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, please complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, please complete the Request for Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent forms to obtain consent from your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Carpentier T. Myles, MSM, CCM, CIP  
Director & Research Compliance Officer  
Office for Research Compliance
THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION PROGRAM
THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Title of Research:  Community college student perception of success and expectations influencing success, beyond traditional definitions of persistence and degree attainment.

Investigator:  Brooke Head

IRB Approval #:  

*You must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this study.

You are being asked to be in a research study.

The name of this study is "Community college student perception of success and expectations influencing success, beyond traditional definitions of persistence and degree attainment.

The study is being conducted by Brooke Head. She is a student in the Executive Higher Education Administration program with the University of Alabama and employed by [Redacted].

What is the purpose of this study—what is it trying to learn?

This study seeks to understand the student perception of success, expectations of success, and how these expectations influence success. In particular, we are interested in how the student perception of success, expectations, and experiences influence success.

Why is this study important—what good will the results do?

Student success has become a national conversation of significance. Much of this conversation, however, focuses on the national definition of success which is graduation rates of full time first time college students. This study adopts the perspective of students beyond the traditional definitions with interest in how students perceive success, expectations of success, and how these expectations influence experience and success.

Why have I been asked to be in this study?

You have been asked to be in this study because you are currently enrolled at [Redacted]. We are seeking individuals currently enrolled with this institution.
How many other people will be in this study?
A total of 25 individuals who are currently enrolled at [redacted] will be asked to participate in this study.

What will I be asked to do in this study?
Participants will be asked to complete a one-on-one interview with the principal investigator. The interview will last approximately one hour and will be audiotaped. The interview will be conducted by phone or Skype when participant is not available for an in-person interview.

How much time will I spend being in this study?
Participants will complete a one-time interview that lasts approximately one hour.

Will being in this study cost us anything?
This study will not cost you anything other than one hour of your time.

What are the benefits of being in this study?
There are no direct benefits to be gained by participants in this study. Results from the study will be used to inform the development of community college higher education programs and understand the student perspective of success and expectations.

What are the risks, dangers, or harms to me if I participate in this study?
There are no risks involved in this study. Your identity will remain confidential, and you may decide to discontinue your participation at any time.

How will my privacy be protected?
We will not tell anyone you are in this study. You do not have to answer any questions or give us any information that you do not want to.

How will my confidentiality be protected?
Names will be known only to the principal investigator. The names will not be used as identifiers in the research to ensure confidentiality of the participants and the institution. No information will be released that identifies you by name. Information from consent forms and interviews will be kept in a locked filing cabinets at all times with access only to the principal investigator. Electronic data will be maintained on a password protected computer, principal investigator access only. The audiotapes of the interview will be destroyed when the study is completed.

What are my rights as a participant in this study?
Taking part in this study is voluntary. It is your free choice. You can refuse to be in this study. If you start the study, you can stop at any time. There will be no effect on your relations with [redacted] or The University of Alabama.
What if we have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints?

If you have questions about the study now, please ask them. If you have questions or concerns later, you can reach Mrs. Head at 334-637-3193. You may also contact The University of Alabama faculty advisor of this study, Dr. Karri Holley at kaholley@ua.edu or 205-348-7825. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant you may contact Ms. Tanta Myles, The University of Alabama Research Compliance Officer at 205-348-8461 or toll free at 1-877-820-3066. You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach website at http://ovpred.ua.edu/research-compliance/prco/participantoutreach@ua.edu.

What else do we need to know?

You do not give up any legal rights when you sign this form.

You will be provided a copy of consent form for your records. Save this form in the event you choose to later review or contact investigator or university about study.

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board (IRB) is the committee that protects the right so people in research studies. The IRB may review study records from time to time to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and the study is being carried out as planned.

I have read this consent form and I have had a chance to ask questions. Our questions have been answered. I understand what I will be asked to do. I voluntarily agree to take part in the study.

Do you agree to have interview audio recorded?

Please check one. Yes [ ] or No [ ]

__________________________________________  Date
Signature of Research Participant

__________________________________________  Date
Signature of Investigator

[Stamp: UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 5/1/18
EXPIRATION DATE: 4/30/19]
APPENDIX E

SIGNED ASSURANCE FORM

AHRPP DOCUMENT # 66
THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA
HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION PROGRAM
FORM: SIGNATURE ASSURANCE SHEET

Directions: The Principal Investigator (PI) and one other person (Dean, Associate Dean, Chair, Supervising Professor, or departmental designee must sign and submit before application can be reviewed by IRB.

Principal Investigator’s Assurance Statement (Student Investigators may sign as PI):

I understand the University of Alabama’s policies concerning research involving human subjects and I agree:

1. To comply with all IRB policies, decisions, conditions, and requirements;
2. To accept responsibility for the scientific and ethical conduct of this research study;
3. To obtain prior approval from the Institutional Review Board before amending or altering the research protocol or implementing changes in the approved consent/assent form;
4. To report to the IRB in accord with federal, sponsor, university, and IRB policies, any adverse event(s) and/or unanticipated problem(s) involving risks to subjects;
5. To complete continuation, modification, and closure forms on time and to collaborate with IRB monitoring of studies for quality improvement or cause;
6. To notify the Office of Sponsored Programs (OSP) and/or the IRB (when applicable) of the development of any financial interest not already disclosed;
7. To ensure that individuals listed as study personnel have received the mandatory human research protections education;
8. To ensure that individuals listed as study personnel possess the necessary experience for conducting research activities in the role described for this research study.

My signature below attests that I have appropriate facilities and resources for conducting the study.

PI SIGNATURE ___________________________ DATE 4/17/18

NAME TYPED ___________________________

STUDY TITLE: Community College student perception of success and expectations

ALL STUDENT RESEARCH: Supervising Professor’s Assurance Statement:

I certify that I have reviewed this research protocol. I attest to the scientific merit of this study; to the competency of the investigator(s) to conduct the project; that facilities, equipment, and personnel are adequate to conduct the research; that continued guidance will be provided as appropriate, and the study will be closed before student graduation.

SIGNATURE ___________________________ DATE 4/28/18

NAME TYPED ___________________________

*Department Chairperson/Department Designee’s Assurance Statement:

I certify that I have reviewed this research protocol. I attest to the scientific validity and importance of this study; to the competency of the investigator(s) to conduct the project; that facilities, equipment, and personnel are adequate to conduct the research; and that continued guidance will be provided as appropriate. When the principal investigator assumes a sponsor function, the investigator is knowledgeable of the additional regulatory requirements of the sponsor and can comply with them.

SIGNATURE ___________________________ DATE ___________________________

NAME TYPED ___________________________ TITLE ___________________________

*If the PI is also the department chair, dean, associate dean for research, or equivalent, another research-qualified person should sign the Signature Assurance Sheet.
APPENDIX F

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that:

Brooke Head

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Human Research (Curriculum Group)
Non-Medical Investigators (Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course (Stage)

Under requirements set by:

University of Alabama

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?v5cd6ff09-efd3-4069-aaddb-2d46c10273c1-2.2772295
APPENDIX G

PSYCHOLOGY CONTRACT THEORY: A MODEL OF STUDENT SUCCESS

Findings

The student perspective of aspects most influential on success are relationships with institutional agents. Positive relational experience and fulfillment overshadowed negative associations in which transactional resources were not fulfilled. These relational aspects were most impactful on overall student experience and success.
## APPENDIX H

### DEMOGRAPHICS CHART

**Demographics Chart**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants Pseudonym</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Year in School</th>
<th>Age/Traditional/Non Traditional</th>
<th>Nationality/sex</th>
<th>Enrollment Status</th>
<th>Graduate/Transfer</th>
<th>First Generation/Low Income (FGLI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>General Studies</td>
<td>1st year Sophomore</td>
<td>19/Traditional</td>
<td>African American/Male</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Graduate &amp; Transfer</td>
<td>FGLI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>General Studies</td>
<td>2nd year Sophomore</td>
<td>20/Traditional</td>
<td>African American/Male</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>FGLI</td>
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<td>Donnie</td>
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<td>1st year Sophomore</td>
<td>19/Traditional</td>
<td>Caucasian Male</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Transfer</td>
<td>FGLI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alecia</td>
<td>General Studies</td>
<td>First year Sophomore</td>
<td>18/Traditional</td>
<td>African American/Female</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>FGLI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Technical Degree</td>
<td>2nd year Sophomore</td>
<td>20/Traditional</td>
<td>African American/Male</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>FGLI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>Technical Degree</td>
<td>2nd year Sophomore</td>
<td>42/Non-Traditional</td>
<td>Caucasian/Female</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>FGLI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Major</td>
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<td>Age/Traditional/Non Traditional</td>
<td>Nationality/sex</td>
<td>Enrollment Status</td>
<td>Graduate/Transfer</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>19/Traditional</td>
<td>African American Male</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Graduate, undecided transfer</td>
<td>FGLI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Technical Degree</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>22/Non Traditional</td>
<td>Hispanic/Female</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>FGLI</td>
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<tr>
<td>Colby</td>
<td>General Studies</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>18/Traditional</td>
<td>Caucasian/Female</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Graduate &amp; Transfer</td>
<td>FGLI</td>
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<tr>
<td>Noah</td>
<td>General Studies</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>21/Traditional</td>
<td>NA Indian/Male</td>
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<td>Transfer</td>
<td>FG</td>
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<td>20/Non Traditional</td>
<td>Hispanic/Female</td>
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<td>19/Traditional</td>
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<td>19/Traditional</td>
<td>African American/Female</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Graduate &amp; Transfer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
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<td>2nd year</td>
<td>38/Non Traditional</td>
<td>African American/Female</td>
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<td>Graduate</td>
<td>FGLI</td>
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<td>Corey</td>
<td>General Studies</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>21/Traditional</td>
<td>African American/Male</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Transfer</td>
<td>FGLI</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nolan</td>
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<td>African American/Male</td>
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<td>Graduate</td>
<td>FGLI</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jeffrey</td>
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<td>2nd year</td>
<td>20/Traditional</td>
<td>African American/Male</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>FGLI</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participants Pseudonym</td>
<td>Major</td>
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<td>Age/Traditional/Non Traditional</td>
<td>Nationality/sex</td>
<td>Enrollment Status</td>
<td>Graduate/Transfer</td>
<td>First Generation/Low Income (FGLI)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Terry</td>
<td>General Studies</td>
<td>2nd year Sophomore</td>
<td>21/Non Traditional</td>
<td>African American/Male</td>
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<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Transfer</td>
<td>FGLI</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This chart provides a visual reference of student participants. Column 1 provides a pseudonym for participants to conceal the identity and confidentiality of each student of this study. Column 2 identifies student majors by program of study, general studies or technical. Column 3 categorizes students by Freshman or Sophomore based on hours completed. Students completing 30 hours or more become classified as Sophomore. All students of this study completed 30 hours; therefore, they were further specified by which year Sophomore. Column 4 outlines not only student age, but also traditional or non-traditional status. Traditional students enrolling immediately following high school as a full time student, non-traditional enrolling after a break from high school, often with external challenges inhibiting full time status. Column 5 specifies student nationality and sex. Column 6 outlines student enrollment status, full time with at least 12 semester hours or part time. Column 7 specifies traditional role of success with intent to graduate and/or transfer. Students enrolled at Rural Ridge Community College were identified with intent to graduate or transfer upon admissions. Column 9 classifies students as first generation college students, those who did not grow up in a household with parent or guardian who obtained a four-year degree. Low income status was based on a low income bracket, sliding scale based on geographic location, determining student income providing insight into depth of financial barriers.