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Opportunity Program Counselors' Perspectives on Factors Affecting Student Retention and Attrition

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Abstract

Current higher education trends show that while college enrollment is increasing, attrition rates are also on the rise. Literature on the topics of current college enrollment and completion data, college readiness, education policy, and the factors affecting retention was reviewed with a focus on differences in education rates based on race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. A phenomenological study was completed to gain an understanding of the factors affecting the college retention of students in educational opportunity programs. These findings would serve to increase the postsecondary knowledge and college readiness of high school students at the researcher's internship site. The qualitative method of conducting focus groups was utilized to gather perspectives from Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) and Higher Educational Opportunity Program (HEOP) counselors and directors on the topic of student retention. The results indicated five main categories of factors affecting retention rates: academic, financial, personal, familial, and health. Similarities were observed among five postsecondary institutions on perspectives regarding college readiness, program components, and the strengths of students in opportunity programs. Conclusions on postsecondary experience and college readiness are included. It is recommended that increased intervention and support services be provided for college-bound high school students, those transitioning to college, and those already enrolled.

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Attrition

Postsecondary education has become a path that many students pursue, for both those

entering directly upon high school graduation and adult students returning to the academic

setting. National rates indicate that enrollment has been increasing for the past few decades,

specifically with the number of students entering college growing from 15.3 million to 21.0

million between 2000 and 2010 (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2012). These

numbers should show promise for our country, as obtaining a college degree improves one's

financial standing, overall health and well-being, and returns to society (ACT, Inc., 2012;

CollegeBoard, 2004). Unfortunately, due to current attrition trends this will not be true for the

21.0 million students enrolling in college.

The number of students who return to their postsecondary institution after their first year

is between 55 and 69%, with the range of differences resulting from the type of institution (ACT,

Inc., 2010). Private, four-year colleges have the highest rate of retaining students but these

numbers are still dismal. Consequently, many students depart before obtaining a degree. What is

causing the increase in college enrollment and decline in retention?

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the factors that negatively

impact students' ability to reach college degree completion. The results would be used to better

prepare college-bound high school students for their transitions to college and subsequent college

careers. This study is important as the findings can be used to increase college readiness and

limit the number of students attending college but failing to graduate.

The participants of this study were counselors and directors from opportunity programs

on five college campuses. These knowledgeable professionals have the potential to obtain the

most detailed information on why students depart. Although the focus groups were centered around discussions on the experiences of students in opportunity programs, the counselors shared perspectives on attrition and retention that apply to regularly admitted students as well.

There were certain limitations to this study, the first being that the data collected was anecdotal. The research method does not allow the findings to be generalizable, as all higher education professionals may not agree upon the EOP/HEOP counselors' perspectives on the factors affecting student retention. Another limitation is that the researcher personally led the focus group discussions and participant anonymity was compromised.

The major finding resulting from the research is that the intervention and support services found in opportunity programs should be offered to all students if improving retention and graduation rates are institutional and national goals. Recommendations for continued research are identified and explored due to the limitations of the study and the importance of this research topic.

Review of the Literature

Engaging in a postsecondary education instills a sense of hope and promise for one's future. Most high school counseling offices display posters highlighting the differences in lifelong earnings between those possessing a high school diploma and those possessing a Bachelor's or Master's degree. For example, the ACT, Inc. (2012) reports that Bachelor's degree holders earn 60% more than individuals with a high school diploma, while high school diploma holders earn 18% more than those who do not complete grade twelve. It is also difficult not to notice accounts of the ever-growing presence of highly skilled workers in our modern economy.

Aside from the sole consideration of economic factors, it has been reported that those with higher educational attainment are more likely to be healthy, be less involved in crime, and be more actively engaged voters and community members (ACT, Inc., 2012). The CollegeBoard (2004) also published similar findings on improved perceptions of health, decreased incarceration rates, and increased volunteerism for individuals with a Bachelor's degree, and detailed how children of mothers with a college education have increased cognitive skill levels, stronger eagerness to learn, and more frequent reading activity. College degree attainment results in positive influences on individuals, their children, and our society as a whole.

President Obama has revisited the importance of our nation's competitive involvement in college and careers, resulting in the creation of goals and a generation of influence around this topic. His administration has developed the mission of graduating the world's highest population of postsecondary students by 2020 (Ryu, 2010). Unfortunately, this goal appears to be quite ambitious, especially with an awareness of the following fact: while the total number of postsecondary students increased by 28% between 1997 and 2007, college persistence rates decreased through the same amount of time (Ryu, 2010).

The ACT, Inc. (2010) compiled a list of national postsecondary retention rates between 1983 and 2010. They found that the average number of students who return to two-year public schools after their first year is 55.7, the average for two-year private schools is 58.6, the average for public four-year schools is 67.6, and the average for private four-year schools is 68.7. The average number of students who graduate from two-year public schools within three years is 28%, the average for two-year private schools is 53.2%, the average number of students who graduate from public four-year schools within five years is 39%, and the average number for private four-year schools is 55.1%. These numbers suggest that many students enrolling in

postsecondary education are not being retained. Furthermore, current college attrition and completion rates show a greater decline when accounting for race and ethnicity.

The review of literature will explore a variety of factors that contribute to current trends in college retention and attrition, beginning with the high school experience and the transition to college. Significant gaps in postsecondary enrollment and completion will be addressed as they relate to race/ethnicity and socioeconomic (SES) status. A review of educational policies created to increase student retention is included, as well as the actions taken by higher education personnel to aid in keeping students enrolled until degree completion. Lastly, the guidelines and components of educational opportunity programs are discussed as they relate to the problem under investigation.

Current College Data

Not all students who graduate high school progress to postsecondary education, but for those who do, there are gaps in who is more likely to make it to degree completion based on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. These demographic characteristics will also influence whether a student attends public or private, four-year or two-year institutions.

Differences in populations. All students experience roadblocks and challenges in the transition to college, but there are certain groups for which these challenges are more prevalent and more detrimental. These students are the ones who are not likely to graduate from their postsecondary institution. According to the ACT, Inc. (2012) and the U.S. Department of Education (2011), there are persistent gaps in college attainment on the basis of family income, race/ethnicity, and sex, and these gaps have not changed in the past decade. Ryu (2010) studied minority involvement in higher education and included African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and American Indians in her definition of minority students. Although the number

of Associate's and Bachelor's degrees increased by 39% between 1997 and 2007, Whites

accounted for half of the growth in Bachelor's degrees and earned 66% of all undergraduate

degrees in 2007 (Ryu, 2010). Data reported in 2011 shows that those earning Bachelor's degrees

within six years are most likely to be Asian American (67%), White (60%), Hispanic (49%),

Black (40%), and American Indian (38%), while females continue to graduate at higher rates

than males (USDOE, 2011).

Although there are programs to aid in the number of minority students involved in

postsecondary education, remarkable inequities in degree completion still exist, due in part to

racism and negative experiences on predominantly White campuses, inequitable funding and

forced desegregation at historically Black colleges, and a decline in need-based financial aid

packages (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). Students from low SES backgrounds experience a

similar conundrum, as they are disproportionately enrolled in colleges and universities with

lower levels of financial resources (Titus, 2006). Those students from middle and high

socioeconomic status and from racial/ethnic majority populations are more likely to complete

college degrees due to cultural values and norms associated with this group membership that

increase one's ability to successfully engage in college (Titus, 2006). Walpole (2003) expands

on this idea by describing how low SES students have more advantages than their parents, but

their high SES peers hold even greater advantages because they are able to devote more time to

studying and extra-curricular involvement since they do not have to work to pay for college.

One trend in educational data that has changed is the number of adult students. The

population of college students ages 25 to 64 has been increasing since 2001 (USDOE, 2011).

Tinto (1993) explained that in the past older students were often returning soldiers, whereas

these populations are now mothers who originally stayed home to care for the family and men

who desire increased job opportunities. Tinto (1993) also explained that these students experience a greater amount of challenges due to their rusty academic skills, social commitments, and work schedules.

Due to the fact that minority and financially disadvantaged students experience inequities in degree completion (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Titus, 2006) and older students experience challenges resulting from the time they have been away from school and are able to commit to school (Tinto, 1993), these groups would benefit from programs on campus to develop a community and provide adequate resources, as these students are often the minority on their college campuses and the resources tailored to their needs are often segregated (Tinto, 1993). The inequity they commonly experience in their primary and secondary school environments often follows them to college and limits the chances they have to obtain a postsecondary degree.

Type of institution. The institutional retention rate refers to the number of students who return to college after successfully completing a given number of courses or semesters. Retention rates typically account for the number of students who return after their first year, because that is when departure is most likely (Tinto, 1993), though graduation rates are also utilized to track the number of students who were retained until degree completion. The rate of student retention has been found to vary due to certain characteristics of postsecondary institutions. For example, Tinto (1993) described how institutional selectivity widely determines the rate of students who return. Some institutions, such as community colleges, offer open enrollment, meaning that all students are selected for admission if they meet a minimum criterion. This criterion is often a high school diploma or General Educational Development certificate. In other words, admission is based solely on one's ability to graduate high school and

not their performance on scholastic aptitude tests or the rigor of the classes taken during these

years. Institutions that place more weight on the accomplishments of the students they select for

admission often have much greater rates of student returns. Tinto (1993) explained that two-year

institutions with open enrollment tend to attract part-time students who display varied

participation in their educational environment. Furthermore, these community colleges are likely

to be non-residential settings in which retaining students becomes more difficult in and of itself

due to the students' decreased connectivity to the institution (Tinto, 1993). The U.S. Department

of Education found similar trends in their 2011 *Condition of Education* report. Graduation rates,

signifying that students have been retained until degree completion, are highest at four-year

private institutions, followed by four-year public, two-year private, and two-year public

institutions.

Even when attained, degree completion varies by the selectivity of the institution. In

2011, public four-year schools with open enrollment saw 27% of males and 34% of females

completing degrees in six years, whereas the public schools that offered admission to less than

25% of applicants saw 73% of males and 72% of females graduating in six years (USDOE,

2011). Graduation from four-year institutions is greater than that at two-year institutions due to

the fact that students entering two-year schools gain admission because of less rigorous

admission requirements than the four-year colleges, however they are not as academically

prepared and are less likely to graduate (Ryu, 2010). This is consistent across all racial groups,

though African American and Hispanic students are more likely to attend community colleges,

state schools, and technical schools (Harper & Griffen, 2010) and White and Asian American

students are more likely to receive Bachelor's degrees (USDOE, 2011).

Remedial courses. An academic experience that causes immediate differences in the trajectory of one's postsecondary education is enrollment in remedial courses. Remedial coursework is designed to assist students who need to further develop their academic skills before they are able to enroll in credit-bearing college-level courses. The subjects most commonly addressed in remedial courses are reading, writing, and mathematics (USDOE, 2011). Students can be placed in remediation based on the level of courses they completed in high school and their performance on assessments such as the SAT and ACCUPLACER, which matches skill levels to course placement. Of the 70% of students who attend college after high school graduation, 28% will immediately take a remedial course in English or math. This often comes as a surprise to the students who successfully completed high school (USDOE, 2002). Although remediation allows students to engage in college before they are fully prepared, the negative impact of remediation is that one's college experience becomes more lengthy and expensive, as students pay for courses that do not count towards their degrees. Ultimately, those who require remediation are less likely to complete their degrees (Adelman, 1999).

Researchers have found differences in the types of students requiring remediation and the institutional setting where remediation is more likely to occur. Remedial course-taking is more likely to occur in urban college and community college environments where a disproportionate number of students enrolled are minority students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Tinto (1993) shared that 60% of the students in urban settings take remedial coursework, and one-third of the students have a schedule comprised entirely of developmental classes. Similarly, 60% of students at community colleges require at least one remedial course, whereas this percentage drops to 30 for students at four-year schools (Adelman, Daniel, Berkovitz, & Owenings, 2003). It was stated in a recent U. S. Department of Education (2011) publication that males, non-White

racial and ethnic groups, and Blacks and Hispanics are more likely to require remediation than women, Whites, and Asians, respectively. Because higher-achieving students are more likely to attend and graduate from four-year colleges, and the majority of these students are White from middle to high SES backgrounds, it is clear that the students more commonly enrolled in remediation are minority students (Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009). The differences in who takes remedial courses by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status helps support the fact that academic preparation for college varies according to one's social and cultural background and faulty preparation is one of the factors that can impact one's degree completion.

       Other factors affecting retention. Regardless of race/ethnicity and SES, most students experience transitional difficulties and there are oft-cited reasons for withdrawal from postsecondary educational environments. Grebennikov and Shah (2012) completed a seven-year study on college attrition in which they administered exit surveys to students leaving their large, multi-campus metropolitan university before completion of their first year of college. They were able to uncover the ten main factors students cited as reasons behind their withdrawal. They are as follows: courses were not what the student expected; employment commitments; timetable made it difficult to attend classes; family pressures; teaching and learning methods used were un-motivating; lack of feedback and/or individual help from staff; difficult to access staff; student felt isolated; unclear expectations related to assessment; pressure to enroll in courses for which students were not adequately prepared (Grebennikov & Shah, 2012). Many of the factors listed are institutionally based, with the exception of one's commitments to family and work. This elucidates the fact that retention is not solely based on the academic characteristics of the student, but also on the foundations and attributes of the college environment.

Vincent Tinto (1993) is a prolific researcher in the study of retention and attrition. His literature on the "roots of individual departure" focused on the individual level and institutional level of withdrawal, as well as external forces (Tinto, 1993, p. 34), but his findings share similarities to Grebennikov and Shah (2012). Tinto explained that a student's individual characteristics of intention (occupational and educational goals) and commitment (motivation, drive, or effort) upon entering their institution can positively or negatively impact persistence in relation to their experiences at the institution post-entry. He identified four institutional factors that affect student departure. They are adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, and isolation. Adjustment relates to dealing with social and institution change; difficulty is defined as the ability or inability to meet minimum standards; incongruence explains the lack of fit between the institution and the academic and social needs, interests, and preferences of the student; and isolation refers to an absence of sufficient contact between the individual and other members of campus communities. The external forces that influence persistence are obligations that limit one's ability to meet institutional demands such as employment and family obligations, and the financial constraints students experience both before and during their college careers. While the amount of influence these factors have on each student's persistence and degree completion varies, all students are likely to experience some form or combination of these institutional and external forces. One's individual characteristics of intention and commitment can affect the degree to which these factors will cause their withdrawal (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto also explained that student departure can come in the form of academic dismissal and voluntary withdrawal. Academic dismissals account for 15-25% of student departures and occur when one does not have the skills and abilities required to meet the academic standards of the institution. Voluntary withdrawal is more common and relates more to the attributes of the

institution than the individual. Tinto argues that the amount and quality of informal and formal

social and academic interactions is a large part of what influences persistence. The more a

student has satisfying interactions with peers, faculty, and social and academic communities, the

more likely they are to persist until degree completion.

      Although the number of students engaging in voluntary institutional withdrawal is

important for retention interventions, the number of students being academically dismissed

cannot be overlooked, as this occurrence has important implications for the high school

experience and college readiness of students who aim to enroll in college.

High School Experience and College Readiness

      One of the greatest factors in the literature reviewed used to explain the phenomena of

college attrition is the lack of college readiness and preparedness for students transitioning from

the high school setting to the postsecondary arena. This factor is important to explore and define

given that the potential lack of readiness and the differing views on college readiness can impact

the educational future of high school and college students across the country.

      Readiness defined and differences in definitions. A common theme arising from the

literature on college readiness is that there is no universal way to define or determine a students'

readiness for successful engagement in postsecondary education. This can be attributed to the

fact that the definition of college readiness is typically divided into two categories: one category

related to a student's academic achievements, and the other related to non-academic indicators

(Porter & Polikoff, 2012). Furthermore, academic achievements can be defined differently,

which promotes the increasing complexity of attaining one comprehensive definition of college

readiness. For example, Conley (2007) and Greene and Forster (2003) explore definitions of

readiness based on academic criteria, but Greene and Forster choose to focus on the academic

qualifications needed for a student to be considered for college admissions, while Conley speaks

of the academic preparation required for a student to enroll in and successfully complete credit-

bearing courses towards the receipt of a bachelor's degree. The variance in defining the concept

of readiness promotes differences in the predictors of readiness used by researchers, high

schools, and postsecondary institutions (Achieve, Inc., 2004; Cohen, 2008; Conley, 2007; Green

& Forster, 2003; Olson, 2006; Porter & Polikoff, 2012; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009).

   Predictors of college readiness. The concept of college readiness has become a major

area of study among education researchers aiming to explore which specific indicators contribute

most to one's preparation to succeed in college. When a student applies to college, the most

frequent information used by admissions advisors to determine their eligibility and acceptability

are their high school courses, high school grades, and standardized test scores (Cohen, 2008;

Conley, 2007). Because postsecondary institutions focus on high school grade point averages

(GPAs), SAT scores, and courses completed in high school to inform their admissions selections,

the reliability of these measures has been well-researched. While one's SAT scores serve as

significant factor in defining their college readiness, Zwick (2004) reviewed extensive literature

on the ability of this instrument to forecast successful academic completion, and found varying

levels of its' successes. The inability to view the SAT as an effective standard is compounded

when minority populations are included in predictability measures, due to issues such as test bias

and differences in cultural capital between populations (Hoffman & Lowitzki, 2005). Hoffman

and Lowitzki (2005) found that high school GPA is a stronger factor than SAT outcomes in

predicting college success. Similarly, Roderick, Nagaoka, and Coca (2009), determined that a

GPA of 3.0 was a key indicator of college readiness. They found that this specific GPA

attainment resulted in their sample population experiencing a 50 percent greater chance of graduating college with a four-year degree within six years of enrolling.

While the predictability level of the GPA has been noted, Adelman (1999) and DesJardins and Lindsay (2008) dispute the importance of this indicator by finding that one's high school course curriculum and class rank are the most important factors in identifying college success and degree completion. Adelman (1999) takes this idea a step further by purporting that successful completion of a high-level math curriculum may be the single-greatest predictor of college-level academic success, as his findings show those who take courses beyond Algebra 2 are twice as likely to complete a 4-year degree. Some researchers agree that high school curriculum counts, though they include the demonstration of basic literacy skills in their definition of college readiness rather than mathematical criteria (Greene & Forster, 2003; Porter & Polikoff, 2012), whereas some assert that writing is the content-related skill most closely connected to success in college (Conley, 2007). The wide range in findings related to predictors of college readiness speaks to the many differences in the data and perspectives of those involved in postsecondary educational processes. Unfortunately for the students who apply to college, many researchers have found that these standards are not sufficient in determining their readiness or ability to succeed in meeting the standards and expectations required of a student in postsecondary education due to the vast differences between these institutions (Conley, 2007; Hull & Seeley, 2010; Porter & Polikoff, 2012).

The statistics on remedial courses cited earlier elucidates the fact that entering freshmen are not as prepared for college careers as they once were. What factors are responsible for this disconnect in skills? While postsecondary institutions continue to consider readiness in terms of high school GPA, SAT scores, and high school curriculum, many researchers have cited factors

such as the disconnect between high school and college curriculum and the declining value of the

diploma as the reasons behind these detrimental changes. Achieve, Inc. (2004), in their

investigation into how high school prepares one for success in higher education, found

significant evidence to support the fact that the high school diploma does not identify college

readiness. Rather, the diploma signifies high school attendance more than knowledge and

achievement. Collins (2002) describes being in a state of "credential inflation", where most

students are provided with a high school diploma, though this does not guarantee the chance at

receiving a college degree. Similarly, Woodruff and Ziomek (2004) conducted a longitudinal

study of the interaction of ACT scores and high school GPAs to conclude that more recent

increases in high school GPAs have been caused by grade inflation as opposed to increases in

student academic achievement, knowledge, or skills. In other words, although students are

earning diplomas, factors such as grade inflation may create the perception that one is ready for

college, but the reality is they make be lacking the skills necessary to be successful in the

postsecondary arena.

 High school diplomas are not the only tools leading to the inaccurate assumption that

attainment signifies preparedness. According to Conley (2007), the supposed readiness

indicators of state tests and assessments are not often aligned with college-level academic

standards, and many states do not require the provision of academic standards beyond the 10th

grade level. Cohen (2008) expands this idea by explaining that the tests used by high schools to

measure their educational accountability are often given in 10th grade, but they measure skills

accomplished in lower grade levels rather than the skills of reasoning and problem-solving that

are necessary for college. Both researchers detail the discrepancy between how students

perceive their academic achievements and readiness, the areas reviewed for admissions standards, and what is truly takes for one to be successful in college.

As previously mentioned, Porter and Polikoff (2012) divide the concept of readiness into academic achievements and non-academic indicators. They operationalize non-academic areas to include the non-cognitive dimensions of work ethic, student personality and persistence, and family resources. They assert that these constructs share the importance of academic factors in determining readiness. Conley (2007) theorizes similarly, and believes there is a gap between what students and educators understand to be adequate in measuring readiness. He built a comprehensive model of college readiness inclusive of not simply content areas, but key cognitive strategies, academic behaviors, and contextual skills and awareness. This model accounts for various areas of student ability, from reasoning and interpreting, to time management, to the interpersonal skill of interacting with individuals from different cultural backgrounds and social stratification (Conley, 2007). He posits that college professors expect their students to enter the classroom with highly developed cognitive skills and strategies in order to keep up with the pace level of work required of them. In other words, college professors view readiness differently than high schools view academic competence. This gap between what high schools and higher educational institutions deem to be acceptable for admission and the true skills and knowledge needed to succeed in college explains the increasing need for remedial education as enrollment rates increase. A universal definition of readiness and readiness indicators could reduce the need for remedial education by allowing students to determine their skills, deficits, and areas of improvement before they enter college (Conley, 2007).

Differences in college enrollment between populations. A minimum rite of passage in one's ability to attend college is the earning of a high school diploma. Therefore, the

characteristics of students less likely to earn these certificates greatly impacts who will enroll in a postsecondary educational setting. The ACT, Inc. (2012) projects that 24% of 9th graders currently enrolled in high school will not graduate. Even more significant in expressing who has the ability to enroll in college is high school graduation data when controlled for gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. African American and Hispanic students are twice as likely to drop out of high school as Whites and four times as likely to dropout as Asians and Pacific Islanders. Additionally, females are more likely to graduate high school than males (ACT, Inc., 2012). Goldberger (2007) studied the impact of socioeconomic status on educational outcomes and found that 65% of students with low SES earn high school diplomas while 91% of students with middle to high SES share this accomplishment. These gaps in educational attainment for minority and disadvantaged students remain consistent for those who graduate high school and aim to enroll in college.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2001), those most likely to immediately enroll in college are White and of higher ability and social status. Those less likely to immediately enroll are male, non-White students, and they are also more likely to attend college part-time once their enrollment begins. These facts reflect the following percentages of enrollment in degree-granting institutions in the fall of 2009 by race and ethnicity: White, 62%; African American, 15%; Hispanic, 13%; Asian/Pacific Islander, 7%, and American Indian/Alaska Native, 1%. In the same year, ten million women enrolled in college compared to seven and a half million men (USDOE, 2011). Over the past twenty years, enrollment has decreased for Whites, increased for African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians, and has remained the same for American Indians, yet White students are still the most likely to attend college. Similar to the high school graduation rate of students from low SES backgrounds, 63% of low

SES students enroll in college while 91% of middle to high SES students enroll (Goldberger, 2007). What are the reasons for these gaps in enrollment? The difference between who enrolls and who does not often results from the lack of educational equity and access for underprivileged youth (Cates & Schaefle, 2011; Conley, 2007; Green & Foster, 2003; Goldberger, 2007; Harper & Griffen, 2010; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coco, 2009).

Academic readiness for college tends to vary based on one's race/ethnicity and SES. Green & Forster (2003) found that Black and Hispanic youth are less likely to be prepared for successful engagement in a college education due to the state of the public school systems these groups are likely to attend. A higher majority of under-resourced, less-educated staff is characteristic of a decreased quality of education experienced by minority students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds (Harper & Griffen, 2010). Not only are students in these environments less likely to be academically prepared for college, they also lack an awareness of college admissions requirements and the college application and financial aid process (Conley, 2007). For the students who happen to be prepared for college success, they may fail to attend college because they never received appropriate or adequate college information (Cates & Schaefle, 2011). Additionally, students whose parents attended college have the liberty of close access to people who personally experienced the transition from high school to college and can assist with this process, while first-generation college students require more support within their high schools since they do not have this personal resource. High schools have the responsibility to delineate information on preparing for and applying to college, so they often target all students at once by including college and career preparation activities into the educational curriculum (Conley, 2007).   This poses a challenge for under-resourced schools already struggling to improve or maintain satisfactory graduation rates. Therefore, minority students from

disadvantaged backgrounds do not have the same access to college information at school and at home as their higher SES White counterparts.

Ricardo Stanton-Salazar (1997) penned an article entitled "A Social Capital Framework for Understanding the Socialization of Racial Minority Children and Youths" in which he expounds the differences in how youth are supported and socialized in relation to their race and socioeconomic status. Two concepts included in his thesis are social capital and institutional support. Social capital refers to "the degree and quality of middle-class forms of social support inherent in a young person's interpersonal network", and institutional support refers to relationships with agents such as middle-class family members, teachers, and counselors in which "a segment of society gains the resources, privileges, and support necessary to advance and maintain their economic and political position in society" (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 6). The superior social networks of middle-class youth provide for opportunities and resources to aid in their motivation and transition into new social classes, and Stanton-Salazar explains that these social supports are often taken-for-granted. These populations also have the advantage of being more familiar with the culture and customs of their learning environment, since the norms present in their institutions are often reflected in their homes and communities. Minority youth are left attempting to navigate school environments that are different from the communities in which they have been raised and socialized and do not have access to the same level of social capital and institutional support as middle-class racial majority populations. They become victims of sociocultural and socioeconomic barriers.

Cates and Schaefle (2011) found similar barriers in their study on low-income Latina/o students and reported that this population is less likely to have parents who can serve as advisors in the college process due to their reduced level of educational attainment. Harper and Griffen

(2010) found that there is a lack of support in the application process for black men from low-income families as a result of their parents' educational experience and financial situation. A popular suggestion for working to remove these sociocultural and socioeconomic barriers to college is for school systems to be aware that there are under-served populations of students and to offer additional social support, resources, and information on the application and financial aid process through the use of knowledgeable and compassionate counselors (Goldberger, 2007; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009). These approaches are often included as components in the programs discussed in the following section.

Education policy. As a result of the gap between high school and college becoming increasingly more evident, especially for minority students, researchers have begun proposing strategies that would reduce the number of students accessing college careers without the proper academic and cognitive preparation.

Proposed collaboration between high schools and postsecondary institutions. One of the most widely suggested strategies for improving college readiness is creating collaboration between high schools and postsecondary institutions (Achieve, Inc., 2004; Cohen, 2008; Conley, 2007; Hoffman, Vargas, Venezia, & Miller, 2007; Porter & Polikoff, 2012; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009). Institutional association could result in the creation of a shared curriculum, which would allow high school students to graduate with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college by preparing students for the rigor of college-level academics as they complete their high school graduation requirements (Achieve, Inc., 2004; Cohen, 2008; Conley, 2007; Hoffman, Vargas, Venezia, & Miller, 2007). Another positive outcome of collaboration would be agreement on which readiness indicators are most important for college success, and the accountability that would be placed on colleges for increasing student readiness (Achieve,

Inc., 2004; Cohen, 2008; Porter & Polioff, 2012; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009). No longer would there be a disconnection between what each institution deems to be adequate for college admission and success, and who is responsible for these student outcomes. Colleges would become stakeholders in the education of the country's youth, rather than placing blame on schools for graduating students before they have developed the necessary college-ready criteria (Achieve, Inc., 2004). Students would become further educated on what they need to obtain and accomplish, rather than continuing the belief that meeting minimum graduation requirements will guarantee them a spot in the next graduating class at the college of their choice.

Another proposed effort to promote greater college readiness involves the creation and assessment of different types of exams. Porter & Polikoff (2012) advocate for the creation of a national college readiness exam to identify which indicators of college readiness are most valid, reliable, and widely used. The information gained would allow students, high schools, and colleges to engage in a shared understanding of what is needed for postsecondary success, and would guide education reforms at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels in order to ensure this success. Achieve, Inc. (2004) supports the creation of a shared high school and college curriculum, but asserts that the states supporting this collaboration should require students to pass a graduation exit exam before they receive their diplomas. In their view, college readiness should be a foundation that all students receive in high school, and graduation should not occur before this foundation has been established. Cohen (2008) believes that exams used in high school should be streamlined to serve as placement exams for entering college students. This would reduce the number of exams students may be required to take, and support increased high school and college collaboration and curriculum development. All three authors mentioned are

advocating for exams that rely on institutional integration for the more accurate assessment of future student success.

In all the approaches suggested above, each would require government support and funding. The increased accountability of colleges, the collaboration of high schools and colleges, and the development of national standards and assessments will not occur without federal and state incentives to promote these strategies (Hoffman, Vargas, Venezia, & Miller, 2007). Secondary and postsecondary institutions have little interaction within many states, and these education systems will remain separate until efforts to increase the college readiness of our nation's students become more accepted and supported (Achieve, Inc., 2004).

College preparation and readiness programs. The authors mentioned above proposed strategies that would increase the overall number of college-ready high school students, yet there are programs currently in place to support the readiness and transition of students who require increased intervention. Outreach programs have become progressively more popular in the attempt to promote the number of students of color and low socioeconomic status represented in college admissions (Bergerson, 2009). The federal government created both Upward Bound and Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), which support the goal of eliminating barriers to a college education by increasing students' academic preparation and knowledge of the college planning process, and encouraging students to apply. Although these programs were developed with the most positive of intentions, Begerson (2009) explains that the programs target such specific populations of students in need of economic and educational support that they do not reach the greatest number of students who could benefit from this type of this outreach. As a result, non-profit organizations followed suit by creating programs such as Advancement Via Individualized Determination (AVID) and Mathematics,

Engineering, Science Achievement (MESA) to fill this void and serve the students in the middle who do not qualify for the government-based programs, or to work specifically with Latino students to increase their enrollment. Huerta, Watt, & Reyes (2013) expanded on the description and study of AVID to provide evidence for the program's benefits. They explain that AVID students engage in and have support for undertaking a more challenging curriculum, are provided with information on financial aid and college requirements, and work with their instructor and fellow students to potentially acquire important social skills that will support their transition. By conducting a qualitative study of AVID students, the researchers found that the majority of the population studied (predominately Latino, economically disadvantaged, and first-generation students) completed an AP course, half of the participants took four years of math, and a quarter earned college credit. In terms of college success, 94% enrolled in college and 40% did not require enrollment in remedial courses (Huerta, Watt, & Reyes, 2013). The authors suggest that schools should keep up with this effort by promoting the strategies used in the AVID program to all students, not just those enrolled, in order to increase college preparation and readiness.

In order to make certain that students are gaining the best type of college information and preparation, Perna (2002) studied the characteristics most beneficial to college transition and outreach programs, and developed a list of the eleven elements employed by successful high school programs. These elements are the goal of college attendance; engagement in college tours, visits, and fairs; promoting rigorous course taking; parental involvement; intervention beginning by eighth grade; college awareness or exposure; the goal of promoting academic skills; parent college awareness; parent assistance with financial aid forms; SAT/ACT training; and tuition assistance. Corwin, Colyar, and Tierney (2005) developed a similar type of list, and also found the aspects of parent engagement, college awareness and exposure, and early

intervention to be critical to a successful college preparation program. To further support this idea, the students in a study of a GEAR UP program reported that the college exposure they received in the form of visits, tours, and the literature from various colleges was most effective in making college a genuine goal of theirs (Cates & Schaefle, 2011).

Consistent with the efforts of these programs and their critical elements is the encouragement of Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca (2009) to have high schools provide increased college application and financial aid support to underserved populations, and the encouragement of Conley (2007) to have colleges support the transition of high school students and first generation college students by teaching these individuals what to expect in a college environment and how to navigate their new surroundings. Although a lack of college knowledge and preparation can be detrimental to one's college enrollment and long-term attendance, the programs and components highlighted above have shown to positively impact entrance opportunities and the road to retention.

Transition and credential programs. In conjunction with high school interventions, postsecondary institutions have also developed internal policies to increase enrollment rates for ensuring the future of the institution by providing students with the preparation they need to remain enrolled. In recent years various foundations, school districts, and colleges and universities have developed programs that allow students to combine high school and college academic programs to ease the burden of full tuition for four years (Fowler & Luna, 2009). In addition, programs have been designed to allow high school students who struggle with motivation and/or the structure of traditional high school programs to participate in courses that earn college credits while also completing requirements for high school graduation.

Originally created in the early 1970s, credit-based transition programs aimed to challenge students to maintain their academic rigor into their senior year of high school when they would typically exhaust their graduation requirements (Syracuse University, 2013). Partnerships between high schools and colleges allowed seniors to earn college credits to be used towards their future college degrees. Taking college-level courses in high school also allowed students to ease their transition to college, familiarize themselves with the academic demands of college before they committed, and lessen the likelihood of requiring remediation once enrolled in college (Wilber & LaFray, 1978). Credit-based transition initiatives are still present today, but more diversified programs have emerged in order to increase the college-credit earning potential of various student populations.

In their article on blending the high school and college transition, Hoffman, Vargas, and Santos (2008) define three types of "accelerated learning options", which serve as college-access programs for underprepared high school students, and Fowler and Luna (2009) define three broad categories of transition programs. The six models discussed in the two articles expound meaningful similarities and differences in determining the appropriate program for a specific high school student.

Singleton programs are those that offer college-level courses for students to take as electives beyond their core academic requirements. An example of a singleton course would be Advanced Placement classes in which students learn material typically provided in introductory college courses, but the credit received does not necessarily transfer to all postsecondary institutions. In comparison, comprehensive credit-based transition programs take up the last year or two of a high school student's curriculum. Highly motivated students take classes that expose them to the expectations of college and intensity of a college curriculum. Aside from the

preparation component, students may also earn college credit if they successfully complete their

coursework or a program exam (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). A program that further

guarantees the transfer of credits earned in high school would be a dual enrollment program.

Students are able to earn credits to be applied both in their high school transcript and a college

environment due to the formal arrangement between both institutions. According to Hoffman,

Vargas, and Santos (2008), dual enrollment programs make college-level courses and future

college attendance accessible for a wide variety of populations.

   While the aforementioned programs provide the potential for high achieving students to

earn college credits before they graduate, dual enrollment pathways and enhanced

comprehensive programs are the two transition opportunities tailored most to serving

underprepared and underrepresented students. Dual enrollment pathways allow students who

would not normally meet college admissions standards without taking previous remedial courses

to take introductory skills-based and general education classes transferable to most two-year

schools (Hoffman, Vargas, & Santos, 2008). Students could then begin regular credit-bearing

courses when they enter college. Enhanced comprehensive programs are similar in that they

allow low achieving students to engage in the transitional experience and preparation by

receiving academic and social support on college campuses in the form of counseling,

mentoring, and help with the application process (Fowler & Luna, 2009). Unfortunately these

two programs are not more common in our educational landscape, as they have shown to be cost-

effective postsecondary opportunities for students and their parents (Hoffman, Vargas, & Santos,

2008; Fowler & Luna, 2009), and aid in high school retention, graduation, and college

preparation (Fowler & Luna, 2009). Hoffman, Vargas, Venezia, and Miller (2007) echo these

sentiments, arguing that integrated education systems and tuition-free opportunities would

capture and support the low-income students who do not graduate, who graduate and do not pursue college, or pursue college but leave before they receive a degree.

Credit-based transition opportunities are not the only institutional programs that have been created to increase the college-going rates of specific populations. Affirmative action policies, while controversial at times, also serve such a purpose.

Affirmative action. The primary goal of many affirmative action initiatives is to provide incentives for colleges and universities to recruit historically under-served and under-privileged high school students for enrollment in postsecondary institutions. The outcome of the goal is greater access for students, particularly those who otherwise may not have the opportunity to attend because of socio-economic or cultural considerations (Hurtado, 2005). The formal definition of affirmative action as stated by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1995) is:

> any measure…that permits the consideration of race, national origin, sex, or disability, along with other criteria, and which is adopted to provide opportunities to a class of qualified individuals who have either historically or actually been denied those opportunities and/or prevent the recurrence of discrimination in the future. (p. 1).

This quote specifically highlights the fact that while special considerations can be made on the basis of one's cultural identify, one must also be a qualified individual. According to Harper and Griffen (2010), a widely perceived consequence of affirmative action policy is that it allows for preferential treatment of minorities, and that minority status is the only qualification reviewed when these populations are offered acceptance into higher educational environments. Therefore, the view is that majority populations with equal or higher achievement are denied access to make room for less deserving students, which is not the case, as minority students must meet the same academic admissions standards as every other individual (Hurtado, 2005). Additionally,

affirmative action policies tend to benefit a campus environment by providing increased diversity

and cultural awareness for all students (Bowen & Bok, 1998), as well as our overall society by

leading to a balanced workforce and social landscape (Hurtado, 2005). Hurtado (2005) declares

that attacks on these policies have resulted in the declining number of diverse and qualified

students enrolled at universities across the country. These attacks are only adding to already

wide gaps between minority groups and the nonminority groups that saturate our nation's

postsecondary education systems. If there was truth to the belief that historically excluded

populations are accepted on their cultural characteristics alone, then this would falsify Bowen

and Bok's (1998) finding that Black students enrolled at selective schools did not experience

social and academic difficulty. Unfortunately, the future of this plan for increased postsecondary

opportunity for all seems to be unknown, which will only add to the need for the programs

discussed above.

Preparing to be Successful in College Once Enrolled

There fails to be a phenomenon in higher education as widely studied and discussed as

student departure, though the analysis of this topic is complicated by the fact that many

researchers track student departure rates in different ways (Tinto, 1993). For instance, some

researchers do not differentiate between involuntary and voluntary departures or between

students who depart from their specific institution and those who depart from the entire

postsecondary system. Consequently, the results of the research on student departure tend to

identify characteristics and attributes of the students most likely to depart rather than the

attributes of the postsecondary institutions they attend. Tinto (1993) recognized this challenge

and aimed to create a theory of departure that focuses on institutional action and the process of

increasing student retention. He argued that institutions are concerned with retention primarily

due to the financial incentive of students remaining enrolled, yet these settings should focus on

the educational and social/ intellectual growth of their students because doing so automatically

results in retention. His theory of student departure has become a widely sourced piece of

literature in the field of higher education and has provided postsecondary institutions with a plan

to aid in the retention of students until their successful degree completion.

      Programs and initiatives. As previously stated, most student departures are voluntary;

therefore retention efforts should focus on what institutions can do to ensure students have a

successful transition and are satisfied with their postsecondary experience. The earliest

knowledge and contact a student forms with an institution is during the recruitment and

admission phase, and Tinto (1993) conjectures that the stage can be set for departure during this

time. This is due to the potential outdated and inaccurate information students receive from their

teachers, parents, and school counselors. This fact is one of the reasons why colleges and

universities created programs such as open houses, campus tours, admissions fairs, and dual

enrollment, which enabled high school students to gain more helpful insight directly from

admissions officials. One of the most common forms of early support for students who have

been admitted is the freshmen orientation program, though Tinto (1993) argued that these

programs can fail to connect students to appropriate resources and identify the true transitional

challenges they are likely to experience. More and more institutions are adding older peers,

parents, and other faculty into the orientation curriculum to allow students to hear real stories of

what to expect and what resources are helpful to access when a problem arises. Some programs

also provide for these connections to continue throughout the year through mentoring programs

with upperclassmen and professional faculty. This type of support has been found to be of the

highest importance during a student's college career, from orientation to degree completion

(Grebennikov & Shah, 2012; Nobel & Henderson, 2011; Tinto, 1993).

　　　As previously cited, Grebennikov and Shah (2012) identified the main reasons students

listed for their withdrawal from the university under investigation and identified areas that were

crucial in renewed retention efforts. Three of these areas were quality of student orientation,

access to support, and support services and facilities being actively promoted and widely

advertised. Nobel and Henderson (2011) studied the effectiveness of a pilot program for first

year university students in which the students met with peers and teaching staff during weekly

sessions to discuss and problem-solve for the difficulties they were experiencing. The

researchers found that social support facilitates caring, trust, and resilience, as well as leading to

successful postsecondary transitions, which accelerates academic success. Additionally, none of

the students who had access to these social networks withdrew during the first year when

departure is most common and students are less integrated (Tinto, 1993), and 80-100% of the

students were retained through the second year of university (Nobel & Henderson, 2011).

Ideally these social supports will continue, and students will experience success with the addition

of counseling, advising, and interventions that further develop their academic skills and treat

their needs and problems as they arise (Tinto, 1993).

　　　Another type of intervention program that is highly successful but not experienced by all

is a pre-freshmen summer program. Students are enrolled in such programs when they are

identified as needing to develop their academic skills before they enroll in a traditional college

education. Students enrolled in pre-freshmen summer programs are required to attend classes

and live on campus for several weeks in the summer between their high school graduation and

the commencement of their freshmen year of college. Their ability to be fully admitted to the

school depends on their ability to successfully complete the summer program. Other

characteristics of summer programs include participation in counseling, advising, tutoring, and

social/recreational programing (Maggio, White, Molstad, & Kher, 2005). An additional benefit

is that the at-risk students who participate in these programs have a head start above their peers

who arrive to campus in the fall, as they have already become familiar with the expectations of

the school, the campus outline and climate, and the breadth of resources available. Fellow

students arriving in the fall will often gather this information during orientation, which has been

found to have the potential for informational inadequacy (Tinto, 1993).

        Higher Educational Opportunity Program and Educational Opportunity Program.

Summer programs have been adopted into several opportunity programs such as the Arthur O.

Eve Higher Educational Opportunity Program (HEOP) and Educational Opportunity Program

(EOP) which serve New York State residents at participating private (HEOP) and public (EOP)

colleges and universities. In order to be considered for college admission through one of these

programs, students must be academically and economically disadvantaged, meaning they would

not normally meet the institution's admissions criteria and their family's income would pose a

challenge for involvement in higher education. Students receive financial assistance through

grants and stipends; academic support services such as tutoring, developmental instruction, and

study skills; and personal support through counseling and advising. HEOP/EOP faculty are

required to maintain information on each program student including academic data (major,

advisor, GPA, type of interventions received, GPA, credits received) and financial data (New

York State Education Department [NYSED], 2013; NYSED, n.d.). Included in the academic

data recorded for each student are the dates a student withdrawals and returns to the institution

and the reason behind the withdrawal, therefore EOP/HEOP counselors have a great

understanding of the challenges their students experience and why they may depart prior to

degree completion. This informational expertise is why HEOP/EOP counselors were selected

for participation in the following research project on the factors that affect student retention.

Summary

College readiness and subsequent retention are popular topics of study in our educational

landscape. There are clear differences in who is most likely to attend college and be successful

enough to reach degree completion. Programs have been created for those who need extra

support within the high school setting to make college a viable goal. But even with these

supports, current attrition rates show that increased numbers of students are enrolling in college,

but less than three quarters are being retained. This is why the topic of retention is so popular in

educational research and to this particular researcher. Are we failing our students who have been

told from the beginning that they could be college graduates? An interesting fact is that at no

point in the literature reviewed was there mention that college and university programs may not

necessarily be for everyone because of a lack of desire, ability, or aptitude. This idea is not

being addressed in the regulations and programs that are currently offered. Even technical

school, a commonly mentioned alternative to the traditional high school and college path,

requires skills that may not be present in all individuals, regardless of an attempt to obtain the

skills. Passing these individuals on to college, even with the best of intentions, may result in

debt and discouragement without the completion of a degree. Continued research should be

conducted with specific populations to address what factors lead to stop-out or attrition in these

groups. This research should be disseminated to those working with secondary students, as there

could be postsecondary planning that is more realistic and supportive of every student's skills,

goals, and needs.

The following research study was designed to answer the question "what are the factors affecting the college retention rates of students in opportunity programs?" This investigation was conducted in order to apply the findings on college attrition to students in an urban high school setting for increased college readiness; to bridge the gap between high school and college; to assist students in successfully transitioning, engaging, and persisting in higher education; and to identify students for whom the college experience may not be best aligned with their skills, abilities, and interests. The review of the literature identified numerous elements with the potential to impact college retention, and the researcher aimed to determine if these were congruent with the experiences of college students in opportunity programs. Opportunity programs were selected because they assist educationally and economically disadvantaged students in accessing postsecondary education, which are qualities fairly common among students at the researcher's urban high school internship setting.

Method

The problem under investigation in this research project was student retention in post-secondary education and the factors that negatively impact degree completion. The method section will provide an outline for how this research project was completed, from the beginning stages of ideation to the final stages of data analysis. The topics described in this section are the participants and setting, the instrument and materials used for data collection, the research design employed in this study, and the procedures utilized for study completion.

The qualitative research method of conducting focus groups with higher education personnel was used in this study. Royse, Thyer, & Padgett (2010) explain that qualitative research designs emphasize narratives over numbers and allow the researcher to be a key participant in the data collection. Most of the studies reviewed on the factors affecting student

retention were based on quantitative designs. Therefore, the researcher aimed to expand on the

ideas suggested in past research by adding the words and views of knowledgeable post-

secondary student service personnel to the topic of student retention. This design falls under the

qualitative paradigm of phenomenology, which is defined by Miller and Salkand as "a method

that seeks to describe the meaning of the lived experiences surrounding those who are intimately

involved or confronted with a concept or a phenomenon" (as cited in Sheperis, Young, &

Daniels, 2010, p. 135). Conducting focus groups with higher educational professionals with a

vast understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the students in their programs holds true

to the paradigm of phenomenology.

Participants and Settings

The participants in this research study were counselors and directors from opportunity

programs in post-secondary educational institutions. Opportunity programs serve students who

would not normally meet regular college admissions requirements based on their high school

grade point average and standardized test scores, but college admissions personnel believe they

have the ability to succeed in the post-secondary environment with the provision of additional

structured academic and personal support. The students selected for enrollment in college with

the aid of opportunity programs must also be economically disadvantaged. The counselors in all

focus groups were either employed in an Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) office, which

operate at New York State public colleges and universities, or a Higher Education Opportunity

Program (HEOP) office, which operate at private colleges and universities in New York. The

five colleges or universities utilized in this study were selected by determining where students

from the researcher's urban high school internship site were most likely to apply to and attend.

Reviewing college application and admissions data from the past three years facilitated this task.

The participants were then selected based on their employment in these institutions. There were

34 potential participants, but the number of participants was 24 due to the other 10 counselors

being unable to attend the focus groups conducted during regularly scheduled staff meetings.

The number of participants in each focus group ranged from two to seven.

Instrumentation and Materials

The instrument used for data collection was a focus group discussion guide, or a list of

roughly 20 predetermined open-ended questions posed to the EOP/HEOP counseling staff. The

researcher created the questions included in this guide with the support of a faculty advisor based

on the potential factors affecting retention addressed in a review of the literature. Although the

amount of questions posed may seem exhaustive, not every participant individually answered

each question and the answers to many questions came up in conversation before they were

asked. The questions ranged from determining the expectations of the students in each program

to the different factors that affect the programs' rates of student retention and suggestions for

how school counselors can help impact post-secondary retention rates. The materials used in this

study were a focus group discussion guide, EOP/HEOP director consent forms, informed consent

documents, and an audio-recording device equipped with a memory card. The focus group

discussion guide is included as Appendix A, the director consent form as Appendix B, and the

informed consent document as Appendix C.

Procedures

As stated above, the five colleges or universities utilized in this study were selected by

determining where students from the researcher's internship site were most likely to apply to and

attend. Ultimately, two community colleges, two public universities, and one private university

were selected. The setting of one community college was suburban, the setting of the other

community college was rural, one public university setting was urban, the other public university

setting was rural, and the private university was located in a suburban environment. Each of the

five schools attract students from urban, suburban, and rural areas. After selecting the post-

secondary institutions for potential involvement in the study, the director of each opportunity

program was contacted and given a summary of the proposed study. Signed director consent

forms were obtained. These forms stated that the researcher had the director's consent to contact

the EOP/HEOP counseling staff to solicit participation in focus groups relating to the topic of

student retention.

Researcher-participant working relationships were established through emails sent to

each potential participant with an introduction from the researcher, a summary of the proposed

study, and a request for participation. The focus groups were scheduled once each counselor

agreed to participate. Ethical considerations were maintained as the counselors were debriefed

on the purpose of the study and their rights to confidentiality before the beginning of each

researcher-led focus group. Informed consent documents were obtained, which included a

statement on audio recording and the option for the counselors to participate in the study without

being recorded. All participants consented to audio recording.

Data Analysis

A standard maximum number of participants in a focus group is about eight people

(McLeod, 1999). Conducting five separate focus groups brought the total number of participants

to 24, which allowed the researcher to observe themes and saturation in participant responses.

The researcher personally transcribed each focus group and the resulting data was organized

through the coding procedure. Each transcript was individually reviewed and participants'

statements were grouped into categories based on common responses. The categories were given

a number code and a name was assigned to each number to identify the idea represented in that

code. If separate ideas and concepts emerged, a new number code was assigned to the topic and

associated ideas were included in this category. Broad categories were created that captured the

main themes in participant responses across all five transcripts and each code was placed within

one of these broad categories. The broad categories represented the most significant results from

the focus groups. An example of a broad category from participant responses is Characteristics

of the EOP/HEOP Programs Under Investigation and a theme under that category is Student

Recruitment and Eligibility.

Results

A phenomenological study was completed to answer the question: what are the factors

affecting the retention rates of students in opportunity programs? Focus groups were conducted

with counselors and directors from Educational Opportunity Programs and Higher Educational

Opportunity Programs at five college campuses. The participants were selected due to their high

level of contact with the program students, thus allowing them to have an understanding of why

students depart before graduation. Certain themes shared within the focus groups relate to all

students, whether admitted through EOP/HEOP or under regular admissions standards; therefore,

regular admits are included in the results and discussion. Common themes of factors affecting

college retention rates of students in opportunity programs were identified through transcribing

and coding. Slight variances in the responses from participants existed and are included. The

main categories resulting from the data analysis were determined with a connection to the

research question and are identified by the subheadings below.

Characteristics of the EOP/HEOP Programs Under Investigation

Questions were posed on student recruitment, the components of the program, the requirements for student participation, the policies and procedures in place to increase retention, and how each program measures effectiveness. The following headings reflect themes identified by the information obtained from the counselors and directors on the topic of program characteristics.

Student recruitment and eligibility. The eligibility for a student to be accepted into an EOP/HEOP program is based on evidence of a student's educational and financial disadvantages. The counselors at the four-year schools described how students cannot be accepted under normal admissions criteria, and that the highest GPA accepted for EOP/HEOP has to be under the lowest GPA accepted for regular admissions. The counselors at the community colleges described how they do not have such stringent admissions criteria, since community colleges offer open enrollment to all students with a high school diploma. The director at the rural community college described how he predicts which students will not be successful in EOP:

> [For] anybody with a [GPA of] 80 or less, there is sufficient evidence of under-preparedness to consider them to be underprepared for the purposes of academic admission to EOP [at this college]…I actually ran the numbers and for anybody who came out of high school with a reported GPA of under 60 [*sic*], and out of two cohorts, one out of eight was not academically dismissed. Seven out of eight were academically dismissed. I had very clear evidence that people with reported high school GPAs in the 60s just don't [*sic*] have a lot of hope for being successful here.

EOP faculties at community colleges have to develop more unique approaches for their recruitment. One director stated that she recruits students from outside agencies working with

high school students who already have familiarity with counseling and advising components, as they tend to fit and perform well within EOP. Two of the four-year institutions target a majority of potential students from a large, downstate urban setting, while the other four-year college is required to recruit 50% of their incoming students from a local urban district.

   Program components. The participants from all five programs spoke to the various support services offered to students who gain admission to the competitive opportunity programs. Academic counseling and advising, financial aid counseling and assistance, career guidance, and personal counseling are the key components of the support provided to EOP/HEOP students. The ways these support services are enlisted share similarities and differences across institutions.

   Summer programs. All five of the programs offer a form of pre-freshmen summer experience, though the length and student requirements vary by institution. Four of the schools have programs lasting four weeks during which students take non credit-bearing developmental courses that enable them to be academically prepared for college-level courses in the fall, and three of the programs offer a credit-bearing course as an introduction to college studies. The participants emphasized that students are required to engage in tutoring with supplemental instructors, participate in study hours, meet with their counselors, and attend workshops and lessons geared towards improving their time management and study skills. It was stated that the time spent in this program allows students to gain familiarity with the campus and college environment; learn the expectations of themselves as students in EOP/HEOP and the college or university as a whole; get acclimated with the faculty, staff, counselors and peers; and allows the student and counseling staff to determine if the academic environment is a good fit for both. The summer program offered at one of the community colleges is a three day expanded orientation

that is not mandatory and does not include any courses. The goal is to focus on the student's

career goals, educational goals, financial aid, and the academic standards of the college.

      Student appointments. Four of the institutions require that students attend regularly

scheduled appointments. First-year and probation students meet with their counselors either

weekly or bi-weekly and upperclassmen and students who have been academically successful are

not required to meet as often, though they are welcome to as needed. One institution reported

sending students to the Office of Student Conduct if they miss three appointments, and another

institution will place a hold on the students' accounts until they attend. The remaining institution

does not set requirements on student engagement in the program, though they reported that 80%

of the students return for academic, financial, and/or personal support services after their initial

contact.

      Academic support. All of the institutions offer tutoring for students in all of their

subjects. One community college makes tutoring mandatory for first-year students, and three

make tutoring and/or study hours mandatory for probation students. Four institutions reported

receiving progress reports, feedback, and early warning from the students' professors for the

purpose of intervention and improvement, and the other institution reported that academic

outreach is much greater for students in EOP. Study skills, time management skills, and self-

regulation skills typically become components of all counseling meetings. Probation students at

the same four institutions engage in a range of activities such as goal setting, workshops on study

skills and time management, intrusive advising based on course requirements, success contracts,

and repeating courses for E grades. Two of the institutions were working on mandating a course

for students transferring into the schools because of their specific needs as students in a new

educational setting.

Financial aid. The counselors from each program stressed that they take an active interest in their students' aid by assisting students with the completion of FAFSA and other required financial aid forms. These conversations commence when the student is still in high school to ensure that the student is able to attend in the fall and that the institution is a financial fit for the student and family.

Social engagement. All three of the four-year schools offer mentoring programs that are reported to be popular among students. One college requires freshmen to be matched with upperclassmen mentors, while another enables students to be matched with faculty members from the academic departments. Two colleges hold support groups for populations such as students who are parents, foster children, women, and student athletes. Social activities such as banquets, honors ceremonies, and meet and greets are held to build engagement, and one rural college holds holiday celebrations and events with cultural concentrations to bring multicultural awareness to the campus.

Policies, procedures, and measuring effectiveness. Each institution reported that their retention rates and graduation rates are tracked and reported to the state education department. This data serves as the greatest indicator of program effectiveness, and every program component and initiative is designed to increase student retention. As one director explained, "the goal of the program is to get people to graduate so everything done is targeted at that goal." The four-year schools allow students to complete assessments on the program as a whole, their counselors, the tutoring and mentoring programs, and program activities. One counselor explained that this allows for the identification of what worked and did not work, which leads to improved service delivery.

College Readiness

A major topic included in the review of the literature was students' experiences in high

school and the level of college readiness resulting from secondary school completion.

Researchers discussed how college readiness is not dependent on the receipt of a high school

diploma (Achieve, Inc., 2004; Conley, 2007; Hull & Seeley, 2010; Porter & Polikoff, 2012);

therefore, the EOP/HEOP counselors were asked questions pertaining to college readiness.

General trends in the college readiness of EOP/HEOP students. The faculty of every

college and university included in this study expressed that students are not prepared for the

demands and expectations of college. More specifically, they have unrealistic expectations of

their academic skills and abilities and how this relates to their academic major and career goals.

One director explained that this can result from being able to fail courses in high school without

a high level of accountability for the student:

> I've seen transcripts where…in 12th grade they are able to somehow get a string of
>
> [grades of] 65s in the courses they need to graduate, so you are talking about a failure, a
>
> failure, a failure, and a pass. And they barely pass in the core academic subjects that they
>
> need in order to graduate. So, what do they learn from that in high school? They learn
>
> that they can fail classes infinitely as long as they pass them eventually, okay [*sic*]? That
>
> is totally not going to work for them in college…it rewards passive persistence but it does
>
> not reward active planning in any way, shape, or form.

Another counselor echoed the same sentiments, explaining that students run into trouble because

they do not make necessary changes and fail to access available resources fast enough to engage

in a successful academic trajectory. One counselor explained that a "D" is a passing grade in

high school, and students do not understand that this grade could lead to a probationary status in

college, or that they are not the top-notch students they once thought they were. Many

counselors addressed the fact that high school students are not taught responsibility because there

are fewer deadlines and consequences placed on them. As a result, they do not know how to

self-manage as they transition from being dependent learners to independent learners.

The other aspects of unpreparedness highlighted by the counselors include poor reading

comprehension and language skills, poor study habits and study skills, lacking communication

etiquette and comfort engaging with professors, and a lack of motivation, behavior change, and

purpose. Although some students have participated in college readiness programs in high

school, one counselor expounded that these programs are successful at increasing motivation for

college attendance, but do not prepare students for the requirements of college.

Urban, minority students. This population of students were identified as experiencing

even greater difficulty in the transition to college based on stronger levels of unpreparedness,

different educational experiences, lack of computer skills and familiarity with textbooks, and

discrepancies in their high school averages and placement scores, which one counselor identified

as resulting from grade inflation. The counselors explained that these students are financially

challenged individuals in financially challenged districts:

> Urban city school districts are all suffering; all of them…the graduation rate for
>
> underrepresented students in the urban school districts, particularly males [have lower
>
> graduations rates], is about 25% or one out of four. Most of them are not eligible for
>
> college [based on academic transcript of lack of receiving a diploma]. So here is the deal.
>
> A student coming out of an urban school district, unless they are coming out of a magnet
>
> or very strong schools in that district, are going to have very strong issues and concerns.

The speaker also explained that most unrepresented students are not eligible for college based on their level of academic skills and preparation, so the unpreparedness of students in EOP/HEOP programs is not as great as the general population of urban, minority students.

Strengths. Although students sometimes lack college readiness, all participants were able to identify strengths of the students in their programs. Persistence, resilience, self-reliance, self-advocacy, ambition, drive, and determination were positive characteristics frequently cited by the counselors. They explained that the nature of the students who qualify for opportunity programs leads them to adjust to difficult transitions, overcome obstacles, and handle their own business to a greater degree than students from more privileged backgrounds. One counselor stated a majority of the students know what they want and have the skill, but they have not had the opportunity to have someone draw it out of them. Combined with the appropriate supports and resources, these students are often able to persist at a higher rate than non-EOP/HEOP students.

Recommendations for K-12 institutions. Each counselor and director offered suggestions for how schools can improve the college readiness of the students they graduate. Several participants addressed the fact that there is a lot that can be done at the high school level, but college preparation should start in at least 7th grade, if not in kindergarten, and should be written into the school curriculum. All participants expressed that more of an active effort should be made by high school counselors to assess the skills, interests, strengths, and weaknesses of their students. Further assessment would allow for the exploration of all postsecondary options so students who are not college candidates can pursue different paths such as starting at a community college or entering a vocational program. Other recommendations for improved college readiness are: developing realistic academic and career goals; time management, communication, and study skills; increased understanding of what is required to be

successful in college; ability to adjust or adapt quickly, mandatory college preparation meetings, college visits, and speakers to promote interest and excitement; exposure to real world experience and leadership activities; engaging in more rigorous course loads; and discussions on critical thinking, choices, decision-making, and responsibility.

Reasons for Student Difficulty, Stop-Out, and Attrition

The following subtopics identify how the counselors intervene before a student departs, their perceptions of factors that negatively impact student retention, and the unique experiences of students who are the first in their family to attend college.

Actions taken before student departure. In order to understand the reasons for student departure, it is helpful to know what information the counselors gain from students before they depart. All counselors spoke to the rarity of not conversing with a student before he/she leaves the institution. Student departure typically results in on-going conversations between the student, their academic department and advisor, the financial aid office, and EOP/HEOP staff. These detailed conversations allow the staff to determine why a student is leaving, if there are alternatives to the departure, and how a student can successfully exit so they are able to return in the future if desired. The counselors stated that students do not always consider the repercussions of their actions; therefore, the counselors like to be as involved as possible in the process. Exit interviews also allow the counselors to document the discussions.

Why students depart. The counselors who participated in the focus groups identified five main categories of reasons behind student departure before graduation. Of the five categories, the two most prevalent causes are academic and financial and they are often interwoven. A majority of the key reasons for lack of retention due to academics are related to the degree program or major the student has chosen. For some it could simply be that the

program the student desired is not offered. Other times students may not get accepted into the

program they wished to pursue, or the rigor of the curriculum and program requirements could

prove too much for them to handle. Because a student is accepted into a program does not

guarantee that one will meet the program's academic standing requirements, so students can be

dismissed from the program or be placed on academic probation until they increase their grades.

Unfortunately, students are not always able to raise their grades before they are academically

dismissed from the institution and this often results from a student lacking a knowledge or

understanding of academic requirements. Less likely, but occurring still, are departures because

the student was overextended in the social aspects of college, such as pledging a fraternity or

sorority. This is considered an academic reason because they fail to meet academic requirements

and are placed on probation or dismissed.

Academic and financial reasons are often related because when a student experiences

academic challenges, they are at-risk of losing their financial aid. Falling below satisfactory

academic progress, or having below a 2.0 GPA, causes a loss of federal and state student aid.

This results in an additional financial burden for low-SES students who are not able to rely on

their families for support. Other key reasons for lack of retention due to financial concerns

include a delay in financial aid funding that results in an inability to obtain academic resources

such as books, computers, student fees, etc. Some students may lack housing and cannot afford

to pay tuition while finding a place to stay. Even with the advice and support of their counselors,

students may misunderstand the amount of loans they are eligible to receive throughout their

undergraduate career and direct too many resources toward expensive campus housing or

personal expenses, which can cause them to dissolve their financial aid. Some students,

particularly low-income students or those in EOP/HEOP, experience burdens due to need for childcare or transportation and the cost of mandatory health insurance.

The third main category identified relates to personal issues encountered by the student like pregnancy and parenthood, some of which require a leave of absence. Personal qualities or impressions held by the student that interferes with academic success, such as a lack of motivation, poor attitude, unrealistic expectations and/or inappropriate placement were also identified as influencing attrition.

Counselors identified family concerns as a fourth reason for lack of retention. Students often have to cope with familial issues such as domestic violence, parenthood, or parents who are unsupportive. The fifth category identified was health and was delineated as issues related to physical health and well-being, as well as mental health and well-being, and a myriad of social-emotional issues that impact on academic success. Attending college and maintaining satisfactory academic progress can be a challenge to accomplish while facing these obstacles.

Counselors also expressed that some students experience the issues identified above to a greater or lesser degree depending on certain other conditions. Students who commute, for example, do not tend to take out as many students loans so their financial picture may be improved. On the other hand, they do miss the connection to campus that may result in increased engagement and greater access to resources that tend to support academic achievement.

In spite of the fact that students may not achieve success as defined by graduation, several counselors believed that students still benefitted from the experience of having enrolled in and attended college. One counselor stated:

Success is not just a degree for me. Success is a better way of life. Hopefully, any student who leaves for whatever reason [*sic*], even if it is [due to] an academic dismissal, the hope is that [one] leaves in a course that will take [one] to a better way of life. Even being here for one semester can change a person's life and I know there are many cases of students who did not get degrees but they were able to better their lives because of their experience.

First generation students. First generation students bring unique forces to both retention and departure. First generation students were described by the counselors as having the potential to be more motivated, driven, cognizant of the unique opportunity to attend college, serious about their goals, highly motivated to give back to the family, and less reliant on their parents. Conversely, counselors also stated that first generation students can suffer from a lack of support from families who cannot identify with the college experience, become derailed by family demands and problems that result in absence from school, and be needed to provide long-term support at home that results in a leave of absence. They also may not know how to handle success, can get sucked back into the home and neighborhood environment, be ostracized by their peers and treated differently by family and friends, and have difficulty balancing the different needs of two very different worlds.

Recommendations for Institution-Wide Retention Efforts

A major theme resulting from the focus groups is that the components utilized within EOP/HEOP programs have been adopted into regular postsecondary curricula. This is because EOP/HEOP students persist at higher rates and experience more successful outcomes than students regularly admitted due to the support services they encounter. One counselor described this phenomena:

So lots of things that [postsecondary] institutions have taken because they saw them

working well in opportunity programs are working well institution-wide because what is

good for students in opportunity programs is good for all students. Those kinds of

innovations are very important to understand because often times the opportunity

programs do not get credit for them. The institutions see it and take it then say [*sic*],

"look how innovative we are."

A director offered that the college president has requested information on the program

components due to the fact that EOP's retention and graduation rates have been exceeding the

rates of the students regularly admitted with 90+ high school averages, and he wants to know

why this is and how he can improve policy efforts. Although what is helpful for EOP/HEOP

students has the potential to be helpful for all students, many institutions do not currently offer

the holistic interventions of counseling, cognitive skill development, and thorough academic

support present within EOP/HEOP programs:

I think the other thing we can do is have other programs [such as freshmen orientation]

model some of the time management, structure, and organizational things [*sic*] that the

HEOP program does for students, because not all students are lucky enough to be a part

of the program…I know the orientation program [for regularly admitted students] is

supposed to help students get acclimated to [the] school [environment], but even within

that there may be some opportunity for academic strategy [such as increased time

management skills].

EOP/HEOP students are encouraged to contact and build connections with advisors, professors,

and resources in the summer or winter before the upcoming semester begins, and the counselors

suggest that all students be encouraged or required to follow suit in order to hit the ground running and build successful engagement before it is too late.

Discussion

Although the research question intended to investigate the factors affecting retention rates of students in opportunity programs, both the literature review and the results of the focus groups identified factors affecting attrition that students experience, whether regularly admitted or admitted through opportunity programs. Thus, the discussion includes students of all backgrounds. The information shared within the focus groups should be disseminated to all students given the potential impact it has to further prepare them for college. The implications of the results are included below. Limitations of the study and areas for future research are expounded.

Implications

The review of the literature addressed the significant differences in educational outcomes on the basis of socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity. African American, Hispanic, and Native American populations are less likely to earn a high school diploma, enroll in college, and successfully complete college than White and Asian American populations. Causes for these differences result from the disadvantaged educational settings in which they develop as students (Green & Forster, 2003), low-income family background (ACT, Inc., 2012; USDOE, 2011), and a lack of awareness of the college application and admissions process (Conley, 2007). Although these populations experience difficulty in the realm of postsecondary education, they are not the only students who lack the skills and abilities for success in college as evidenced by the rate of students requiring remedial education (Adelman, Berkovits, & Owenings, 2003), the occurrence of students being academically dismissed (Tinto, 1993), and the students who exceeded regular

college admissions standards lacking the cognitive and contextual skills necessary for college success (Conley, 2007).

Educational opportunity programs. Educational opportunity programs were formed to provide equitable college admission to students from educationally and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Not only do the programs enable students from underprivileged backgrounds to access college, the counselors and program directors in the study stated that these students often have academic outcomes that exceed those of students entering the institutions under regular admissions standards. To clarify, the acute level of support and intervention utilized in opportunity programs shows such effectiveness as to retain and graduate students, who were initially less prepared, at equal and higher rates than general student populations. The students entering college through opportunity programs are not alone in their need for increased skills and abilities. The implication is that the interventions utilized for EOP/HEOP students should be allocated to all students to increase successful college completion.

The research participants explained that college students are not accurately prepared for the skill sets and cognitive abilities needed to immediately engage in a successful academic trajectory once they step foot on a college campus. EOP/HEOP students are able to refine their skills, experience college culture, and gain an awareness of what is expected of them academically, behaviorally, and cognitively before they begin their freshmen year through engagement in summer programs. They are able to become socially connected to counselors, peers, and faculty and to embark on more effective secondary to postsecondary transitions. The participants stressed that every intervention and support effort these students absorb has been shown to increase student retention and progress towards degree completion. Tinto (1993) believed that all students transitioning to college experience levels of adjustment, isolation,

difficulty, and incongruence that impact their persistence and retention. EOP/HEOP students

have been found to be in no way unique in these regards, but they are able to become more

efficacious college students through the supports provided to them. General student populations

typically receive short orientation programs introducing them to the college environment, but

Tinto (1993) explained that the information provided during this time is not sufficient, and the

research participants agreed by saying there is room for academic strategy activities during these

programs. The academic strategies that students should experience include study skills, time

management skills, and an increased understanding of the expectations and responsibilities of

college students. If a national goal is to make college a reality for all, more interventions need to

occur at both the secondary and postsecondary levels, and more active partnerships need to be

developed between colleges and high schools.

   Intervention programs and college readiness. One director shared that pre-college

preparation programs do a good job at increasing high school students' motivation to attend

college, but they do not teach what is required to be successful in college such as the grades

needed to remain in academic and financial aid compliance, study and time management skills,

and the academic requirements for specific majors and career goals. Building these components

into K-12 curriculums would allow students to become more actively engaged in their own

futures and college readiness, and would lead to subsequent engagement and understanding of

what resources they should access as soon as they arrive to college if they are in need of

additional support. Many students are close to graduating high school before they start

developing their postsecondary plans, and some struggle to understand that their high school

GPAs and standardized test scores will not allow them to access four-year schools. Partnerships

between high schools and colleges could assist students in gaining a clearer understanding of

what they need to do to be accepted to the institution of their choice. College visits and presentations led by admissions representatives, in conjunction with the support of their high school counselors, would place students on a better path towards college readiness. The participants spoke to the fact that a lack of resources discourages such engagement. If college is to be a goal for all, we need to support this goal with increased resources and awareness of the barriers to college, especially for students from disadvantaged school districts.

Retention and attrition counseling. Although the effectiveness of EOP/HEOP programs is measured by retention and graduation rates and the programs consistently show successful student outcomes, not every opportunity program student will reach graduation. By definition, the students eligible for opportunity programs do not meet normal admissions requirements and have experienced various financial and educational hardships. Therefore, it often happens that they have postsecondary experiences different from the general population and will need higher levels of support. These counselors realized that although admitted, college may not be the right path for every student, whether due to academic, financial, or personal considerations. The institutions will track their retention and measure their success accordingly, but the counselors consider success to be finding the best option for each student. Each counselor spoke to the experience of assisting students to exit properly, meaning that they will evaluate the students' goals and will help the student to find a better path to take. This action is always done with a focus on how the student can leave the institution in good academic and financial standing so that they can return in the future if so desired. An interesting point made by the counselors was that students who withdraw and return are generally more mature, determined, and persistent upon their return because they have had an opportunity to reevaluate their experience and see that their goal of college completion is possible. Also, not every departure results from a desire

to leave school, so students often return once they have fewer family, personal, and financial concerns and responsibilities.

The counselors and directors shared that they work with students who display a strong desire to be in college and succeed until degree completion and beyond, yet they also work with students who do not share the same level of motivation and determination. Often students do not attend college because it was a personal goal, but rather a goal of their family members, or they view college as a means to an end with no interest in the road to degree completion. Perhaps not enough was done in their pre-college experience to address their personal skills, abilities, interests, and goals. A student having the means to enroll in college does not denote one will successfully complete it. For those with the desire, the support services and interventions utilized in EOP/HEOP programs will increase their success, but these services alone will not guarantee retention and graduation. All stakeholders should engage in realistic conversations with students from early on to determine the best course for them to take after high school. Although a college education leads to increased financial and social benefits (ACT, Inc., 2012; CollegeBoard, 2004), directing people onto college who do not have the desire or ability could provide these students with unnecessary debt and discouragement and would lead to decreased retention rates for the institution. The EOP/HEOP counselors work with students to find appropriate postsecondary paths, but more should be done to ensure these students and all students do not stop-out in the first place.

Certainly, there are personal circumstances affecting student retention that are beyond the control of both student and advisor, but the participants overwhelmingly agreed that financial and academic considerations were most likely to cause student departure. These departures occur even after there have been numerous conversations and interventions with the student.

These conversations are not as likely to occur for non-EOP/HEOP students who tend to be more independent, as intervention services may be offered but regularly admitted students are not required to partake. EOP/HEOP students at-risk of being academically dismissed due to their failure to meet satisfactory academic progress are placed on a plan for increasing their grades with the assistance of tutoring, frequent meetings with counselors, and participation in workshops, which all allow the staff to intervene before there is a serious problem. The average student does not receive the same level of support, which helps elucidate why student rates of return are lower for the students with less structured intervention, guidance, support, and skill development. Therefore, initiatives should be developed for opportunities for increased intervention and support services for all. Postsecondary institutions view success in terms of retention and graduation, and though it would be more costly and require the development of new policies and procedures, an increase in retention and graduation would likely result from the improved efforts.

Considerations for urban students. Another interesting finding is that one of the schools has experienced an anecdotal decline in student performance since an institutional requirement to recruit 50% of the incoming HEOP freshmen from the local city school district was established. The program director will be tracking the consequences of this occurrence in the future. Several EOP/HEOP directors shared the same views on students from this particular district. This signifies that these students are leaving high school less prepared for college than students from other areas in the state. This is concerning as it appears that individuals coming from disadvantaged backgrounds are not receiving the education and skills needed to improve their financial and social situations by earning a college degree. Urban students often start by attending open-enrollment institutions, but the retention and graduation rates of these colleges

have been found to be lower than at more selective institutions. This results from students enrolling in the institution based on their receipt of a high school diploma, which does not guarantee they have the skills necessary for success. The EOP director at one of the community colleges found that seven out of eight students with a low high school average were academically dismissed from the institution. The students entered college unprepared for what they needed to be successful, and it is often too late for them to improve their skills before they are academically dismissed or lose their financial aid. More needs to be done to ensure these students understand the struggles they may encounter or find a path that may better suit their skills, abilities, interests, and goals. EOP/HOEOP students are able to engage in developmental courses to increase their academic skills before they begin their freshmen year through summer programs, and this is something that would likely benefit all disadvantaged students, not just the ones admitted through opportunity programs.

Limitations of the Study

Most of the data from the study, aside from the graduation and retention rates, is anecdotal. Though the purpose of this research was to gather EOP/HEOP counselors' perspectives on the factors that affect student retention, the research method does not allow the findings of this study to be generalizable. Another potential limitation is that the study focus groups lacked anonymity. Therefore, the participants could have been less likely to engage in full disclosure or report factors affecting retention that portray their programs as ineffective or in a negative way.

Recommendations for Future Study

According to previous research and this current study, the populations with the lowest educational outcomes and successes are African Americans, Latino/a Americans, Native

Americans (AALANA populations), specifically minority men (Ryu, 2010; USDOE, 2011). One program director hoped that the AALANA students in HEOP would have outcomes that were matched to the non-AALANA population at the institution given their level of support, but the outcome data were not yet available to provide an answer. Opportunity programs should track their AALANA and male populations alongside institutional and national statistics, as these populations are in the greatest need of improved educational outcomes and this information would help identify areas of improvement for our education system.

If college should be a reality for all, the aforementioned support programs and interventions should be available to a wider population of students, and this should be a focus of future research and development. Another idea to consider is if college should be reserved only for those who already have the skills and abilities to be successful in college or those from disadvantaged backgrounds with the potential for success with the addition of structured support. Should all students be able to access college if the support needed is so great? How much should be done for the students who need significant remediation and intervention before they are able to successfully complete college-level work? Our current financial aid system does not allow for leniency with unsuccessful student outcomes, and the EOP/HEOP counselors worry that this will only get more problematic in upcoming years, which will only complicate the degree completion of underprepared students.

According to one director, opportunity programs only admit about one-tenth of the eligible population, and most students admitted through EOP are high-academic performers. More qualitative research should focus on the experiences of students who lack college readiness and attend open-enrollment institutions. There were anecdotal differences in the academic backgrounds of students attending the four-year schools and community colleges, yet the

EOP/HEOP students attending the latter were higher academic achievers than those regularly admitted to community colleges. Consequently, the differences between non-EOP/HEOP and opportunity program students are likely to be much wider when investigating the overall abilities and skills of those attending community colleges.

Conclusion

Students are experiencing difficult transitions to college. More students are enrolling in college than ever before, but they lack the college readiness to garner success. This is especially true of students from low-income and minority backgrounds. There are programs in place to assist students from underrepresented populations with college admission and degree completion, but not all students who would benefit from the support services within the programs can be admitted through such initiatives.

If institutional and national goals are to improve retention rates for all college students, then all students should receive more significant support and intervention. Creating programs for high school students that mirror the activities and skill development characteristic of opportunity programs would be a unique approach to meeting such a goal. The participants of this study stated that students in opportunity programs often have more successful outcomes than those regularly admitted and that college readiness needs to start as early as possible. Offering high school students the curriculum that EOP/HEOP students receive would bridge these two important findings and improve postsecondary outcomes.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Discussion Guide

The following is the focus group guide that the researcher will use when meeting with the EOP/HEOP counselors of each college selected for participation. This list may include additional relevant follow-up questions that arise during the interview process.

1. Please tell me about the components of your program and the expectations of your students. How often must students meet with their counselors? What do the students do during their pre-freshman summer program?
2. In terms of demographic data, how many students are enrolled in your program? What is the breakdown of students based on gender and race/ ethnicity? Approximately how many students in your program graduated from the ██████ ████████████████████? How many students graduated from ████████ ██████████?
3. What is your program's rate of student retention?
4. What policies and procedures, if any, do you currently have in place to increase the retention rates of students in your program?
5. How do you measure your program's effectiveness?
6. What type of information do you obtain from students who plan on leaving your institution before they graduate?
7. What do you believe to be the most common factors affecting student retention? Social? Emotional? Academic?
8. Tell me what you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the students in your program.
9. Do you recall differences between students from the ██████ and other regions? If so, what are these differences?
10. Do you recall differences in retention rates between students based on age, gender, and or race/ethnicity? If so, what are these differences?
11. What are the differences between students who live on campus and students who commute to campus?
12. What are the differences between first-generation college students and students whose parents attended college?
13. How do money and financial aid affect student retention rates? Student employment?
14. How many students from the two-year colleges transfer to a four-year institution to receive a Bachelor's degree? How many students, from either the two or four-year colleges, transfer to a different school before finishing their degree requirements?
15. What can be done in high school to better prepare students for the transition to college?
16. How would you define college readiness?
17. What should be done in the first 90 days of a student's college career to build engagement and success?
18. How does your program contribute to the greater campus environment?
19. Are there any factors that may affect student retention that I have left out?

Appendix B

HEOP/EOP Director Consent Form

By signing below, I am giving my permission for Annie Hasler to contact the employees of the Higher Educational Opportunity Program/Educational Opportunity Program at ███████████████ to be interviewed as part of her thesis project for the Counselor Education program at the College at Brockport. She may interview any employee who is willing to participate. I understand that neither the employees' names nor the organization's name will be used in the research project.

_____
Name of Organization's Director (please print)

_____
Signature

_____
Date

Appendix C

STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT

The purpose of this research study is to examine the factors that affect the retention rates of students in Educational Opportunity Programs (EOP) or Higher Educational Opportunity Programs (HEOP) at the five colleges in the Rochester, NY area that students from ▇▇▇▇▇▇ ▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇ are most likely to attend. EOP and HEOP counselors will partake in focus groups, which will be audio-recorded and transcribed. The information obtained will be used to develop a program component for ▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇ seniors who will be attending college in the fall 2014 semester. This project is also being conducted in order for the researcher to complete her master's thesis for the Department of Counselor Education at the College at Brockport, SUNY.

In order to participate in this study, your informed consent is required. You are being asked to make a decision whether or not to participate in this project. If you want to participate in the project, and agree with the statements below, please sign your name in the space provided at the end. You may change your mind at any time and leave the study without penalty, even after the study has begun.

I understand that:

1. My participation is voluntary and I have the right to refuse to answer any questions.
2. My confidentiality is guaranteed. There will be no way to connect me to the information obtained during the focus group. If any publication results from this research, I would not be identified by name.
3. There will be no anticipated personal risks or benefits because of my participation in this project.
4. My participation involves partaking in a focus group with the researcher and my colleagues. The focus group will be audio recorded. It is estimated that it will take an hour and a half at most.
5. Approximately 25 people will take part in this study. The results will be used for the completion of a master's thesis by the primary researcher.
6. Audio recordings and transcriptions will be kept in a locked container by the investigator. Data and consent forms will be destroyed with the shredding of paper documents and the audiotapes will be destroyed once the research has been accepted and approved.

I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and understand the above statements. All my questions about my participation in this study have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in the study realizing I may withdraw without penalty at any time during the focus group process. Signing this form indicates my consent to participate.

Participant Signature _____

If you have any questions you may contact:

Primary Researcher   Faculty Advisor
Annie Hasler   Dr. Patricia Goodspeed-Grant
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