STUDENT VARIABLES CONTRIBUTING TO PROGRAM COMPLETION IN CAREER SCHOOL SECTOR FOR-PROFIT SCHOOLS

Timothy Allen Eatman, B.A., M.A.

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APPROVED:

Patsy Fulton-Calkins, Major Professor
Ronald W. Newsom, Committee Member
Hooshiyar Ahmadi, Committee Member
Janice Holden, Chair of the Department of Counseling and Higher Education
Kathleen Whitson, Program Coordinator
Jerry R. Thomas, Dean of the College of Education
Sandra L. Terrell, Dean of the Robert B. Toulouse School of Graduate Studies
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The general purpose of the study was to compile current descriptive information for recent graduates from career school sector institutions that reveals the significant factors which contributed to their program completion. The research project focused upon career school program completers. The scope of the study was directed to recent program completers at two career schools in Texas which offer a cross-section of programs designed to provide students specific skills for immediate employment.

Based upon an extensive review of literature and the input of a focus group of experienced career school administrators and faculty members, seven variables were determined to be worthy of a focused study of their possible contributions to career school program completion. The variables were ability to accept responsibility for completion, academic preparedness, family or friends support system, self-esteem, life skills preparedness, sense of being goal-oriented, and sense of connectedness to the school.

It was determined that each of the seven variables existed prominently in the majority of these recent graduates. The researcher concludes that there is a tremendous need for continued study that is focused on career school sector students. The paper offers the suggestion of a specific retention program that can be employed by career school administrators to emphasize the 7 variables and implement specific interventions designed to increase student retention and program completion.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Recent figures released by the U.S. Department of Education indicate that an increasing percentage of students in the United States who are in higher education are attending non-traditional or for-profit colleges (Berg, 2005). One of the largest universities in the world, The University of Phoenix, is a for-profit university with a 30% annual growth rate (Berg, 2005). In the foreword to his book Higher Ed, Inc. The Rise of the For-profit University, author Richard S. Ruch states “Currently there are more profit-making, proprietary, postsecondary schools and colleges in the United States than there are non-profit institutions” (Ruch, 2001). Although about one fourth of the students in higher education are attending career schools and other for-profit institutions, the majority of the research that is focused upon the characteristics and profile of the American college student has been conducted on “traditional” college campuses (Breneman, Pusser, Turner, 2006).

Over the last two decades four developments have contributed to the emergence of for-profit institutions as a prominent segment of higher education in the United States:

1. Adult education itself has expanded. More than half of U.S. college enrollees today are over 25 years of age and that percentage is even greater among for-profits (58%).

2. Our contemporary workforce has placed an increasing emphasis on training and continuing education at all levels. Entry-level positions now, more than ever, require certifications or diplomas based on acquired skill levels. Additionally, career development has become a common phrase in corporate America.

3. Electronic technology has provided students an increased opportunity to receive distant education as institutions are able to deliver instruction across the United States and abroad.

4. Higher education has been forced to re-examine increasing costs and modes of operation in a society that is increasingly focused on bottom line results (Ruch, 2001).

The Commission on Higher Education reported in 2006 that “a growing number of adult
learners …want to improve their career prospects by acquiring the new skills employers are demanding. They care – as we do- about results” (Parker & O’Donnell, 2006). The Commission further states, “We want postsecondary institutions to adapt to a world altered by technology, changing demographics and globalization, in which the higher-education landscape includes new providers and new paradigms, from for-profit universities to distance learning”(Parker & O’Donnell, 2006).

Even though for-profit schools have historically played a role in the educational development of the trade segment of our society, it was only after World War II that these institutions began to be viewed by traditional colleges as competition (Outcalt & Schirmer, 2003.) “There’s no disputing that for-profit institutions have changed the face of the way education is provided and they continue to exert a significant influence at the graduate level” (Berg, 2005). The contribution for-profit schools make to our society is not the focus of this research project. It is, however, relevant to this preliminary discussion to establish that for-profit schools have always played and continue to play an increasingly significant role in providing certain skilled workers for our country’s workforce. Specifically, for-profit schools that fall into the category of the career school sector provide the workforce trained workers in such areas as nursing, medical and dental assisting, criminal justice, accounting, business administration, finance, massage, culinary arts, management, human resources, public administration, health care management, information technology, truck driving, electronics, dental hygiene, and cosmetology (Kamanetz, 2005). As an industry, higher education cannot afford to ignore such a significant portion of the post secondary student population. A better knowledge of the student’s characteristics, motivations, and potential obstacles to completion is highly sought-after information for nontraditional school administrators. Such understanding aids
the administration’s efforts in multiple areas including the recruitment of the right kind of student, the process of designing curriculum and programs that meet both the student’s career needs and that of the workforce, and ultimately keeping the student focused throughout the program resulting in both the student’s and the institution’s ultimate goal – program completion (Ruch, 2001).

Statement of the Problem

Without a clear understanding of the factors that contribute to the student’s program completion, most career school sector institutions have been forced to be reactive to student attrition. There is a definite need for research information concerning successful students. Such information can enable administrators and faculty members to be focused proactively on increasing student retention.

This study seeks to answer the research question: What do the successful students themselves believe are the major variables that contribute to program completion in career sector for-profit schools?

Purpose of the Study

For the career school sector to continue to make a contribution to the workforce, it is essential that these educators have the tools necessary to assure their student stakeholders that they are being provided the real skills they need for the real world – as one prominent diploma-granting for-profit school in the United States markets itself (Remington College, 2008). With the exception of the segment of the for-profit population enrolled in graduate studies, the primary reason students choose shorter programs in non-traditional schools is to secure a skill that will
translate quickly into employment. For these students, program completion becomes almost mandatory.

Without the certificate or diploma, whatever skill that is developed in the portion of the program completed will have minimal impact when the student seeks to enter the workforce (Bailey, Badway, & Gumport, 2007). Equally important to career school sector administrators is state government compliance. In order to be in compliance with many state regulatory bodies, the schools often must meet specifically required minimum percentages in program completion and career placement. Program completion, therefore, becomes the primary focus of most career school sector administrators. “For–profit students want to get in, get out, and get a job and they are not particularly interested in the collegiate experience” (Berg, 2005). These schools traditionally have very few if any outside activities, and they are almost exclusively commuter or on-line schools. The focus of this research project is to provide these career school sector administrators a better understanding of the defining characteristics of those students most likely to complete their programs.

Because of the differences in career objectives and educational objectives between traditional students and for-profit students, there is overwhelming justification for research focused specifically upon the students of for-profit institutions. There are also major differences between career school sector students and those students at large for-profit schools such as those that make up “the big four” -- University of Phoenix, DeVry, ITT Educational Services, and Strayer. Stereotypically, these institutions have a wider-based curriculum and often attract a much different student than those in the career school sector (Breneman, Pusser, Turner, 2006). These “big four schools” offer bachelors, masters, and sometimes doctoral degrees and their students are in many ways quite different from the stereotypical career school sector student. In
many cases, the career school student has not had high school academic success that would provide the opportunity to acquire traditional college admittance. These students are typically seeking a short program diploma or certificate that will translate into the attainment of a specific skill and immediate employment. The “big four” student is more likely to already have some degree of professional success and often sees the for-profit route more convenient and accommodating toward the accomplishment of a higher degree or credential than the path offered at traditional colleges (Breneman, Pusser, Turner, 2006). This research project specifically focuses on the career school sector and their student population.

Not every American adult is adequately equipped academically, financially, or socially to attend the traditional American college. Each year, more than half of our country’s graduating seniors either never bother to try or fail to qualify for admission to traditional higher educational institutions. In the year 2008, more than ever before, these recent graduates join an older segment of the population who are realizing that they need more than a high school education in order to function at an economic level above poverty in our society. They both need and desire definable skills to obtain realistic employment quickly. The proprietary career school sector institutions exist with the general mission statement to provide these students an opportunity to acquire specific skills which will assist them in the attainment of employment that will allow them to make a living without having to spend four or more years getting a traditional college degree (National Education Writers Association Survey, 2007).

The stereotypical traditional college is visible throughout the world. These schools historically offer degrees ranging from the associates degree, the bachelor’s degree, the master’s degree and various doctoral degrees. Their programs vary from a required minimum of 72 hours to extended programs requiring multiple years to complete. Operating at both the private and
public level, these traditional institutions receive funding from multiple sources including federal, state, and local funding, alumni contributions, and endowments from private industry. These contributions exist in a variety of percentages and ratios along with the individual student’s contribution. These colleges often offer a variety of living arrangements, student activities, and campus facilities ranging from student/instructor interactive “ground” classes to online instruction. These institutions traditionally play an important role in the community and extracurricular activities such as athletics and the arts often provide visibility and life-sustaining marketing exposure for the institution (Kelly, 2007).

By contrast, the nontraditional institution is usually a much shorter program designed to accommodate the adult learner who often has part-time or fulltime employment, a family, and the desire for a specific skill which can translate into immediate employment or a credential that will enhance career development (Ruch, 2001). It should be noted here that these characteristics are becoming increasingly more prevalent among all students in higher education. These “nontraditional for-profit institutions” are typically private, and in most cases their existence depends primarily upon student-paid tuition (Berg, 2005). The nontraditional institution exists because there is a demand for it. Since by definition, the nontraditional school’s population consists of nontraditional students, a better understanding of the internal make-up of these students provides proprietary schools and career schools more tools to establish and maintain their programs.

The additional consideration for career school sector administration is compliance. State offices monitor the school’s performance regularly and when schools fail to meet minimum standards they are not only reprimanded but eventually could be forced to close their doors. Program completion is more than just “desirable” for proprietary schools. It has now become integral to their existence (Breneman, Pusser, Turner, 2006).
An example of a state government’s requirements for career schools and colleges of technology in the area of program completion is provided here. Section b of Provision 807.131 of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board code states: “To maintain program approval, the school shall demonstrate the following: (1) a reasonable student completion rate for each program; and (2) a minimum employment rate for graduates in jobs related to the stated occupation” (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2008).

To summarize the purpose of this study: (1) There are major differences in both the institutions and the students in traditional and non-traditional higher education. (2) Previous research has focused primarily upon the traditional higher educational experience and there is a need for more research that specifically targets the students in career school sector for-profit institutions. (3) For careers schools to continue to make their contribution to society, they must know more about their students and, therefore, be able to better assist their students to program completion. For these reasons, the purpose of this study is to centralize the theme of discovering the important factors that contribute to non-traditional student program completion in the career school sector. Specifically, the question is asked, “What do the students themselves perceive to be the contributing factors to the completion of his or her non-traditional educational program?”

Research Objectives

The intent of this dissertation is to provide non-traditional career school administrators and educators a better understanding of the intangible qualities or circumstances that the students themselves believe are most contributory to their program completion. A survey will be given to students who have completed their program. The results of the survey will be tabulated and distributed to the administrators and faculty for their knowledge of the qualities. Knowing what
these qualities are will enable administrators and faculty to provide a learning environment that nourishes the supportive characteristics. Additionally, a better understanding of the student’s qualities and needs will also provide administrative leaders and classroom instructors an objective view of activities or programs that might inhibit program completion and, conversely, activities and programs that will increase student retention.

While there may be many factors which contribute to program completion, certainly it is not the intent of this study that a formula will be discovered whereby implementation would assure that every student would complete his or her program. What is being sought is an indication of the specific variables which best describe the successful student.

Significance of the Study

Student retention has always been the initial goal for the career school sector administrators because retention and persistence are believed to result in the ultimate goal of program completion. (It should be noted here that many career schools do not stop here but have a higher goal of assisting the students in career placement). For-profit institutions rely on their student population base to remain as high as possible in order to meet expenditures and maintain their existence. Additionally, some regulatory agencies and accrediting commissions mandate minimum standards of both retention and completion (and sometimes career placement). Positive enrollment is determined by the recruitment of new students exceeding the number of students who graduate or drop out before completion of their program (Brenneman, Pusser, Turner, 2006). Because the life of the institution is directly related to the student population base, these schools historically spend considerable effort in finding ways to encourage students to complete their academic programs. Avoiding student attrition has evolved into a major daily consideration
for administrators of most of these schools. There is a dire need for more information about the ever-changing student that will enable the schools to be proactive about retention rather than having to be reactive to attrition. In order to facilitate an organized proactive effort to achieve these retention goals, administrators require as much knowledge as possible about the nontraditional student population. There is a dearth of student-based research that is focused specifically upon the nontraditional student. Most of the research related to student retention has been conducted by researchers at traditional institutions. In order for most nontraditional schools to survive and be competitive for the higher educational dollar, they must do a better job of identifying all the things that contribute to either retention or attrition. This research project is focused solely on career school sector students. Who are they? Why do some students persist while others drop out? Are there measurable variables that program completers possess that don’t exist to the same degree for drop-outs? What are the measures that the institutions can take to encourage program completion? It is questions such as these that most career school administrators ask incessantly. Due to a lack of quality research findings, most of these institutions have had to rely on speculation and “hit or miss” programs to obtain their daily retention goals. The emphasis of this research project is to provide inductive data concerning the attributes of those students who persist through their programs and remain active students until graduation (completion). A better understanding of the students themselves will enable the institutions to proactively recruit the student most likely to persist and provide the active student with the tools that contribute to program completion.

When nontraditional students fail to complete their program, there are three distinct groups who suffer – the student, the institution, and the workforce. All three are interdependent
and have an investment in the student’s commitment that pays dividends upon completion. When
the student drops out before graduating, each group suffers its own distinctive loss (Ruch, 2001).

Students who fail to finish their educational program suffer a loss of time, money, and in
many cases, self esteem. While there is some merit to the argument that the student will receive
some degree of benefit from the experience, it pales in comparison to the “mountaintop
experience” that graduates often describe. A long journey down a road that does not lead to the
intended destination may get one closer to the ultimate destination, but there is usually a
significant loss of time. Without the certification or diploma, employers are less likely to hire the
applicant. Almost all nontraditional students depend upon student loans or grants in order to be
able to participate in their program. These come from federal, state, and local governments,
commercial and nonprofit institutions, and from the private sector. With the exception of grants,
these loans must be repaid even if the student does not complete the program. Drop outs may
suddenly find themselves thousands of dollars in debt, yet without the skills required in order to
become employable and attain their career goals (Ruch, 2001).

Perhaps the most significant loss endured by the nontraditional student dropout is the loss
of self esteem. The excitement and anticipation often associated with the beginning of the
educational journey may end suddenly with disappointment and frustration when the student
finds himself or herself back where they were when they began the program – without the
employment and without the skill. Only now they are also older and usually more in debt
(Turner, 2006). Researchers say it is only speculation, but it is quite likely that a significant
percentage of our society consists of such students who failed to reach their educational goals
and lived the remainder of their lives possibly feeling like a “failure” to society (Turner, 2006).
For all of these reasons, there is a significant problem for the student who fails to complete his or
her program.

The institutions themselves suffer both short term and long term financial loss when students do not finish their programs. Textbooks, facilities, and instructors are just some of the areas in which “upfront commitments” are made by the for-profit schools. When students do not stay in school, the institutions suffer varying degrees of immediate financial loss from such investments. The long term loss suffered from the lack of positive marketing and possibly the presence of negative marketing has often been the downfall of many proprietary institutions. Equally important, state workforce agencies often require the institution to maintain a predetermined graduation or career placement percentage in order to keep their doors open. For all of these reasons, career schools spend a considerable amount of effort trying to keep their students in school all the way through program completion (Berg, 2005).

Many argue that the ultimate stakeholder in all of higher education is society itself. Without an educated workforce we as a country will find ourselves trailing other countries in an ongoing battle for economic supremacy or survival (Ruch, 2001). When the nontraditional student leaves his or her program prior to completion, there is one less individual available to the workforce to fulfill a needed job opening that requires a specific skill.

Since the early days of organized higher education, retention of students has been a popular topic of discussion. However, much of the literature focuses on factors that involve attrition. This research project asks the question, what do the students themselves believe were the factors that contributed to their program completion? The basic purpose of this study is to provide a starting point to assist today’s career school sector administrators and faculty with information about why students finish.
Definition of Terms

Ability to accept responsibility for program completion: The degree to which the student assigns internal or external responsibility for finishing his or her program.

Academic preparedness: The degree of achievement of practical knowledge and scholarly ability obtained by the student prior to entering the institution.

Career sector schools: For-profit schools which offer specific programs designed to provide students attainment of a specific skill which, ideally, upon program completion will enable the student to find employment in the student’s chosen career sector.

Characteristics of students in for-profit institutions: These students stereotypically are seeking a skill that will translate into employment and have shorter program goals. Compared with traditional students, these students usually have less academic preparedness, they are more likely to have a family, they are more likely to have full or part-time employment, and are more likely to belong to an ethnic minority.

Connectedness: The degree of interaction between the student and the institution outside of the structured classroom experience. Connectivity can be expressed in many ways including participation in student organizations, relationships with peers, relationships with faculty or administrative advisors, etc.

Family or friend support system: Those persons closest to the student who positively contribute to the student’s attendance and persistence.

For-profit schools: Private higher education schools and colleges which operate independently from state or other tax-payer based support and maintain their existence primarily through the collection of student tuition.
Life skills or maturity: The degree to which the student’s personal experiences have prepared them for all the interaction and decision-making necessary to meet the daily requirements of attendance, participation, and program completion.

Program completion: The student’s attainment of a degree, diploma, or certificate indicating the fulfillment of all of the institution’s academic and financial requirements.

Assumptions

My primary assumption is that the information generated by the survey instrument will relate specifically to the focus of the study by providing data that will provide a better understanding of the factors contributing to program completion among students in career school sector for-profit institutions. It is further assumed that analysis of the data from these self-reported factors may contribute to improved completion rates in the future. It is a further assumption that both retention and persistence are not the focus of this study but are contributory to the ultimate goal of studying program completion.

Limitations of the Study

This study includes two career schools in the state of Texas – Remington College Dallas Campus and Remington College North Houston Campus. Although these Remington Colleges offer a wide variety of programs including criminal justice, business administration, computer networking technology, culinary arts, electronics, cosmetology, pharmacy technician services, medical assisting, and medical insurance coding, there are many more career specialties that are offered in other career school sector institutions throughout the United States and abroad. A random sample will not be achieved since the usable data will include all returned surveys from
two specific groups: those students choosing to participate in graduation ceremonies and those students willing to take the time to complete the survey on their own and return it to the institution.

Delimitations

The following delimitations apply to this study:

1. The research is limited to two career schools in Texas. The schools were not selected randomly.

2. The student participants will be limited to those students choosing to participate in graduation ceremonies or those willing to complete a survey on their own and return it to the institution.

3. The students will be given a survey designed to measure feelings, attitudes, perception, and opinions.

4. The survey instrument is based upon an extensive review of available literature, personal experience, intuition, pre-survey testing, and input from a select group of higher education educators.

Summary

In summary, what we already know about the for-profit student population in general provides a starting point for this research. Continued growth in the proprietary school education industry indicates that these schools offer a choice that is being increasingly selected by a significant number of adult learners in our society. For a wide variety of reasons, these adults are turning to career schools, technical schools, and other for-profit institutions to provide them the basic skills needed that will allow them to enter the workforce and receive an income that is above poverty level and at least approaches middle class standards. For career schools to be able to sustain the programs that satisfy the workforce’s needs and at the same time remain in compliance with government regulations, they must attract and maintain a student population
base that has the tools needed to complete their programs and ultimately obtain employment in their field of study. This paper seeks to identify these tools. Knowing what the program completers themselves consider to be the factors that contributed to their completion will assist career school sector institutions in their ongoing task to proactively design facilities, programs, and instruction that encourage program completion.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this literature review is to provide an overall understanding of what higher education research has been able to learn about student program completion and how it specifically relates to the students of career school sector for-profit schools. Historically, science has provided us documented proof that environment plays a significant role in any study of behavior. Just as research focused on the behavior of the Bengal tiger would produce totally different results if conducted in a zoo rather than the natural habitat of the jungle, environment is an equally important variable in a study of postsecondary student behavior. As higher education has historically defined itself with traditional institutional standards, the literature review revealed that most of the available research literature is based upon the traditional stereotypical college and the traditional college student. The importance of this research project is to a large degree based upon this significant fact: most of the information we have about postsecondary student retention and attrition is based on research conducted in the traditional college environment (Brenneman, Pusser, & Turner, 2006).

As previously discussed in this paper’s introduction, in the formulation stage of the research project, a list of 27 possible contributory factors was comprised by a selected group of career school sector higher education administrators and faculty members. This team narrowed the factors down to seven variables that through their experience appeared to have the greatest impact on program completion among career school sector students. The literature review examined each of the original 27 variables. Although there were other studies that demonstrated the existence of all of the variables, the committee’s chosen 7 variables were proven to be
noteworthy of both future examination in the literature review and inclusion in the research instrument.

Because of the expanse of existing literature on retention that directly or indirectly provides insight for this particular journey to uncover “completion variables” among career school students, I provide a starting point based upon specific literature relating to the seven variables established by the 37 member preliminary research team’s speculative contribution. Literature relating to each variable is examined. There is a twofold purpose for this literature review approach. First, it is to provide the reader an overview of how prior researchers have viewed the relevance of the variable, thereby adding a degree of clarity to the perceived importance of the variable’s inclusion in the research instrument. Secondly, the literature review has proven to be vitally important to the creation of the research instrument itself.

Because higher education is in a constant state of evolution, all research on the subject of collegiate life and college students will be “dated” and subject to reevaluation when examined at a later time. For this reason, it should be noted that this literature review is intended to provide some general concepts about retention and attrition among postsecondary students. As for-profit institutions begin to play a more significant role in higher education, many predict that the differences between traditional and non-traditional institutions will eventually become less definitive. It is not likely that the differences will disappear completely, but there is reason to speculate that both types of institutions will borrow from each other those concepts that allow our society’s higher educational system to evolve most productively. At this point in the evolution, however, there needs to be a better understanding of the career school student if this sector of for-profit institutions is to continue to successfully provide a much needed service to a significant segment of our society.
As is often the case in literature research, there emerged in this project a particular study which seemed to have relevant information for almost every individual topic of discussion. Despite the publication date of 1987, Vincent Tinto’s Leaving College – Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition asked the right questions which provided higher education a significant starting point for thousands of research projects to follow. According to Tinto:

most observers of student departure have tended to concentrate upon the behavior of those persons who start their college careers in recognized degree programs. Since part-time or non degree program students are sometimes less likely than other students to complete degree programs, past research has somewhat underestimated the total scope of student departure within the higher education enterprise and, at the same time, has understated the range of pathways individual students employ to earn their college degrees and the length of time they take to eventually do so. Be that as it may, we will have to make do with such partial descriptions. Until more accurate data are available on the entire range of student movements, we will have to make our estimates of aggregate rates of student departure as precisely that: estimates, which may in some situations misrepresent the scope and patterning of student participation in higher education (Tinto, 1987, p.10).

To effectively examine the possible reasons students complete their academic journey requires the researcher to generalize concepts which may play a significant role in the individual’s behavior. In focusing on the individual, there is a potential danger in stereotyping or generalizing an individual’s behavior as “typical.” It is with this knowledge that this research project proceeds cautiously to avoid any misinterpretations concerning the project’s intent. This literature review was an attempt to analyze existing research in specific areas which pre-project analyses established as a working theory, built on the carefully selected variables deemed as those most likely to contribute to program completion specifically among career school students.

In 1969, Kenneth Feldman and Theodore Newcomb published a landmark research project which introduced bold new directions for higher educational research. They dared to pioneer new areas of research that in the past had only been given surface attention. They prefaced their historical work with “If one believes in the cumulative nature of science, then
periodic stocktaking becomes essential for any particular arena of scientific endeavor. The cumulation of knowledge may, of course, occur more or less haphazardly – but this does not and should not preclude more systematic attempts by laborers in the field to determine where they have arrived and where they might go” (Pascarella & Terenzini, p.xi).

Feldman and Newcomb reviewed more than 1,500 studies which focused specifically on the influence of college on students. Conducted over four decades, *The Impact of College* is a work which provided countless higher education researchers a platform for asking qualitative questions based on “why” and “how”. This particular research project is greatly indebted to the pioneers who blazed new trails in higher educational research. These trails moved past the quantitative arena and gave birth to the concept that it is essential that we know all we can about the consumers of our educational product. It is research such as that done by Feldman and Newcomb that prefaced the second major work which made an even greater impact on the higher education industry. Twenty years later, Earnest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini published *How College Affects Students*, a synthesis of over 2,600 individual studies which focused on how college impacted the lives of its students. Soon after the work was published, the authors realized that major changes occurring in the industry would necessitate another study just as expansive. The decade of the ‘90’s proved to be filled with so many innovations that in 2005 the same two authors published *How College Affects Students, Volume II*. Each of these three works provided significant analyses of research projects that helped provide an overview of the current status of attrition/retention in higher education (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Six major changes in the available research literature are noted by Pascarella and Terenzini as contributory to the need for their second work. First, the growing diversity of the American college student necessitated the need for more extensive research into the conditional
or interaction effect of the college experience. Secondly, the kinds of institutions themselves had changed significantly to include black colleges, women’s colleges, two year community colleges, and private for-profit schools.

The third important impact on the literature was the growing evidence that students learn differently than what had been believed for hundreds of years by higher education’s forefathers. No longer was learning regarded as “an act of acquiring or absorbing a set of objectively verifiable facts and concepts.” New research was starting to reveal that a “substantial amount of knowledge is actively constructed by the learner” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Among others, Baxter and Magolda made impactful contributions to this theory. In 1993 Brooks and Brooks concluded that “the learner does not just passively receive knowledge or truth from others – that is, faculty members. Rather, students work actively and collaboratively with faculty members and student peers to create their own knowledge by trying to make personal sense out of the material presented to them” (Pascarella & Terenzini, p.3).

A fourth change in Higher Education was noted by the authors in the area of not only how students learn but also how they develop intellectually. Pedagogy, the art of teaching children, gave way to andragogy, a concept developed by Malcolm Knowles which identified the intricacies involved in teaching adults. Knowles concepts that adults learn differently from children gave rise to research on instructional approaches such as learning communities, supplemental instruction, collaborative and cooperative learning, problem based learning, and service learning.

The fifth need for the second volume arose from the changes in technology. The technical advances in society itself through the decade of the nineties made a tremendous impact on college life. Concepts such as off campus instruction and virtual classrooms are examples of how
researchers had to begin to focus on how such innovations impacted the student.

The last change which necessitated the new project was centered in the changes in research methodology. An expanded repertoire of methodological approaches which included more qualitative research made it important for the Pascarella Terenzini (2005) team to synthesize the literature which was daily opening new areas for new research. The offshoots started producing offshoots that produced more offshoot studies. These two pioneers recognized that as soon as their original work was completed it was time to start over and do it again.

This research project is one of those offshoots of offshoots. Without the landmark work How College Affects Students, it would be difficult to ask such a specific question as “why do students in the career school sector persist and finish their programs?” This specific research endeavor recognizes the historic roots established by this important work.

In 1977, Alexander Astin wrote Four Critical Years, a book which sought answers to specific questions about how college life affected different students:

- What is the impact of college attendance on students’ personal, social, academic, and vocational development?
- Do different types of colleges produce different outcomes?
- How important is the curriculum as opposed to the student peer group and the faculty?
- How are students affected by the quality and quantity of their personal involvement in the academic and extracurricular life of the institution? (Astin, 1993).

Although Astin’s work actually preceded that of Pascarella and Terenzini, the latter team’s contribution is generally recognized as having a greater impact on higher education as an industry. In the body of their book, however, the authors cite Astin’s work as a significant contribution to the existing literature (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). By asking questions such as these, higher education as an industry made a statement to its stakeholders that there is a continuing need to probe below the surface of “the ivory walls.”
Sixteen years later in 1993, Astin followed up his original work with *What Matters in College?* In this work, Astin expanded his research to reveal how college can enhance the development of the student. He based the study on the contributions of over 25,000 faculty members and 20,000 students from over 200 different institutions. Astin examined more than 190 environmental characteristics of institutions and reveals significant information on how these factors can influence the student’s personality, self concept, patterns of behavior, values and belief system, academic and cognitive development, career development, and their satisfaction with the college environment (Astin, 1993).

*What Matters in College* investigates innovative methodologies that shed new light on student persistence. Astin’s research findings concerning what really matters in college are summarized in five general precautionary conclusions. First, he reminds us that “just the fact that students change in some demonstrable ways while attending college does not mean that college attendance per se has produced the change” (Astin, 1993). There is little supportive evidence that attending a different college or no college at all would necessarily produce similar or different effects for the student.

Secondly, one or two simple outcomes, such as graduation or obtaining a certain income, cannot be adequately assessed because the college experience has the potential to affect multiple aspects of a student’s life while other experiences outside the collegiate life play an equally important role. These outside variables, Astin warns, are difficult if not impossible to isolate or control.

Third, Astin cites the inadequacies of the traditional method of assessing the value of an education through grade point averages, credits received, and diplomas or certification attained. He suggests that the career school methods of assessing educational value has significant merit.
His analysis is based on a medical treatment analogy. Astin says the medical treatment process involves a starting point, treatment, and a conclusion. To properly assess college impacts, Astin suggests that colleges apply similar pre-program and post program diagnoses.

Fourth, because of limitations in the data and methods of analysis, Astin believed that most of the previous research on college impact produced inconclusive findings. Astin developed his own model, the I-E-O model which provided the framework for his future research projects. Input data, environmental data, and outcome data are the three types of information Astin asserted as being essential to all studies of college impact. Astin declared that most of the previous research had failed to include all three aspects of data input.

The fifth warning from Astin involved the general assumption that college attendees could be compared with non-attendees. He says this design “oversimplifies” the college impact problem. He says, “Given the great variety of institutions and programs, it is necessary to assess the impact of college characteristics and collegiate experiences rather than college as such” (Astin, 1993, p.31).

In the author’s preface, he makes specific reference to how his research should be interpreted. He says, “Being in a particular type of institution for example, a research university (or in the case of this study, a career school), does not necessarily limit the effectiveness of undergraduate education; that is, although different types of institutions tend to have particular types of environments, there are notable exceptions, and it is the environment created by the faculty and students – rather than the type of institution per se – that really seems to matter.” He concludes that through judicious and imaginative use of peer groups, the college can strengthen its impact on the student and positively affect student learning, personal development, and program completion. The book also concludes specific implications for educational theory and
practice implementation (Astin, 1993). These discoveries will be discussed later in this literature review as they specifically apply to the seven possible completion variables chosen for this research.

Astin’s precautionary research warnings have been given careful attention in this research project. The advice has been more constructive than destructive. Rather than limit the project, Astin’s directions have provided support to the project’s validity because the project focuses upon career sector students whose completion most often results in employment or the pursuit of employment in the specific field of study. A research project such as this one focusing specifically upon program completion in the career school sector is therefore, not only significant but vitally important to the very life of career schools themselves. Astin’s warning oversimplifies the fact that attrition in traditional schools may only be temporary, but in career schools it is more likely to be terminal.

As stated earlier, one of the most significant literature contributions in the area of how college affects the student was presented by Vincent Tinto. First introduced in the early 70’s, Tinto’s *Leaving College – Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* has proven to be a pioneering endeavor in the more specific areas of retention and attrition. He developed a theory of individual departure from institutions of higher education. This work examines the scope and patterning of student departure, the roots of individual departure, and the dimensions of institutional action. Tinto posits that the institution has a responsibility to the student to provide an experience that will result in individual growth and the accomplishment of the individual student’s educational and career goals. His work is founded in his theory that the interaction between the institution and the student plays the most significant role in student retention. His major contribution to this research project lies in the introduction of the existence of contributory
variables that are relevant to each individual student. He examines both the student and the institution. He places responsibility for completion on both entities in an effort to distinguish the roles each play in retention. He outlines specific logical procedures the institution can employ in their efforts to diminish attrition. While his approach focuses primarily on the institution and its administrators, Tinto does provide valuable insight into the retention factors contributed by the student (Tinto, 1987).

Tinto’s model is described as “primarily sociological in character.” It is his theory that students enter college with a personal variety of social patterns of personal, family, and academic values and skills. These established values make a major contribution to the student’s initial disposition, intentions, and commitments in regard to college attendance, the accomplishment of goals, and ultimately, completion of their program. The Tinto model states, “These intentions and commitments are subsequently modified and reformulated on a continuing basis through a longitudinal series of interactions between the individual and the structure and members of the academic and social systems of the institution. The academic and social communities within an institution are seen as nested inside an external environment of family, friends, and other commitments that place its demand on students in ways largely beyond the students’ institutional worlds” (Tinto, 1987). Tinto’s conclusion is that “rewarding encounters with the formal and informal academic and social systems of the institution presumably lead to greater student integration in these systems and thus to persistence” (Tinto, 1987).

In 1986, Lee Noel, Randi Levitz, Diana Saluri and Associates published a detailed analysis of the existing literature available up to that date on student retention. *Increasing Student Retention* is based on nine nationwide surveys of retention practices conducted on the campuses of 375 college institutions. This precise compilation of facts, statistics, and
documentation was written to provide administrators with “practical, step-by-step guidelines and strategies” for achieving improvement in student retention (Noel, Levitz, Saluri, & Associates, 1985). Although the project is focused almost exclusively on the traditional college experience, there is a wealth of valuable data in this publication that can be utilized by all institutions of learning. This book’s most important contribution to this research project lies in its chapters devoted to student characteristics. Later in this literature review we will probe each of the target variables contributory to completion. In these specific areas, information from *Increasing Student Retention* will be used to provide significant data which is relevant to each specific target variable.

Another pioneer project resulted in the contribution of valuable research data for this project. *Black Student Retention in Higher Education* was published in 1988. It was the first major retention work that was focused on one target demographic. The latest statistics show that minorities compose almost 75% of the population in career schools (Ruch, 2001). Marvel Lang and Clinita A. Ford’s book is designed to provide educators a better understanding of Black students and the unique problems and challenges they face. They compiled a series of articles and publications which related specifically to the retention of black college students. In the book they discuss a wide range of issues, strategies, and ideas related to student coping abilities, teaching strategies, and summaries of campus-wide advising and counseling for Black college students (Lang & Ford, 1988). The publication provides data which will be used in detail later in this review in the section devoted to the role family and support systems play in individual student retention.

Although they fail to compare in quantity with the plethora of research conducted on traditional campuses, there are some specific higher educational research studies that have
focused exclusively on students in proprietary and for-profit schools. A study in 2000 by Susan Schultz was particularly insightful because it dared to explore a particular segment of the career school sector. In many ways Schultz laid the foundation for this type of research by addressing retention of students in the massage school industry (Schultz, 2000).

The review of literature continues now with an individual examination of what has been studied and revealed about seven specific target variables which will be the focus of this research project. What follows is a brief review of existing information about each of these contributory characteristics.

Ability to Accept Responsibility for Completion

The first area of target variable literature analysis examines research studies that focused on general individual behavior. The disciplines of psychology and sociology play important roles in this project which focuses specifically and initially on individual behavior that will later be used to provide guidance for effectively enhancing the understanding of group behavior. The social learning theory developed by Julian B. Rotter provides an excellent starting point for discussion concentrating on why some individual students may behave differently than others. Rotter has become well known in cross-over disciplines for the development of the locus of control theory. Locus of control refers to an individual’s personal, cross-situational beliefs about what determines or controls their life experiences. The locus of control theory provides the individual personality studies that directly relate to the discussion concerning a student’s ability to accept personal responsibility for completion of their educational program (Mearns, 2006).

At the time Rotter developed his social learning theory, Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis reigned as the dominant perspective in clinical psychology. Most psychologists at that time
believed the individual’s “deep-seated instinctual motives” determined behavior. Rotter departed from this perspective by developing a theory centered on the belief that psychological theory should have a psychological motivational principle. The empirical law of effect was Rotter’s motivating factor. The law of effect theorizes that “individuals are motivated to seek out positive stimulation, or reinforcement, and to avoid unpleasant stimulation”. His main idea represents an interaction of the individual with the environment. Rotter expressed his theory in a predictive formula combining behavior potential, expectancy, and reinforcement value:

$$BP = f(E \& RV)$$

The formula can best be read as “behavior potential is a function of expectancy and reinforcement value… the likelihood of a person exhibiting a particular behavior is a function of the probability that that behavior will lead to a given outcome and the desirability of that outcome.” The locus of control theory extends the formula to specifically suggest that an individual’s belief about generalized expectancies and their control over reinforcement affects the individual’s behavior. The location of that control is either perceived as internal or external (American Psychologist, 1989).

Rotter theorized that people with a strong internal locus of control believe that the responsibility for whether or not they get reinforced ultimately lies within themselves. In contrast, people who have an external locus of control believe that success or failure in life is controlled by luck, chance, or the power of others. Psychologist Phillip Zimbardo stated it succinctly: “A locus of control orientation is a belief about whether the outcomes of our actions are contingent on what we do (internal control orientation) or on events outside our personal control (external control orientation)” (Mearns, 2006, p.2).

In a study by Crook and Lavin in 1989, they concluded that:
• Males tend to be more internal than females
• As people get older, they tend to become more internal
• People higher up in organizational structures tend to be more internal (Crook & Lavin, 1989)

For this study, LOC theory provides two ways students can perceive their own responsibility for program completion. “Internals” have a strong belief that they are most responsible for the completion or incompletion of their program.” Externals”, however, will find an outside person, entity, or circumstance to assign responsibility for their completion or incompletion.

I theorize that students with an internal locus of control are more likely to finish their program than those with an external LOC. In recent years, Rotter’s theory has been utilized to provide insight into success or failure in cross-disciplines.

Psychologists tend to agree that “in general it seems to be psychologically healthy to perceive that one has control over those things which one is capable of influencing”.

The generalization is that a more internal locus of control is viewed by “experts” as desirable (Rotter, 1981).

The concept spawned numerous studies in higher educational research. In 1991, Perry’s research findings were that “students who attribute their academic success to their own efforts (those who are internally directed) are more likely to score at higher levels on various measures of academic achievement and motivation than are similar students who believe their success is a function of something other than their own ability, motivation, or effort.” Weiner extends the concept of locus of control to include attribution. Attribution refers to the reasons students give for their successes or failures, including luck, timing, motivation, effort, or health (Weiner, 1980).
The term self-efficacy has emerged as a derivation from Rotter’s theory of locus of control. Bandura defines self-efficacy as “beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives” (Bandura, 1997). All of the research and findings in this area have set the stage for this research project. What looms is the possibility of uncovering more information about the role accepting responsibility for one’s behavior plays in the student’s ability to persist and complete their program of study.

The theory of andragogy was developed in 1972 by Malcolm Knowles, considered by many to be “the” central figure in adult education in the second half of the twentieth century. Knowles introduced a distinctive conceptual model for adult education and adult learning. His theory consists of six assumptions about the adult learner which provide significant background information applicable to this study of adult learners in the career school sector. One of Knowles’ assumptions is that adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own lives. Knowles concluded that adults resent and resist situations in which they feel others are imposing their wills on them. As adults, he says they are moving into a pattern of learning where they become self-directed, taking responsibility for their own learning. Knowles’ also theorized that adults come into an educational activity with both a greater volume and a different quality of experience from youths (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991).

Rotter’s theory of locus of control and Knowles’ andragogical model serve as the foundation for questions included in the survey designed to determine how career school students perceive the importance of their ability to accept responsibility for their completion and also the importance of the development of life skills or maturity.

This review of literature relating to the importance of the student’s internal or external assignment of responsibility has revealed that this variable might play a significant role in
student persistence. The variable’s inclusion in the research instrument is supported by the literature despite the fact that there have been no studies revealed that were addressed specifically to career school students’ locus of control or Knowles’ assumptions about the adult learner.

Academic Preparedness

The affects of academic preparedness on student retention is one of the most highly probed areas in higher education research. Hundreds of studies employing multiple methodologies and research methods have revealed that high school grade point averages and admission information are relatively accurate in the prediction of both academic success and program completion (Campbell & Campbell, 1997). Among admission information, the most relevant predictors are the student’s high school GPA and scores on college admission tests. Grades almost always carry more significance than admission tests (Noel, Levitz, Saluri, & Associates, 1985).

The University of Nevada TRIO application (2007) for student support services requests applicants to choose from the following list of indicators of need:

- Low high school GPA
- Low SAT scores (verbal)
- Low SAT scores (math)
- Low SAT Scores (verbal and math)
- Low ACT scores
- Poor performance on diagnostic test
- Low college GPA
- G.E.D. recipient
- Failing grades
- Out of academic pipeline for 5 or more years
- Limited English proficiency
- Lack of educational or career goal
- Lack of preparedness for college level work
- Need for academic support to raise grades in required courses

Difficulty and student departure are frequently found to be associated with measures of past school performance and the individual student’s academic ability (Noel, Levitz, Saluri, & Associates, 1985). It is often perceived that the typical academic drop out is generally of lower ability and has inferior high school grades than the average program completer.

Tinto provides an alternative viewpoint regarding the intersection of retention and academic preparedness. He says, “The association between academic failures and standard measures of ability and high school performance is not very great” (Tinto, 1987, 50). Irvine’s five year follow up study of 659 men who entered the University of Georgia found that high school grade average was the single best predictor of college persistence. The research, however, revealed that the variable produced only a 12 % variance in staying or leaving behaviors resulting in 88 % of the variance unaccounted. Additionally, only high school grades were used to predict persistence. Tinto states that even when academic dismissals are studied separately, it is still the case that measures of academic ability and high school performance are not highly correlated with departure. Tinto stresses the importance of considering the effect of intentions and commitment and integrating them into the departure equation. He points out that “common
measures of ability and past school performance are not consistently good predictors of the study
skills and habits required for successful performance in college” (Tinto, 1987, p.51).

Tinto’s argument opens the door for more in-depth discussion regarding study skills and
their importance to program completion. Academic preparedness, for this discussion, involves
more than just proven ability, intelligence, and past academic performance. An investigation of
college websites focusing on new student orientation suggests that “how to study” is a significant
factor in program completion. One such website asks the question “Are you prepared for the
academic challenges the program you want to enter will present to you?” That question is
followed by these three self assessment questions:

- Have I met the admissions requirements for the program?
- Have I reviewed the program profile for my program of study?
- Do I have good “studentship” skills? (SIAST, 2007)

The last question suggests that college administrators place high importance on a
student’s “studentship” skills when advising students on how to best achieve successful
program completion results. These skills include such areas as time management, reading
comprehension skills, preparing for and taking examinations, and writing skills.

At the U.S. Chamber’s Education and Workforce Summit in Dallas, Texas in 2006, three
higher education executives directed their comments about student attrition to the lack of
academic preparedness. According to Dick Ferguson, CEO and chairman of ACT, “only 21% of
high school students will arrive at college prepared to earn a grade of C or better in their
freshman class in English, math, and science” (U.S. Chamber, 2006, p.1). The trio claimed that
28% of students in all higher education institutions end up participating in remedial courses.
Reading proficiency for beginning college students was declared to be at the eighth or ninth
grade level (U.S. Chamber, 2006). Career schools often face close scrutiny by state legislatures regarding student completion rates and job placement percentages. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board has instigated a program called TSI – Texas Success Initiative. This state-legislated program is designed to improve student success in college by requiring higher education institutions to produce (1) an assessment to diagnose students’ basic skills in reading, mathematics and writing; and (2) developmental instruction, to strengthen academic skills that need improvement (THECB, 2008). By their legislative action, the State of Texas recognizes the need for higher education to assure students are academically prepared for success at the college level.

There is some research evidence regarding the specific need for attention to academic preparedness in career school sector proprietary schools. The National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey compared these schools with other higher education institutions.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
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<th></th>
<th>All Undergraduates</th>
<th>Proprietary Schools</th>
<th>Public Community Colleges</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HS diploma</td>
<td>91K</td>
<td>74K</td>
<td>88K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GED</td>
<td>5K</td>
<td>13K</td>
<td>8K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate</td>
<td>2K</td>
<td>4K</td>
<td>3K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not complete</td>
<td>2K</td>
<td>9K</td>
<td>1K</td>
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The survey reminds us of what many individuals might consider the obvious, but nevertheless important to this study. Of the students in higher education who did not have a high school diploma, 55% attended proprietary schools.
One of the most extensive and scientific research projects to provide information about the role academic preparedness plays in college student success was conducted by a team of researchers from University of Arkansas in 2005. Mulvenon, Denny, Stegman, Airola, and McKenzie used a variety of correlational and longitudinal techniques to analyze middle level, high school level, and early college academic data. Not only did the team investigate individual test scores and transcripts, they provided a new dimension to retention study by including the impact of course selection in middle school levels and high school levels. Their overall purpose was to identify precursors of college retention and remediation. Their goal was to identify protective risk factors for college persistence that emerge during the middle and secondary grades and to compare the academic profiles of students who continue in college to those who choose not to finish their educational program (National Office for Research, Measurement, and Evaluation, 2005).

The results of their study were summarized in the team’s analysis of the ANOVA. The indication was that students who left college performed consistently lower on high school and college measures than students who remained for five semesters. Additionally, the ANOVA results indicated that students receiving remediation consistently scored lower than non-remedial students. Perhaps the most significant finding from the study was that survival in the postsecondary environment may be associated with high school GPA, but more importantly, longevity and successful completion of a degree may be associated with mathematics preparation and performance. Regression analysis also revealed an importance of mathematics indicators in the success of college course completion (Mulvenon, 2006). These studies suggest the possible need for specific future research conducted exclusively among career school sector students that will include the impact variables of GPA and mathematics preparation.
One of the most important studies uncovered by this literature search involved one conducted by ACT, Inc. in association with the Education Trust. They studied 10 high schools during the 2003-2004 academic year in an attempt to discover the quality of the high school classroom study in the most significant college preparation classes. Previous studies have identified the minimal course work essential for college success as four or more years of English, three or more years of math, social sciences, and natural sciences. The association’s study focused on the *quality* of the coursework. This study pointed clearly to the danger of identifying attrition or retention predictors simply by a student’s exposure to a subject. They warned that the quality of the experience can play a more significant role than simply the analysis of a test score or of a research test that focuses merely on exposure (EdTrust, 2008).

College academic advising departments have always considered retention as a primary focus of concern. Almost all college websites feature a variation of the theme of “how to be a successful student”. The State Legislature of California prompted an intensive combination study by the University of California, California State University, and California Community Colleges. In response to the Legislature’s interest in improving students’ academic preparation for college, they examined what high schools and colleges are doing to identify and assist college-bound students who are not yet prepared for college-level work. According to the pre-study information, “almost half of all the students at the three institutional systems arrived unprepared for college-level reading, writing, or mathematics” (Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College, 2008, p.1).

Marvel and Lang’s (1988, p.15) research of Black college students reveals specific data regarding disadvantaged and minority students. “disadvantaged students are victims of poor preparation rather than lack of intelligence and academic deficits can be corrected by the school
after the student has been admitted.” The authors concluded that retention programs that feature remedial instruction have for the most part proved to be successful.

To summarize this section of the literature review, it is clear that academic preparedness has received much deserved attention from higher education researchers attempting to find reasons for early departure. Conclusions, however, have not conclusively provided definitive quantitative information applicable throughout higher education. Three separate higher education studies, however, reported findings which support continued research investigating the importance of academic achievement and its relationship with student persistence. The conclusions of Ryland, Riodan, & Brack, in 1994, McGrath and Braunstein in 1997, and Kirby & Sharpe in 2001 are summarized by Pascarella and Terenzini. “There is a consistent relationship between college academic achievement and retention, with higher performing students persisting in their studies to a greater degree than their lower achieving cohorts” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p.419).

Pascarella and Terenzini’s comprehensive study among traditional colleges concludes “even given their limitations, however, college grades may well be the single best predictors of student persistence, degree completion, and graduate school enrollment” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p.396). They continue, “Perhaps more important from a practical and policy perspective, academic achievement during a student’s first year of college may be a particularly powerful influence on subsequent retention and degree completion” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p.397).

What appears to be unrevealed by the studies is the role a student’s desire to persist may play in the determination of the grades. Rather than address academic preparedness from quantitative measurements, for this paper it is my decision to investigate the self-reported
perceptions of the persisting students. This approach is in part due to the overall decision to maintain anonymity for the participants. This portion of the review of literature pertaining to academic preparedness has revealed that while the variable may play a significant role in completion among traditional students, there is a nonexistence of literature that specifically addresses the career school sector student. It is the intent of this study to determine how the student perceives his or her level of academic preparedness and how important he or she believes it to be to his or her own program completion. Chapter 5 of this paper discusses the suggestion of including quantitative academic preparedness data in future research projects.

Family or Friends Support System

Rarely do accomplished artists, performers, or athletes who receive industry recognition fail to allocate at least part of the credit for success to a family or friends support system. What role do family and friends play in the completion rate of career college sector proprietary students? This question did not emerge as one asked specifically, but the literature review uncovered numerous articles and books which devoted sections to the importance of support systems in traditional college program completion.

Literature discussing two different support systems will be analyzed in this section of the review: immediate family support (which includes parents, siblings, and significant others) and peers.

We begin our analysis with general comments from Vincent Tinto regarding external communities and congruence in the life of the college. Tinto reminds us that no institution is an “island unto itself” and with the possible exception of students at military or other strict, small, isolated colleges, most students find themselves exposed to a range of individuals and
communities external to the college campus. He references a study by Weidman in 1985 to note that for many persons, especially the ones living at home or off campus, membership in external communities may play a pivotal role in persistence. “For those whose initial goal and/or institutional commitments are weak, the impact of those communities may make the difference between persistence and departure. When the value orientations of external communities are such as to support the goals of college education, they may aid persistence. When they oppose them, the reverse may apply” (Tinto, 1987, p.61).

Tinto continues his discussion of the importance of external communities by addressing the impact the involvement has on the students. The choice of continuing or discontinuing the relationship often has a major impact on the student’s self esteem or self concept. He adds that “when the person seeks to preserve participation in both internal and external communities, the role conflicts which frequently arise may be so great as to hinder the person’s ability to attend to the demands of either set of communities” (Tinto, 1987, p.61). He adds that this conflict appears to be greater among disadvantaged students than others. This theory gives relevance to the establishment among many colleges of residential programs for the retention of disadvantaged students (Tinto, 1987).

Immediate Family

The work of Bonnie Golden and Kay Lesh is cited here as an excellent compilation of ideas and concepts relevant to student retention. Their book, Building Self-Esteem – Strategies for Success in School and Beyond (1994) goes below the surface in probing for reasons why some students persist while others drop out. Although a separate section devoted to the importance of self-esteem and the self concept will be presented in detail later in this review, it is
important to note here that the family support system plays a significant role in the development of the individual student’s self concept. Although the two may in some ways be inter-related, they will be discussed separately because of the unique contributions each make to the resultant persistence or departure.

Golden and Lesh remind us that our view of the world is formed long before we develop our words or can comprehend the idea of self. These early family messages play a significant role in everyone’s personal psychological development. By the time the student reaches the young adult or adult stage and enters college, these early messages have helped form a world view that is integral to the values displayed by the student attempting to fulfill a commitment. In some cases, the goal is not really theirs at all, but one instilled in them by parents who wish to have their offspring receive life benefits that might have eluded them. Golden and Lesh continue, “Our families of origin served as our role models in many areas. A role model is someone we learn from and try to imitate. Even when we choose to do the opposite of what we observed in our role models, they still impact us” (Golden & Lesh, 1994, p.33).

Many studies have focused upon the importance of parental education in regards to student persistence. Pascarella and Terenzini found that “students whose parents have had some exposure to college are twice as likely as first generation students to earn a bachelor’s degree and are five times more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree if their parents also hold one” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p.590). While a parent’s educational achievement can certainly be influential on the child’s perception of the value of education, there are others who argue that there is no proven direct connection between parental values and student persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). One study did uncover some interesting relationships between a student’s parental level of education and the student’s perceptions and expectations about college. A
research project at Tulsa Junior College studied over 1700 students. The survey was designed to assess six basic components: general information, academic needs, study skills, career planning, social involvement, and financial needs. The student surveys were divided into four groups according to their parents education: (1) high school or less, (2) some college, (3) Bachelor’s degree (4) and post Bachelor’s education. The research team analysis indicated: “Students whose parents had no college background were more likely to perceive their abilities and skills somewhat lower than other groups. First generation students were also less likely to have a social support network helping them adjust to the demands of college life and were more likely to have applied for financial aid than other groups. Finally, first generation students were more likely to have an associate degree as their primary educational goal than other groups, indicating a lower expectancy for success” (Tulsa Junior College Office of Institutional Research Report, 1995, p.4).

The findings from the Tulsa Junior College study are noted as being particularly relevant to this study of career school sector students who have also chosen a less aggressive educational path that is more skill-focused than credential-focused.

Golden and Lesh provide an excellent description of how family encouragement of education can effect the way their offspring perceive education. They provide a positive scenario example:

In some cases, there is positive support from the beginning. The expectation begins early in life as the parents prepare the child for kindergarten with a feeling of anticipation. The parents let the child know school is important, and they expect their child to do well academically. Parents who value education ask, “What did you do in school today, dear?” These parents encourage their children’s learning and progress and take an interest in the specifics of their children’s studies. (Golden & Lesh, 1994, p.34)

Golden and Lesh’s research uncovered a significant connection between academic success and reading as a family value. “Studies show that when parents or significant
others read to children they are more likely to become readers themselves. Our research shows that parents have a strong influence on a child’s reading performance.” The study quotes author David Cooper who says, “Those who cannot read and communicate well in the future will be doomed to a growing number of low-paying jobs” (Golden & Lesh, 1994, p.36).

The family is also an integral part of the deliverance of cultural values. Many cultures place a high value on education and that value is generally delivered by the family. A recent study of Indochinese refugee children illustrates this value and underscores the importance of the family in school achievement.

Although the children studied were traumatized severely by their escape from Southeast Asia, had lost months and, in some cases, years of formal schooling, and arrived in the United States with limited skill in English, they adjusted quickly to U.S. schools and began to excel. When researchers from the University of Michigan sought to explain this level of achievement, their findings showed a strong link between family values and education. Even though the children attended schools in low-income metropolitan areas, family support, not the school itself, was what made the difference. (Golden & Lesh, pp. 36-37)

Contrarily, negative family support can be just as significant to a student’s academic outcome. First generation students often find themselves facing a variety of pressures that are not present in families where education is an accepted value. The U.S. government recognized this phenomena and in the 1970’s legislated the landmark TRIO programs. The TRIO programs – Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Special Service were developed with the goal of identifying and providing services to promising first generation students to help them overcome educational barriers. It was determined that these students often “face barriers such as little family support, lack of educational role models, and no identifiable educational goals” (U. S. Department of Education, 2004, p.3).
Edward Anderson summarizes the literature pertaining to the role of family in college persistence. “One of the most important forces influencing student persistence and achievement is parents who value a college education and stress its importance” (Anderson, 2005, p.97).

Peer Influence

As demonstrated by the previous review of literature that focused upon the importance of the family’s impact on the student’s self esteem and self-concept, the role played by the student’s peers is also significant to the student’s self-concept. Social support has been defined as “the existence or availability of people on whom we can rely, people who let us know that they care about, value, and love us” (Rosenberg, 1979, p.64). In other definitions, social support involves the consideration of how personal friends and interaction with others affects the individual’s ability to stay focused on goals, commitments, and values. In a study by Fisher in 1985, he found that social support may have a direct effect on stress, anxiety, and well-being. He found that individuals with high levels of support experience fewer negative consequences (Newland & Furnham, 1999). He continues, “Social support may facilitate successful coping during stressful situations such that it buffers the effects of stress” (Newland & Furnham, 1999, p.114).

Hunter R. Boylan, director of the National Center for Developmental Education states that social interaction and other less measurable but self-defining characteristics play a more significant role in a student’s success than some of the traditional academic standards. He writes, “Students fail to do well in college for a variety of reasons, and only one of them is lack of academic preparedness. Factors such as personal autonomy, self-confidence, ability to deal with racism, study behaviors, or social competence have as much or more to do with grades, retention, and graduation than how well a student writes or how competent a student is in mathematics”
Much previous research has been conducted upon college campuses that addressed the student’s ability to cope with a changing environment. Although this environment is different from the one faced by most career school students who commute to school, these studies deserve mention because of the general discoveries of the importance of a student developing a support system. In their first work, Pascarella and Terenzini noted that the most important factor in predicting a student’s eventual departure from college is absence of sufficient contact with others (Pascarella and Terezini, 2005). Ostrow, Paul, Dark, and Berhman in 1986 conducted a study in which they found that supportive relationships enable students to better cope with the demands of the college environment. In another study, Husband concluded that those students who withdraw from college prior to graduation are less likely to be able to identify someone on campus with whom they had developed a significant relationship. He said, “These students report low satisfaction with their personal interactions, social isolation, and absence of opportunities for social contact. Most of these students report adequate grades suggesting that social difficulties rather than academic difficulties influenced their departure from college” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p.427).

These preliminary studies were used as a background for an offshoot research project in 2002 by Donna Coffman and Tammy Gilligan. They noted the studies that had effectively focused on a student’s “life satisfaction”. They defined this as “a pleasurable emotional state resulting from a person’s enactment of the role of being a student” (Coffman & Gilligan, 2003, p.112). They used the previous research to establish overall life satisfaction including satisfaction with specific domains, such as student satisfaction. They claimed, “Therefore, it is assumed that life satisfaction is an indicator of college persistence. Life satisfaction is positively related to
social support and negatively related to perceived stress” (Coffman & Gilligan, 2003, p.54.) The Coffman Gilligan team developed their own study to examine how perceived social support, perceived stress, and self-efficacy predict life satisfaction. Although previous research had adequately addressed each of those variables in relation to college persistence and withdrawal, their study attempted to integrate the variables in order to examine the influence on a prediction model. The portion of their work devoted to social support is particularly significant to this study because before integrating social support into the predictor model, they clearly defined social support as a concept for individual student examination.

Perceived social support refers to anticipated support provided by others if it is needed. Previous research suggests that social support may have an effect on perceived stress by providing a person with integration into the community and by enhancing overall well being. The strongest support for this model is evident in the contrast between those who are socially isolated, defined as having few or no social contacts, and those with moderate to high levels of social support. (Coffman & Gilligan, 2003, p 55.)

Social competence and social integration was particularly important in Tinto’s studies. In 1975 he proposed a model of student retention which focused on the impact of social and academic integration on goal and institutional commitment, and the resulting decision to persist or withdraw from post-secondary institutions. The Tinto model stated that the extent to which students were motivated to get a degree and to graduate from a specific institution was determined principally by the students’ characteristics and interactions with the social and academic environment (Tinto, 1987). Additionally, studies by Anderson in 1981, Metzner in 1984, and Nora in 1987 supported Tinto’s theory that encouragement from others and specifically encouragement to continue attending and discouragement from leaving were shown to influence students toward persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Golden and Lesh provide a poignant summary for conclusion of this examination of literature focusing on the significance of the peer group upon a student’s persistence. “A
person’s self-esteem relies heavily on accomplishments in areas that are important, not only to the self but also to the peer group or culture to which we belong” (Golden & Lesh, 1994).

Again, the available literature focusing specifically on the variable of friends and family support systems’ contribution to program completion was done outside the career school sector. I decided that the studies that have been conducted that focused upon students in general is sufficient evidence to suggest the inclusion of the variable in this targeted study. Based upon the literature review, the research instrument has been designed to qualitatively reveal the student’s self-reported opinion regarding the family and friends support system variable’s significance to their program completion.

“Good” Self-Esteem, Not Necessarily High

As evidenced by its mention throughout the earlier pages of this literature review, self-esteem is not an isolated concept affecting student persistence. As noted earlier, each of the target variables interact throughout the student’s experience and it is impossible to disallow the impact one might have on another. In order to conduct the study itself, it was necessary, however, to divide the concepts into separate categories to distinguish each concept’s individual contribution to the student’s persistence journey.

University of Washington Psychologist Jonathon D. Brown studied the nature, origins, and consequences of self-esteem. Brown says self-esteem is primarily a construct based largely on irrational processes of self determination. He says high self-esteem is characterized by a feeling of general fondness or love for oneself while low self-esteem is characterized by a feeling of ambivalent feelings toward oneself (Brown & Kobayashi, 2003). His findings about the consequences of low or high self esteem have significant relevance to this study of persistence
variables. Brown says self-esteem plays its most significant role when people confront negative personal experiences such as interpersonal rejection, criticism from others, or (most significant to this study) achievement-related failure (Brown & Kobayashi, 2003).

Documented evidence suggests that students during their college years develop more positive self-concepts and generally a greater degree of self-confidence. The self-confidence criterion was significant enough to motivate Pascarella and Terenzini to devote more than fifty pages to the subject in their powerfully important book, How College Affects Students Volume II. They thoroughly examined the significant research in this area to derive at the conclusion that “culture and institutional environments contribute to the strengthened self-confidence more significantly than conventional structural or organizational characteristics such as type, control, size, or selectivity” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p.240).

This review discovered that researchers often use the phrases self-concept and self-esteem interchangeably. While the self-concept is generally considered to be an individual’s perceptions of themselves formed through interaction with the environment and significant relationships, the term self-esteem takes a more internal direction. Self-esteem tends to focus on a more self-judgmental approach that differentiates between the “real” self and the “ideal” self. Persons with high self-esteem tend to display a greater degree of satisfaction with their position in the environment. Person’s with low self-esteem are more likely to display characteristics that some consider fear-based (Baumeister, 1993). Overcoming fear can be a vital part of the college student’s pursuit of an education. Stanley Coopersmith states, “Self-esteem reveals an evaluation with general and personalized connotations. Self-esteem as operationalized usually is not specific to a particular dimension of the self and is based on internal, rather than external, standards. Self-esteem expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval and indicates the extent
to which the individual believes himself to be capable, significant, successful, and worthy’’ (Pascarella & Terenzini, p.219).

Golden and Lesh define self-esteem as a “unique internal self-rating.” They conclude, “Self-esteem determines how worthy we believe we are, how we see ourselves fitting into the world, and what we think we can or cannot do. Understandably, self-esteem has a strong impact on the individual’s success in life” (Golden & Lesh, 1994, p.7). The team specifically relates the importance of self esteem to success in the classroom. “In a school context, self-esteem is defined as self-confidence, sense of personal worth, and belief in one’s capability in matters relating to education” (Golden & Lesh, 1994, pp.7-8). They say education is one area of life in which as self-esteem is played out, old insecurities can resurface (Golden & Lesh, 1994).

Beginning the educational post secondary journey is greatly affected by the degree of self-esteem possessed by the student. Since career school students tend to bring lower success rates academically to the new venture of college, the importance of self-esteem becomes a dominant concept when discussing why some students persist while others withdraw. Students who have a high degree of self-esteem upon entering the institution may have a greater likelihood of finishing their program (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The primary agents of socialization during college are peers, significant others, and faculty connections. Numerous studies reflect the importance of these social support groups and the settings in which the interaction occurs. According to a study conducted by the Cooperative Institutional Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles, “there can be little doubt that student conduct with peers plays a central role in how students think about themselves” (Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, 2005, p.3). The data from this study was comprised of large, nationally
representative samples of students surveyed at several hundred four year institutions with a follow-up survey conducted four years later. The studies’ criterion variables were individual items based upon the self reflective reports of characteristics which included academic ability, intellectual self-confidence, and mathematical competency. The study concluded, “the evidence consistently indicates freshman –to senior year increases in academic self-confidence are positively associated with student-student interactions, even after adjusting for a battery of background characteristics, including academic self-concept, institutional characteristics, and other college experiences” (Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, 2005, p.5).

Research findings indicate that there are distinctive types of self-confidence. Belief in ones’ ability to achieve, or self-efficacy, seems to play a primary role in the identification of factors that contribute to personal growth for the student. Academic self-confidence has been the term often used to describe how the individual’s self concept affects academic achievement and persistence. Bob Harrison, an Algebra instructor at a career school in Texas, says most of the students who fail college algebra do so before they enter the class. He says, “Prior to their entry into the course, many students have already developed a feeling of inferiority about their math performance that often stifles their ability to grasp the concepts. These students often expect to fail and usually it is a self-fulfilling prophecy” (Harrison, 2007).

Astin writes that there is clear evidence relating to net changes in students’ perception and their abilities and how this affects performance. The perception becomes significant whether it is compared to a personal standard or one of their peers. The college experience evolves as a precise environment that provides indicators of success at this level that tend to breed more success and thus enhance the student’s academic self-confidence. In Astin’s measurements, he
discovered that students who remain in college longer (extensity) and who are more deeply engaged in college experiences (intensity) are more likely to demonstrate greater changes than those with less exposure or involvement within the institution” (Astin, 1993).

According to the research team of Pascarella and Terenzini, few studies examine the net effects of college on self-esteem, but the ones that do tend to suggest that college has a positive net effect on self-esteem (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In 1998, Monzon and Maramba used a cross-sectional design to determine how self-esteem changed during the college experience. It is a noteworthy study because they were able to control the age variable. They were also able to control for pre-college academic ability and achievement, family environment, and gender. They discovered a positive relationship between class year and self-esteem. They concluded that due to the control factors, they could differentiate that the self-esteem enhancement was not a result of maturational forces (Monzon and Maramba, 1998).

In a particularly significant study because of its sample size, Knox, Lindsay, and Kolb analyzed data from a sample of nearly 5,500 high school seniors selected in the National Longitudinal Study of the high school class of 1972. After students were surveyed in their senior year of high school, they were revisited again 2 and 14 years later. Besides the sample size significance, the study is also noteworthy because it included a control group which had only a high school diploma. The research team used a multi-item, factorially derived scale with items that dealt with specific feelings of self-esteem. The studies’ results were definitive. The team found a high degree of correlation between self-esteem and educational attainment. As educational level rose, self-esteem scores reflected comparable increases (Knox, Lindsay, and Kolb, 1992).

Once again, the literature review has overwhelmingly supported this variables’ inclusion
in the research project. Interwoven throughout the literature are specific examples of how self-esteem affects the students’ behavior in almost every aspect of their educational journey. I proceeded to study how career school program completers viewed their own self-esteem and how they assessed its significance in their program completion.

Life Skills Preparedness or Maturity/Sense of Being Goal-Focused

While the variables of Life Skills Preparedness or Maturity and Being Goal-Focused were studied separately in this research project, the existing literature was found to be quite similar. For that reason the two variables are being considered together in this literature review. Many would argue that being goal focused is a measure of the individual’s development of prioritizing skills. Most previous studies focusing on prioritizing among college students were often associated with studies focusing on student maturation. There are many studies available which consider the relationship of age and retention. The persistence variable Life Skills or Maturity may have some connection with age in many isolated circumstances. However, it is important to note that age and maturity are certainly not the same measurement factor. Determining age is a relatively easy thing for researchers to accomplish. Determining maturity, however, lends itself to a much different subjective approach and methodology. What is maturity? What life skills are significant to the individual’s ability to remain focused on their goals and finish their program? Three specific life skills have been selected for examination in this study:

1. Ability to prioritize
2. Ability to maintain focus
3. Ability to cope with adversity
The literary definition of maturity covers a wide spectrum of concepts. Maturity has been defined as “deliberateness of action, widespread consideration, due deliberation, fullness or perfection of natural development, ripeness, due promptness, the state of being complete, perfect, ready, and so on…” (Golden & Lesh, 1994, p.27).

In a general sense, “maturity means complete physical and mental growth, or the state of adulthood” (Throop and Gelb, 2001, p.219). Physical growth is easy to understand because it is visible, measurable, and in most cases does not extend past certain age limitations. In considering mental maturity, however, the task becomes more difficult. First, it is impossible to declare exactly when an individual stops growing mentally if they do so at all. Secondly, mental growth is different from individual to individual. Thirdly, the same individual may exhibit maturity in some ways while showing immaturity in others (Throop and Gelb, 2001).

The variable of maturity is significant to the study of student program persistence because it encompasses the student’s decision making process in making the choice to withdraw or continue their program. Although research provided a multitude of descriptive characteristics of a mature person, for this study, five of these characteristics relate specifically to the ability to make good decisions. A mature person:

1. Weighs a situation carefully before drawing conclusions
2. Relies upon his reason rather than his emotions
3. Has a healthy self image and sense of self
4. Makes practical decisions based upon his perception of the situation
5. Knows how to deal with his anxiety, fear, and worries (Hirsch & Kummerow, 1989).

The purpose of this discussion is to draw some inferences from existing literature on how maturity or the development of life skills affects the individual student’s likelihood to experience
academic success or program completion. This proved to be a subject with very little factual
studies conducted which could provide educators with additional tools for program structure.
Most studies simply focused on age as a demographic. Few researchers attempted to probe
deeper into the importance of life skills in the development of the total student most likely to
persist in their educational journey.

Astin’s studies focused on the relationship of age and the changes that occur in students
as they progress through the institution. Choosing to focus on the age of the entering student, he
noted that if a particular change occurs in the student’s assessed attitudes and behavior that is in
part the result of maturation, the older students would show less change than the younger ones.
He concluded “if a particular change occurs in most young people during the interval from age
18 to 20, regardless of whether a person attends college, then it is reasonable to expect that
students who are already 20 when they first enter college would be less likely to exhibit these
changes than students who are 17 or 18. In short, a negative relationship between any given
change and age at college entry would constitute evidence that the change is in part
maturational” (Astin, 1993, p.87).

Prioritizing is a skill which receives primary attention in almost all discussions of time
management. Most universities devote a segment of their student help web pages to the
importance of developing time management skills. One particular study was conducted which
focused on the possible correlation of effective time management skills and academic success
(Throop and Gelb, 2001). A random search of college web sites revealed that almost all of them
devote some space to the importance of time management. At the Clemson University web site,
the time management section listed the following keys to successful time management in
college:

- You control the timing of your academic schedule; do it wisely.
- Studying properly is serious business; plan on devoting hours of out-of-class time per
  week to the task.
- You will study better if you study often and in relatively short sessions.
- Weekly planning is a good way to ensure that you have adequate time for studying.
  Remember, writing it down works!
• Get in the habit of making a weekly schedule of your study plans.
• Stick to your plan! (Clemson University Web Page, 2007).

Although there have been few studies which focused on the importance of coping abilities among college as it relates to attrition, Scott DeBernard, Glen Spielmans, and Deana Julka included coping as a risk factor variable in their 2004 research project entitled “Predictors of Academic Achievement and Retention among College Freshmen: A Longitudinal Study” (2004). An earlier study by Brown and Cross in 1997 reported conflicting results from those found by Ryland et al. in 1994. Although Ryland reported no relationship between coping and academic achievement, Brown & Cross’ study determined coping to be a strong predictor of achievement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). That theory was supported by the DeBernard, Spielmans, and Julka 2004 study. They included two separate coping strategies as potential predictors: “escape avoidance coping and accepting responsibility coping.” Because of the conflicting findings of previous studies, their study sought to use the two types of predictors to further analyze the relationship between coping and retention. The team concluded that “acceptance-focused coping was related to poor academic achievement. This type of coping involves blaming oneself for one’s problems. It is possible that this coping style may lower effort, as internal attributions for failure may result in an increasing sense of helplessness, which may in turn lower achievement. The study concluded that “people who believe they have the ability and hold high expectations of success work harder, persist longer, and often perform better in intellectual and manual tasks” (DeBernard, Scott, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004).

This project’s beginning hypothesis was that the variable of Sense of Being Focused or Goal-Oriented has the potential to be a significant factor in a student’s completion or exit behavior in the career school sector. Most career school programs are two years or less. Obviously, the shorter the program or the lesser distance between entry and
completion may significantly affect the student’s likelihood of completion. It is hypothesized by some administrators that staying focused for one or two years is more likely to occur than doing so for four or more years as is the timetable for most student completion in more traditional institutional programs. Even within the career school sector itself, the shorter programs often display better retention rates than their longer program counterparts (Ruch, 2001). In 2000, Butler County Community College developed a specific program to determine how individual student goals affected retention. An SIS or Student Retention Survey was created to:

1) Identify student goals
2) Find out to what extent students accomplish their goals at the college
3) Identify factors related to student success
4) Identify factors related to student retention (Noel – Levitz, 2007).

The goals the students identified were categorized into four general groups and one labeled “other”: transfer credits, learn subject, acquire skill, and obtain a degree.

Since this study was conducted at a two year community college, the results are skewed toward a high percentage of students who entered the institution with plans to transfer. This type of goal is indigenous to two year community colleges. The survey revealed that about 58% of the students entered with the goal of completing their degree, while 42% were attending college for other reasons. The study ranked the reasons students gave for leaving the college as:

- Scheduling problems
- Stress from competing demands
- Constant worry about money problems
- Lack of energy after work
- Lack of course relevance to future jobs/plans
• Difficulty juggling family and studies
• Choose to spend more time with family
• Tired of studying (Noel – Levitz, 2007).

While results from this type of study should not be carelessly assumed to be representative of all college students, the results do provide researchers some ideas and direction for future investigation.

A former instructor once proclaimed that “a goal is a dream with a date attached to it”. For adults who dream of having a better life, the ones who have the best opportunity to make the dream come true are those who have the ability to devise a plan for achievement (Throop & Gelb, 2001). The more specific the plan, the greater the likelihood that the adult will be able to achieve measurable results. The more specific the plan, the easier it is for the individual to stay focused upon it. Career schools usually offer individual adults a diploma or credential that is easier for the student to focus upon than some of the general fields of study that are often offered by traditional institutions. Again, this literature review has uncovered the need for a better understanding of how maturity and the ability to focus upon a goal may differ greatly in the variables’ significance for traditional college students and for those in career school sector proprietary colleges. The intent of the survey instrument was not to measure the student’s maturity (or life skills), but rather to accept the student’s self-reported belief about how important or unimportant the factor was to their program completion.

Sense of “Connectedness” with the School

This particular variable offers a multitude of possibilities of how connectedness or the lack of it might contribute to both attrition and retention. On the surface, there is a temptation to
oversimplify connectedness. After all, it makes common sense that as long as a person is having a good time and feels “connected” to an event such as a party that he or she would want to remain and enjoy the experience. Contrarily, when there is no “connection” it is likely that one would not stay longer than necessary. I was intrigued by the possibility of uncovering the importance career school sector students place to the variable of “connectivity with the school”. The significant questions are:

1) What constitutes connectivity?
2) What role does its presence play in persistence?
3) What role does its absence play in attrition?

This review of existing literature regarding student connectivity revealed a considerable amount of existing data and speculation on its importance among traditional college students, but no studies were found that were conducted exclusively at career schools. Some of the terms used to describe the phenomena were social experience, friends, faculty interaction, outside activities, peer involvement, social engagement, social environment, student support services, faculty advising, and external factors shaping perception, commitment, and preference.

The dictionary provides multiple accepted uses for the word “connectivity.” The definitions include: two objects being joined, association, synchronization, joined in sequence, not separated, united, and oneness among others. For this paper, the term chosen is “connectedness” and it is defined as the attachment or attachments (perceived or not) between the institution and the student that cause(s) the student to remain a student at that institution. The literature review of the role connectivity plays in student persistence revealed three major contributory elements: faculty, friends, and activities outside the classroom.
Faculty

The role the institution plays in persistence received considerable attention from Pascarella and Terenzini in each of their exhaustive research projects investigating how college affects students. They provide the following overview:

Research reviewed in our earlier book indicates that student contact with faculty members outside the classroom appears consistently to promote student persistence, educational aspirations, and degree completion, even when other factors are taken into account. The nature of this realization appears to be a function of at least two processes. One is the socialization of students to the normative values and attitudes of the academy. The second is the bond between student and institution that appears to be facilitated and promoted by positive interactions with faculty members as well as peers. (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p.310)

Their research revealed that while not all studies proclaimed a positive relationship between persistence and the frequency of contact between faculty and students, most of the studies did show a positive relationship. Astin found that “student-faculty interaction has significant positive correlations with every academic attainment outcome: college GPA, degree attainment, graduating with honors, and enrollment in graduate or professional school (Pascarella & Terenzini, p.417). Similar results were found by Avalos, 1994, Kuh and Hu in 2001, Belchier and Michener in 1997, Shield in 1994, Johnson in 1997, Milem and Berger in 1997, and Mohr, Eiche, and Sedlacek in 1998 (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

In the study conducted by Juan Avalos “Student Retention at Northern Virginia Community College,” Avalos found that both academic and social involvement is perceived as being important for students. Avalos found that involvement matters most during the first year of enrollment. He found that almost half of all students who withdraw from college do so before the start of the second year of their program (Avalos, 1996).
Friends

Social support has been identified as one of the most significant factors in the persistence of any endeavor. As students find themselves interacting with others on a daily basis, their development of friends, peer groups, or other social support systems can play a significant role in their adjustment to the college experience. In a study by Sarason, Levine, Basham, and Sarason in 1983, social support is defined as “the existence or availability of people on whom we can rely, people who let us know they care about, value, and love us” (Sarason, Levine, Basham, & Sarason, 1987, p.184). The study found that social support is beneficial to students for two reasons. “First, social support may have a main effect on stress, anxiety, and well-being such that individuals with higher levels of support experience fewer negative consequences. Second, social support may facilitate successful coping during stressful situations, such that it buffers the effects of stress” (Sarason, Levine, Basham, & Sarason, 1987, p.186).

Napoli and Wortman reported findings that students who have a degree of social support from family and peers were more likely to earn higher grade point averages in their first year. He concluded that these students also reported higher levels of social and academic adjustment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Activities Outside the Classroom

In his groundbreaking book Leaving College, Vincent Tinto provides the warning that college retention programs should focus on the total educational program and not merely upon numbers. Socialization, Tinto claims, should be an integral part of such a program. He states:

Education, not mere retention, should be the guiding principle of retention programs. Programs should be designed to provide each and every person with continued opportunity to grow, both socially and intellectually, while in college. Institutions need to do more than simply act to ensure the continued presence of students on campus. They
must come to view the success of retention programs not only by the increased numbers of persons who stay until degree completion, but also and more importantly by the character and quality of the learning which takes place during that period. In providing individuals with the resources to acquire the skills needed for college work and with interactional opportunities for the establishment of community membership, institutions must also ensure that those skills and communities are such as to promote the social and intellectual growth of its members. (Tinto, 1987, p.5)

A recognized research pioneer in American community college data, Florence Brawer found that the more academically and socially involved students are with an institution, the more likely they will persist with their academic studies. Overall, she says in two year programs academic integration becomes more important. She says the reason for this is because typically in the shorter programs, the classroom becomes the only place for social integration. She says, academic integration and interaction with the faculty either in the classroom or outside should be strong because students in typical commuter colleges do not have access to as many social activities and groups as do students at four year institutions (Cohen and Brawer, 1987).

The institutions themselves have been charged with a major responsibility in providing students a collegiate environment conducive to the development of a social support system. Specific programs exist on most college campuses which are designed to provide the student the tools necessary for adjustment to college life. The Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) and Academic support Program for Intellectual Rewards and Enhancement (ASPIRE) are examples of this type of institutional commitment to the individual student’s social adjustment. In traditional colleges, intramural sports, fraternities, and sororities are exemplary of outside the classroom activities which add balance to the student’s life (Astin, 1993).

Tinto’s student integration theory ties in several of the variables in consideration in this literature review chapter. His theory encompasses the aforementioned concepts of the student’s acceptance of responsibility for completion, maturity, ability to achieve goals, and the role of the
student and institution in regards to academic and social interaction. His theory attributes attrition to the lack of congruency between institutions and students. He asserts that the relationship of the student’s motivation and academic ability and the institution’s academic and social characteristics help shape two important underlying commitments: commitment to the student’s educational goals and the student’s commitment to remain a student at the institution. He concludes that the higher the student’s commitment to the goal of program completion, the greater the probability of the same outcome (Tinto, 1987).

This literature review regarding a student’s connectedness with the institution has provided a solid argument for its inclusion in the research instrument. Although no studies were found that focused exclusively on the career school student, I believe that a better understanding of how career school sector students feel about connectedness to the school will be invaluable information for administrators of these institutions.

**Literature Review Summary**

Most of the available studies focusing on retention/attrition have been conducted on traditional college campuses. These studies have asked the right questions, but they fail to be addressed to the students in career sector for-profit institutions who comprise an increasing segment of the student population in higher education. However, their contribution to this study is immeasurable. Without the foundation laid by these studies, there would be no possibility of “offshoot” studies such as this one. As is the case for all scientific endeavors, “knowing what we know and what we don’t know” is the starting point for this research endeavor. The same type of behavioral questions asked by higher education research pioneers such as Tinto, Astin, Pascarella and Terenzini were utilized in the research portion of this project. Rather than address them
quantitatively as the majority of the previous research has done, this research project will attempt to uncover how the students themselves assess the seven chosen variables’ significance to completion. I express genuine appreciation to those who have laid the groundwork for this project that adds new understanding of the ever-changing population called “today’s college student.”

The existing literature that focuses upon retention and attrition among higher education is massive. Thousands of researchers have attempted to discover the reasons some students persist while others discontinue their educational journey. So what have they discovered?

First, there is no magic formula for the achievement of student retention. Tinto and others developed their theories, but even they openly admit that there is no scientific or quantitative formula that lends itself to duplication and resulting in student retention.

Secondly, the subject of student retention is a fascinating one. Why else would so many research teams spend decades of involvement in the pursuit of information? The studies have probed all aspects of the institution including administration, faculty, curricula, campus activities, ad infinitum. Other studies have focused upon the students and the myriad of differences they bring to the college campus. Still other studies have focused upon society, the environment, and outside influences that play various roles in the student’s educational journey. It seems that the more we learn about retention, the more we discover what we don’t know.

The literature review itself was instrumental in providing guidance for this research project. Some of the variables originally hypothesized by the focus group to be significant to program completion were “left on the cutting room floor” because of the insight developed in reviewing the path honed by the dedicated efforts of previous researchers.

Since most of the available research information focuses upon students at traditional
institutions, the lack of information about the career school sector for-profit students shouts out for more research. Astin and others probed into the students themselves and the role they play in the retention/attrition process. Their efforts resulted in a much better understanding of the importance of academic preparedness, locus of control, student connectivity with faculty and other aspects of the institution, maturity, self-esteem, peer and family support systems, and the role goal orientation plays in the student’s adjustment, involvement, and persistence. It is time now to apply that information specifically to this study that spotlights today’s career school sector student. In a non-threatening manner, I attempted to encourage program completers to share their self-reported beliefs and perceptions regarding the role each of the chosen variables played in this portion of their completed educational journey.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

Since the objective of this project is to develop a better understanding about an existing community, the descriptive research design was chosen. This qualitative methodology was chosen because it allowed the research team to efficiently examine the focus population with an instrument designed to reveal program completing students’ self-reported perceived information, attitudes, opinions, preferences, and perceptions. Utilizing a questionnaire survey instrument, the study focused on a selected population of recent career school program completers. The questionnaire was designed to identify self-reported perception of the students whose performance classified them as individuals who achieved completion goals. The purpose of this study was to systematically identify the defining attitudes, perceptions, characteristics and other variables that might be shared among career school program completers and determine the contribution the students themselves believe each of the seven carefully chosen and researched variables made to their program completion. Knowing more about the internal make-up of students who have achieved success will provide career school administrators and faculty a better understanding of how to best structure all aspects of the learning environment.

The beginning of the project was dominated by an extended period of brainstorming, free writing, and critical analysis. A support team of higher education professionals was formed to provide insight and guidance to ensure the project would answer to appropriate questions derived from research in the field, would remain focused, and would provide knowledge that would prove valuable to the industry. From its inception, the research project was designed to provide guidance and direction for career school sector faculty and administrators.

The initial questions the research team had to answer were:
• What do we need to know about program completers that will enable us to provide both a better educational product and also aid our retention efforts?
• What research instrument will provide the most useful data?
• What population will best provide this information?
• How can each of these questions be answered economically and practically?

Based upon a combination of adult education experience, specific knowledge about career school sector students, and higher education retention and attrition, the team of 37 higher education professionals was formed. Their specific experiences with career sector students included such interaction as classroom experience, student finances counseling, recruitment, student advisory sessions, orientation experiences, entrance processing and exit processing. These individuals comprised a focus group with the assigned task to determine from their experiences the most significant possible contributors to program completion among career school sector students. Based on their own experience and research, each member of the team originally submitted specific factors which they asserted “may” contribute to either attrition or retention among career school sector students. Their contributions resulted in an original list of 27 variables. In alphabetical order they were:

• Ability or inability to accept responsibility for completion
• Ability or inability to prioritize
• Academic preparedness
• Expulsion – Academics
• Expulsion – Cheating
• Expulsion – Classroom disruption
• Expulsion – Drugs or alcohol abuse
• Expulsion – Physical or verbal abuse
- Family emergency
- Family or friends support system or lack of it
- Financial problems
- Incarceration
- Institutional program changes
- Job related problems
- Legal problems
- Maturity or lack of maturity
- Medical problems with the students
- Medical problems with the family
- Military obligations
- Personal problems
- Pregnancy
- Scheduling and institutional program offering conflicts
- Self esteem
- Sense of being goal oriented
- Sense of connectedness with the school
- Transferring to another institution
- Transportation issues

From this list, the team was asked to rank the top ten variables which from their experience and research were most contributory to program completion. Each team member was instructed to include overcoming an attrition problem if they considered it significant to retention or persistence (and ultimately, to completion). The team’s choices were weighted with 10 points.
awarded for a number one ranking, 9 points awarded for a number two ranking, etc. From this ranking and the extensive literature review, seven variables emerged as factors most likely to contribute to program completion among career school sector students. These factors were supported by the literature review and became the focal point of the research project. They appear here in alphabetical order:

1. Ability to accept responsibility for completion
2. Academic preparedness
3. Family or friends support system
4. “Good” self esteem (not necessarily high)
5. Life skills preparedness (or maturity)
6. Sense of being focused or goal oriented
7. Sense of “connectedness” with the school (including instructor/student relationships)

Based on these carefully selected variables, the project addresses the research objective of determining how career school sector program completers themselves perceive the importance of these variables toward program completion.

Research Questions

Based upon the literature review and input from the support team of higher education professionals, the seven specific variables were chosen to be studied for each variable’s possible significance to program completion among career school students. The 7 variables comprise the direction for the 7 specific research questions:

1. How significant is the ability to accept responsibility for completion to program completion?
2. How significant is academic preparedness to program completion?
3. How significant is a family or friend support system to program completion?
4. How significant is “good” self-esteem (not necessarily high) to program completion?
5. How significant is life skills preparedness (or maturity) to program completion?
6. How significant is a sense of being focused or goal oriented to program completion?
7. How significant is a sense of “connectedness” with the school (including instructor/student relationship) to program completion?

In addition to the main objective of determining the students’ perceived significance of the seven variables’ contribution to program completion, questions designed to reveal relevant information about three additional areas were included in the instrument. These additional questions were chosen based upon indicators of importance revealed by the literature review and input from the team of career school professionals. The questions were added to provide some general information about the program completers that might also be beneficial information for future administrative decisions. Since the literature reviewed revealed that there are few studies that provide information about career school sector students, a better overall picture of these students who finished their programs can be beneficial to administrators and career school decision makers in such administrative areas as recruitment, student finances, career placement and future school locations: Who are these students? How did they overcome specific challenges? From where did they get their motivation to finish? I determined that the additional information might provide future researchers additional variables or interventions for future research projects.

Survey Instrument

Development of the survey instrument required considerable attention to assuring participation and completion of the survey questionnaire. According to Gall, Gall, and Borg in
their extensive textbook outlining procedures for advanced research, “you need to have a good understanding of your respondents so that you use language that they understand, so that you can obtain all the information you need without exhausting their patience, and so that the items engage their interest and willingness to respond honestly” (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003, p.227). In addition to the input from the career sector professional focus group, five years of personal experience in the career school sector as an instructor and administrator proved to be invaluable to my construction of the survey instrument.

Graduating students from Remington College North Houston Campus and Remington College Dallas Campus in the second and third quarters of 2007 were asked to complete a survey as part of the exit process on the day he or she processed out of the school and received their cap and gown for graduation ceremonies. Students choosing not to participate in graduation ceremonies were mailed the survey questionnaire and provided a return mail option. The survey consists of questions designed to be completed in less than ten minutes.

Throughout the questionnaire, specific questions were included to provide a picture of how the students perceived the variables’ significance in the completion of their own individual program. The questionnaire concluded with a question which required the students to specifically rank the variables in order of perceived importance to their program completion.

As mentioned earlier, a list of possible contributing factors to program completion was methodically constructed and examined by myself and the focus group. The final seven variables selected for inclusion in the instrument were identified from research in the field and from faculty and staff with long histories of working with career school students. A pre-survey test of 25 subgroup respondents was helpful to the editing process that resulted in the final instrument.
The pre-survey test revealed no significant distinction between diploma graduates or degree graduates, so that information was not included in the actual questionnaire.

Each question in the survey instrument relates directly to one of the seven variables or one of the three additional research questions. The actual survey instrument is presented in the appendix section of this paper.

Research Question 1: What role does the ability to accept personal responsibility for program completion play in the actual program completion process?

Rotter’s locus of control theory and Knowles’ theory of andragogy provided the guidance for these survey questions designed to reveal the program completers’ primary locus of control as being internal or external. The survey question that most directly addressed this question was “The person most responsible for my program completion was…”

The survey also included two similar questions with the same choices as above, “The second most responsible person for my completion was…”, and “The party that had little effect upon my completion was…”

Research Question 2: What role does the student’s perceived academic preparedness play in the actual program completion process?

The 2005 University of Arkansas research study provided the impetus for adding a qualitative analysis approach to academic preparedness. Mulvenon, Denny, Stegman, Airola, and McKenzie’s goal was to identify possible contributors to completion or incompletion from secondary educational experiences. For this study, the decision was made to ask survey questions which revealed the students’ self reported perceptions about their preparedness. Future researchers may choose to determine actual high school performance scores which might reveal
different results than those perceived by the participants. There were three questions in the survey which addressed academic preparedness. One specific question addressed the student’s perception of his or her own pre-college academic level and the second question addressed the student’s general perception of his or her intelligence. A third question generally addressed the value for education they may have received from their parents’ educational experience.

Research Question 3: How does the student perceive the importance of friends and/or a family support system as it relates to program completion?

Tinto, Golden and Lesh, and the team of Coffman and Gilligan all stressed the importance of this variable in studies conducted upon students in traditional institutions of higher learning. The questionnaire in this study extended their research questions to the different population represented by career school students. The first question mentioned in Research Question 1 was also significant in addressing the student’s perceived importance of friends and family. The greatest contributor to the information in this category came from the following question: When I attended college I had a solid family, friend, or significant other support system

Research Question 4: How important was the students’ level of self-esteem to program completion?

Golden and Lesh’s theories of self-esteem were used in developing Questions 4 and 5.

Research Question 5: What is the perceived importance of “life skills preparedness” or individual maturity to program completion among these students?

Although age was not equated with maturity in this study, it was determined to be of value in the overall analysis of the student. For that reason, a question regarding the student’s age
was included. Based upon Malcolm Knowles assumptions, three other questions addressed maturity level and life skills.

Research Question 6: How did the students perceive the significance of being focused or goal-oriented to program completion?

With the intention of extending the focus of the Butler County Community College study, two direct survey questions were included to shed light on the importance of goal orientation as perceived by the students.

Research Question 7: How important did these students believe that being connected to the school contributed to their program completion?

Since career schools offer minimal opportunities for outside the classroom activities, most of the connection is usually perceived by administrators to be through instructors or other students. The previously mentioned questions concerning friends at the school were significant in addressing this research question.

There are many various contributors to an individual student’s decision to continue or discontinue their educational commitment. It was never the intent of this project to label the chosen variables as exclusive or dominant. Each variable’s inclusion was based upon both the literature review and the chosen team of higher education professionals and my experience and perceptions of relevance. The variables were selected from an original list of 27 variables and inclusion in the survey instrument resulted in a study grounded on both the team’s experienced-based choices and information revealed as a result of the literature review. This team was selected because of their professional experience, variety of educational responsibilities, and passion for the subject of student retention. It is also my belief that none of these variables lend
themselves to scientific factual conclusion. Each variable carries degrees of interpretation that provide an inherent limitation to any research “findings.” The survey instrument was developed because of its ability to describe the students’ perceptions, attitudes, and opinions about each variable’s contribution to their program completion. A target group of 25 test graduates were given the survey in an effort to assure clarity and efficiency. Based upon this test, some changes were made to the original instrument. An example was the addition of clarifiers in the ranking question that concluded the survey: “Good” Self-esteem (not necessarily high”, and “Life Skills Preparedness (or maturity).”

Participants

As an academic administrator (Director of Education) at Remington College, I chose to conduct the research with Remington student participants. The students were offered to participate in an “exit survey” from the college. They were told that they would remain anonymous and their answers were being used to help provide a better academic product for future Remington students. As the program completing students came to the college to process out before graduation ceremonies, they were given the survey and taken to a private room and allowed to complete the survey in solitude. The survey was then hand-delivered to me. All students who completed their program were offered the survey and 99% chose to participate. Students who out-processed at an earlier or later time were mailed the survey. This group was 24% of the program completers and 15% of the surveys were returned by mail.

Rationale for Choosing Remington College

Remington College, North Houston Campus and Dallas Campus were chosen for three
reasons. The first is because Remington is an established career school which objectively provides a database of program completers that meet all the objectives of the target population. With over six thousand students in 18 different locations throughout the United States, Remington provides geographical and cultural diversity. Offering two year degree programs and eight to twenty month long diploma programs makes Remington representative of the typical career school program length. Remington’s wide variety of program offerings also provide the research project with a representative cross section of career objectives. Remington College degree programs include business administration, criminal justice, computer networking, electronics, and culinary arts; Remington’s diploma programs include cosmetology, dental assisting, medical assisting, and pharmacy technician services (Remington College Catalog, 2008).

The second reason Remington College was chosen for the study was because of its natural accessibility, economics, and practicality. Surveys were administered in a controlled campus environment to 263 program completers. Twenty eight additional surveys were received by mail. Ninety-four percent of the 291 surveys were completed correctly and included in the analysis.

The third justification for selecting Remington College was due to the timeliness of the survey. Student perceptions about completion are at their clearest when the survey is administered immediately upon graduation. All surveys were completed by Remington students within three months of program completion.

Procedure for Analysis of Research Findings

The descriptive analytical method was chosen for this project. Simple percentages proved
to be most valuable to the establishment of a starting place for the analysis. The individual survey questions were examined to provide a comparison response to examine congruency with the student’s self-reported ranking of the variable’s individual significance with the variable’s specific questions included in the body of the questionnaire. Based on these findings, a qualitative approach was taken to provide a thorough analysis of the significance and importance of each of the target variables’ self-reported contribution to program completion among these graduating students of career school sector for-profit schools.

Data analysis began with a simple frequency count. Because each question relates directly to one of the seven variables, the answers were grouped accordingly. A narrative analysis described the consistency of each student’s answers within variable categories. The student’s ranking of the variables were coded with assigned values which received weighted significance and provided a comparative ranking system to establish the students’ perceived importance of each variable and its relationship to the others. Since the survey was designed to provide perceptions, feelings, and opinions, the survey choices have purposefully been written in conversational style.

The instructions provided to the students were as follows:

Congratulations on your program completion at Remington College. As part of your exit process you are being asked to voluntarily provide the college feedback on your experience. Your participation is anonymous and your answers will be used to provide administrators at Remington College valuable information for future administration of the college. This is an opinion survey and your honest feelings and perceptions are both encouraged and appreciated.
CHAPTER 4
ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Introduction

This chapter outlines results related to the importance of the seven selected variables and their contribution to program completion among students in career school sector for-profit institutions. The survey instrument was designed to reveal perceptions and beliefs from the participants themselves. In addition to asking the respondents to rank each variable in degree of significance to program completion, specific survey questions for each variable were included to provide additional supportive information for qualitative analysis of the students’ perceived importance of each variable.

The significance of the seven variables was addressed as Research Questions 1 through 7; three other questions were included in the project. Since the literature review revealed that there are few studies that provide specific information about career school sector students, a better overall picture of these students who finished their programs can also be beneficial to administrators and career school decision makers in such administrative areas as recruitment, student finances, career placement and future school locations. The additional questions were: Who are these students? What challenges did they have to overcome? and From where did they get their motivation to finish?

Table 2

Survey Completion Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Completion</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Surveys completed on campus in controlled environment</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mailed – in return surveys</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invalid surveys</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useable Completed surveys</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Who Are These Students?

Seven questions were included in the survey designed to reveal general information about program completers. The questions were intended to give an overview of some of the characteristics which might be: (1) shared by most of the participants (2) insignificant factors or (3) factors necessitating further research.

When asked, “Do you feel that your experience at the school properly prepared you for the workforce?” 96.6 % of respondents answered yes, indicating a general degree of satisfaction with the school. Almost 80 % of the program completers indicated that they were either honor students (A’s), or made B’s and C’s in high school. Of the responders, 91.6% said they had a solid family, friend, or significant other support system while attending the school. Additionally, 93.3% stated that the primary reason they attended this school was to obtain a specific skill for employment. According to the survey, 91.6% noted that they had at least one instructor who made an impact on their life or specifically contributed to their program completion. The majority of students, 98.8%, perceived themselves to be mature enough when they entered the school. Additionally, 94.9% said they had clear-cut goals when they entered the school. In addition to 95.3% of the students claimed they were good at making decisions, 90.2% stated that as students they were good at prioritizing.

Some research questions produced a variety of responses: Student ages ranged from 43.3% who were under 21, 31.6% who were between 21 and 25, 10% from 26 to 30, and 15% of the respondents were over 30. Only 18.75% of the students had parents who graduated from college. However, 18.45% of the students stated that they had parents who had attended some college. Of the students’ parents, 25.1% were high school graduates. Perhaps more significantly, 37.5% of the students reported having parents who did not finish high school.
Some responses indicated a need for future studies which might reveal significant information regarding students who are married and those with full or part-time employment while attending school. Of the program completers, 71.6% were not married, and 68.3% had full or part-time employment while attending college.

*What Challenges Did They Have to Overcome?*

For this research question the word challenge is defined as any obstacle or outside factor which may play a significant role in attrition or require some degree of student resilience to achieve program completion.

Twenty percent of the students said they either barely graduated from high school or dropped out or got their GED later. As stated earlier, 37.5% of the students had parents who did not finish high school. Of the program completers, 29.4% also had a spouse or family commitments while attending college. As previously mentioned, 68.3% of the students also had to achieve some degree of balance between their school attendance and a full or part-time job.

*From Where Did They Get Their Motivation to Finish?*

Three specific survey questions addressed the students’ perception of the party or parties most responsible for their program completion.

The party most responsible for my completion was

The administration – 2.9%
My family/support system – 26.4%
My instructors – 17.8%
Me – 52.9%
The second most party responsible for my completion was

The administration – 0%

My family/support system – 40.9%

My instructors – 36.3%

Me – 22.8%

The party that had little effect upon my completion was

The administration – 52%

My family/support system – 18.4%

My instructors – 20.4%

Me – 9.1%

A fourth survey questions designed to reveal the students’ perceived motivation for completion required a specific response. The reason I finished was _________.

These answers produced a variety of responses that were assigned to nine general categories:

Commitment to career and personal goals - 35.4%

Personal drive, determination, and perseverance – 23.1%

Support from specific instructors – 11.8%

To prove something to themselves – 9.5%

Support from family members or friends – 8%

To help their families – 5.8%

To prove something to others – 3.3%

Support from a spiritual source 2.1%

Other – 1%
How Do The Program Completers Personally Rank The Hypothesized Variables Which May Have Contributed To Their Completion?

Each of the seven hypothesized variables was analyzed separately based upon the respondent’s ranking of relevance and the respondent’s answers to specific questions targeted to each variables. The respondents were asked to rank each variable from 1 to 7 in order of perceived significance to program completion. When an individual respondent gave a ranking of 1 or first in importance, the variable was assigned 7 points for comparative data analysis. A ranking of 2 or second in importance received 6 points for comparative data analysis. A ranking of 3 or third in importance received 5 points, etc. The seven variables received the following comparative ranking points:

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family or friends support system</td>
<td>1752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of being focused or goal oriented</td>
<td>1714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life skills preparedness (or maturity)</td>
<td>1299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good self-esteem (not necessarily high)</td>
<td>962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to accept responsibility for completion</td>
<td>933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic preparedness</td>
<td>493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of “connectedness” to the school, instructors, or fellow students</td>
<td>463</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additional percentages indicate that 116 students (42.4%) rated family or friends support system as the number one contributing factor to their completion. Of the 215 students who completed the survey, the family or friends support system variable was mentioned by 79% as one of the top three variables. Of the graduates, 21.2% rated sense of being focused or goal
orientation as their top reason for finishing, while 175 (64 %) rated the variable in their top three. Twenty-five students (9.1%) rated life skills preparedness (or maturity) as the primary contributing factor to their graduation. Of the responders, 56.6% rated life skills preparedness (or maturity) as one of the top three categories for significance to completion.

Research Question 1: What role does the ability to accept personal responsibility for program completion play in the actual program completion process?

Although this question was designed to provide specific information regarding the student’s perception of their own responsibility in the completion process, the internal survey questions were the same as three questions which focused generally on all parties who played a role in motivating the student to finish his or her program mentioned in the earlier portion of this chapter. The three questions were:

The party most responsible for my completion was

1. The administration – 2.9%
2. My family/support system – 26.4%
3. My instructors – 17.8%
4. Me – 52.9%

The second party most responsible for my completion was

1. The administration – 0%
2. My family/support system – 40.9%
3. My instructors – 36.3%
4. Me – 22.8%

The party that had little effect upon my completion was

1. The administration – 52.1%
2. My family/support system – 18.4%
3. My instructors – 20.4%
4. Me – 9.1%

Again, these answers indicate that 75.7% of the students ranked themselves as either the first or second-most responsible party for their program completion. When asked which of the four choices given for program completion responsibility had the least effect in their perception, the administration, the family/support system, and the instructors were chosen over themselves.

The question which most directly addressed the student’s internal or external locus of control was “The person most responsible for my success or failure in life is ____________.” Seventy-two percent of the respondents answered me or myself, 25.9% indicated a family member and 1.7% indicated another choice.

When ranking this variable with the six other choices, the specific importance of accepting personal responsibility for program completion received an overall rating of 933 comparative rating points, which made it the fifth most significant out of the 7 variable choices.

Research Question 2: What role does the student’s academic preparedness play in actual program completion?

The first question addressed the student’s perception of their own pre-college academic level:

In high school

1. I was an honor student – 35.6%
2. I made B’s and C’s – 44.0%
3. I barely graduated – 6.8%
4. I dropped out or got my GED later – 13.6%
Another question which addressed the student’s perception of their general intelligence was:

I believe

1. I am smart- 83.3%
2. I am not really smart but slightly above average- 11.7%
3. I am of average intelligence- 3.4%
4. I am below average in intelligence- 1.6%

It is noted by the research team that this question was addressed to program completers after they had had the program experience.

A third question generally addressed the value for education they may have received from their parents’ educational experience.

My parents

1. Graduated from college – 18.73%
2. Had some college- 18.77%
3. Graduated from high school – 25.2%
4. Did not finish high school- 37.3%

When ranking this variable with the six other choices, the specific importance of academic preparedness to program completion received an overall rating of 493 comparative rating points, which made it the sixth most significant out of the 7 variable choices.

Research Question 3: How does the student perceive the importance of friends and/or a family support system as it relates to program completion?

Three questions also significant to confirmation in Research Question 1 overlapped in significance for this research question. Sixty-seven percent of the responders indicated that
friends or family support system was either first or second most relevant to their completion among the two other choices – administration and instructors. A more direct question from the survey asked for a yes or no response:

When I attended college I had a solid family, friend, or significant other support system

Yes – 91.6%
No – 8.4%

A third question addressed the students’ perception of whether or not they had lots of friends at the school

I had lots of friends at the school

Yes – 88.2%
No – 11.8%

While these questions may indicate that the students perceived themselves as having a solid friends or family support system, it does not necessarily equate to their perception of the variable’s significance to program completion. When ranking this variable with the six other choices, however, the specific importance of having a friend or family support system to program completion received an overall rating of 1,752 comparative rating points, which made it the first most significant out of the 7 variable choices.

Research Question 4: How important to program completion was the students’ level of self-esteem?

Three specific question directly related to this variable.

When I began my program

1. I already had a good self image – 54.9%
2. I was just O.K. with myself – 32.3%
3. I was angry with myself for not being better – 11.3%

4. I hated myself – 1.5%

When I completed my program

1. I really liked myself – 97.8%
2. I was still just O.K. with myself – 2.2%
3. I was angry – 0%
4. I hated myself – 0%

Other people

1. Tend to like me – 97.5%
2. Are just O.K. with me – 2.5%
3. Don’t really notice me much – 0%
4. Usually hate me – 0%

When ranking this variable with the six other choices, the specific importance of self-esteem to program completion received an overall rating of 962 comparative rating points, which made it the fourth most significant out of the 7 variable choices.

Research Question 5: What is the perceived importance of “life skills preparedness” or individual maturity to program completion among these students?

Although age was not equated with maturity in this study, it was determined to be of value in the overall analysis of the student. For that reason, the following question was included in the survey:

My age when I entered the school was

1. Under 21 - 43.3%
2. 21-25 – 31.6%
Three other questions addressed maturity level and life skills.

I think I was mature enough when I entered the school

Yes – 98.8%

No – 1.2%

When I was a student I was good at making decisions

Yes - 95.3%

No – 4.7%

When I was a student I was good at prioritizing

Yes – 90.2%

No – 9.8%

When ranking this variable with the six other choices, the specific importance of life skills or maturity to program completion received an overall rating of 1,299 comparative rating points, which made it the third most significant out of the 7 variable choices.

Research Question 6: How did the students perceive the significance of being focused or goal-oriented to program completion?

Students were asked to make a yes or no response to the following question:

I think I had clear cut goals when I entered the school

Yes – 94.9%

No – 5.1%

A second question received a variety of answers that were included earlier in this chapter in relationship to the research question concerning motivation to complete their program: “The
reason I finished was ____________________________.”

As noted earlier these were placed in nine categories:

1. Commitment to career and personal goals - 35.4%
2. Personal drive, determination, and perseverance – 23.1%
1. Support from specific instructors – 11.8%
2. To prove something to themselves – 9.5%
3. Support from family members or friends – 8%
4. To help their families – 5.8%
5. To prove something to others – 3.3%
6. Support from a spiritual source 2.1%
7. Other – 1%

When ranking this variable with the six other choices, the specific importance of being focused or goal-oriented to program completion received an overall rating of 1,714 comparative rating points, which made it the second most significant out of the 7 variable choices.

Research Question 7: How much did these students believe that being connected to the school contributed to their program completion?

As noted in chapter 3, career schools offer minimal opportunities for outside of classroom activities. Since most of the connection is usually perceived by administrators to be through instructors or other students, the following questions provided the most insight into the students’ perceived significance of this variable.

I had an instructor(s) who made an impact on my life

Yes – 91.6%
No – 8.4%
This instructor(s) was contributory to my completion

Yes - 91.6%
No – 8.4%

When ranking this variable with the six other choices, the specific importance of being connected to the school and its contribution to program completion received an overall rating of 463 comparative rating points, which made it the seventh most significant out of the 7 variable choices.

Summary

The survey instrument provided useable data from 272 program completers at Remington College. Since the purpose of the survey was to encourage students to willfully submit their opinions, perceptions, and feelings, the response level of 93.4% useable surveys was deemed to be significant. A survey of this nature can become frustrating to respondents if it is not worded accurately to allow the participant to feel confident in the understanding of the questions. The high level of accurately completed surveys indicates that the objective of gathering useable raw data was successfully achieved.

The survey was designed to provide simple responses that provided data that was easily converted to percentages and rankings. These measurements proved to be compatible to detailed analysis and interpretive conclusions that follow in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While the previous chapter was devoted to an examination of the raw data revealed by the survey instrument, this chapter takes the data a step further with interpretation, suggestions for future administrative application, and suggestions for future research projects.

The owner of one of the most successful automobile dealerships in the United States was once asked to reveal his secret for success. He said the answer was “simple.” He said he let his satisfied customers tell him how to run his business. One month after the sale of each new vehicle, his marketing representative would invite the new vehicle owner to lunch and would conduct an informal post sale interview. The automobile magnate said the representative took detailed notes. Those notes became the framework for his business. He said that not only did they find out what they had done wrong, but more importantly they found out what they had done right to create a happy customer. Perhaps the most important comment of all was that the owner said they implemented changes throughout the dealership based upon the perceptions of the “prospects” who became “satisfied customers.”

This research project is based upon an exit survey of satisfied “prospects” for a career school who became “satisfied customers” to the extent that they finished what they started (and consequently made all of the financial payments required). Based upon my qualitative analysis of the survey data, the students’ feelings, perceptions, and beliefs have provided some clear-cut directions for future career school administrative decisions.

Who Are These Students?

This discussion of survey findings begins with the data which revealed similarities in
perception by the survey respondents. There were several overwhelmingly similar responses which would indicate some areas for future administrative decisions based on a high degree of confidence.

Although the program completers ranked the importance of academic preparedness in sixth place (next to last) in importance to completion, the survey indicated that almost 80% of them identified themselves as being either an honor student (A’s) or average student (B’s and C’s).

Almost all of these program completers seemed to be confident that their attendance had not been a waste of time. Close to 97% of them indicated that they felt the experience at the school had properly prepared them for the workforce. Program completion cannot necessarily be equated with satisfaction. Some students might feel that the amount of time and money already invested in their program might justify completion even if they did not believe they were getting everything they needed to be properly prepared for the workforce. These respondents’ answers simply indicate that almost all of them were satisfied that they probably either got what they paid for or received the training, knowledge, or skill they expected. It appears to be more than an accident that 93.3% of these same students claimed that the primary reason they chose to attend this school was to obtain a specific skill that would translate into employment.

Four questions designed to get a picture of how the students perceived themselves before and during their school participation received a positive response rate of higher than 90%. Ninety-nine percent of them perceived themselves to be mature enough when they entered the school. Ninety-five percent claimed to have clear cut goals. While attending the school, 95.3% said they believed they were good at making decisions, and 90.2% thought they were good at
prioritizing. All of these responses indicate that almost all of these program completers felt they entered the school with strong internal skills.

These same students (97.8%) said that when they completed their program they really liked themselves. Ninety-eight percent said that “other people tend to like me.” Eighty-seven percent said they believed they are smart. All of these high percentages seem to indicate that most of these program completers had a high level of confidence, good self-esteem, and were satisfied that their decision to attend the school had adequately prepared them for the workforce.

Other questions produced a variety of responses. Student age did not appear to be a dominant factor to program completion but did skew toward a range of under 25 (almost 75%) with responses of 43.3% under age 21 and 31.6% between 21 and 25. Parental education was generally equally distributed between graduation from college, some college, high school graduation, and parents who did not finish high school. The latter had the greatest percentage, 37.5%, possibly indicating that more than one third of the students were not afforded the specific support of parents whose educational experience could relate to the student’s adult education experience.

*What challenges did they have to overcome?*

The survey presented four areas which might present challenges for the students outside of the classroom. Student responders were posed questions concerning previous academic achievement, parental education, spouse or family commitments, and full or part-time employment.

Two thirds of the students had full or part-time jobs while attending school. More than one third had parents who had not finished high school so it is speculated that they probably
could not specifically relate to the students’ academic challenges. Almost 30% were married and had family commitments to balance while attending school. One fifth of the completers “barely graduated” from high school, dropped out, or achieved their GED later.

From the survey responses, it is generally true that a significant number of these adult program completers became so by overcoming various challenges outside of the classroom. Obviously, student challenges can come from a myriad of sources and it was never the intention of this survey to insinuate that these challenges were the most significant or more important than others. Their inclusion was intended to add some initial insight into these specific areas that my previous experience had indicated as often a contributing factor to attrition. Additionally, all are measurable and lend themselves to quantitative investigation in future research.

*From where did they get their motivation to finish?*

The study of motivation is a complicated endeavor that requires much more than a cursory glimpse of possible contributing factors. For the purposes of this paper, the survey questions were intended to provide career school administrators an initial understanding of what the graduates themselves believed to be their own motivating factors. This became an area for examination of the students’ locus of control and the specific party or parties they perceived to be contributors to their program completion.

More than half of the respondents said that they were most responsible for the completion of their program (an internal locus of control). Almost exactly an equal number of respondents said the administration had little effect on their completion. The students’ family or friends support system (40.9%) was accredited as being second most influential to completion followed
by the influence of instructors (36.3%). These secondary choices do not necessarily indicate an external locus of control since the primary choice may have been internal.

The direct question posed to the respondents, “The reason I finished was…,” produced nine different categories of responses. Administrators can benefit greatly from knowing that more than a third of the program completers specifically said they stayed with their program to complete their commitment to career and personal goals. This information will again be addressed later in this chapter in the discussion of suggestions for future administrative application. Another significant number of students (23.1%) attributed the reason for their completion to personal drive, determination, and perseverance. Each of these categories lends itself to discussion later in this chapter about how career school administrators can best “tap in” to or bolster the beginning students’ commitment, goal establishment, or determination to finish.

**What role does the student’s academic preparedness play in actual program completion?**

Although almost 80% of the students perceived themselves as honor students or B or C level students, they ranked this variable sixth out of the seven variable choices for program completion. It appears to me that the students could possibly have considered this variable important, but not as significant as other variable choices. It also appears to be enigmatic that 83.3% of them also considered themselves smart.

Careful analysis of these responses can lead to multiple conclusions. Perhaps the students believed they were already of above average intelligence and their academic preparedness had little to do with their program success or completion. Others might interpret the answers to be aligned with a student perception that the other variables simply played a more significant role to their completion. A third interpretation might be that these successful students viewed the
variable of academic preparedness as neither important nor contributory to program completion. However one chooses to interpret the students’ responses concerning this variable, it remains unclear as to how the students perceive the role academic preparedness played in their program completion. It follows that future research of a quantitative nature would be more likely to provide more definitive guidance for career school administrators.

*What is the perceived importance of “life skills preparedness” or individual maturity to program completion among these students?*

For the most part, these program completers perceived themselves as mature individuals who were good at making decisions and prioritizing. They ranked the variable as the third most important out of the seven. Ninety-nine percent of the program completers said they believed they were already mature enough when they entered the program.

*How much did these students believe that being connected to the school contributed to their program completion?*

Although 91.6% of the students said they had an instructor who impacted their life and contributed to their completion, it appears that this impact was made primarily in the classroom. On page 68 of this paper, it was noted by researchers Pascarelli and Terenzini that at traditional colleges and institutions, outside the classroom interaction with faculty positively affects student persistence. When asked to rank the variable of “connectedness,” the career school program completers ranked it last. In the process of trying to interpret the students’ response, at least three possible viewpoints emerged. First, it is highly possible that the students did not fully understand the meaning of the variable labeled “Sense of connectedness with the school, instructors, or fellow students.” Secondly, they may have simply considered their connection with instructors as
the least important factor contributing to their completion. The third explanation is that in addition to instructors, perhaps a lack of perceived connection with the school or their fellow students affected the students’ ranking of the variable.

How important was the student’s level of self-esteem to program completion?

Although the students ranked the variable somewhat in the middle, almost all of them (97.8%) said that when they completed their program they really like themselves. The number of students who claimed to have a good self image at the beginning of their program was 54.9%. It appears that half of the students started their program with “good self-esteem” but almost all of them had developed it by the end of their program. The survey, taken after the students had completed their program, revealed that 97.5% of the students said “Other people tend to like me.”

This variable seems to shout out for future attention from career school administrators, and it is the catalyst for specific suggestions to follow later in the chapter. Based on these research findings, a strong case can be made for the importance of each student developing a high level of self-esteem. Future career school administrators should focus on a climate that will encourage high self-esteem.

How did the students perceive the significance of being focused or goal-oriented to program completion?

This variable was ranked as the second most important variable to program completion. Ninety-five percent of the students claimed to have clear cut goals when they entered the school. When asked to fill in the blank for the statement, “The reason I finished was,” one third of the students answered commitment to career and personal goals.
How does the student perceive the importance of friends and/or a family support system as it relates to program completion?

This variable emerged as one of the most significant of the research findings. Among the four given choices for parties most responsible for program completion (themselves, family and/or friends support system, instructors, or administration), having a friends or family support system was ranked first or second by 67.3% of the responders, 91.6% of the students indicated that they had a solid friend or family support system and 88% of them claimed to have “lots of friends at the school”. Complementary to these responses, the variable friends and/or a family support system was the top ranked choice among the seven proposed variables as contributory to program completion. Specific suggestions concerning how this information can possibly be used to guide future career school administration appears later in this chapter.

What role does the ability to accept personal responsibility for program completion play in the actual program completion process?

As mentioned earlier, this research question aligns closely with the specific question concerning the students’ perception of motivation factors affecting their program completion. Based upon their answers, it appears that most program completers in this study had a high level of internal locus of control. Over half of the respondents named themselves as being primarily responsible for their program completion. Over 75% of them ranked themselves either first or second among the choices for responsible parties for program completion.

More specifically, when asked which party was most responsible for their success or failure in life, 72.4% of the students answered me or myself. Since the remaining 27.6% mentioned the responsible party as a family member or another external choice, it seems likely that roughly three fourths of the program completers possessed an internal locus of control in the
area of responsibility for their educational success.

Although the students themselves ranked the importance of this variable fifth out of the seven provided choices among variables contributing to program completion, their responses, however, indicate the majority of them looked internally when asked about the party or person most responsible for their program completion.

In conclusion, regardless of the overall ranking of each of the 7 variables, the program completers participating in the survey indicated by their answers that each of the chosen variables individually carried a relatively high degree of importance to them. A review of the highlights for each variable indicates:

1. Academic preparedness -- More than 83% of the responders considered themselves smart, and almost 80% said they made grades of B’s or C’s or higher in high school.

2. Life skills preparedness (or maturity): Over 98% of the students stated they believed they were mature enough when they entered the program.

3. Sense of “connectedness” with the school, instructors, or fellow students: Eighty eight percent of the responders said they had lots of friends at the school and 91.6% of them said they had an instructor who impacted their life and was contributory to their completion.

4. “Good” self-esteem (not necessarily high): Nearly all of the surveyed students (97.8%) said that when they completed their program they really liked themselves.

5. Sense of being focused or goal oriented: Ninety-five percent of these program completers claimed to have clear cut goals when they entered the school.

6. Family or friends support system: Of the student responders, 91.6% of them indicated that they had a solid friends or family support system and 88% claimed to have “lots of friends at the school”.

7. Ability to accept responsibility for completion: Over 75% of them ranked themselves either first or second among the choices for responsible parties for program completion.

In summary, the major conclusions from this study are:

- Based upon their experience, the focus group inferred 7 factors significant to program completion
These 7 factors were supported by the literature as ones contributing to program completion.

The student responders who were program completers reported that each of the 7 factors were contributory to their program completion.

What now is unknown is how can career school sector administrators intervene around these factors to generate increased program completion rates.

Suggestions for Career School Administrators

In chapter 1, the stated purpose of this research project was to provide non-traditional career school administrators and educators a better understanding of the intangible qualities or circumstances that the students themselves believe are most contributory to their program completion. It was one of the pre-study assumptions that knowing what these qualities are will enable administrators and faculty to provide a learning environment that nourishes the supportive characteristics. Additionally, it was projected that a better understanding of the student’s qualities and needs will also provide administrative leaders and classroom instructors an objective view of activities or programs that might inhibit program completion and, conversely, activities and programs that will increase student retention. It is with these objectives in mind that I interpreted the research data; based on the data analysis, I now proceed to offer suggestions for future career school administration. Each of the sixteen suggestions to follow is based on the specific data revealed by the program completer respondents.

Institutional Commitments

1. The institution must be committed to providing the student an educational experience that properly prepares them to obtain employment in the chosen career field after successful completion of the program.
2. The institution must adhere to all accreditation or government guidelines to assure the student that his or her efforts will be rewarded with credentials that are consistent with current workforce requirements.

3. The institution must conduct annual or semi-annual professional advisory council meetings in order to assure students that the curriculum, equipment, and instruction is congruent with the current requirements of the workforce.

4. The institution must provide a physical and a cultural environment that is conducive to learning.

5. The institution must employ instructors with the experience, skills, and teaching expertise necessary to assure the student is properly prepared for employment.

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**Pre-enrollment Activity**

1. Provide the prospective new student detailed information and counseling regarding all academic, financial, and logistical aspects of their program before they choose to become a student.

2. Have prospective students prepare a handwritten statement outlining their educational goals and reasons for wanting to enroll in the program.

3. Provide one-on-one counseling to all prospective students to assure congruency between the realities of the program and the prospective student’s goals and expectations.

4. During the enrollment and orientation process, conduct a group meeting with all new enrollees’ friends or family support system. This is an excellent opportunity to communicate with these interested parties the importance of the role they play in the student’s educational journey.

5. During the orientation process, heavy emphasis should be given to communicating to each new student the importance of not only starting, but of finishing their program.

6. During the orientation process, heavy emphasis should be given to communicating to each student exactly how the program will prepare him or her for obtaining employment in their career field.

7. It is suggested that all prospective new students be given a test that would indicate their maturity or life skills preparedness level. Based on the results of this test, some students would be enrolled in a special life skills program during the first term or modular portion of the student’s training. This program should be designed to assist the student’s transition to adult education and/or the institution.

8. New enrollees should be offered the opportunity to have a student mentor during their first term or mod. This same sex individual would be a student who is further advanced in
the same program as the new student. They would serve as a “buddy” or friend to assist the student’s transition to adult education and/or the institution.

**Ongoing Institutional Responsibilities**

1. The institution must provide the student access to all information relevant to the student’s educational experience.

2. The instructor must assume responsibility for establishing an instructor/student relationship that results in the student’s perception that he or she is being provided a daily opportunity to succeed.

3. The student’s self-esteem should be augmented whenever possible. All the institution can do to keep the student’s confidence at a high level will be rewarded. Modular perfect attendance awards and honor roll certificates are examples of how the student’s success can be recognized, rewarded, and used to bolster self-esteem.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

One of the pre-study objectives of this research project was to “open the door” for future higher education research that is targeted to the non-traditional student. Perhaps this study has provided more questions than answers. That is not a bad thing if it serves in any way as a catalyst for future endeavors to better understand the career school sector student. There is a vital need for this further research.

The obvious direction for future study would be to apply quantitative research methods to create a more definitive picture of the career school student. Getting the successful student’s perceptions and feelings about why they completed their program is a great place to start. However, this study has now created a glaring need for future study that goes past what the students perceive to be the truth to a study that reveals the facts themselves. For instance, this study asked what do career school program completers perceive to be the importance of academic preparedness in regard to their program completion. A future study might research
actual high school GPA scores and study their possible significance or generalizability for both completers and drop outs.

Each of the seven variables individually might prove to be worthy of future research. For instance, an in depth study of LOC might reveal beneficial information for adult educators at all types of institutions.

The seven chosen variables provided valuable information, but future researchers might ask what other variables might be significant factors.

Future higher education research may focus on student challenges. Each of the four challenges included in this study (lack of academic preparedness, parental education, family commitments, and job commitments) might be the subject for a future study. Future researchers might choose to investigate the many other challenges that students face and how these relate to program completion or program stoppage.

This paper concludes with the suggestion of a specific future research project designed to implement this project’s research findings into an organized career school student success program. Each of the seven variables should be incorporated into a retention model that will provide faculty and administrators at career schools a specific program that can be utilized to produce measurable student completion results.

Programmed Application for Student Success

The Programmed Application for Student Success Program (P.A.S.S.) is a total system designed to increase career school student retention and program completion for students beginning their first term or modular section. The program consists of four interactive components formatted to address student attrition and program completion problems.
1. The Student Retention Council is an internal group organized with the objective of maximizing student retention and program completion. The council consists of selected administrative and faculty participants who coordinate all components of the P.A.S.S. program. The council is responsible for establishing student retention goals, maintaining accurate retention records, and the execution of the Student Mentoring Program and Family Orientation Day activities.

2. The P.A.S.S. Introductory Course is a first term 16 clock hour course based on the overall course objective: “to assist the new college student’s transition to college life.” The course covers goal setting, self-concept development, communication skills, study skills, and prioritizing. The material presented in the proposed text entitled Cornerstone encompasses each of these subjects. The course addresses the following five areas identified as significant to program completion: academic preparedness, life skills, self-esteem, goal orientation, and ability to accept responsibility for program completion.

3. Family Orientation Day is a one day (or evening) event designed to involve the student’s family, friends, or spouse in the student’s learning experience. The guests receive a tour of the campus, meet faculty and administrators, and participate in an interactive seminar. All activities are designed to inform the student’s support system about the school, curriculum, and daily challenges facing the student. Family Orientation Day addresses the family/friends support system variable identified as significant to program completion.

4. The Student Mentoring Program is designed to provide first term or first modular students a same sex student companion who will assist the new student’s transition to college life. All mentors are volunteers who are instructed to simply provide the mentored student an on campus peer support system. Mentors are not counselors themselves, but are trained to direct the mentored students to the appropriate campus administrators and administrative services. The Student Mentoring Program addresses the connectivity variable identified as significant to program completion.

The P.A.S.S. program is designed to provide the career school administrators a proactive approach to encourage program completion. Each of the 7 variables which served as the primary focus of this research project is included in the program. It is suggested for future higher education researchers that this model could provide a quantitative analytical basis for measurement of the 7 variables identified by the students themselves as significant to program completion.
APPENDIX

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE
REMINGTON COLLEGE PROGRAM COMPLETION SURVEY

Do you feel that your experience at this school properly prepared you for the workforce?
   Yes
   No

In high school
   1. I was an honor student
   2. I made B’s and C’s
   3. I barely graduated
   4. I dropped out or got my GED later

My age when I entered the school was
   1. Under 21
   2. 21-25
   3. 26-30
   4. Over 30

My parents
   1. Graduated from college
   2. Had some college
   3. Graduated from high school
   4. Did not finish high school

When I attended college, I had a part time or full time job
   Yes
   No

When I attended college I was married
   Yes
   No

When I attended college I had a solid family, friend, or significant other support system
   Yes
   No

The primary reason I attended college was to obtain a specific skill for employment
   Yes
   No

I had an instructor(s) who made an impact on my life
   Yes
   No

This instructor(s) was or were contributory to my completion
   Yes
   No

I think I was mature enough when I entered the school
   Yes
   No

I think I had clear cut goals when I entered the school
   Yes
No

I had lots of friends at the school
  Yes
  No

The reason I finished was __________________________________________________________

The person most responsible for my completion was
  1. The administration
  2. My family/support system
  3. My instructors
  4. Me

The second party most responsible for my completion was
  1. The administration
  2. My family/support system
  3. My instructors
  4. Me

The party that had little effect upon my completion was
  1. The administration
  2. Me family support system
  3. My instructors
  4. Me

When I was a student I was good at making decisions
  Yes
  No

When I was a student I was good at prioritizing
  Yes
  No

At least once while I was a student I did or seriously considered dropping out
  Yes
  No

If so, the party most responsible for my staying or coming back was
  1. Administration
  2. Family support system
  3. Instructor
  4. Me

If so, the second most responsible party for my staying was
  1. Administration
  2. Family
  3. Instructor
  4. Me

When I began my program
  1. I already had a good self image
  2. I was just Ok with myself
  3. I was angry or disappointed in myself for not being better
When I completed my program
1. I really liked myself
2. I was still just ok with myself
3. I was angry or disappointed in myself

Other people
1. Tend to like me
2. Are just ok with me
3. Don't really notice me much

The person most responsible for my success or failure in life is ________

I believe
1. I am smart
2. I am not really smart but slightly above average
3. I am of average intelligence
4. I am below average in intelligence

Read all 7 answers then rate them from 1 to 7 as being the most important aspects to your completion with one as the most important and 8 being the least important.

_______ Academic Preparedness
_______ Life Skills Preparedness (or maturity)
_______ Sense of “Connectedness” with the School, instructors, or fellow students
_______ “Good” Self Esteem (not necessarily high)
_______ Sense of Being Focused or Goal Oriented
_______ Family or Friends Support System
_______ Ability to Accept Responsibility for Completion
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