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The Lived Experiences of Conditionally Admitted College Students

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THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF CONDITIONALLY ADMITTED COLLEGE
STUDENTS

Ashley J. Wildman, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2016

College students vary in their preparedness for higher education. While low high

school grades and standardized test scores are associated with poor college performance,

many colleges and universities admit at least a few academically underprepared students

in order to maintain a certain student body size, meet goals for ethnic or socioeconomic

diversity, or recruit students with certain artistic or athletic skills (Hossler & Kalsbeek,

2009; Mapes, 2011; Parisi 2012; Zwick, 2007). In order to help academically

underprepared students such as these, some institutions admit students who do not meet

regular admissions standards "conditionally" and offer them specialized programs to

provide additional support (Adebayo, 2008; Bembenutty & Karabenick, 1997; Eaton,

2006; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Johnson, 2000-2001; Laden, Matranga, & Peltier, 1999;

Legutko, 2006; Mapes, 2011; Mattson, 2007; Palmer & Davis, 2012; Stewart & Heaney,

2013; Ting, 1997; White & Sedlacek, 1986). This population has been the focus of a

significant amount of research into their rates of retention and graduation as well as their

academic success in terms of college GPA. This literature is primarily quantitative in

nature; however, little has been learned from this research beyond what explains retention

and graduation for most students does not necessarily apply to those who are

conditionally admitted (Adebayo, 2008; Copeland, 1991; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; House,

1995; Houston, 1980; Laden et al., 1999; Ting, 1997; White & Sedlacek, 1986). There is a need to understand the phenomenon of conditional admission beyond the numbers and through the experiences of the students themselves who have participated.

The goal of the current study was to better understand the experiences of conditionally admitted students through a phenomenological qualitative approach in order to inform and advise those who work with these students. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with students who have completed a conditional admission program and continued in school were the basis for this study. The major findings include: (a) most of the participants had experienced some sort of academic failure and were able to recover, (b) while in college the students had worked hard and become adults, (c) most participants had experienced stigma and confusion early in the conditional admission program, and (d) many participants gained a sense of confidence as a result of the conditional admission program. Discussion of the findings includes comparisons to existing research, implications for counselors and student affairs professionals, limitations, and suggestions for further research.

THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF CONDITIONALLY ADMITTED COLLEGE
STUDENTS

by

Ashley J. Wildman

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

College students vary in their academic preparedness for higher education.

Ideally, all students graduating from high school would be equipped and ready to move

on to college-level work, and yet this is often not the case. Many colleges and

universities admit at least a few academically underprepared students in order to maintain

a certain student body size, meet goals for ethnic or socioeconomic diversity, or recruit

students with certain artistic or athletic skills (Hossler & Kalsbeek, 2009; Mapes, 2011;

Parisi, 2012; Zwick, 2007). These underprepared students are sometimes admitted to

college conditionally when they do not have a high enough high school GPA, class rank,

and/or standardized test scores (e.g., SAT or ACT) for regular admission at that

institution (Adebayo, 2008; Bembenutty & Karabenick, 1997; Eaton, 2006; Heaney &

Fisher, 2011; Johnson, 2000-2001; Laden et al., 1999; Legutko, 2006; Mapes, 2011;

Mattson, 2007; Palmer & Davis, 2012; Stewart & Heaney, 2013; Ting, 1997; White &

Sedlacek, 1986).

Conditionally admitted college students are at higher risk for dropping out or

being academically dismissed before graduation (Adebayo, 2008; Mattson, 2007; Nora &

Crisp, 2012; Stewart & Heaney, 2013). Third semester retention is about 76% for

conditionally admitted students at public four-year institutions compared to 83% overall

at similar colleges and universities (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2015). A number of factors

may explain why the risk for not graduating is higher for these students. For one, high

school academic performance is the best predictor of college performance (Astin &

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Oseguera, 2012; Attewell, Heil, & Reisel, 2011; DesJardins, Kim, & Rzonca, 2002-2003), and by definition those students who are conditionally admitted did not do well in high school. Demographics such as ethnic background, first-generation status, and gender may also play a role in the risk these students face as conditionally admitted students are more likely to be male, Black or Latino, and not have had parents who went to college than college students in general (Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Mapes, 2011), all of which are known to be populations with lower graduation rates (Attewell et al., 2011; DiMaria, 2006; Hu & St. John, 2001).

Because of this heightened risk, one of the conditions placed on their admission usually involves participation in some type of retention program in order to provide supports that may alleviate some of the challenges these students face (e.g., Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Johnson, 2000-2001). Students in these conditional admission programs may have to attend mandatory tutoring, mentoring, and/or advising sessions in order to remain in good academic standing; the exact nature of a particular conditional admission program varies widely by institution.

A number of factors led to the development of conditional admission programs. One of these is the expansion of higher education that occurred after World War II (Berger, Ramírez, & Lyons, 2012; Nisbet, Ruble, & Schurr, 1982; Thelin, 2011). A large number of veterans with G.I. Bill benefits were given access to a college education. The federal government poured money into universities in order to prepare educated citizens to fight the Cold War. At the same time, the Civil Rights Movement was fighting for and beginning to win opportunities for ethnic minority students to get college educations (Berger et al., 2012; Nisbet et al., 1982; Thelin, 2011). Lucas (2006) also attributes much

of the growth in college enrollment at this time to improvements in the quality of secondary education and an increased appetite for higher education. A college education, once reserved for wealthy, White men, was now becoming available to anyone who had completed high school (Copeland, 1991; Lincoln, 1959).

With the influx of students into higher education also came a greater number of students who were not academically prepared for college. The first programs for students who did not meet regular admissions standards were called "special admission" programs because they were focused on the admission of students from particular populations. One of the earliest descriptions of such a program comes from Pennsylvania State University (Hull, 1969). In the fall of 1968, Penn State began a special admission program that provided a "quota" of 198 admission spots for "culturally disadvantaged" students with a focus on Black students. Hull's (1969) description of the program is based on interviews with the deans of each of the colleges in order to determine how these students were chosen and what services they were offered as part of the program. What he found was that the admission standards were similar to those of regularly admitted students and few of the colleges offered any additional supports.

The constitutionality of programs like the one at Penn State was questioned with the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) Supreme Court decision. This case involved a special admission program for a medical school and Allan Bakke, a White male who argued that he would have been admitted if there had not been a "quota" of spots set aside for students with minority ethnic backgrounds. The Supreme Court narrowly ruled in favor of Bakke saying that the school could not reserve seats for students from specific racial or ethnic groups. This appears to explain the move from

"special admission" programs found in the literature of the 1960s and 1970s to "conditional admission" programs where the emphasis is on students who do not meet admissions criteria with less of a focus on students who identify with a particular race or ethnicity.

While college enrollment was increasing in the 1950s and 1960s, another important development was taking place. Prior to the 1960s, many institutions considered high dropout rates as a sign of prestige and academic rigor (Barefoot, 2004). In their description of the history of higher education retention policies, Berger et al. (2012) outlined how schools started realizing that students who stayed and completed their degrees were good for schools, local communities, and the country as a whole. They dated this increased focus on retention to the 1950s and '60s. The development of special and conditional admission programs appears to be related both to this increased concern for retention and to the influx of students, many of whom were academically underprepared.

It was in this context of increased college enrollment, greater numbers of minority and underprepared students in higher education, and a growing interest in improving student retention that Western Michigan University began the Alpha Program in 1979. An early report describes the program as

> designed to: 1) assist those individuals who have demonstrated academic ability, but have not fully utilized their potential, to have an opportunity to have a post-secondary educational experience, and 2) provide individualized support services that would hopefully increase the student's chance of success. (*Annual Report,* 1982, p. 16)

This basic mission continues today.

There are several reasons why students who have completed the Alpha Program in particular are ideal for study. One is that the program has been in operation for decades, and while there are variations from year-to-year, there is a consistency in mission and purpose. The students who take part in Alpha their first year at Western Michigan enter a program that is established and has certain traditions and policies. As part of this study, participants will be reflecting on a program that is in many ways similar to the program that is still in place today, and not one that was in the throes of change that happen as a program is just getting off the ground.

Additionally, the Alpha Program has not been the focus of a qualitative study and there is a need to understand how students experience the program. Alpha students made up approximately five percent of the fall 2012 first year class at Western Michigan, the most recent year reported by the Office of Institutional Research (2014). In addition to having lower high school GPAs and ACT scores, they also are more likely to be male, a student of color, and first-generation than the student body as a whole (Office of Institutional Research, 2014; R. Bowers, personal communication, August 17, 2011). Both the academic backgrounds and the demographic backgrounds of these students place them at risk of dropping out of school or being academically dismissed before graduating. And yet, 63% students in the 2012 cohort of Alpha students returned for their second year at Western compared to 73.6% of the class as a whole (Office of Institutional Research, 2014). While the absolute percentage for those in the Alpha Program was lower, the difference between the two rates was not statistically significant. The program appears to give many students an opportunity to get a college education despite weak high school performance. By understanding the experiences of these

students in the program and in college more generally, the benefits of the program and

challenges the students face can be discovered and used to improve Alpha and other

programs like it.

Conditional admission programs like Alpha have been the focus of research since

they began. A study of demographics and outcomes of the various special admission

programs including Alpha at WMU was completed in 1983, covering data from the first

four years of the program (Wilson-Garrison, 1985). An early dissertation on special

admission practices reviews the outcomes of programs that began in the late 1940s and

early 1950s to enroll students who had not graduated from high school (Lincoln, 1959).

Since that time, researchers have explored how students in conditional admission

programs have fared in college based on the usual cognitive measures of high school

GPA and admissions tests such as the SAT and ACT (Adebayo, 2008; Copeland, 1991;

Donnelly, 2010; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Hornberger, 2010; Mattson, 2007; Tincher,

2005; Ting, 1997; Wilson-Garrison, 1985; Woodruff, 1998). They have also looked at

how non-cognitive and demographic attributes are related to the academic performance

of conditionally admitted students (Adebayo, 2008; Copeland, 1991; Heaney & Fisher,

2011; Hornberger, 2010; Mattson, 2007; Parisi, 2012; Pelkey, 2011; Tincher, 2005; Ting,

1997; White & Sedlacek, 1986; Wilson-Garrison, 1985; Woodruff, 1998). Sometimes

researchers compare conditionally admitted students who are retained for their

sophomore or junior years with those who stop out (Adebayo, 2008; Copeland, 1991;

Heaney & Fisher, 2011). Other times conditionally admitted students are compared with

those at the same institution who were regularly admitted (Johnson, 2000-2001; Legutko,

2006; Parisi, 2012). The amount of data collected on students in conditional admission programs is impressive.

Even with the number of studies involving conditionally admitted students, important questions remain. In 1972, Losak critiqued the studies of retention programs for underprepared students, pointing out the reluctance of institutions to enroll these students without also providing support services. This meant that schools did not have control mechanisms in place to understand if these services actually achieved the results they desired. Nearly 40 years later, Valentine and his colleagues (2011) found in a meta-analysis of retention program research that the effectiveness of these programs continues to be largely unknown because all eligible students are placed into the programs. Without having a similar group of students who attend the same institution and are not in the program, we cannot determine how the students would have performed if they had not participated in that program. This means the impacts of these programs on the students who participate remain unknown because schools are understandably concerned about admitting underprepared students without providing them with these support programs.

A few institutions have more than one conditional admission program and students can be compared between the programs (Johnson, 2000-2001; Stewart & Scappaticci, 2005). However, when schools have more than one program, often this is because the programs have been designed to serve different groups of students who have been identified as having different needs. This makes comparison between the different programs problematic. Only a few studies have offered different interventions to students within a single conditional admission program, such as having some students to

receive laptops (Hughey & Manco, 2012) or take part in learning communities (Sanchez, 2003). Even in these two examples, students are not randomized to the interventions, choosing whether or not to take the laptop or enroll in the learning community (Hughey & Manco, 2012; Sanchez, 2003).

Even though there are concerns with how the effectiveness of these programs is measured, this is not to say there are no data that support their use. The students in the program studied by Heaney and Fisher (2011) were retained at higher levels than students with similar academic backgrounds that were enrolled at the same institution before the program began. Johnson (2000-2001) found that students in one conditional admission program were retained at higher rates than that of the university's student body as a whole. Yet there is something missing if the outcomes we focus on are all about the number of students who are retained or first year GPAs: the voices of the students themselves.

Schools avoid having "control groups" to study conditional admission programs, not because they are uninterested in understanding the effectiveness of their programs, but because they see accepting a student who is identified as being academically at-risk without offering them increased support as unethical. This might be a problem for those who want to understand what a program does in terms of impacting retention rates or first year GPA. But looking at enrollment figures and grades only tells us so much. These are students, not lab rats. They have families and friends, hopes and fears, beliefs and ideas. If we want to truly understand the impact of a conditional admission program, we have to move beyond the numbers and hear from the students themselves.

Purpose of This Study

The purpose of this qualitative investigation into the experiences of students conditionally admitted to Western Michigan University through the Alpha Program is to understand the lived experiences of college students who have participated in a conditional admission program. The goal of this study is to understand patterns of meaning behind behavior in order to provide better services for conditionally admitted students and to inform faculty, staff, and administrators about ways to work more effectively with them. It is particularly important to look at this population qualitatively because so far the quantitative research has not been able to find the attitudes, behaviors, or supports that consistently explain the success of conditionally admitted students. As a counselor education dissertation, this investigation is particularly interested in helping college counselors and school counselors at the secondary level understand the experience of conditionally admitted students in order to both advise and advocate for their students.

Research Questions

This study is designed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of college students in higher education who have participated in a conditional admission program? What are their experiences academically, socially and relationally, and financially?

2. What were the experiences of these students while they were in the conditional admission program, and how do they see those experiences as having impacted their subsequent college experiences?

3. What recommendations do students who have completed a conditional admission program have for improving how conditional admission programs support conditionally admitted students?

Significance of This Study

The population of undergraduate students who participate in conditional admission programs has been addressed regularly in the literature. Research tends to focus on two quantitative outcomes: academic success (usually college GPA) and retention or persistence (e.g., Adebayo, 2008; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Houston, 1980; Ting, 1997). This research is necessary for the development of effective programs and is reviewed more thoroughly in Chapter 2. Additionally, there have been a few qualitative studies that have looked at different aspects of conditional admission, often in the form of dissertations. For example, DeVilbiss (2014) looked at the transition from high school to college for conditionally admitted students, and Clark (2009) explored the experiences conditionally admitted students had in a communication skills class. These qualitative studies tend to look at either the transition process or one piece of the conditional admission program. The Alpha Program has been formally assessed quantitatively through internal reviews and a dissertation (Wilson-Garrison, 1985). There is a need to investigate qualitatively the impact conditional admissions programs have on the students who participate. In particular, the Alpha Program has not yet been studied qualitatively.

Definitions of Terms

Conditional Admission Program. A college or university program for students who did not meet regular admission requirements such as a minimum high school GPA, SAT score, and/or ACT score. Services offered (e.g., specialized classes, dedicated

advisors, etc.) and time frames (e.g., a few weeks in the summer prior to beginning

school to the first three semesters of college) vary by institution (Adebayo, 2008;

Bembenutty & Karabenick, 1997; Eaton, 2006; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Johnson, 2000-

2001; Laden et al., 1999; Legutko, 2006; Mapes, 2011; Mattson, 2007; Palmer & Davis,

2012; Stewart & Heaney, 2013; Ting, 1997; White & Sedlacek, 1986). The broad term

"conditional admission" also applies to programs for international students who are

required to take English as a second language (ESL) courses in order to enroll in a regular

degree program. For the purpose of this study, the focus will be on academically

underprepared American students in specialized support programs, not international

students.

Conditionally Admitted Student. A college student who did not meet regular

admission requirements for the school they chose to attend and participates in a

conditional-admission program (Adebayo, 2008; Bembenutty & Karabenick, 1997;

Eaton, 2006; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Johnson, 2000-2001; Laden et al., 1999; Legutko,

2006; Mattson, 2007; Palmer & Davis, 2012; Stewart & Heaney, 2013; Ting, 1997;

White & Sedlacek, 1986).

Developmental Classes. Sometimes referred to as remedial classes, these are

courses that address reading, writing, or mathematics material that is usually covered in

high school (Complete College America, 2012; Fain, 2012). Often these classes do not

count towards the credits needed for a bachelor's degree.

First-Generation. Referring to students who are the first in their families to

attend college, that is, neither parent went to college (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

GPA. An abbreviation for grade point average, the average of the grades a student has received weighted by the number of credit hours each class is worth.

Graduation Rate. The percentage of students in a given cohort who have completed the graduation requirements within a specific period of time, often measured in three years for an associates degree and six years for a bachelors degree (Glenn, 2010; Mortenson, 2012).

Persistence. The tendency for a student to continue to enroll in and attend college through graduation (Berger et al., 2012; Mortenson, 2012).

Retention. The percentage of students in a given cohort that enroll for a given semester, usually calculated at semesters three (fall of sophomore year) and five (fall of junior year) (Mortenson, 2012).

Traditional Students. College students that matriculate shortly after completing high school and while in their late teens (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter examines the history and literature relevant to conditional admission programs and the college students they serve in order to provide a background for this study. This is supplemented with some of the results of research into underprepared, at-risk, and developmental college students as these populations often overlap with conditionally admitted students. This chapter begins with a review of the history of the admission of underprepared college students as well as a more in-depth look at conditional admission programs in terms of the services they provide and the students they serve. Because so much of the literature regarding conditional admission is focused on the areas of college GPA, retention rates, and graduation rates, review of these areas will follow and make up the bulk of the chapter. Next is a review of the qualitative research related to conditional admission. Finally, a summary of student development theories related to conditional admission will conclude the chapter.

History

The admission of underprepared college students in the United States is often traced back to the 1960s. This was a time of increased enrollment as the result of a number of factors (Berger et al., 2012; Nisbet et al., 1982; Thelin, 2011). Veterans of World War II and the Korean War were taking advantage of the GI Bill and the federal government was encouraging science programs in order to fight the Cold War. The Civil Rights Movement and the legislation it encouraged, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, led to increased minority student enrollment in postsecondary education (Berger et al., 2012; Nisbet et al., 1982; Thelin, 2011). Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973

allowed a greater number of students with disabilities access to college (Strichart & Mangrum, 1985). Additionally, there were calls for decreasing the barriers to higher education, which led to open admissions and an increase in the number of underprepared college students (Nisbet et al., 1982). Shaughnessy (1977) described open admissions, where any student with a high school diploma or GED is allowed to enroll, as a disruptive (although in a good way) force in education that led to the establishment of developmental coursework.

Concerns about lax academic standards as a result of open admissions and the increased numbers of students going to college began to be voiced in the late twentieth century (Lucas, 2006). However, as Legutko (2006) noted, "Historically, American higher education has never enjoyed an entering population of students well-prepared for the demands of postsecondary institutions" (p. 73). In her dissertation on conditionally admitted students, Copeland (1991) traced the history of the underprepared student from the founding of Harvard prior to the Revolutionary War. Lucas (2006) blames any lessening of standards on the failure of the professorate to stand their ground in the face of 1960s and 1970s student protests, not on changes to admissions. In other words, underprepared students have always been a part of higher education. What appears to have changed is the interest of schools in keeping their students in school (Berger et al., 2012).

Ritter (2009) also challenged the assertion that the enrollment of underprepared students and the need for specialized programs to help them succeed was the result of open admissions and the Civil Rights Movement. Her book on developmental writing focused on Harvard and Yale from the 1920s to the 1960s. She chose these prestigious,

private institutions in the decades before open admissions to deliberately counter the idea that academic underpreparedness is a problem only faced by public community colleges and is somehow the result of allowing greater access to higher education for students of color or disadvantaged socioeconomic status (Ritter, 2009).

The history of conditional admission programs mirrors this history of underprepared students. As greater numbers of underprepared students enrolled in college, programs to support them began to be developed. Lincoln (1959) describes the first special admission programs for students who did not finish high school. In these early programs that began just after WWI, students took special classes and were not eligible to work toward a degree. Only if these special admission students showed academic promise in these non-credit classes were they able to matriculate as regular students. These programs were primarily directed at World War I veterans who had joined the service before finishing high school.

Malcolm (1966) describes another reason for the first conditional admission programs – with a larger pool of applicants, colleges and universities were rapidly increasing admission requirements. He cites Harvard as an example, where admissions standards were rising so quickly that "only the very best of the 1958 students could possibly meet the anticipated requirements of 1968" (Malcolm, 1966, p. 3). Even so, when Harvard had admitted an experimental group of students who did not meet the admissions standards, these admissions risks were actually more likely to make the dean's list than regularly admitted students. Malcolm's (1966) study is on the 1963 cohort of conditionally admitted students at the University of Southern California. While he does not describe the reason for USC's conditional admission program, he does talk

about its history. When it first started in 1932, the program was similar to the ones described by Lincoln (1959) in that students who were in the program (called the "Junior College") could not take regular classes unless they received at 2.0 in their first semester of special classes (Malcolm, 1966). However, in 1963, USC started a new conditional program similar in some ways to the Junior College except that students could enroll in regular classes. Again, Malcolm does not explain the reasoning for this change, although it seems related to the discussion of increasing admissions requirements.

By the early 1970s, special and conditional admission programs were becoming more focused on creating greater access to higher education for ethnic minorities and those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Researchers like Sedlacek and Brooks (1970) and Green (1969) raised questions about the application of admission requirements like SAT scores to minority students given that standardized tests do not measure the attitudes and motivations needed for students to do well in college. Hull (1969) references *Brown v. the Board of Education* (1954) as an indication of the need to address the history of educational discrimination against Blacks as one of the factors in beginning a special admission program at Penn State University. A 1973 study of special admission students describes them as "predominately Black or Puerto Rican" compared to the "predominately white" control group students (Leon, 1973, p. 523). In another study published the same year, nine of the 11 special admission students that participated in the research were Black while eight of the 10 regular admission students were White (Borland, 1973). Leslie and Gunne (1973) describe the development of special admissions at the graduate level based both on findings that suggested that undergraduate GPA and GRE scores failed to predict graduate school success and "in an attempt to

remedy certain existing social injustices" (p. 86). In other words, these programs were focused in providing admissions primarily to poor and minority students.

These programs from the late 1960s and early 1970s describe themselves as serving the "disadvantaged" -- whether that disadvantage be social, cultural, educational, financial, or some combination of these (Borland, 1973; Hull, 1969; Kapel, 1973; Leon, 1973). Even with this broad definition of disadvantage, these programs predominately enrolled Black students. Hull (1969) noted that 85% of the students who had been admitted under the Penn State program were Black. However, special admission did not always mean that the students the schools recruited and enrolled were held to different admissions standards or were academically underprepared. After looking at the academic backgrounds of the first cohort of special admission students at Penn State, Hull explained that many of students met traditional admissions requirements: "the 'special admission' students turn out to be basically 'economically disadvantaged' or 'culturally disadvantaged' rather than 'high risks' academically" (Hull, 1969, p. 5). Stanley (1971) cynically observed that for many programs, "the expression 'educationally disadvantaged' or 'high-risk applicant' [is no] more than a euphemism for 'member of a minority group'" (p. 640).

This preference for racial or ethnic minority students in special admission programs came under scrutiny with the verdict in the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) case. The Supreme Court ruled that the University of California should not have set aside a fixed number of seats for students representing certain racial identities. Bakke had argued that he was not admitted to the medical school at UC Davis because the school had a special admission program that reserved a number

of seats for ethnic minority students rather than all of the seats being open for the strongest candidates. The Court found that Bakke should have been admitted and the special admission program as it currently functioned was unconstitutional. It is not clear how many special admission programs like the one at the UC Davis Medical School had to be discontinued after *Bakke*. However, the retention program literature in the student affairs field mentions fewer "special admission" and more "conditional admission" programs through the 1980s and 1990s.

At the same time that college enrollment was on the rise, colleges and universities were also becoming more interested and aware of not just enrolling students, but also retaining and graduating them. In the first half of the twentieth century, being a school where it was difficult to complete a degree was considered an honor (Barefoot, 2004). But beginning in the 1950s, many institutions of higher education started seeing retention very differently (Berger et al., 2012). Producing college graduates became more of a patriotic duty. This change in focus suggests that two factors were at work in the development of conditional admission programs: the increase in the number of college students, many of whom were underprepared and non-traditional, and the desire of colleges and universities to turn those students into graduates. For example, in the fall of 1968, Ball State University began a retention program for high-risk students, a population that had a third semester retention rate of only 10% in 1968 (Nisbet et al., 1982). By 1979, Ball State had a five-year graduation rate of 62% for these same students. Nisbet and her colleagues (1982) credit both increased enrollment and an interest in improving retention rates for the development of the Academic Opportunity Program at Ball State.

Conditional Admission Programs

One way some colleges and universities have sought to increase retention of academically underprepared students is through the use of conditional admission programs. The following section describes the types of services provided by conditional admission programs as well as the students they serve.

Programs

Because conditionally admitted students are at greater risk of not graduating because of their lack of academic preparation, most schools that offer conditional admission provide additional supports to those students in an attempt to level the playing field. As the reader will learn in this section, these programs vary greatly in the types and numbers of services offered. The following are three conditional admission programs that have been described recently in either peer-reviewed journals or dissertations. A description of the program the participants for this study completed, the Alpha Program at Western Michigan University, can be found in Chapter 3.

Synergy: University of Wyoming (Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Stewart & Heaney, 2013). Students who applied to the University of Wyoming and did not meet the high school GPA requirement of 2.5 for in-state residents or 2.75 for out-of-state residents may have been accepted into the Synergy learning community. About 150 conditionally admitted students take part each year, and they are divided into cohorts of around 38 students each. As a cohort, students take three general education courses in the fall and one in the spring: College Composition and Rhetoric, US and Wyoming Government, Introduction to Public Speaking, and Critical Reflection in Intellectual Communities. In addition to taking multiple classes with the same people, Synergy

students enroll in reading and writing sections with lower enrollment caps than those offered for other first year students. Also, instructors working with the same cohort collaborate with each other in order to develop connections between the different classes. The program also has a strong peer-mentoring component made up of students who have successfully completed Synergy.

"Conditional Admission Program": "Researched University" (Parisi, 2012). Students who would like to attend "Researched University," the pseudonym Parisi (2012) gives to the school where his research took place, and have a high school GPA between 2.3 and 2.5 and an ACT score between 18 and 20 can submit additional application materials to be considered for conditional admission. Admission decisions are made on a case-by-case basis. Conditionally admitted students work closely with an academic advisor, a success advisor, and a peer mentor during their first year of college for academic and social support. In addition to meeting with their advisors and mentor, they develop a success contract and are required to maintain at least a 2.0 GPA during the first two semesters.

"Degree Seeking Track": "Midwestern Research University" (Donnelly, 2010). At "Midwestern Research University," also a school pseudonym, prospective students apply directly to the college within the university that has the program they are interested in studying. However, some students who are denied admission into their desired college are eligible to take part in the "Degree Seeking Track" (DST) Program. DST students are assigned an academic advisor, with whom they create a Learning Agenda that specifies what classes they are to take and the grades they need to earn in those classes in order to get into their desired college. The Learning Agenda is based off

of a Transition Agreement most of the baccalaureate programs have with the DST

Program. The Transition Agreements outline what the academic programs want to see

from students in order to allow DST students to become regularly admitted into a

particular program. DST students meet three times a quarter with their academic advisor

and have four quarters to complete their Learning Agendas.

Program Components

The three programs described above all have some similarities. Each is focused

on the first year of college and is comprised of students who did not meet regular

admission requirements. However, each of them has different components that make up

the program. For example, Synergy has learning communities where a group of students

take a group of classes together (Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Stewart & Heaney, 2013) while

the "Conditional Admission Program" makes more use of advisors and mentors that meet

individually with the student (Parisi, 2012). What follows are descriptions of some of the

different pieces that can make up a conditional admission program. Most programs use a

number of these interventions to support conditionally admitted students.

Contracts. Implied in the phrase "conditional admission" is that there are certain

conditions placed on the enrollment of a student who has not met regular admission

requirements. In some cases, a conditionally admitted student will have to sign a formal

contract that outlines these conditions (Adebayo, 2008; Donnelly, 2010; Hodges &

White, 2001; Holland, 1999; Johnson, 2000-2001; Parisi, 2012). Contracts stipulate

things like course-load requirements (Donnelly, 2010; Hodges & White, 2001; Holland,

1999; House, 1992; House & Wolht, 1991; Johnson, 2000-2001; Legutko, 2006; Parisi,

2012) or the GPA needed to remain enrolled (Hodges & White, 2001; Johnson, 2000-

2001; Parisi, 2012; Stewart & Scappaticci, 2005; Ting, 1997). They may also require that a student lives on campus (House, 1992; House & Wolht, 1991; Stewart & Scappaticci, 2005) or that the student consents to allow program staff to contact his or her parents (Parisi, 2012). Program components like those described in the next three sections may also be part of a student's contract.

 Classes. It is not uncommon for conditional admission programs to require their students to complete certain classes (Bryson, Smith, & Vineyard, 2002; Clark, 2009; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Parisi, 2012; Woodruff, 1998). For many programs, first year seminar is one of these required courses (Donnelly, 2010; Eaton, 2006; Hodges & White, 2001; Johnson, 2000-2001; Legutko, 2006). First year seminar is often a course designed to orient first year students to campus and teach them skills for college success (Barefoot, Griffin, & Koch, 2012). Sometimes conditional admission students take more than one class together in what are called learning communities (Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Holland, 1999; Johnson, 2000-2001). Other programs may have students come to campus during the summer prior to the beginning of regular fall enrollment for a bridge program where they take the classes they need to catch up with regularly admitted students (Bembenutty & Karabenick, 1997; Borland, 1973; Copeland, 1991; Holland, 1999; Klompien, 2001; Legutko, 2006; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Stewart & Scappaticci, 2005; Suzuki, Amrein-Beardsley, & Perry, 2012; Walpole, Simmerman, Mack, Mills, Scales, & Albano, 2008). Some institutions offer basic skills classes or special workshops for conditionally admitted students outside of their regular college coursework (Borland, 1973; Bryson et al., 2002; Haynes & Johnson, 1983; Hodges & White, 2001; Woodruff, 1998).

Meetings. Some form of group and/or individual non-class meetings is a common component of conditional admission programs. This includes individual or group counseling (Eaton, 2006; Haynes & Johnson, 1983; Holland, 1999; Roszkowski & Goetz, 2009; Woodruff, 1998), academic advising (Donnelly, 2010; Hodges & White, 2001; Holland, 1999; Johnson, 2000-2001; Parisi, 2012), or mentoring (Bembenutty & Karabenick, 1997; Bryson et al., 2002; Donnelly, 2010; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Parisi, 2012) specific to the needs of conditionally admitted students. Other types of meetings could include tutoring (Bembenutty & Karabenick, 1997; Roszkowski & Goetz, 2009) or Supplemental Instruction (Eaton, 2006; Hodges & White, 2001; Johnson, 2000-2001), both of which are developed to increase student performance in certain classes.

Other. Contracts, classes, and meetings do not cover all of the services offered by programs or all of the requirements asked of conditionally admitted students. For example, a program may require that a student get an on-campus job (Bembenutty & Karabenick, 1997) or complete a portfolio (Holland, 1999). Some programs offer access to a special center that provides counselors, tutors, and mentors (Bryson et al., 2002; Dominick, Stevens, & Smith, 2006; Lippert, Titsworth, & Hunt, 2005). There is a certain amount of creativity that is allowed for developing programs based on the resources available and the culture of the larger institution.

Students Served

Just as there is diversity in specifics of conditional admission programs, the students who are admitted to college conditionally can vary a great deal from one program to another. Next we turn to what is known about conditionally admitted students and how they are similar to and different from regularly admitted students.

Conditionally admitted students do not meet the regular admissions standards for that particular institution. For many programs this means that the student's SAT or ACT scores do not meet the threshold for regular admissions (Adebayo, 2008; Bryson et al., 2002; Clark, 2009; Copeland, 1991; DeVilbiss, 2014; Eaton, 2006; Haynes & Johnson, 1983; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Hodges & White, 2001; Morrison, 1999; Nisbet et al., 1982; Palmer et al., 2009; Parisi, 2012; Roszkowski & Goetz, 2009; Sanchez, 2003; Sriram, 2014; Stewart & Scappaticci, 2005; Ting, 1997). Some schools also take high school class rank (Adebayo, 2008; Copeland, 1991; Eaton, 2006; Hodges & White, 2001; Sanchez, 2003; Sriram, 2014; Stewart & Scappaticci, 2005; Ting, 1997) or high school grade point average (Clark, 2009; Davis & Burgher, 2013; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Morrison, 1999; Palmer et al., 2009; Parisi, 2012; Sanchez, 2003) into account in making conditional admission decisions. At some institutions, regular and conditional admission is less about grades and scores and decisions are made at the discretion of the admissions staff (Hornberger, 2010; Legutko, 2006; Nisbet et al., 1982).

Even though many colleges and universities admit students who do not meet the admissions criteria listed above, few take all underprepared students who apply. Depending on the school, an admissions team may look for certain characteristics for conditional admission like students with first generation college student status or from a low-income family (House, 1992, 1995; House & Wohlt, 1991; Mapes, 2011; Roszkowski & Goetz, 2009; Walpole et al., 2008). Schools may recruit athletes or those who have interests in specific majors (Hornberger, 2010; Mapes, 2011; Mattson, 2007). Conditional admission programs may target students from specific inner city neighborhoods or low college-attending high schools (Eaton, 2006; House, 1992, 1995;

House & Wohlt, 1991). Still others try to find those students with motivation (Dominick et al., 2006; Laden et al., 1999), potential (Bryson et al., 2002; Walpole et al., 2008), or "diverse backgrounds or . . . unique perspectives" (Mattson, 2007, p. 11), characteristics that can be difficult to measure.

Despite the differences in how they are admitted to college, conditionally admitted students in some ways closely resemble their regularly admitted peers. The two groups have been found to be similar in personality (Leon, 1973), communication apprehension (Lippert et al., 2005), and academic delay of gratification (Bembenutty, & Karabenick, 1997). And like early decision students, conditionally admitted students cited their families as an important reason for going to college (Nieves & Hartman, 2001).

However, because of the characteristics conditional admission programs seek in their students, programs tend to have more male, low-income, minority, and first generation students than the student body as a whole (Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Mapes, 2011). There are also important non-demographic differences. Compared to regularly admitted students, conditionally admitted students had greater use of some learning strategies (Bembenutty, & Karabenick, 1997), were more likely to be referred for alcohol interventions (Linkenbach & Hutt, 1991), talked more about school, and were more verbally aggressive (Lippert et al., 2005). They tended to have a more sociable personality style than others their age and their personality styles were more rigid (Wilson-Garrison, 1985). They were less likely to say college seemed like the next step or that they went to college to improve their job opportunities when compared to early decision students (Nieves & Hartman, 2001). And conditionally admitted students had a

negative relationship between GPA and interpersonal trust while that relationship was positive for regularly admitted students (Leon, 1973).

Perhaps the most important difference between regularly and conditionally admitted students is in the predictive value of admissions standards themselves. While pre-admission characteristics like high school grades and standardized test scores are generally predictive of success in college, many students who are conditionally admitted do well and graduate despite poor high school records. The next section details the research in this area.

Retention, Persistence, and Graduation

One of the most studied areas of higher education involves what keeps students in school and helps them through to graduation. This may be called retention, persistence, or graduation depending on the research question. For example, two schools may have similar third semester retention rates (the rate at which students of a particular cohort reenroll for their second year at the same institution) yet have very different four-year and six-year graduation rates because of the nature of their curricula or the number of students who have to work while going to school.

Measurements of graduation rates have been criticized because they fail to take into account the various ways students move through the higher education system (Hagedorn, 2012). Graduation rates at community colleges, for example, count students who begin at a two-year institution and then transfer to a four-year college before completing an associate's degree as a failure. Recent analysis suggests that more students who transfer are going from four-year schools to community colleges (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center & Project on Academic Success, 2012). When a

student transfers institutions, this hurts the beginning institution's numbers and will not even be considered in the graduation rate of the school to which he or she transferred. There has been some pressure to award state and federal funding to colleges and universities based on their success at creating graduates rather than simply enrolling students (Doubleday, 2013). So far there is not a clear way to measure the success of an institution or a program based on graduation rates while also removing any incentives to artificially inflate their numbers by decreasing standards. This section will first look at the research related to the retention, persistence, and graduation of college students in general followed by the specifics for underprepared and conditionally admitted students.

Persistence of College Students in General

There is general agreement that no single factor explains graduation rates (Attewell et al., 2011). According to the 2005 *Community College Survey of Student Engagement*, eight factors were associated with the risk of not finishing a community college degree: being academically underprepared, being a student of color, having first-generation status, being 25 years old or older, enrolling part-time, not enrolling directly out of high school, working more than 30 hours a week, and being financially independent (DiMaria, 2006). In developing higher education programs, academic leaders recommend paying special attention to minority, first-generation, and first-year students with the idea that these students represent the best return on retention effort investment (Talbert, 2012).

General student factors in persistence. A great deal of attention is paid in the literature to student characteristics and their relationships with various indicators of college persistence. Academic preparation prior to beginning college is the best predictor

of retention and graduation in four-year schools (Attewell et al., 2011; DesJardins et al., 2002-2003). College academic performance (DesJardins et al., 2002-2003; Hu & St. John, 2001) and college major (DesJardins et al., 2002-2003) are also both related to retention and graduation.

Race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status also have been associated with certain outcomes in some studies (Attewell et al., 2011; DiMaria, 2006; Hu & St. John, 2001) but not in others (DesJardins et al., 2002-2003). Sometimes the relationship is less straightforward. For example, at selective, predominately White institutions, Black women were more likely to graduate than Black men even though they had similar GPAs (Keels, 2013). In another study, differences in retention and graduation that appeared to be based on race, gender, and socio-economic status turned out to not be significant after academic preparation was taken into account (Attewell et al., 2011).

Another characteristic that put students at risk of not graduating was the age at which they start college (Attewell et al., 2011; DiMaria, 2006). The older a student was when he or she begun college, the less likely he or she was to graduate regardless of the type of institution attended (Attewell et al., 2011). Institutions with higher average student ages also had lower graduation rates (Goenner, 2003-2004).

Institutional factors in persistence. Much of the retention research has been focused on student characteristics so that schools can choose the students who are most likely to persist. However, there are also institutional characteristics that impact persistence. According to Keels (2013), "persisting through to degree attainment is about much more than being able to manage the coursework" (p. 318), pointing to data that the institutional environment may be as important as the individual student's academic

background. For example, one model showed that simply increasing admissions selectivity did not result in increased graduation rates (Francesconi, Aina, & Cappellari, 2011).

Characteristics of research universities that were positively correlated with graduation rates included an institution's percentage of full-time faculty, expenditures on students, and tuition and fees (Goenner, 2003-2004). Student-faculty ratios were negatively correlated with graduation rates (Goenner, 2003-2004). Carnevale and Strohl (2013) also found that the amount of money spent per student improves outcomes, particularly for African-American and Hispanic students. Institutional characteristics based on types of students are also significant, with average high school rank, average standardized test scores, and percentage of students from out of state being positively correlated with graduation rates (Goenner, 2003-2004). Colleges and universities have demonstrated the ability to improve persistence rates through offering services such as formal mentoring programs (Salinitri, 2005) and learning communities (Barefoot, 2004; Johnson, 2000-2001).

The impact of financial aid on student persistence. Many decisions to withdraw from college are motivated by financial concerns, so it is not surprising that financial aid improved the retention of students who received it (Nora & Crisp, 2012; Singell, 2004). Aid was particularly important for the academic success of underrepresented groups like Black, Hispanic, and low-income students (Hu & St. John, 2001; Perna, 2010), as well as students taking developmental coursework (Thompson, 1998). Students who received financial aid were more likely to stay in college in part because they were also the type of students who were motivated enough to navigate the

financial aid system (Singell, 2004). Financial need and poor academic performance
were both correlated with dropping out of college. However, financial need tended to
predict poor performance, possibly because academic performance can be hindered by
the need to work (Singell, 2004).

The relationship between financial aid and persistence is not yet well understood.
The data on the impact of financial aid on college enrollment and student outcomes is
lacking, and what currently exists is not adequate to develop effective programs (Perna,
2010). Financial aid has been slowly changing to provide fewer grants and more loans,
and these changes could be particularly perilous for the retention of financially needy
students (Singell, 2004).

Changes in persistence rates over time. Between 1972 and 1992, college
enrollment increased while completion decreased (Bound, Lovenheim, & Turner, 2010).
The group that showed the biggest decrease in completion was men who initially enrolled
in community colleges or less selective public universities. Some of the decrease in
college completion can be explained by changes in the preparedness of students going
into college and by increased student-faculty ratios (Bound et al., 2010). This downward
trend in college completion has been noted for all racial groups (Hu & St. John, 2001).
However, degree completion has actually increased for private schools and highly ranked
public schools (Bound et al., 2010).

High-Risk Student Persistence

Some students are particularly at risk for not completing college because their
academic background has not sufficiently prepared them for college-level work. In the

interest of providing access to a college education for as many students as possible, a great deal of the persistence research has focused on this population.

The relationship between developmental education and persistence. While not synonymous with at-risk or underprepared students, students who take developmental classes are generally less academically prepared for college and at higher risk of not finishing (Bettinger & Long, 2009) and therefore are included in this overview of at-risk student retention. Developmental classes, sometimes referred to as remedial classes, cover high school level material and often do not count toward the credits a student needs to graduate. Some of the proponents of doing away with developmental classes or increasing the standards for getting into college point to the low retention and graduation rates for students in developmental classes (Charles A. Dana Center, Complete College America, Educational Commission of the States, and Jobs for the Future, 2012; Complete College America, 2012). However, when the academic backgrounds of these students are taken into account, the picture becomes more complicated.

Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and Levey (2006) found that developmental coursework impacted graduation rates in different ways depending on which classes were taken and in what type of institution the student was enrolled. For example, these classes seemed to have no effect on the graduation rates of community college students while they lowered the graduation rate 6-7% for four-year college students and slightly lengthened the time needed to complete a bachelor's degree. Another study showed that students who took developmental classes were less likely to persist than students who did not have to take those classes until academic background was taken into consideration, and then developmental education was associated with improved outcomes (Bettinger & Long,

2009).

While looking deeper into the number and type of developmental classes, Attewell et al. (2006) found that for four-year college students, having to take a developmental course in reading was associated with lower graduation rates while math and writing classes were not. Community college students who took developmental reading and writing classes had higher graduation rates, and those taking developmental math were slightly less likely to graduate (Attewell et al., 2006). A separate study found that developmental math education led to improvement in retention and graduation, while developmental English only did so for students with ACT scores above a certain level (Bettinger & Long, 2009).

Sullivan and Nielsen (2013) assert that no matter how low the placement scores, many academically underprepared students have the ability to pass classes and graduate. In fact, one third of four-year college students who had to take three or more developmental classes still completed college within eight years of high school graduation (Attewell et al., 2006). Few students who fail to complete college do so for purely academic reasons (Tinto, 1993); most have financial and/or family issues as well (Johnson, 2000-2001; Sullivan & Nielsen, 2013). The increased lifetime job earnings for those who have some college or an associate's degree appeared to offset the costs of developmental classes (Bettinger & Long, 2009; Sullivan & Nielsen, 2013).

Interventions and the persistence of high-risk students. Many colleges and universities offer interventions for at-risk students in an attempt to improve their persistence. At-risk students in a mentoring program were more likely to be retained and graduate than similar students in a control group (Vivian, 2005). However, students

taking developmental coursework who had access to a personal laptop with course materials were no more likely to be retained than students who were not offered laptops (Hughey & Manco, 2012). Also, contacting students early in the semester who were not doing well in classes or not attending actually led to worse outcomes (Johnson, 2000-2001).

Some of these interventions are grouped together into comprehensive programs. Students in a program with mentoring and block registration had higher retention and graduation rates than those who had chosen not to participate, even though participants were more academically at-risk based on admissions factors (Mangold, Bean, Adams, Schwab, & Lynch, 2002-2003). This program had the greatest effects for those students with higher ACT scores, females, and Black students (Mangold et al., 2002-2003). Analysis of a federally funded retention program found that participants had a higher rate of retention than the student body as a whole and a much higher retention rate than of those students eligible for the program but who chose not to enroll (Colton, Conner, Schultz, & Easter, 1999-2000). This program included academic advising, first-year seminar, mentoring, academic skills training, and social activities. California State University at San Bernardino's Intensive Learning Experience program included smaller classes as well as specialized curriculum, advising, and social activities for academically underprepared students (Clark & Halpern, 1993). This program increased retention rates for participants compared with students of similar educational backgrounds who attended the same institution prior to the beginning of the program.

Conditionally Admitted Student Persistence

Because conditionally admitted college students are academically underprepared and assumed to be at greater risk for dropping out or failing, they are placed into retention programs with the intent of increasing their chance at persisting through graduation. Depending on the school and the program, conditionally admitted students may have lower (Holland, 1999; Johnson, 2000-2001), similar (Copeland, 1991; Legutko, 2006), or even better (Johnson, 2000-2001) retention rates than regularly admitted students at the same school. Graduation rates and time to graduation differ between schools and programs as well (Copeland, 1991; Houston, 1980; Laden et al., 1999; Legutko, 2006).

Even though most schools with conditionally admitted students offer specialized services for these students, few institutions have clearly demonstrated the effectiveness of their conditional admission programs or components of those programs. Much of the research into conditional admission is focused on characteristics of the students involved. This research tries to determine what about the individual student predicts whether or not he or she is successful (e.g., Adebayo, 2008; Bryson et al., 2002; Copeland, 1991; Davis & Burgher, 2013; Donnelly, 2010; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Hornberger, 2010; House, 1992, 1995; Houston, 1980, 1983; Laden et al., 1999; Mattson, 2007; Morrison, 1999; Nisbet et al., 1982; Tincher, 2005; Ting, 1997; Wilson-Garrison, 1985). Only a few have compared the outcomes of different conditional admission programs at the same school, used a matched control group, or offered different interventions to conditionally admitted students (e.g., Haynes & Johnson, 1983; House & Wohlt, 1991; Johnson, 2000-2001; Parisi, 2012; Sanchez, 2003; Sriram, 2014; Walpole et al., 2008; Woodruff, 1998).

The Synergy program at the University of Wyoming is one program that has shown evidence of effectiveness – students in the program had a persistence rate higher than similarly prepared students prior to the program implementation (Stewart & Heaney, 2013). Similarly, Johnson (2000-2001) looked at four retention programs at the University of Southern Maine, two of which were conditional admission programs. One of the conditional programs involved a contract where the students agreed to perform certain tasks such as taking particular classes and meeting regularly with an advisor. In the other, students were placed in learning communities where they took classes together and attended group tutoring sessions. Despite the students in the learning community group being less academically prepared than those in the contract group, they had higher retention rates than both those in the contract group and the student body as a whole (Johnson, 2000-2001). A third study attempted to gauge the impact of a five-week summer bridge program by comparing participants with first year students who did not attend the program but had similar SAT scores (Walpole et al., 2008). The students who attended the summer bridge program had higher junior year retention rates but had earned fewer credits than those who were not part of the program (Walpole et al., 2008). These three studies probably are the strongest in showing the effectiveness of conditional admission programs in impacting retention.

Two other studies involving the retention of conditional admission students look at the specific interventions of tutoring services and learning communities. A study on the voluntary use of tutoring found that while conditionally admitted Black and Latino students who used tutoring were more likely to be retained than those who did not, no such relationship was found with Asian American students (House & Wohlt, 1991). And

there was no difference in retention for conditionally admitted students who participated in a learning community with those who did not (Sanchez, 2003). These studies both involved students volunteering for the intervention rather than being randomly assigned.

The attributes of conditionally admitted students and persistence. As mentioned above, most of the research about conditional admission and retention centers on student attributes in order to determine which students might benefit from the program offered. This type of research is probably common because most schools only have one conditional admission program and assigning some underprepared students to non-treatment is not viewed as an ethical option. The following is a summary of the research involving conditionally admitted students comparing those who persisted to a certain semester or graduated to those who were not retained. This research covers academic attributes, race, gender, socioeconomics, first generation status, non-cognitive attributes, and college behaviors.

Academic attributes. By definition, conditionally admitted students are less academically prepared than regularly admitted students, and students who are underprepared academically are less likely to graduate (Astin & Oseguera, 2012; Attewell et al., 2011; DesJardins et al., 2002-2003). However, when the focus has been narrowed to only conditionally admitted students, academic preparation has had less of an impact on a student's tendency to be retained or graduate. Conditionally admitted students who had high school GPAs between 2.0 and 2.5 were just as likely to be retained as those with high school GPAs between 2.5 and 3.0 (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). And those who had SAT scores in the 500s out of a possible 1600 had a persistence rate of 80% compared to 62% of students with SAT scores in the 600s (Copeland, 1991).

The graduation or retention of conditionally admitted students has not been found

to be correlated with ACT scores (Donnelly, 2010; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Laden et al.,

1999); high school class rank (Williams, 1991); taking high school lab science, geometry,

or English classes (Laden et al., 1999); reading test scores (Donnelly, 2010; Nisbet et al.,

1982); study skills test results; ability to write at the college level; math placement;

learning style; or size of high school (Copeland, 1991). High school GPA was not

predictive of the retention of some conditionally admitted students (Heaney & Fisher,

2011; Laden et al., 1999) although it was for others (Davis & Burgher, 2013; Donnelly,

2010; Nisbet et al., 1982).

In fact, Davis and Burgher (2013), Donnelly (2010), and Nisbet and her

colleagues (1982) all found high school GPA to be the best predictor of retention out of a

number of variables. The conditionally admitted students in Donnelly's (2010) study

also were more likely to stay with higher high school class ranks, English placements,

and math placements. In the Nisbet et al. (1982) study, GPA was the most predictive of

completing the third quarter of school. Adding high school class rank, Meyers-Briggs

results, study skills, and SAT scores accounted for another 5% of variance with a total of

20% for all five factors. For conditionally admitted Black female students, high school

class rank was most predictive of graduation followed by SAT-Math and SAT-Verbal

scores (Houston, 1980).

A few high school classes have been shown to increase the persistence of

conditionally admitted college students: foreign language (Laden et al., 1999) and college

prep or AP classes (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). Although students with low SAT scores,

low class rank, and low IQ scores are less likely to persist, many of them still do: "A high

entrance test score or high school rank or similar score may indicate success, but a low score does not necessarily mean the opposite" (Copeland, 1991, p. 100).

Non-cognitive factors. Some researchers are interested in what are called "non-cognitive factors" to see how they relate to a conditionally admitted student's ability to stay in college and graduate. Non-cognitive factors include those attributes a student may possess that impact academic success that are not directly related to academic ability. While there is a Noncognitive Questionnaire (NCQ) developed by Tracey and Sedlacek (1984), other factors have been identified by other studies that are also non-cognitive in nature and have been found to be related to conditionally admitted student retention and graduation.

A study of the NCQ with conditionally admitted students found different significant retention markers depending on the semester. For example, successful leadership and positive self concept were associated with second semester retention, while positive self concept, strong support person, and dealing with racism were associated with fourth semester retention (White & Sedlacek, 1986). Other studies have explored NCQ results for students in conditional admission programs, looking at college GPA as the outcome (Adebayo, 2008; Ting, 1997). These will be addressed later in this chapter.

Other researchers have attempted to find other non-cognitive traits associated with retention. A study by House (1992) seemed to point toward drive and confidence as important in the retention of special admission students. At fourth and eighth semesters, special admission students who stayed in school had higher self-reports of drive to achieve. After eight semesters, those who were still enrolled in college were more likely

to have rated themselves as having above average academic ability although less likely to believe they were going to graduate with honors (House, 1992). This self-confidence in academic ability was a retention factor in another study as well. The perception of reading ability was more predictive of a conditionally admitted student staying in school than a test that measured actual reading ability (Nisbet et al., 1982).

Heaney and Fisher (2011) asked students in their first semester of a conditional admission program what had been most helpful so far in college. Those who were still in school two semesters later wrote about things they were doing such as going to class or studying in a quiet place (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). Those who later left college wrote about what others had done for them. Those who stayed also wrote longer answers than those who ended up leaving (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). All of the students who reported extreme boredom left school before the third semester (Heaney & Fisher, 2011).

Other noncognitive predictors of retention were meeting admissions deadlines for applying to school (Davis & Burgher, 2013), certain Myers-Briggs personality types, and study skills (Nisbet et al., 1982). Results of the Holland Vocational Preference Inventory were not found to be related to retention in conditionally admitted students (Nisbet et al., 1982).

College behaviors. The behaviors of conditionally admitted students in the college environment also appear to play a role in persistence. Heaney and Fisher (2011) found the following to be associated with retention: reason for attending college, fewer visits home first semester of college, making connections between what is being learned in class and future goals, using school resources such as math lab or supplemental instruction, starting homework early in the day, and spending time in friends' rooms or

the student union. There is also evidence to suggest that conditionally admitted students

who were active on campus (Copeland, 1991) or were able to ask for help (Leslie &

Gunne, 1973) were more likely to persist. In one study, students who did not start

college right after finishing high school were more likely to enroll in a second semester

(Davis & Burgher, 2013).

Other behaviors may not be related to persistence for conditionally admitted

students such as living in a residence hall, being a student-athlete (Laden et al., 1999), or

class attendance (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). Laden and colleagues (1999) found that while

there was no significant relationship between joining a Greek organization and

graduation rates, those who joined Greek organizations were more likely to be

academically dismissed.

Ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and first generation status. The

retention and graduation rates of conditionally admitted students also seemed to not be

related to aspects of identity such as gender (Copeland, 1991; Laden et al., 1999), age

(Laden et al., 1999), or first generation status (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). At one

institution, legacy students were more likely to stay for a second semester, although they

were similar to non-legacies in graduation rates (Davis & Burgher, 2013). Father's level

of education was more predictive of retention than mother's (Copeland, 1991).

Conditionally admitted students at a public university who were state residents were

retained longer than students from out-of-state (Davis & Burgher, 2013).

The impact of ethnic identity on the retention of conditionally admitted students is

more complicated. At least two studies found no significant relationship between

ethnicity and retention (Copeland, 1991; Laden et al., 1999). In another study, Hispanic

identity appeared to be good for the retention of conditionally admitted students while it was associated with poorer outcomes in regularly admitted students (Davis & Burgher, 2013). The impact of non-cognitive attributes described above on retention can also differ based on the student's ethnicity (House, 1992).

Academic Performance

Being successful in college is about more than persisting and graduating. Those who work with college students also track GPA in order to get a sense of how students are doing on a scale (4.0 to 0.0) rather than the binary outcomes of graduated or not, retained or not. Like with measures of persistence, how conditionally admitted students perform compared to regularly admitted students on GPA varies by institution and program. Conditionally admitted graduates may have lower (Leslie & Gunne, 1973; Stewart & Heaney, 2013) or similar (Legutko, 2006) college GPAs relative to their regularly admitted counterparts.

Academic Background

Research shows that the academic background of conditionally admitted and academically underprepared students has some relationship to college GPA. However, the results are mixed as to which aspects of academic background are most important for this population and to what extent they predict grades at the college level. Standardized tests such as the SAT were sometimes related to college GPA (Bryson et al., 2002 [White students]; Goldman & Widawski, 1976 [Black students]; Houston, 1980; Naumann, Bandalos, & Gutkin, 2003; Nisbet et al., 1982; Thompson, 1998; Ting, 1997) and other times were not (Adebayo, 2008; Bryson et al., 2002 [Black students]; Goldman & Widawski, 1976 [Latino students]; Mattson, 2007; Parisi, 2012; Tincher, 2005; Wilson-

Garrison, 1985). High school class rank was usually an indicator of college GPA (Bryson et al., 2002 [White students]; Hornberger, 2010; Houston 1980; Nisbet et al., 1982; Ting, 1997) but not always (Adebayo, 2008; Bryson et al., 2002 [Black students]; Tincher, 2005; Williams, 1991). The most consistent predictor of college GPA in academically underprepared and conditionally admitted students was high school GPA (Adebayo, 2008; Bryson et al., 2002 [Black students]; Goldman & Widawski, 1976; Hornberger, 2010 ["core" classes]; Mattson, 2007; Thompson, 1998; Tincher, 2005), although there are still a few studies that did not find this to be the case (Parisi, 2012; Wilson-Garrison, 1985).

Placement exams for math and English also had limited predictive value. They predicted math performance more accurately than English and who were going to succeed more precisely than who were going to fail (Scott-Clayton, 2012). Their predictive value increased when combined with a student's high school records such as courses taken and grades (Scott-Clayton, 2012).

Noncognitive Factors

Because of the inconsistent results of academic background in predicting the GPAs of conditionally admitted and academically underprepared students, some have put hope in Tracey and Sedlacek's (1984) noncognitive factors as a better predictor of academic success for these students. And yet, results have been mixed here as well. Ting (1997) found that White conditionally admitted students with acquired knowledge in a field, preference for long-term goals, and availability of a strong support person had higher first semester GPAs and those with demonstrated community service had higher second semester GPAs. Only successful leadership experiences was associated with

higher GPAs both semesters (Ting, 1997). Understanding and coping with racism was found to lead to higher GPAs in two studies (Adebayo, 2008; White & Sedlacek, 1986) and realistic self-appraisal in one (Adebayo, 2008).

The Bryson Instrument of Noncognitive Assessment was developed to be an additional measure of noncognitive traits. However, it only explained an additional two percent of variance in grades of conditionally admitted students when combined with traditional admissions variables (Bryson et al., 2002). While it would appear that noncognitive traits such as ability to make long-term goals and self-esteem could help explain the success of college students with poor academic preparation, so far there is a lack of consistent findings in this area.

Other Non-academic Student Attributes

Many other student attributes have been studied in conditionally admitted college students. Student attitudes were able to predict college grades in academically underprepared college students, although not as well as academic background was (House, 1995). Asking for help (Leslie & Gunne, 1973), goal commitment (Thompson, 1998), having leadership experiences in high school (Mattson, 2007), institutional commitment (Thompson, 1998), internal locus of control (Leon, 1973), interpersonal trust (Leon, 1973), and self-regulated learning (Naumann et al., 2003) have all been found to be associated with higher GPAs in these students. However, career interest (Nisbet et al., 1982), ethnicity (Hornberger, 2010; Tincher, 2005), living on campus (Parisi, 2012), motivation, attitude, gender, and geographic region (Tincher, 2005) were not related to GPA. Playing college sports also has mixed results with some conditionally admitted students performing better in classes than those who are not

athletes (Parisi, 2012), while another study found no significant differences between college athletes and non-athletes (Hornberger, 2010).

Confidence or expectancies also can play a part in academic outcomes in this population. A study found that while reading skills did not predict college GPA, reading confidence did (Nisbet et al., 1982). However, academically underprepared students are not accurate in their ability to predict grades in a college biology class, with most students doing more poorly than they had anticipated (Moore & Jensen, 2006). Students who were told to expect they were going to be successful had higher GPAs than those who had not been told anything (Haynes & Johnson, 1983). This relationship was stronger if the faculty also had been told to expect good things from this student. Higher GPAs were not found in those who only had faculty with raised expectations (Haynes & Johnson, 1983).

A study using the *College Student Inventory* compared CSI results of conditionally admitted students with the grades they received in a required English class (Morrison, 1999). Those who did well (B+ or better) scored higher on study habits, academic confidence, attitude toward educators, family emotional support, and openness scales than those who had performed poorly (C- or worse). The students with the lower English grades had higher scores on the desire to finish college, self-reliance, leadership, ease of transition, career planning, academic assistance, personal counseling, and social enrichment scales compared to those who did well (Morrison, 1999).

Personality has also been researched in relationship to conditionally admitted students and the grades they earn. Myers-Briggs Type Indicator results were related to grades, especially on the judgmental-perceiving dichotomy (Nisbet et al., 1982). Results

of the Millon Adolescent Personality Inventory, on the other hand, did not have

correlations with grades (Wilson-Garrison, 1985). However, behaviors such as expressed

concerns, behavior problems, and behavior nonconformity all had negative relationships

with college grades (Wilson-Garrison, 1985).

Institutional Interventions

While a student's academic background and nonacademic attributes are important

to his or her GPA, there are also interventions that can be taken by colleges and

universities to impact academic success. Supplemental instruction (Hodges & White,

2001) appeared to improve the GPAs of participants while tutoring (Hodges & White,

2001) and laptop computer access (Hughey & Manco, 2012) did not significantly impact

grades. Mentoring improved GPAs in some studies (Salinitri, 2005; Vivian, 2005) but

did not have a significant effect in another (Parisi, 2012). Conditionally admitted

students who participated in a learning community had GPAs similar to students who did

not participate, although the learning community students had higher GPAs than their

academic backgrounds had predicted (Sanchez, 2003). Comprehensive retention

programs for academically underprepared students led to higher GPAs for program

participants compared to similar students who attended the same institution prior to the

implementation of the program (Clark & Halpern, 1993; Stewart & Heaney, 2013) or

compared to a control group of similarly underprepared students (Woodruff, 1998).

Multiple Determinants

Multiple regression analyses suggest that the factors impacting the college GPAs

of academically underprepared college students are highly complex. In one study, SAT

scores, class rank, study skills, and personality were found to be predictors of GPA in

conditionally admitted college students (Nisbet et al., 1982). These four variables taken together accounted for 67% of the variance in college GPA. Thompson (1998) also found four variables that explained 27% of the variance in cumulative GPA in developmental education students: high school GPA, ACT score, institutional commitment, and goal commitment.

When groups are compared more differences emerge. Goldman and Widawski (1976) and House (1995) noted that which student characteristics best predicted grades varied by ethnic background. For first-generation college students, expectancy beliefs were most closely related to GPA followed by ACT score (Naumann et al., 2003). Fifty percent of the variance in their GPAs was explained by these two factors. ACT scores were most important in determining second-generation college student GPA followed by expectancy for success and goal setting. These three variables explained 31% of the variance in second-generation GPAs (Naumann et al., 2003).

Qualitative Studies

Because the impact of conditional admission is not easily quantified, a number of researchers have explored conditional admission qualitatively. What follows are summaries of qualitative studies that involve conditionally admitted students or, in one case, the college faculty and staff that positively influence successful conditionally admitted students. These studies are grouped into three categories: those found in peer reviewed journals, studies published by University of Minnesota's Center for Research on Developmental Education and Urban Literacy (CRDEUL), and dissertations.

Qualitative Studies in Peer-Reviewed Journals

The qualitative studies that have been published in peer-reviewed journals are diverse in focus, method, and participants. Two of these articles involve single-case studies of individual conditionally admitted students. Stewart (2006) profiles "Mimi," a college graduate who began school as a conditional admit, and Mapes (2011) shares the story of "Keneika's" first year of college in a conditional admission program. Stewart (2006) completes three interviews with Mimi: the first focusing on her life before coming to college, the second on how she experienced both her conditional admission program and college after completing the program, and in the third Mimi "reflect[s] on the meaning of her experiences" (p. 68). Mapes' (2011) participant is a student in her class. In addition to an interview, Mapes uses her experience in the classroom, the work Keneika turned in for class, and student-teacher conference transcripts for data.

While both studies are looking at a single student, Stewart (2006) is looking at a student who has graduated while Mapes (2011) focuses her attention on what is happening with a student who is navigating her first year of college. However, both subjects are female minority students admitted to college through a conditional admission program. Both students were raised outside of the US – Mimi is ethnic Chinese born in Vietnam, and Keneika was born in the US to a Caribbean mother and an African father and spent most of her life in Jamaica. Both Mapes (2011) and Stewart (2006) remark on the process of identity development in their participants, paying special attention to the roles of culture and gender in that process.

Robert T. Palmer has published a series of articles based on his dissertation research, a qualitative study of 11 African American males who had been conditionally

admitted to a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) (Palmer, 2007). They

include "Determined to succeed: Salient factors that foster academic success for

academically unprepared Black males at a Black college" (Palmer & Young, 2008-2009),

"'It takes a village to raise a child': The role of social capital in promoting academic

success for African American men at a Black college" (Palmer & Gasman, 2008),

"Exploring challenges that threaten to impede the academic success of academically

underprepared Black males at an HBCU" (Palmer et al., 2009), "Role of an HBCU in

supporting academic success for underprepared Black males" (Palmer, Davis, &

Maramba, 2010), "The impact of family support on the success of Black men at an

historically Black university: Affirming the revision of Tinto's theory" (Palmer, Davis, &

Maramba, 2011), and "'Diamond in the rough': The impact of a remedial program on

college access and opportunity for Black males at an historically Black institution"

(Palmer & Davis, 2012). Each article explores a different aspect of the students'

experiences from factors that promote success to factors that challenge success and from

the impact of the family to the impact of the institution. One of the major findings from

Palmer's work is that HBCUs provide social capital for Black males that is not provided

for them at predominately White institutions (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Also, factors

that lead to success were belonging and engagement through campus involvement,

faculty and staff members who were supportive, and non-cognitive traits of the students

themselves such as drive (Palmer & Young, 2008-2009), whereas lack of financial

support, reluctance to ask for help, and difficult situations outside of school involving

family were the greatest challenges these students faced (Palmer et al., 2009). Palmer

also shows the need for institutions to look beyond the campus to the families and

communities supporting underprepared Black male students in order to understand retention (Palmer et al., 2009; Palmer et al., 2011).

Two other studies look at writing, either how conditionally admitted students write or how conditional admission programs communicate with their students. Klompien (2001) randomly selected 25 writing portfolios from students in a summer bridge program for conditionally admitted students, then chose five to examine more closely. In all of the papers she found evidence of "patchwriting," which she describes as being part of the development of writing. Her concern was that these students not only need to learn to integrate material in order to write in their own words, but that they could be unfairly accused of plagiarism (Klompien, 2001).

Stewart and Heaney (2013) wrote a primarily theoretical article on the importance of the first communication a conditional admission program has with its students in order to encourage an attitude for success. The authors describe the process of developing an admissions letter for the Synergy Program at the University of Wyoming. They compare the type of language used for students who are accepted into an honors program as compared to the language used for students who are accepted into a conditional admission program. The research portion of the article involved data from Synergy students who took part in focus groups during the spring of the first few years the program was running. Prior to beginning the focus groups, students wrote responses to questions about how they first heard about the program. Most (65-70%) heard about the program through their admission letter. Fifty-eight percent of the students said their first thoughts about the program were positive, while 36% "did not remember the language of their first communication" (Stewart & Heaney, 2013, p. 30). Only 6% of students had a

negative reaction to the first communication they received. Stewart and Heaney (2013)

did not credit the communication for the success of the program while still maintaining it

has a role in promoting the culture they want the program to have.

The final qualitative study to be described in this section focuses more on those

who work with conditionally admitted students than the students themselves. The study

by Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, and Cantwell (2011) begins by identifying 62 students

who had been identified as being academically high-risk, including conditionally

admitted students, and were being successful in college. Those students were asked who

on campus was most instrumental in their college persistence. The researchers then

interviewed the 54 college faculty and staff that had been identified by the students. In

talking with the students and college personnel, the researchers found seven themes in

helping at-risk students succeed:

> (a) a desire to connect with students, (b) being unaware of their influence on students at critical junctures, (c) wanting to make a difference in students' lives, (d) possessing a wide variety of personality styles and strengths but being perceived by students as genuine and authentic, (e) being intentional about connecting personally with students, (f) different approaches utilized by faculty compared to staff, and (g) differences in the types of behaviors that community college students reported as fostering their success. (Schreiner et al., 2011, pp. 325-326)

Schreiner and her colleagues (2011) encourage colleges and universities to look for

individuals with these qualities when making hiring decisions.

CRDEUL Studies

The monographs published by the University of Minnesota's Center for Research

on Developmental Education and Urban Literacy (CRDEUL) were another great source

of qualitative studies related to conditionally admitted students. Once housed in the

General College of the University of Minnesota, CRDEUL focused on developing and

disseminating research related to educating students like those in General College (Lundell, 2002), a college at the University of Minnesota for students who did not meet regular admission requirements to the other colleges at the university (Moore & Jensen, 2006). However, General College was closed in 2006 after 74 years at the University of Minnesota (Brothen & Wambach, 2004; Collins, 2008), and CRDEUL was moved to the College of Education and Human Development before being closed two years later ("CRDEUL," 2013). Yet while it existed, CRDEUL published many articles related to the concerns of conditionally admitted students. One monograph in particular called *Student Standpoints About Access Programs in Higher Education* (Lundell, Higbee, Duranczyk, & Goff, 2006) was filled with qualitative studies involving conditionally admitted students, although other monographs included similar studies. Below are summaries of these studies. Many describe their focus as "developmental education" but only those studies where students were in programs with a conditional element to admission are included here.

As CRDEUL was part of General College (GC), many of the studies involve GC students. Beach, Lundell, and Jung (2002; Lundell, Beach, & Jung, 2006) wrote two monograph chapters based on their interviews with 14 GC students. The first publication described the students' experiences through the concepts of "worlds" and "trajectories" (Beach et al., 2002). Worlds refer to the different social aspects of the students' lives such as family, friends, school, and work. Worlds could be congruent in terms of similar values and expectations between these different aspects or incongruent if those values and expectations differed significantly. Trajectory is the movement a student is making in terms of engagement with the academic world of GC and are either peripheral,

inbound, boundary, or outbound. For example, the two students who withdrew from GC during the study had trajectories that were described as outbound (Beach et al., 2002). This study was less about finding similarities in the GC students' stories and more about displaying the diversity of experience. The authors recommend that educators and program staff working with students in developmental coursework understand that students come from worlds that may not have the same values as those in the college setting and that students represent a diverse set of learning trajectories (Beach et al., 2002).

The second in this set of articles on 14 GC students focused more on what students thought about GC itself (Lundell, Beach, et al., 2006). The authors looked at three main types of responses: their first impressions of GC, their thoughts on GC programs and student services, and how their thoughts about GC changed over the two years they were interviewed. The students reported four main first impressions: "stigma and disappointment," "physical marginalization and dislocation," "racial stereotypes," and "second chance and opportunity" (Lundell, Beach, et al., 2006, p. 78). When asked about programs and services they talked about GC student services, advising, classes, and their instructors. There was some diversity in how they described these aspects of GC with some students seeing the services as more helpful than others. Finally, the authors noted that most of the students interviewed had formed a more favorable view of GC as they spent more time in the program (Lundell, Beach, et al., 2006).

Two other chapters in *Student Standpoints* had qualitative inquiries into the thoughts and experiences of General College students (Lundell, Higbee, et al., 2006). Higbee (2006) interviewed 68 GC students about college readiness and the advice they

would give to high school students interested in going to college. She found that the advice they gave was similar to those given by those who work for colleges, but that high school students may be more open to getting this advice from college students (Higbee, 2006). The other chapter simply consists of reflections written by seven GC students (Schmitt et al., 2006). While this not a qualitative study per se, the conclusion notes three themes found in the reflections. First, all of the students were initially concerned about their ability to do well in college. Second, they have all done well academically. And lastly, each "student has become an ambassador for the General College" (Schmitt et al., 2006, p. 57).

General College at the University of Minnesota was not the only program covered by the CRDEUL publications. Two qualitative studies out of Northern Illinois University are also relevant here. Eaton (2006) completed telephone surveys with more than 25% of the nearly 2,000 graduates of NIU's Counseling Help and Assistance Necessary for a College Education (CHANCE) program. Six themes were identified from the responses to the open-ended questions from the survey: the educational experiences, successes, counseling and CHANCE staff support, tutoring and developmental education coursework, and the influence of diversity (Eaton, 2006). In general, graduates were very positive about their experiences with CHANCE and remembered the names of staff they had worked with decades before.

Also out of NIU is a chapter that explores the experiences of first year students in "an access admission program" (note: it is unclear if this is CHANCE or another program at NIU with a similar mission) through their writing (Dominick et al., 2006, p. 22). Students were asked to write about their transition to college and 26 of those writings

were analyzed by the authors. "Expectation Versus Reality, Support From Family, Support From Friends, College Academic Life, and College Social Life" were the five themes identified from the writings (Dominick et al., 2006, p. 23). The authors note the importance students place on social support particularly from their families while support from college staff and faculty was not noted by students (Dominick et al., 2006).

Finally, one international study published by CRDEUL addressed the experiences of students in a special admission program at a university in New Zealand (Anderson, Stephenson, Millward, & Rio, 2004). In this study, the responses of students in this program from 51 interviews are compared with Tinto's (2002) work on factors for success in learning communities. The authors looked at how students talked about four areas: engagement with lecturers, peers, and the institution as well as external factors (Anderson et al., 2004). They argue that for this population there is not a clear distinction between academic and social engagement as theorized by Tinto. They describe a culture of study groups, which meet both academic and social needs. The authors also note that the students tended to have negative views of administration and suggest that the institution should take more responsibility for its role in student attrition and retention (Anderson et al., 2004).

In addition to these seven inquiries, CRDEUL published many more qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies that relate to underprepared students and developmental education. This section is limited to only those qualitative investigations that involved some type of conditional admission program. Unfortunately, the closing of CRDEUL in 2008 means a prolific voice for developmental education is no longer available.

Dissertations

A number of dissertations have also addressed the experiences of conditionally admitted students. Two have explored the adjustment or transition process of conditionally admitted college students (DeVilbiss, 2014; Williams, 1991). Both Clark (2009) and Ries (2005) looked into the experiences these students had in particular classes. Another dissertation asked students about the relationships that helped them be successful in college (Morrow, 2005). Because the data from Palmer's (2007) dissertation research has been published elsewhere and summarized above, it will not be reviewed here.

The dissertations that focused on the transition or adjustment of conditionally admitted students looked at different populations: traditionally aged (DeVilbiss, 2014) and adult or non-traditionally aged (Williams, 1991). Williams (1991) completed a series of four interviews over the course of the first year of college with 15 conditionally admitted adult students. She was most interested in the adjustment process for these students. Through the interviews, four main factors impacting adjustment were found: transitions, institutional factors, situational factors, and dispositional factors. The students reported they had decided to go to college because of transitions they were facing in life, often to get a better job and to make more money. Going into college, the participants were most concerned about their academic abilities, but situational factors (e.g., illness, family conflict) were the biggest challenges once they were taking classes. Participants reported little connection to or support from their conditional admission program, while those in a separate federally funded support program (ten of the participants) described more institutional support and engagement (Williams, 1991).

DeVilbiss (2014) uses the term transition rather than adjustment for her dissertation on traditionally aged conditionally admitted students. Using Schlossberg's transition theory as a theoretical lens, she interviewed eight students twice during their first semester in college. Six themes emerged from the data: "(a) increasing independence, (b) intensifying demands and difficulty, (c) learning what works and what doesn't, (d) leaving loved ones behind but keeping some in one's life, (e) uncovering support, and (f) finding one's place" (DeVilbiss, 2014, abstract). The author recommends that schools help their conditionally admitted students find the assets they already have to help them succeed, and to help them make connections to an institution that was likely the one that accepted them rather than their first choice for college. She also suggests schools offer programming to address the transition from high school to college, particularly summer bridge programs or longer orientation sessions for conditionally admitted students (DeVilbiss, 2014).

The course-based dissertations explore conditionally admitted students' experiences with classes they need to take because of their status as academically at-risk. Clark's (2009) research was interested in a skill-building course called "Springboard," one of the four bridge courses conditionally admitted students had to choose from at Bowling Green State University. Five students completed two interviews each to answer four research questions. For each question, a theme based on the responses to the interviews was found. For question one, "What do students perceive they learned from their experiences in Springboard?" the theme was "Skills for College and Life" (Clark, 2009, p. 157). Theme two was "Building Community Through an Interactive Supportive Environment" as a response to the question, "What impact do students perceive

Springboard had on their transition from high school to college?" (Clark, 2009, p. 161).

For the question, "What aspects of Springboard do students perceive had the most long-lasting impact?" the theme was "Most Memorable Moments of Springboard" (Clark, 2009, p. 165). And the final question of "What are students' perceptions of their Springboard experiences?" the theme "Reflections and Perceptions" was generated (Clark, 2009, p. 168). Springboard was a communication-focused course that taught skills students found to help them in other classes, and the author recommends implementation of the teaching of these skills for other academically at-risk students (Clark, 2009).

Ries (2005) focused her study on students who had completed a sequence of writing classes. The participants were six conditionally admitted students who had successfully completed a developmental writing class and two college-level writing classes. In addition to an interview, Ries (2005) also had the students participate in a focus group, complete a questionnaire, and write a reflection on their experiences in their writing courses. She also gained access to their high school transcripts, college records, ACT/SAT scores, and proficiency exam scores. The data showed that high school instruction in writing was focused on grammar and underemphasized the need to rewrite (Ries, 2005). Students reported greater writing confidence as a result of their coursework, although they did not believe the classes adequately prepared them to write the kind of academic research papers required to do well in college (Ries, 2005).

The last dissertation reviewed here looks at the relationships that help conditionally admitted students be successful in college through the lens of Rogers' relational components (Morrow, 2005). Ten students were interviewed and asked to talk

about a person in their life who has helped them be academically successful. Based on their responses, Morrow (2005) found that the relationships could be best described as "growth enabling" (p. 117). The responses were also compared to Rogers' (1961) definition of a helping relationship:

> Rogers believed that if an individual could provide a relationship that exemplified transparency, acceptance, and empathic understanding (component number one), then another individual would discover within himself/herself the motivation to change (component number two), and constructive personal growth (component number three) would occur. (Morrow, 2005, p. 122)

All three of these components were found in the relationships described by the participants. For seven of the 10 participants, the person recognized as being most helpful to them in college was a family member rather than school personnel or peers, prompting the author to encourage more communication with the families of students (Morrow, 2005).

Summary of Qualitative Studies

In looking at the qualitative studies reviewed above, there are some themes to be noted in the work that has been done so far. Particularly interesting is the importance relationships play in the lives and successes of these students (Morrow, 2005; Palmer et al., 2009; Palmer et al., 2011; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Schreiner et al., 2011; Williams, 1991). The role of family is especially significant (Morrow, 2005; Palmer et al., 2009; Palmer et al., 2011; Williams, 1991), maybe even more crucial than academic preparation (Williams, 1991). Both Morrow (2005) and Dominick et al. (2006) note the lack of importance students place on relationships with college faculty and staff.

It should also be noted that although conditionally admitted students are the participants in most of these studies (exception: Schreiner et al., 2011), only a few are

interested in the experience of students in the conditional admission program itself (Eaton, 2006; Lundell, Beach, et al., 2006; Palmer & Davis, 2012; Schmitt et al., 2006). A few others look at particular aspects of the conditional admission program such as required courses (Clark, 2009; Mapes, 2011; Ries, 2005) or admissions communication (Stewart & Heaney, 2013). Some researchers have looked at factors related to persistence (Anderson et al., 2004; Palmer, et al., 2009; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Palmer & Young, 2008-2009; Williams, 1991) with mixed findings related to the impact of the program itself. Others have focused more on the transition from high school to college (DeVilbiss, 2014; Dominick et al., 2006; Mapes, 2011; Williams, 1991).

Given the apparent popularity of studying students who have been conditionally admitted to college qualitatively, it is striking that more has not been done to understand the lived experiences of students in the very programs meant to address their needs. And while there is much to learn from the students who were in General College (Lundell, Beach, et al., 2006; Schmitt et al., 2006), CHANCE (Eaton, 2006), or the program described by Palmer and Davis (2012), the experiences of the Alpha students at Western Michigan University may give us additional insights and contribute to the understanding of conditional admission.

College Student Development Theory

Numerous theories have been developed to help higher education researchers and practitioners understand what happens for college students over the course of earning a bachelor's degree. For example, the textbook *Foundations of Student Affairs Practice* covers more than 30 different theories in its chapter on student development (Hamrick, Evans, & Schuh, 2002). While nearly every student development theory could relate to

most students who take part in conditional admission programs, here we will focus on

five that seem to particularly related to the unique experiences of these students: Marcia's

ego identity statuses (Marcia, 1966), Chickering's student development vectors

(Chickering & Reisser, 1993), Schlossberg's model of adult transition (Anderson,

Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012), and the retention theories developed by Astin (1984,

1999) and Tinto (2012).

Marcia's Ego Identity Statuses

The middle of the twentieth century saw the beginnings of the first student

development theories (Hamrick et al., 2002). Two of these early theories both focused on

identity as first described in Erikson's stages of psychosocial development: Marcia

(1966) and Chickering (1969). Erikson had described the crisis at the heart of

adolescence as one of identity and both Marcia and Chickering were interested in how

college impacts the development of identity in students. Marcia (1966) had taken the two

possible identity outcomes of adolescence described by Erikson (identity and role

diffusion) and expanded them into four ego identity statuses. The ego identity status of a

student is determined by crisis and commitment. Marcia (1966) described crisis as a

period of exploration that led to commitment in one of three areas: career, politics, and

religion. This was later expanded to a fourth area of beliefs about premarital sex in order

to better describe identity in women (Marcia & Friedman, 1970; Schenkel & Marcia,

1972). The healthiest or most complete identity status is that of identity achievement

(Marcia, 1966). A student at this status has explored possible careers and ideologies and

has made commitments toward his future. These commitments may differ from what his

or her parents would have wanted. On the other end of the identity spectrum is the status

of identity diffusion. This student has not experienced a crisis or made any

commitments. Between these two extremes are the statuses of foreclosure and

moratorium. The student in foreclosure has not experienced a crisis and yet has made

firm commitments, often based on the opinions of authority figures, usually parents. The

student in moratorium is currently experiencing a crisis and is in the process of making

commitments (Marcia, 1966).

While identity achievement is the ideal ego status, Marcia (1966) was careful not

to describe the statuses as linear or suggest that students need to move through each of

the statuses. One's ego identity status can change over time and may never fit neatly into

a single category. As he articulated in a later article, "individuals are never just one

status; even if one status is predominant, there will still be a mix of statuses" (Marcia,

2002, p. 23).

Colleges interested in applying Marcia's theory do so by providing space and

supports for students to explore their views on the four areas of commitment (Hamrick et

al., 2002). Most notably, many schools have a Career Center for students to learn more

about career options and prepare themselves to make career decisions. In looking

specifically at the experiences of conditionally admitted students, being labeled as

conditionally admitted and participating in a specialized program could have an impact

on a student's identity status. On one hand, conditional admission could in itself be

catalyst for crisis and exploration. For example, a student in foreclosure who has always

wanted to be a doctor because her parents always wanted her to be a doctor could take an

offer of conditional admission as a sign that she is not academically prepared for that

career path. This might cause her to be more open to other possible careers and begin

exploring more options. On the other hand, conditional admission might be taken by a student as a reason not to explore or make commitments. Because conditional admission can be a liminal space where a student is in college but only conditionally, a student could take that to mean he is not a "real" college student and therefore delay making commitments.

Chickering's Vectors

Like Marcia's work, Chickering's vectors are an expansion of the identity crisis in the psychosocial development model of Erik Erickson (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Erikson's model had eight stages or crises individuals faced at different points in their lives. For adolescents, the crisis is that of identity versus identity diffusion. Therefore, Chickering's vectors attempt to explain the process of developing identity in college students and to provide a framework for helping college students successfully resolve this crisis. Chickering chose to call these different aspects of identity development "vectors" because the development of identity is a complex process that happens at different rates and different times rather than set phases or stages worked out in a certain order with one needing to be resolved before moving on to the next (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). However, the vectors are presented in the order in which most students work through them.

The seven vectors are as follows: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). There is a movement through each vector – "Each step from 'lower' to 'higher' brings more awareness, skill, confidence, complexity, stability,

and integration but does not rule out an accidental or intentional return to ground already traversed" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 34). For example, one aspect of the vector of establishing identity is to move from a "lack of clarity about others' evaluation" to "sense of self in response to feedback from valued others" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 38).

In addition to the seven vectors, Chickering's theory also recognizes seven key influences on student development and seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). These influences and principles help translate the vectors from an internal process for an individual student into the environments and practices that can encourage identity development for most students. The key influences on student development are institutional objectives, institutional size, student-faculty relationships, curriculum, teaching, friendships and student communities, and student development programs and services (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Encouraging student-faculty contact, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations, and respect for diverse talents and ways of knowing make up the principles for good practice in undergraduate education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Because the seven vectors were developed to describe identity development of college students including non-traditional students (i.e., those whom Erikson would have considered to be past the identity crisis), Chickering's vectors should also describe the this process for students who have been conditionally admitted to college. Also, given the applicability of this theory for higher education programing (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010), the seven vectors could provide a theoretical foundation for conditional admission programs and may already be employed in that manner.

Schlossberg's Model of Adult Transition

Unlike Chickering's vectors, which were devised specifically for college students, Schlossberg's model of transition is for adults more generally. However, most students find that college is full of transitions – beginning college, developing new relationships, ending old relationships, choosing a major, etc. Because conditional admission programs often try to ease the transition of beginning college for students who have been admitted conditionally, this model can help provide a framework for programs in this regard.

Schlossberg began describing her model of transition in the early 1980s (Evans et al., 2010), and her book on the topic, *Counseling Adults in Transition*, is now in its fourth edition (Anderson et al., 2012). Transition is defined in this model as "any event or nonevent that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 39). There are three pieces to the transition model:

"1. Approaching Transitions: Transition Identification and Transition Process

"2. Taking Stock of Coping Reserves: The 4S System

"3. Taking Charge: Strengthening Resources" (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 38)

Transition identification refers to recognizing the type of change taking place. The specifics of the change, the type of change (i.e., anticipated, unanticipated, nonevent), and the significance of the change to the person who is experiencing the change are all part of the identifying the transition (Anderson et al., 2012). The transition process denotes where the transition is in time – whether the person is "*moving in, through, or out of* the transition" (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 38). The 4S System that is part of taking stock signifies the possible resources one may have to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. Once the 4Ss are identified, taking charge then is the

process of learning to mange the aspects of a transition that are within the control of the person experiencing the transition.

Evans et al. (2010) noted that Schlossberg's model works well for many different college students because of its attention to the specifics of the situation and of the perception of the individual involved. Personality and culture can both be taken into account. An important part of the model is the recognition that while college students face similar transitions, such as the transition of beginning college, personal differences in the perception of the transition and in the resources available to that student to cope with it can lead to vast differences in how two students experience and respond to the same transition (Evans et al., 2010).

Astin's and Tinto's Retention Theories

While Marcia's ego identity statuses, Chickering's vectors, and Schlossberg's transition model can all be applied to students who have been conditionally admitted to college and the programs that support them, conditional admission programs are specifically designed to improve retention for a subset of students. Because of the importance of retention, two theories that deal specifically with this aspect of higher education are reviewed here: Astin's (1984, 1999) student involvement theory and Tinto's (1987, 1993, & 2012) interactionalist model.

Astin (1984) defines student involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 297). He describes the theory of student involvement through five postulates:

1. "Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects."

2. "Different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object, and the same student manifests different degrees of involvement in different objects at different times."

3. "Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features." For example, studying involves both the amount of time a student spends in the activity of studying (quantitative) as well as the level of attention given to it (qualitative).

4. "The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program."

5. "The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement." (p. 298)

While student involvement can be used to explain the development of students in relation to areas such as moral or intellectual development, Astin based his theory in his research on students who dropped out of college and has clear implications for student retention efforts.

Astin has not published an update to this theory. In fact, his original 1984 piece was republished 15 years later without change (Astin, 1999). However, student involvement continues to be an important part of his work. For example, a more recent article explored the meaning of student involvement in relation to what is known about students before they begin college (Astin, 2005-2006). This analysis found that

> most institutions whose students are "highly engaged" should not "take the credit" for engaging their students at such a high level; and most institutions whose students exhibit mediocre or low levels of engagement should not be "blamed" for failing to engage their students at a higher level. (Astin, 2005-2006, p. 14)

Here the word "engagement" replaces "involvement," but they both are used to describe

similar activities such as participation in extracurricular activities and time occupied in academic work. In his 1984 article, Astin writes that student involvement theory "directs attention away from subject matter and technique and toward the motivation and behavior of the student" (p. 307). This emphasis on the student continues more than 20 years later in his 2005-2006 article with the conclusion that most of the explanation for graduation rates involves the characteristics of students before they enter college. However, rather than use this finding to suggest that schools should only accept students who are likely to be involved, Astin (2005-2006) suggests that the performance of schools should be measured in relationship to their incoming student characteristics. He gives the example of two schools with nearly identical graduation rates (56% vs. 55%) but have very different expected rates of graduation based on their incoming student characteristics (40% vs. 65%). In cases like these where graduation rates differ significantly from expectation, understanding what institutions are doing to either encourage or discourage student involvement can be informative (Astin, 2005-2006).

Tinto's theory is similar to Astin's in that it incorporates student involvement; however, it is more complex, taking into account issues beyond involvement and changing significantly over the years. In fact, this change has been so significant, rather than publish a third edition of *Leaving College* (Tinto, 1987, 1993), in 2012 Tinto wrote *Completing College.* This title change reflects a shift in his thinking about retention. Tinto (2012) writes,

> Much of the research on student attrition has not been particularly useful to those in the field who seek to develop and implement programs to improve retention and completion because it assumes, incorrectly, that knowing why students leave is equivalent to knowing why students stay and succeed. (p. 5)

In shifting his focus from why students leave to why students stay, Tinto (2012) also abandons his earlier theoretical framework based on Durkeim's theory of suicide (Tinto, 1987, 1993) and develops a completely revised, simplified model to explain college student retention.

In this new model, Tinto (2012) recognizes four conditions for retention: expectations, support, assessment and feedback, and involvement. Briefly, expectations refers to what an institution communicates that it expects for its students with high expectations being preferred to low expectations. Also needed are academic, social, and in some cases financial supports in order for those high expectations to be realized. Tinto (2012) describes the assessment and feedback condition in this way: "Students are more likely to succeed in institutions that assess their performance and provide feedback in ways that enable students, faculty, and staff alike to adjust their behaviors to better promote student success" (p. 7). The final condition of involvement is very similar to Astin's (1984, 1999) student involvement theory and includes both a student's social and academic engagement in the institution. Also like Astin (2005-2006), Tinto (2012) recognizes that most factors that influence whether or not a student is successful in college is determined by characteristics of the students themselves and are not within the ability of the institution itself to influence. Even so, the focus of *Completing College* is on those ways the school can improve their students' chances of leaving with a degree (Tinto, 2012).

Summary

While a great deal of data has been generated in the study of conditionally admitted students, there are still many unanswered questions. In looking at the areas of

retention or academic success, the literature on conditionally admitted students is not consistent. There is a lack of agreement on the factors that lead to a successful academic career for these students. For example, of the three studies involving conditionally admitted students and the NCQ, every study has found a different set of noncognitive factors to be significant (Adebayo, 2008; Ting, 1997; White & Sedlacek, 1986). And there is also disagreement on whether or not standardized tests are appropriate for these students (Adebayo, 2008; Bryson et al., 2002; Goldman & Widawski, 1976; Houston, 1980; Mattson, 2007; Naumann et al., 2003; Thompson, 1998; Ting, 1997). If we do not know the importance of the high school academic background is for these students, we certainly have no idea to what extent the supports and programs offered by colleges are able to make up for the lack of preparation. While some conditional admission programs have shown promise (e.g., Johnson, 2000-2001; Stewart & Heaney, 2013), outcomes vary widely, and the ways in which results are tracked make it all but impossible to compare programs across schools (Valentine et al., 2011).

In order to better understand the students who have been conditionally admitted, further qualitative inquiry into this phenomenon is necessary. By exploring the stories of the students who take part in conditional admission programs, we may be able to develop stronger programs and better advocate for the needs of these students. Some of this work has begun with the qualitative studies of researchers like Eaton (2006) and Palmer (2007), and still more is needed especially given the diversity of programs and the students they serve.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study was developed to better understand the college experiences of college students who have participated in a conditional admission program in order to help develop more effective programs to meet the needs of these students and provide data to assist counselors in advising and advocating for students. Three research questions guided this study:

1. What are the experiences of college students in higher education who have participated in a conditional admission program? What are their experiences academically, socially and relationally, and financially?

2. What were the experiences of these students while they were in the conditional admission program, and how do they believe those experiences impacted the their subsequent college experiences?

3. What recommendations do students who have completed a conditional admission program have for improving how conditional admission programs support conditionally admitted students?

This chapter begins with a rationale for the research approach and a depiction of the proposed sample. A description of the research method follows with explanations of both the strategies for data collection and data analysis. This is followed by ethical considerations and issues of trustworthiness. The chapter ends with a narrative about the researcher's relationship to the study.

Rationale for a Qualitative Research Approach

Padgett (2008) contrasts qualitative methods with quantitative methods in five ways:

- Insider rather than outsider perspectives

- Person-centered rather than variable-centered

- Holistic rather than particularistic

- Contextual rather than decontextual

- Depth rather than breadth. (p. 2)

The reason for studying the experiences of conditionally admitted students from a qualitative viewpoint are to find out from the students themselves what participating in a conditional admission program is like. By using a qualitative approach this study can look at the student themselves rather than variables such as GPAs and retention rates. The experiences of the students can be seen as a whole within a particular context. And the experiences of a few students can be mined deeply rather than learning a little about the experiences of many students. The researcher believes that in order to produce the rich data needed to answer the research questions, a qualitative approach is necessary.

The topic of the experiences of students who were conditionally admitted to college is well suited to a qualitative approach. Not only is experience a concept that is difficult to capture through quantitative measures, conditionally admitted college students as a population have not been fully explored qualitatively. Much of the research into conditional admission has been quantitative which has shown that what works for understanding regularly admitted students does not work for students who were conditionally admitted (Adebayo, 2008; Copeland, 1991; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; House,

1995; Houston, 1980; Laden et al., 1999; Ting, 1997; White & Sedlacek, 1986). In order to uncover the unique aspects of the conditional admission experience, additional qualitative inquiries may be helpful.

Rationale for the Use of a Phenomenological Methodology

This study used the qualitative method of phenomenology. This approach was chosen in order to better understand how students think about and experience higher education if they had taken part in a conditional admission program during their first year of college. Phenomenology has been described as a way to "explore, describe, and analyze the meaning of individual lived experience" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 19). Because of this, a phenomenology is an appropriate method of study to develop a deeper understanding of the experience of being a conditionally admitted college student. While some previous qualitative studies have explored conditional admission, few have looked at the experience of being a conditionally admitted student. Given that there has been little description so far of the experience of conditional admission, there is a need for a phenomenology of conditional admission.

Sample

The Alpha Program at Western Michigan University was the focus of the study at hand because it provides a group of potential student participants who may meaningfully speak about the experience of conditional admission. This program has been running for more than three decades with the same basic purpose and is expected to continue to do so for the foreseeable future. The program's *Annual Report* (1982) from the 1981-1982 school year describes the program as

> designed to: 1) assist those individuals who have demonstrated academic ability, but have not fully utilized their potential, to have an opportunity to have a post-

secondary educational experience, and 2) provide individualized support services that would hopefully increase the student's chance of success. (p. 16)

While the details of the program have changed over the years, this basic mission continues today. Students are chosen for the Program by the office of admissions because they fail to achieve either the minimum ACT score or high school GPA required by the university for admission but show promise for college-level work. Students who are identified as meeting the criteria for the program and have decided to enroll are then conditionally admitted with the understanding that they will participate in the Program during their first year of college. Students who decide to enroll sign a contact that outlines program expectations. Appendix A is a copy of the Alpha Program Contract for the 2012 cohort.

The number of students admitted through the Alpha Program and enroll varies from year to year. Participants in this study were from the 2012 and 2013 cohorts. In the fall semester of 2012, 203 students took part in the Alpha Program. This number was 186 for the fall of 2013. Interviews took place in the summer and fall of 2015. As of the fall semester of 2015, 96 students from the 2012 cohort and 88 students from the 2013 cohort were still enrolled at Western Michigan. This represents a 47% fourth year retention rate for the 2012 cohort and a 47% third year retention rate for the 2013 cohort.

This study focused on the experiences of ten students who were conditionally admitted to Western Michigan University and continued their studies after completing the Alpha Program during their first year in college. Because participants completed their conditional admission program, their observations are retrospective in nature rather than reflecting a current experience of being in the program. As a phenomenological study that employs an in-depth interview process, each interview generated a lot of data. This

necessitated a limited number of interviews with a focus on depth of experience rather than collecting a large number of interviews on a limited range of topics (Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Each participant was interviewed at least once and then given the opportunity to interview a second time. Five students participated in the second follow-up interview, for a total of 15 interviews. This number of interviews is appropriate for phenomenological inquiry (Creswell, 2013; Padgett, 2008).

Students from the 2012 cohort of the Alpha Program who were continuously enrolled (enrolled in both fall and spring semesters) through the spring 2015 semester were invited to participate. When this recruitment only yielded five participants, students from the 2013 cohort of the Alpha Program who were continuously enrolled through the fall 2015 semester were invited to participate. Recruitment consisted of an email sent from a staff member in the Center for Academic Success Programs (CASP) to eligible students. The email described the study and requested those interested in participating to contact the researcher by phone or email. When an eligible student contacted the researcher to express interest in participation, she would email that student a copy of the informed consent form. Three rounds of invitation emails were sent to eligible students from the 2012 cohort of the Alpha Program. Only one invitation email was sent to the 2013 cohort.

All participating students had completed a year in the Alpha Program and were continuously enrolled at Western Michigan University for the semesters leading up to the interview. In order to determine which students were eligible to be invited to participate, staff members in CASP compared a list of students from the 2012 cohort against a list of students who had been continuously enrolled in the University through the spring 2015

semester and a list of students from the 2013 cohort to those who were continuously enrolled through the fall of 2015. The researcher provided those staff members with a list of students who were in the first year seminar she taught for those cohorts, and these students were excluded from the invitation. The first list of continuously enrolled, 2012 cohort Alpha students who did not take part in the researcher's first year seminar all received an email invitation to participate through their university accounts. There were not enough students who had responded to the first email, so second and third emails were sent. A total of five students were recruited from the 2012 cohort to participate. This was not enough participants for the study, so the recruitment was opened up to the 2013 cohort. Five students from the 2013 cohort agreed to participate and took part in an interview, for a total of ten participants.

Every student who participated in this study had the following characteristics: a member of 2012 or 2013 cohort of a specific conditional admission program and continuously enrolled through the time of the interview at the university where they began their studies. This type of sampling where the participants all meet certain criteria is called criterion-based sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). This sampling strategy is appropriate for the phenomenological nature of this study because in order to study the experience of conditional admission, participants need to have taken part in a conditional admission program (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). This study was limited to two sequential cohorts of a conditional admission program in order to assure overlap in program experience (i.e., same admissions standards, same access to advisors, all students having participated in a first year experience course in their first semester).

The 2012 and 2013 cohorts were chosen because the students in those cohorts had completed a year in the conditional admission program and at least one year of college beyond their year as a conditional admission student in order to explore how the program impacted their subsequent college experiences. The students were also expected to be close enough to the experience of the conditional admission program to be able to describe what it was like to be in the program. The participants were limited to those students continuously enrolled in the University through the time of the interview in order to understand specifically the experiences of those who have continued with school after the conditional admission program ended. Students who had graduated, dropped out, or transferred to another university were not eligible for participation. Students who were currently enrolled were anticipated to be easier to contact and to be more in touch with their experiences as students. Also, the goal of the Alpha Program is to increase the likelihood that certain underprepared students remain in school and graduate. By focusing on those students who remain enrolled, the study was expected to help understand the experiences of students for whom the program is meeting its goals.

Participant Demographics

The participants were ten students at Western Michigan University who were former Alpha Students and continuously enrolled at the time of their first interviews. As shown in Table 1, five were members of the 2012 cohort, and five were members of the 2013 cohort. All of the participants reported that they were 20 or 21 years of age at the time of the interview, and four identified as male and the rest as female. Nine of the participants identified as African American, Black, or both, with the remaining

participant identifying as White. Five of the participants also completed a second interview.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Cohort	Gender	Race and/or Ethnicity	Second Interview
Alyce	2012	female	Black	yes
Dwight	2013	male	African American	no
Elena	2013	female	White	yes
James	2012	male	Black	yes
Jeanice	2013	female	African American	yes
Koby	2012	male	Black	no
Moe	2013	female	Black African American	yes
Nairod	2012	male	African American	no
Raven	2012	female	Black African American	no
Tyler	2013	female	African American	no

Research Design

The following is a summary of the steps used for carrying out this qualitative inquiry into the experiences of students who were conditionally admitted to college. The researcher obtained approval from the University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB). Potential participants were contacted by a CASP staff member through email as described above. Those who were interested in participating then contacted the researcher, and the researcher then provided an electronic copy of the informed consent document (Appendix E) and answered any questions the participant had. The researcher scheduled an interview with those who wanted to take part in the study. Semi-structured interviews with ten students were recorded and transcribed. Participants received their interview transcript and a summary of the first interview along with an invitation to take part in a follow-up interview. If participants did not respond to this this email, they were sent at least one reminder email. The second interview was

primarily used to review the initial summaries and allow for elaboration on the initial interview. This allowed the researcher to ask any clarifying or follow-up questions as needed.

Five of the original ten participants scheduled and attended second round interviews. These interviews were also recorded and transcribed. These transcripts were also sent to the applicable participant, and they were welcome to contact the researcher if they had anything from the second interview they wanted to clarify or change about the second interview transcript. The researcher then formally analyzed both sets of transcribed interviews in order to describe and make meaning of the experience of conditional admission from the student perspective. The next two sections more fully detail the processes of data collection and data analysis.

Data Collection

Before any data collection took place, the researcher obtained approval from the HSIRB to conduct this study. The application to the HSIRB included an overview of the study's purpose, literature informing the study, and research methodology. The HSIRB also needed to approve of the steps taken to protect participant safety and confidentiality. This included approving the informed consent document that apprised participants of their rights regarding their involvement in the study.

Once the HSIRB approved the study to move forward, eligible students were contacted by email and invited to participate in the study. This generated a sample of ten students who participated in a conditional admission program during their first year of college. The details on participant selection and contact are detailed in the "Sample" section of this chapter.

Those who were interested in participating contacted the researcher by phone or email. She then emailed the student a copy of the consent form and arranged a time and place for the interview at one of Western Michigan University's campuses.

The data collection itself consisted of two rounds of interviews. This is consistent with data collection in most phenomenological inquiries, which relies mainly on interviews with participants who have experienced a particular phenomenon as the source of data (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The interview guide for the first round of interviews can be found in Appendix C. The interview script was developed in order to answer the research questions. The particular questions and probes were developed after reviewing the literature and theory, and both informed the development of the script elements. For example, questions that cover high school and first year of college experiences are meant to better understand the transition students experienced and relate to Schlossberg's model of transition (Anderson et al., 2012). The script was meant to facilitate students in telling their stories in a complete and sequential manner. After the first interview was completed, the interview was reviewed to determine if any of the questions needed to be added or changed. No major changes were found to be necessary and the researcher continued with the rest of the interviews.

The first interview began with the researcher developing rapport with the student participant by introducing herself, talking a little about her background with the Program, and describing the importance of the study. She then reviewed the informed consent document with the participant, confirming that the student understood the form before signing. Once the informed consent document was signed, the student completed the

demographics questionnaire (Appendix B), and then the audio-recorded interview began

following the script found in Appendix C.

Once the first round interviews were completed, transcribed, and summarized, the

researcher then emailed each participant a copy of his or her interview transcription and

interview summary. She then arranged a time with each participant to meet for the

second interview with the students who responded. The second interview focused on

elaboration and clarification of the answers the participants gave during the first

interview. The interview guide for the second interview can be found in Appendix D.

Participants had an opportunity to respond to their transcripts and summaries, and the

researcher was able to ask questions to clarify anything she did not understand.

Each participant was asked to take part in both interviews. The first round

interviews lasted between about 50 and 90 minutes. The second round interviews

followed between five and seven months after the first. The second round of interviews

lasted between about 10 and 30 minutes. Total data collection lasted ten months.

Data Analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The recordings were made

on a digital recording device, with recordings backed up onto the researcher's secure

computer. All transcriptions were kept as separate document files and as data in computer

aided qualitative data analysis software program.

The researcher used the qualitative data analysis software program NVivo for

Mac (QSR, 2014) to help organize and manage the data. Even though it is called a "data

analysis" software program, it does not code or analyze the data; it only helps researchers

organize the data to aid in analysis. The researcher herself was the one to apply codes and analyze them for meaning.

Creswell (2013) describes six steps in phenomenological analysis that he has streamlined from Moustakas' (1994) adaptation of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. First, the researcher describes her own experiences with the phenomenon being studied in order to allow the focus to be on the experiences of the participants. This is done later in this chapter in the section "The Researcher's Relationship with the Phenomenon." Next, a list is made of the "nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping" significant statements made in the course of the interviews (Creswell, 2013, p. 193). These statements are then grouped together into "'meaning units' or themes" (p. 193). The themes are used to develop a "textural description" which is "a description of 'what' the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon" (p. 193). This is followed by the writing of the "structural description" which states "'how' the experience happened" (Creswell, 2013, p. 194). Lastly, there is the "composite description" which combines the first two descriptions to describe "the 'essence' of the experience" (p. 194).

In addition to following the steps for phenomenological analysis as outlined by Creswell (2013), the researcher also was memoing. As the first set of interviews were being completed, the researcher was continually making note of similarities and differences between what was being said by each of the students. Her thoughts about the phenomenon and possible codes were documented through the process of memoing as described by Miles and his colleagues (2014). This initial, informal analysis then contributed to what was to be sought through the second round of interviews. Once both rounds of interviews had been completed and transcribed, a more formal round of coding

began. The initial coding was based on what was observed in the transcription and memoing process as well as the research questions. As those codes were being applied, new codes were identified and applied. Memoing continued throughout this process in order to leave an audit trail and allow others to be able to review the coding and analysis decisions (Padgett, 2008).

Ethical Considerations

As with all research involving human subjects, this study had certain risks. Padgett (2008) described the following as possible ethical issues in qualitative research: deception and disclosure; informed consent; coercion and "deformed" consent; confidentiality and privacy; distress and emotional harm; and incentives, payback, and maintaining goodwill. This section will address each of these areas with details about how the possible ethical concerns were attended to in this study.

Deception and Disclosure

There was no need for deception in this study. The researcher made known the purpose of the study to all participants before beginning interviews. While the researcher has had experiences as an advisor and first year seminar instructor, and some of those experiences may inform some of her analysis and understanding of the interviews, the majority of the data for this study is from interviews with students who were fully informed about the study with minimal attention to the researcher's personal observations and experiences.

Informed Consent

Appendix E is the informed consent form. This form was made available to possible participants when they contacted the researcher about their interest in taking part

in the study. Before interviews were recorded, the researcher reviewed the informed

consent form with each interviewee, making sure he or she understood the form.

Recording did not begin until the student demonstrated that he or she comprehended the

information in the form, agreed to go forward with the interview, and signed the form.

During the second round of interviews, students did not sign the form again. However,

the researcher still reviewed the form and obtained verbal assent to participate before

recording.

Coercion and "Deformed" Consent

In order to avoid even the appearance of coercion, potential participants were

informed that the decision to either participate or not would in no way impact their status

with the conditional admission program or the university. Also, the amount that was

offered for participation in the interview ($30) respects the time being offered by the

students while not being so large that students would feel compelled to participate if they

did not want to.

Confidentiality and Privacy

Because of the group of possible participants is limited and very specific, there is

a crucial need to make sure that those who participated cannot be discerned by university

administrators, instructors, or other students. In order to ensure that the identity of

participants is protected throughout the process of the inquiry, a number of precautions

were put in place to protect participant confidentiality and privacy.

The complete audio recordings and transcripts based on the audio recordings were

only accessible to the researcher. De-identified transcripts were shared with the auditor.

Each participant was able to read and approve the transcripts of his or her first interview

and not the interviews of anyone else involved. Participants choose pseudonyms that were used in place of their real names.

The name of the conditional admission program (Alpha) and the name of the university the students attend (Western Michigan University) have been maintained in this dissertation. Identifying characteristics of the participants were concealed in such a way that even other students who were in Alpha or staff members that worked with Alpha would not be able to identify the participants unless a participant chooses to disclose their participation to others.

Consent forms (Appendix E) and names of participants have been maintained separately from audio recordings and transcripts. Audio recordings and transcripts were only labeled with pseudonyms. All physical papers were stored in a locked cabinet accessible only to the researcher. All digital recordings and transcripts were maintained on a computer, which was password protected with all files encrypted.

Distress and Emotional Harm

This study was designed to learn about the academic, social, and financial experiences of students who took part in a conditional admission program their first year of college. It is possible that some of their experiences were not entirely positive and may have been distressful to talk about. However, the topics of the interviews were not expected to be particularly sensitive or elicit overwhelming emotions, and nothing of that nature was observed in the interviewing process. As a precaution, all participants were given the contact information for University Counseling Services through the informed consent process.

Incentives, Payback, and Maintaining Goodwill

Participants in this study were paid $20 for taking part in the first interview and an additional $10 if they completed the second. Compensating college students for their time and expertise is appropriate when doing in-depth interviews. The amount was such that it would make it more likely that a busy college student would chose to participate without offering so much money that it would inappropriately incentivize a student into participating.

<center>**Trustworthiness**</center>

Quantitative research has well-defined standards for what constitutes good research such as validity and reliability. Within the field of qualitative inquiry, there is some debate, not only on what those standards should be, but even whether or not there should be standards (Padgett, 2008). The one thing qualitative researchers do agree on is that quantitative standards are not appropriate for evaluating qualitative methods (Padgett, 2008). Even though there is some disagreement, many qualitative researchers strive for "trustworthiness" in their work. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) have taken the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985; Guba & Lincoln, 1998) and distilled trustworthiness into three parts: credibility, dependability, and transferability. In the following sections, I will define each of these concepts as they relate to trustworthiness of qualitative research and outline how they were addressed in this study.

Credibility

Credibility asks, "Have the perceptions, experiences, and behaviors of the participants been portrayed accurately by the researcher(s)?" In order to increase the credibility of this study, a few safeguards were put in place. The researcher is making her

possible biases known through this chapter in the section titled "The Researcher's

Relationship to the Phenomenon." She also begun memoing thoughts about the study as

she developed the proposal and continued to do so throughout the research process. The

researcher also did what is referred to as "prolonged engagement" (Padgett, 2008, p. 186)

by completing two sets of interviews with those students who were willing to participate

in a second interview. By doing the second interview the researcher hoped to improve

the interviewee's comfort with the process and ensure truthful answers as opposed to

hearing from students what they think she wants to hear.

Other strategies to improve the study's credibility involve reporting negative or

discrepant findings and peer debriefing (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Both of these

strategies have been used in some way. The researcher will present data that seems to

disagree with what she expected or with her preliminary analyses. An interview cannot

be tossed out because it seems like an outlier as it may have something important to teach

us. An auditor who is familiar with qualitative work will also be employed to review

transcripts and give feedback on theme development and analysis. Taking these steps

will help to eliminate threats to trustworthiness in this study.

Dependability

Dependability asks, "Can the practices and methods used to collect and analyze

the data for this study be followed by another person?" In quantitative research, if a

researcher uses a scale to measure some aspect of a research participant, it should have

the same result with the same participant regardless of the researcher administering the

scale. In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument of data collection and

analysis. Given the same participant and questions, two researchers may get different

answers. Given the same set of data, two researchers may come to different conclusions. This is not considered a problem in and of itself. After all, real life is contextual. We respond differently to different people. Dependability does not ask for consistency between researchers, it only asks that the methods for collecting and analyzing data be made transparent. In order to complete a dependable study, the researcher has been keeping an "audit trail" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 113; Padgett, 2008, p. 191). This means that she has recorded to the extent that is practical all of her data collection and analysis decisions.

Transferability

Transferability asks, "To what extent can the findings from this study be applied to other contexts?" Unlike dependability and credibility, which are more focused on what the researcher does during data collection and analysis, transferability is primarily based on how the study is presented and is judged by the reader (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Transferability is achieved through providing details and description with the goal of allowing the readers to feel as if they were there.

This study is focused on students from two consecutive cohorts of a particular conditional admission program. From a quantitative standpoint, studying this population would have little generalizability because of the narrowly defined sample and small sample size. If, however, the researcher can describe what is going on for these students adequately including their life contexts, the findings from this study may be used to understand and appreciate the experiences of other conditionally admitted students in later cohorts of the same program. The goal is to develop further understanding of the

experiences of a small group of conditionally admitted students that may also have meaning for those associated with conditional admission programs at other universities.

By taking the steps outlined above, the researcher trusts that she has produced a study that is credible, dependable, and transferable.

The Researcher's Relationship to the Phenomenon

In order to increase the trustworthiness of this study and minimize the limitations, one of the things I need to do is share my thoughts and potential biases about conditional admission. Within the tradition of phenomenology this is called bracketing. I do not believe that I can bracket myself completely out of the study, but I can be open with my thoughts and experiences in order to allow the reader to judge whether or not biases may have impacted the study.

In the fall of 2011, I began a graduate assistantship as an advisor for a conditional admission program. My thoughts on this program have changed over the last five years and continue to change and develop. Sometimes I see students thrive and succeed in college who were given the opportunity because of this program. Other times I am disheartened to see a student, lacking the preparation for college work, spend two semesters failing classes while going into thousands of dollars of debt.

In some ways, I identify with conditionally admitted students. I grew up in a rural area with limited opportunities for extra-curricular activities or advanced placement classes. I experienced a kind of culture shock when I arrived on campus to find a roommate with monogramed bath towels who complained that the chemistry lab equipment was not as advanced as what she had used in high school. There were some aspects of college that I was underprepared for given this background.

In other ways, I am very different from these students. Both of my parents went to college and instilled in me early both the expectation that I was going to go to college as well as the knowledge of what I needed to do academically and socially to prepare for higher education. They also both worked in careers related to higher education access: my mom as a college administrator and my dad as a high school guidance counselor. During my senior year of high school I had the opportunity to take two classes at a local college. I also did well in high school and was admitted to a selective, private liberal arts college where I was awarded substantial merit-based scholarships. The college I attended did not admit students conditionally or offer developmental classes. I was academically prepared to go to college.

As a high school student I probably would have thought that conditional admission was a bad idea. Why should someone who did not do well in high school, did not take the right classes, and had low test scores go on to college? I would have thought that they should have worked harder in high school. But when I got to college, I met people from very different backgrounds than mine. Many were first generation college students who did not know what were the right classes to take or could not afford to take the SAT multiple times and who still did well in college. Around this time my mom began working with a support program for first generation college students. Her explanation of that program helped me understand what a privileged position I held having parents who had both gone to college. What really struck me, though, were those college classmates I had with perfect SAT scores and high school GPAs above 4.0 who managed to fail out or quit. The question of how high school preparation and college readiness were related was already becoming a reality to me years before I became

familiar with this conditional admission program. I have wondered that if, for most schools, it would make sense to get rid of admissions standards entirely and go to a lottery system to choose which students to accept.

I have now spent several years serving conditionally admitted students as an advisor or first-year seminar instructor. As I have worked with a conditional admission program and the first-year students it serves, I have found myself with more questions than answers in regard to whether conditional admission is good for the students and the university. As I went into this research, I sought to be open to what the students have to say and let their voices come through. However, I recognize that as someone who was academically well prepared for college and has worked in higher education, primarily at private, liberal arts colleges without conditional admission programs, I do have some ideas and biases that I have attempted to be open about through this process.

As a researcher I have both outsider and insider status with respect to this population. I am an outsider in the sense that I did not attend the same undergraduate institution that these students are attending and I was regularly admitted as an undergraduate. However, I am an insider in that I do attend the same institution they do as a graduate student and I have worked with this conditional admission program as an advisor and a first year seminar instructor. I have professional relationships with both the current program staff as well as those who worked for the program when the 2012 cohort was in their first year of college. This likely allowed some students to feel more comfortable talking with me because I understand the program. At the same time, they may have seen me as an authority figure with whom they may have had reservations about speaking honestly about concerns or problems. As someone who has not been

through the program myself, I am hoping that what is in the next two chapters allows the experiences of the students come through rather than their stories coming through the filter of someone who had been through very similar circumstances and assumed the stories of her participants are identical to her own.

Summary

To summarize, this chapter presents the methodology for this study on the lived experiences of conditionally admitted students. This qualitative study was primarily phenomenological in its design. Data collection consisted of two rounds of in-depth interviews with ten students in the first round and five in the second. The participants had taken part in a conditional admission program during their first year of college. In addition to describing the sample, data collection, and analysis, this chapter also covered ethical considerations and trustworthiness before ending with a description of the researcher's relationship to the phenomenon. The intention for this study is that it allows for a better understanding of the experiences of students who were conditionally admitted which will hopefully lead to improved programs and services for this population.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative investigation into the experiences of students

conditionally admitted to Western Michigan University through the Alpha Program was

to understand the lived experiences of college students who have participated in a

conditional admission program. The researcher completed in-depth interviews with ten

participants, and five of those participants took part in a follow-up interview. These

participants each chose a pseudonym that was used in place of their real names to

maintain the confidentiality of those who took part in the study. Analysis of the answers

participants gave in these interviews yielded insights into the experience of conditionally

admitted college students. This chapter reviews the findings of the analysis.

The chapter is separated into three sections, with each of the research questions

framing this division. The first section addresses the question, "What are the experiences

of college students in higher education who have participated in a conditional admission

program? What are their experiences academically, socially and relationally, and

financially?" This section speaks to the general experiences of conditionally admitted

college students outside of their admission program and are common among college

students such as academic performance and relationships with family members. The

second section tackles the question, "What were the experiences of these students while

they were in the conditional admission program, and how do they see those experiences

as having impacted their subsequent college experiences?" The experiences of the

participants while they were in the Alpha Program and how those experiences have

continued to impact them are the foci of this section. The question of "What

recommendations do students who have completed a conditional admission program have for improving how conditional admission programs support conditionally admitted students?" is the topic of the third and final section of this chapter. Suggestions students gave for improving the Alpha Program will be explored in this section.

General Experiences in College

The first research question this study was set up to consider was "What are the experiences of college students in higher education who have participated in a conditional admission program? What are their experiences academically, socially and relationally, and financially?" While many of the questions participants were asked in the interviews focused on the Alpha Program, the goal of this study was to understand the general college experiences of the participants both inside and outside of the conditional admission program. Therefore, the interviews included questions about academic, social, family, and financial experiences both during the first year of college when participants were involved in the Alpha Program and after they completed Alpha. Qualitative analysis showed connections between academic and social experiences and between family and financial experiences. Also, themes of "becoming an adult" and "hard work," while not specifically asked about in the interviews, were obviously experiences most of the participants had. "Becoming an adult" and "hard work" also fit within this section of more general college experiences and are addressed at the end.

Differing Experiences: Family and Finances

The participants' responses to questions about academics, social relationships, family relationships, and finances very rarely addressed only one of these areas. Questions about academics were likely to elicit a response like this one from Nairod: "my

one finance class, I actually didn't have the money to buy the Connect Online stuff, and then I didn't really want to ask my mom for the money." For Nairod, this academic experience was not strictly academic but involved financial and familial considerations as well. Analyzing the responses as a whole, while there was a lot of blending and overlap between the four areas of academic, social, familial, and financial experiences, two overlaps were most common. The first was that a number of statements were marked as referring to both academic and social experiences. The other overlap was in responses that were both about familial and financial experiences. The areas of family relationships and money will be addressed in the next few paragraphs before exploring the relationship between academics and social relationships.

Family. Family is an important part of college experiences for these conditionally admitted college students. In the interviews, the words "family" or "families" occurred 90 times, and other words for family members 295 times. "Mom" was the most common family member mentioned with "parents" at a distant second (see Table 2). For comparison, the most frequently used non-filler word was "people," which was used by participants 409 times. While all of the participants used family-related words often, the nature of the relationship with family members varied greatly between the participants. For example, Jeanice chose to go to Western in order to stay close to her mother while Tyler chose Western because it was the school farthest away from her mom that her mom would let her attend. Elena only talked about her immediate family: dad, mom, and brother. However, in addition to talking about his parents and brothers, James also mentioned his grandparents, an aunt, and a cousin.

Table 2

Use of Family-related Words in Interviews

Word(s)	# of times used	Word(s)	#of times used
mom, mother, mommy, mama	108	aunt, aunts, auntie	12
family, families	90	cousin, cousins	12
parent, parents	45	fiancé	4
dad, father	40	grandparents	3
sister, sisters	30	uncle	3
brother, brothers	19	grandpa, grandfather	3
grandma, grandmother, nana	16		

What was common among most of the participants in terms of family was a sense of growth in relationships. Every participant with the exception of Alyce described family relationships that had grown deeper and stronger while the participant has been in college. This growth in family relationships was found to be related to the theme of becoming an adult and will be addressed in more detail later in this section.

Finances. Finances, like family relationships, was another area where there was a great deal of variation between participants. Some participants described relatively comfortable financial situations. James, for example, said he had not used any federal financial aid so far and believed he was going to be able to graduate without it. Koby, on the other hand, has struggled to find the money to stay in school:

> My parents had to take money out of their 401k to pay for it. It was stressful. I didn't know if I was gonna be able to come back to Western my spring semester, and even last year, I didn't know if I was gonna be able to come back.

Both Dwight and Tyler qualified for work-study jobs. Despite this variation, there wasn't any student for whom money was of no concern. Each participant described money as important and was looking to do what he or she could to control their college costs. Also all ten students described jobs they have held since starting college.

There was a common money experience shared among half of the participants. Five interviewees described improved financial security after moving off-campus and another, Alyce, mentioned a desire to move off-campus partly for financial reasons. The nature of living on-campus is that the whole semester's worth of payments are due all at once: tuition, housing, and meal plan. Often this wipes out a student's financial aid package. When a student moves off-campus, the tuition is taken out and what is left over from grants and loans is paid out to the student who uses the money to pay for rent and food through the semester. In many cases off-campus housing is cheaper than living in a residence hall. Food can be trickier as Moe points out, "Financially, I spent way too much money this semester on stupid stuff like food. I mean, food, that's not stupid. Take-out, delivery, stuff like that." For a busy college student, convenient food is often expensive.

The connections between family and finances. There are two major connections between family and finances that can be observed in the interviews with these students. One is the variation within these two areas. As described above, they come from backgrounds where money is not a concern and backgrounds where money is always tight and everywhere in between. They come from large and small families. Some have tried to stay close to their families, while others have tried to get away. Little can be said about families or finances that these participants would all share.

The other connection between family and finances is that they were often talked about together. The codes for "family" and "finances" often overlapped, although it is important to note that this was usually in a particular direction. When asked about family, participants usually did not bring up finances, but when asked about finances,

family was almost always mentioned. This is most clearly seen in how the students discussed applying for financial aid. In those who specified who filled out their financial aid forms, three said it was their moms and one said it was either her mom or her sister. Tyler did not talk about filling out the FAFSA but did describe her mother's successful bid to get additional money for school:

> First semester, I think I owed 4000, and my parents are like, "Oh, boy." . . . My mom was calling up to financial aid every day, bugging the heck out of them, and they ended up giving me this residence hall grant, which took care of the money that I owed, and I got some back.

Koby even mentioned that his parents used their 401k money to help pay for school. For these students, family is a key factor in their ability in to pay for school.

Maintaining Balance: Academics and Social Life

As families and finances go together, so do the academics and social lives of these participants. The next few paragraphs explore the themes of the academic and social experiences found in the interviews. A discussion of the connections between academic and social experiences will follow.

Academics. By definition, conditionally admitted college students are academically underprepared. Their high school GPA or their ACT scores were not high enough for regular admission. Therefore many of the questions developed by the researcher focused on the academic experiences of the participants. How do these students who did not do well in high school manage to complete the Alpha Program and continue on toward graduation? The following are some of the themes that were found in the students' reflections on their academic experiences.

High school is different than college. While there was not a question about why the participants were admitted to Western Michigan University through the Alpha

Program, most of the students felt the need to explain what happened in high school that they then found themselves being admitted conditionally. Jeanice described herself as "lazy" and said she was more focused on sports than on doing well in school. Elena used the word "unmotivated" to depict her high school self. James said, "I was very intelligent in high school as I am now, but my work ethic didn't match." Dwight said it was his low ACT score, which he explained,

> I could blame and say, "Oh, well, I'm a bad test-taker," or I could like blame it on things like that, but then it was just a lack of preparation for it and just being thrown into it and not really having the choice.

Nairod spoke more generally about Alpha Students saying, "we weren't really applying ourselves in high school like we should have."

For the most part, the participants saw themselves as not living up to their potential in high school and saw college as a second chance. For example, Dwight called being rejected to his first choice school and then only getting admitted to Western through Alpha as a wake-up call: "I was beyond scared straight. I was there to prove myself." Elena noted, "I was capable of going to class and learning the material and testing." The major exception to this was Alyce who used glowing terms to describe her academic work in high school. She gave "social reasons" for why she was involved in the Alpha Program.

Having a second chance to show they were capable of doing well academically was significant for these participants. Several of them also noted that the structure of college was better for them than high school. Nairod called the college schedule where you can arrange later classes and days off as "a really underrated aspect of college." Tyler said that college was less stressful than high school because homework is not due

right away: "It's not something like you get a six- to eight-page paper today and it's due tomorrow. . . . You got time to do the things." She also explained that the professors provide the structure needed to be successful:

> I'm like, "Six to eight pages, what the heck?" And that's the longest paper I've ever had to do in college. So I'm like, "I don't know where to start. I don't know what to put." But he [the instructor] gave us an overview of how many pages this should be, and he gave us, the layout was right there.

These participants described college as different from high school, not only in terms of the usual aspects like syllabi and breaks between classes, but something was also different about them as students. They saw college as a way to prove that they could be successful.

Resiliency in academics. The most common academic experience described by the participants was failing an exam, failing a class, or having to repeat a class to get the grade needed for their major. Dwight failed his first math exam and he had to retake Chemistry when he did not earn the "C" he needed for his major. Elena failed one of the Psychology classes required to declare her major. Tyler also failed an introductory course for her major. Koby not only failed a class he needed for his major, he actually was on academic probation after two semesters of overall poor academic performance. James failed the introductory course for his major, a math class required by his major, and had to withdraw from another math class and retake it later. Alyce described failing or having to withdraw from several classes. Jeanice did not report failing a class, but she did fail the first exam of the introductory course in her major:

> We had three exams. The first one I actually failed, and I didn't know what to do. I'm like, "Oh my gosh. This is college. You're failing. This is not okay." I knew I had to work really, really, really hard. I talked to the professor, went to his office hours, and was like, "Okay, well, how can I get a 'B' in this class since there's only three exams?" And he said, "You have to get a 92 or a 90 above on

your next two exams." And so I worked really hard, studied, did everything I never did before in my life, and I literally lived in this library for my freshman year, and I got over a 90 percent on the last two exams and passed with a "B" somehow.

The students who did not mention failing a class, coming close to failing, or not getting the grade needed in a class were Moe, Nairod, and Raven. All three talked about academic difficulties but never explicitly mentioned failing an exam or class or having to retake a class.

Dwight was the most open about his experiences in this regard. He described failing his first math class as a student who was planning to major in engineering and needed to complete a math sequence before declaring:

> Math, I struggled a little bit early on, but then I got it rolling and then it ended up going well, but I remember my first math test I failed, and I . . . felt defeated. I'm like, "Aw, man, how could I fail that test?" But then you realize that sometimes you do get bad grades on tests, but you have to study and just hope to do better.

Later he did not get the grade he needed in Chemistry:

> I got a "D" in that class. . . . I felt terrible about it. I was like, "Aw, man, I got a 'D.' Got to retake this class. Oh, man, people will think I'm not smart at all." That was a huge setback for me, but then . . . my family [was] offering support saying, "You know, hey, everybody fails classes. You're not the only kid that failed a class. Hey, you can do it better. At least you know what could you done differently, and just apply that to things." So I was like, "You know what? I'm going to take their advice and just not stay too down about it." So I retook it in the spring, and I ended up getting a better grade. . . . I bounced back from it.

Tyler shared a similar story:

> Everyone fails classes every once in a while. I took a Soc class freshman year, and I did retake it last year so I can make up for the grade to open the door for other classes in the department. . . . When I went to the class last year, and I'm like, "I already took this class before." I go to my teachers' office hours all the time. So I'm like, "I took this class before. Don't want to take it again. How do I pass? Give me the guideline to your class on how to pass."

These students, they failed, but they did not quit. They did not change majors. For the most part, they did not blame their instructors. They got up and dusted themselves off and went back and did it again successfully. They learned from their mistakes and often talked with the instructor about how to turn things around. Both James and Elena mentioned their failures when asked about their academic successes, so even failure when turned around can become a success. This is the advice Dwight wanted to share with prospective Alpha Students:

> You're going to fail sometimes. You're going to have to withdrawal sometimes. You're going to have ups and downs, and that's life . . . but also learning how to work through it. You may fail a class but at least you can know . . . I could have done a lot of things better.

Choosing a major. When it came to choosing a major, the participants fell into one of two groups: those who knew what they wanted to do when they came to college and those who either didn't know coming in or changed majors. Those who knew coming in what they wanted to do and stuck with that major included Dwight, Elena, James, Jeanice, Koby, and Tyler. Alyce, Moe, Nairod, and Raven either were unsure of their major coming in or changed majors. Dwight and James are both in the College of Engineering and Applied Sciences with Dwight pursuing Electrical Engineering and James in Computer Science. Jeanice, Koby, and Tyler are all majoring in Criminal Justice although Jeanice is also majoring in Social Psychology. General Psychology is Elena's major.

Alyce was interested in Psychology when she came to WMU, but didn't like the department's focus on behaviorism. She tried out a number of majors in the social sciences before landing on Social Psychology, which is housed in the Sociology Department. Moe went through a number of majors in the College of Health and Human

Services thinking that a job in the medical field would make good money. However, she

didn't enjoy the classes and eventually decided on Family and Child Development

because of her interest in working with children. Nairod started off in Design but never

really felt connected with it. After being assured by his aunt that majoring in Business

would not require him "to be elite at math," he switched to Finance because he had

always been interested in the stock market. Social Work was Raven's first choice for a

major before deciding that Organizational Communications would better prepare her for

becoming an event planner.

      For both groups, the choice of a major came down to basically one thing: personal

interest. Both Jeanice and Raven said they asked themselves what it was that they really

wanted to do. Raven described her process like this:

> My first time declaring a major was because of my high school experiences, and
> then I don't know if I had an epiphany or what happened, but I really sat down
> and I said, "*/Raven/,* what do you like to do? What makes you happy? . . . What
> do you really like to do?"

One of the things that pointed Jeanice to her major was the type of TV shows she liked to

watch:

> I don't even know how it came to me, but I was thinking, "Oh, what do I like to
> do? What am I really interested in? What can I see myself doing?" I would always
> think about the TV shows that I watch . . . *CSI, Law and Order,* and stuff like that,
> and that's really the only thing that interests me.

James said he chose Computer Science because "I love gadgets and stuff. . . . So being

that someone who can create those gadgets, it just gives me endless joy." Koby chose

Criminal Justice because "law enforcement is something I have a huge passion for."

Passion, joy, interest, happiness: these are the type of things that the participants said

drove their decisions on their choice of major. Nairod mentioned that he did not connect

with the other Design students and one of the things he liked about Finance was that he had friends who were majoring in the various business programs. Dwight said he chose Electrical Engineering over Mechanical Engineering because it seemed like "everybody" was doing Mechanical so maybe there would be more opportunities in Electrical because it was not as popular. Other than those two examples, major choice seemed to be about what the student liked either in the coursework itself or the career opportunities that the major might provide.

While the major chosen by a student influences her or his experiences academically because it determines to some extent what classes a student takes, academics experience or ability was not brought up by any of the students in this study as a reason for choosing or changing majors. Raven mentioned that she did better academically after switching majors; however, her reason for changing majors was that her career goals had changed, not that she was doing poorly in her previous major. Both of the engineering students, Dwight and James, seemed to expect that academic successes in their majors would be rare. Dwight said, "The Intro to History classes come easy to me because I really enjoy History. [I'm] one of the people that watches the History Channel in his downtime." Despite doing well in History and enjoying the subject, he never considered history as a possible major. Similarly, James took an Anthropology class his first semester and earned an "A" despite knowing nothing about the field before going in. However, he failed his Computer Science I class the first time he took the introductory class for his major. Rather than discourage him from pursuing Computer Science, he used the experience to pass the course the second time. In fact, five of the six

students who stayed with their original majors had to retake a class required for their major because they did not earn the grade required the first time.

On the other hand, warning students that a particular class is difficult appears to have made a difference for at least some of these students. At Western Michigan, General Psychology is a notoriously difficult class, but Alyce, Elena, and Jeanice all reported that they passed it with a "B" or better the first time they took it. Jeanice also took an upper-level Philosophy course despite an advisor trying to dissuade her from doing so, earning a "BA"[1] in the class. James had heard from many of his fellow engineering students that Calculus II was particularly difficult. Armed with this knowledge, he passed it with a "B" the first time he enrolled. It is as if telling these students that a class is hard helps them to rise to the challenge.

Overall, despite not having the academic credentials from high school to be regularly admitted to Western, these ten students have managed to be academically successful in college-level work. They have had difficulties and setbacks, and yet they have persevered. Some even mentioned the possibility of continuing on and getting a graduate degree.

Social life. While there were a number of shared academic experiences, social experiences varied between participants. Some students came to Western with friends from high school and others by themselves. Some found themselves limiting social interactions while others spent most of their time with friends. Some made friends easily when they got to school, others found making friends to be more difficult. Some participants became involved in student organizations, while others have not. The one

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[1] Western Michigan University has a different grading system than most schools. The grades and their GPA points are as follows: A=4.0, BA=3.5, B=3.0, CB=2.5, C=2.0, DC=1.5, D=1.0, and E=0.0.

aspect of participants' social lives that appeared to be connected was the interaction between social and academic experiences, which will be explored next.

Connection between academics and social life. There was a strong relationship between academic and social experiences for the participants. There were 45 statements made in the course of the interviews that were coded both as "social" and "academic." Social here refers to relationships with friends and peers. This means that when these students were asked about academic experiences, they would occasionally also mention the impact their friends had on their academics. And when asked about social relationships, sometimes they would talk about the role academics played in those interactions with friends and peers. These academic-social statements could be grouped in three categories: how relationships and academics are at odds, how relationships and academics can work together, and the need to balance academics and relationships.

Of these three categories, how relationships and academics were at odds was the most common, mentioned by seven of the ten participants. One way to talk about this negative connection between these two experiences is how relationships and socialization hurt students' abilities to do well academically. When asked about academic setbacks, Alyce answered, "Relationships, the stress and strain of them. Not being able to put in as much effort." Koby said that his academic troubles his sophomore year were related to too much socializing:

> Partying too much, grades was slipping. . . . I was disappointed in myself, but at the same time, I knew it was gonna happen because I didn't do as well as I should have, and I didn't put the time and effort that I know I am capable of to be successful here.

For James, the cafeteria was a place where he would be distracted by the social opportunities:

On Tuesdays I sit down and do my Computer Science work, but I saw this girl in the Caf, so I'm gonna spend hours at the Cafeteria. . . . Especially when you got a gold meal plan. Freshman year spent five hours at a time in there.

When Tyler heard that some of her friends had been dismissed from college for academic reasons, she assumed that it had something to do with their relationships:

A lot of my friends that actually went off to college are back home for academic probation reasons. They're like, "Yay, */Tyler/* you're still there." And I'm just like, "Yeah, how are you not? How did your social life go wrong?"

Relationships require time and energy, time and energy that can take away from academic performance.

However, it also works in the opposite direction. The desire to do well academically can in turn hurt a student's social life when they try to distance themselves from the relationships that are hurting them academically. Koby shared,

I lost a lot of, I wouldn't call them friends, a lot of associates. I recognize people want to turn up more than school, and it was affecting me my first semester. So I had to let those people go because they were not a positive aspect in my life at all.

Jeanice said she broke up with a boyfriend who was keeping her from being academically successful. Dwight also saw his desire to do well in school causing misunderstandings with his friends:

Some of my friends didn't realize how much I put effort into college. . . . It was like, "Aw, man, how come you never want to hang out?" And it's like, "'Cause I got to study." . . . They thought that I was trying to grow away from them, but I'm like, "No, I'm just taking this time to work on me because . . . who's going to help me solve this problem? Who's going to help me study? Who's going to get up and go to my class for me? Nobody. I have to do those things." So it took them a while to get used to that.

Three of the five participants from the 2013 cohort all said within a word or two the exact same thing about relationships: "You are the product of the people you place in your presence." This was a statement they had heard from an Alpha Advisor early in their

Alpha experience. This helped them recognize the importance relationships play in their

academic success. When Elena was asked about obstacles to her success, she answered,

> Hanging around people that I know that if I study with them, I won't get anything
> done. . . . I can remember */Alpha Advisor/* saying, "You have to live by the three
> P's: you're the product of people in your presence," and that really hit home with
> me. I was like, "Oh my god, that's so right, because if you hang around negative
> people all the time that are doing not such great things, you'll fall into that. But if
> you're hanging around people who are motivated and want to do well in school
> and just want to get involved, then you'll also want to do that."

Having a social life, going to parties, and maintaining relationships all can have a

negative impact on academics just because of the time involved in these activities. Then,

as evidenced in the Alpha Advisor quote mentioned above, some people and some

relationships can have a particularly negative effect. However, students can also be the

"product" of positive interactions. Moe described how this quote could go both ways:

> That [quote] really just changed me. Now I'm around people that want the same
> things in life, are trying to move forward in life. I don't want to be with people
> that just are okay with being stagnant. . . . If you are around people that do
> anything positive, you're gonna end up like that too.

Nairod said that his relationships with other business majors have been helpful for him:

"We have classes together. We know what classes each one of us is taking, and we're

always there to get each other's back when we're not doing as we should." He also

shared, "Business training helped me out a lot because it's dudes who are in my major

who could help me out with stuff. We pass along books to each other . . . and just really

networking." Elena described her sorority as "a huge support system."

Just like academics can hurt relationships, academics can also help forge

relationships in college. Both Jeanice and Tyler said that their First Year Seminar (FYS)

classes were places where they developed relationships with peers that were helpful to

them. Tyler said her FYS instructor even gave them opportunities to help each other out

with homework for other classes. Jeanice credited both FYS and the Alpha Leadership

class for getting her "out of my shell" and interacting with other students. However, the

positive connection between the social and the academic was not as recognized by the

participants, with five of the participants speaking to that effect.

One other way academics and social experiences connected for these students was

the idea of balancing the two. Four students spoke to this idea, primarily as a way to

mitigate the ways relationships can hurt academics. Koby said,

> It was very hard balancing going out every weekend and taking 12 to 15 credit
> hours. I got hurt sometimes trying to balance, and then you didn't want to put too
> much into partying but at the same time you want to go out with your friends . . .
> but you have to take your homework. You have to find that balance. I think for
> me it was all about time management. I was horrible at that.

Moe went to the other end of the spectrum, spending too much time away from people:

> I did pretty good [academically] freshman year because I shut everybody out, and
> I didn't have a good balance between academic and social life . . . but if I were to
> go back, I wouldn't do that. In college you have to have that balance of the social
> life and the academic because let's be real, it's college . . . you have to interact
> with somebody.

Tyler had considered taking more credits in order to graduate and then changed her mind

in order to have a better school-social balance: "Next semester I was going to take 18

credits, but I'm like, 'No, I want a social life.'"

Like family and finances are connected, so are academics and relationships. The

right relationships can foster academic success, but for the students in this study, most of

the time there is a trade-off between doing well academically and having a good social

life. Keeping one's social life from interfering with academics requires a careful balance.

Too much socializing can lead to poor academic performance. Only one student tried

cutting herself off from relationships to focus solely on academics. While she earned

good grades that semester, she did not find the academic success to be worth the lack of relationships.

Becoming an Adult and Working Hard

Participants were specifically asked about their experiences in college regarding academics, family, friends, and money. Another important college experience for these participants was becoming an adult. This was mentioned by every single participant even though there was not a question that was asked to directly elicit this response. Usually participants mentioned becoming an adult either in relationship to financial or family experiences. For example, they would mention adulthood while talking about having to pay rent or about their improved relationships with parents. However, adulthood was also brought up sometimes when speaking about academics, and a few students also gave the Alpha Program credit for helping them become adults.

Participants used a number of different ideas to describe their new adulthood such as "responsibility," "independence," and "awareness." The most common idea associated with adulthood for these students was "hard work." As Dwight observed, "Adulting is hard." This phrase or idea was found in all but one of the participant's interviews. The next several paragraphs will detail the experience participants described of becoming an adult including the relationship of hard work and adulthood.

Becoming an adult. As mentioned above, every participant spoke about becoming an adult, usually using the word "adult" and other times talking about something closely related such as "maturing" or being a "man" or "woman." Students viewed changing relationships with family, being a college student, and gaining financial independence all as facilitating the process of becoming an adult. Students also

explained that becoming an adult meant seeing the world in a new way. The following

paragraphs will review each of these experiences in relationship to becoming an adult.

Changing relationships with family and becoming an adult. Family was the

context in which most of the participants described becoming an adult. Part of it had to

do with moving away from home. Alpha Students are required to live on campus during

their first year at Western unless they live with a parent or guardian within 35 miles of

campus. All of the participants in this study lived on campus during their first year of

college, even those who were from Kalamazoo. For these students, part of the process of

becoming an adult was about leaving home and forging an identity separate from the

family. And yet, this distance and new identity often led to stronger relationships with

their parents. There was a sense in which the perspective they gained allowed them to

understand and appreciate their parents and other family members.

For some students, the move to college was one actively encouraged by their

parents. Moe shared, "I wanted to stay home. I wanted to commute . . . but then my

parents were like, 'No, you need to go off, flap your wings, and fly.'" Dwight also said,

"Family [encouraged me] to take that next step into life" by going to college. Elena was

particularly concerned about leaving: "I was very nervous to move away from home

'cause . . . I'm extremely close to my dad." For Elena and others in this study, moving

away from family had its benefits: "Going away really made me mature and grow up and

become more independent and completely different person than when I was in high

school." Not only did Koby move away from his parents to go to college, they then

moved out of state. He said this actually strengthened their relationships with each other

and helped him grow into adulthood:

This summer they [my parents] move[d]. . . . We've grown together as a family, grown a lot a tighter. I got a lot closer to my dad. . . . It's made me a lot stronger and a lot more independent.

For some participants, there was a noticeable move from child to adult in

relationship to their families that was facilitated by going to college. Tyler shared,

When I first went off to college, I was the baby . . . but . . . they look at me as a woman now more than that little girl. I was their little precious baby . . . but now I just feel like I'm developing into that woman that I will be . . . and I'm proud of the person I'm becoming.

Moe also used the word "baby" to describe herself early in college:

[My family] supported me in college because I was able to talk to them all the time, and they gave me all the tools, and if I ever needed anything I knew that they were a phone call away. . . . The first year I [was] still a baby and needed them a lot, but they gave me that push to flap my wings and fly, and now I'm flying.

In Moe's account, she went from a "baby" who called home often and now is

independent enough to "fly." This was common among participants: they would call

home or communicate frequently with family early in college, and this would lessen as

time went on. Raven said,

Freshman year it was like, "Mommy, Mommy, Mommy. Mommy, let me come home. . . ." Sophomore year it was twice a semester I talked to my mom, and it was like, "Why are you doing this /Raven/? Why don't you talk to me? Oh, you don't love me any more." And luckily my aunt was like, "You have to understand, when you're in college, it's not that you intentionally do it, it's just you're so caught up in what you're used to doing you don't think to do it." . . . So she was like, "You can't be upset at her, you can't." So mom adjusted to it. . . . My mom knows I love her, but my family relationships changed.

Dwight also found himself communicating less with his family:

My relationships with family, they did change a little bit because I'm one of those people, when I get out on my own, I'm in the happy place. . . . That's one of the things that I have to work on is communication because people do want to know how you're doing. . . . I think it was three weeks before I talked to anybody from my family, and it wasn't because I had bad relationships with them, I was just so into school that I was just really focused.

Elena also found herself having to call home less often:

> Becoming more independent and figuring stuff out on my own without having to call up my dad and be like, "How do I do this?" They [my parents] were are really supportive, and they thought that I was maturing and growing up.

For Nairod, it was his mother who started calling less:

> [I] learned to appreciate my mom a lot more, more so than I did when I was in high school. We don't see each other all the time, so it's different. I've grown. She's still getting used to it. She used to call me about once every week freshman year. Sophomore year, start winding down. She's starting to understand I'm growing up, but our relationship is probably as strong as it's ever been.

> Another aspect of changing relationships with parents is that students found that as they matured they gained a sense of appreciation for their parents they did not have before. Dwight reported he was closer to his mother "because of me becoming an adult and realizing what adults go through." Moe experienced something similar with her parents:

> My mom and my dad, they've always trusted me, but I think college, our relationship is actually a lot better. . . . The distance helps me appreciate them more because when I was at home . . . I didn't appreciate them. . . . I hated everything in high school, so it helps me appreciate them more. And that in turn makes the relationship better because now I know the things they did. Even though I hated it, now I know it helped me become who I am.

Jeanice said her ability to be more responsible and dependable had improved her relationship with her mother. In all, eight of the ten participants connected becoming an adult with their changing relationships with parents and other family members.

Becoming an adult through financial independence. For many of the participants in this study, financial independence was a marker of adulthood. Koby made this connection between financial independence and becoming an adult: "I have my own apartment for the first time. I'm paying bills for the first time. So it's adulthood,

manhood in me." Bills were often mentioned as a sign of adulthood. Tyler shared that

the summer before college

> was the last time I really had ultimate fun. Now I'm an adult so all I do is work in
> the summer. I think it was the life. I didn't have to pay any bills. It was definitely
> something that I cherish now.

She also said, "Now I'm the adult, I pay rent. I'm just like, 'I hate bills. I don't like being

an adult. So whoever wants to pay my rent this month, come on. Go ahead.'" Raven

commented,

> I decided to move out and that really was an eye-opener because freshman year I
> was like, "Oh, I want to spend my money on what I want to spend it on," and I
> couldn't but it really put that fire under my behind to be like, "Open your eyes.
> Realize this is real life. You cannot be evicted. You cannot have no lights. You
> have to have water."

Financial independence was not only about paying bills. For Elena, becoming an

adult involved employment: "I definitely became more independent because . . . I got my

first, real, big girl job." Dwight described his financial independence as expedited by his

family. "I had financial support [from my family] during my first [year of college], and

then second year it went away. They said, 'Yeah, you kinda on your own now.'"

On the whole, becoming an adult was viewed as a positive development, one that

students described with a certain amount of pride. However, financial independence

inspired more ambivalence. Tyler admitted,

> [I am] paying bills and I was just like, "Whoa, I have a bill in my name. I have a
> lease. Like what, what?" It's just that I came a long way from where I could have
> been, even though I'd love to stay at home paying no rent.

In talking about her relationships with family, Tyler explains that she is not the "baby"

anymore, but there is part of her that wants to go home and not have to worry about

paying the rent.

Becoming an adult by being a college student. The act of leaving home to go to

college fostered independence from family and assisted the formation of adulthood, but

the act of going to college in and of itself was also described as helping students become

adults. Koby said what he had heard about college growing up was

> Amazing time, get away from your parents. Get to live on your own. Get to
> experience new things and new people, and find out who you really are as a
> person and try to develop yourself through tests and trials, and also get to learn
> who you are as an individual, what makes you tick. Become a better person.

This appears to be true to the experiences of some participants. Dwight shared,

> [What] was significant [about my first year at Western] was my growth as a
> person, as a man, or as a young adult. It's growing into your own person. . . . It
> was important because it helped me realize the things I want to do in life.

Moe said,

> Being here [at Western] shaped me to be who I am. My values haven't changed,
> but they've shifted I guess, 'cause growing up you have your parents' values, but
> then once you go out on your own, you kind of started to form your own.

She was very clear that these changes she noticed were from going to Western

specifically:

> Coming to this school, I would say honestly, probably changed my life 'cause it
> opened my eyes and exposed me to different things. If I would have went
> somewhere else, I probably wouldn't experienced half the stuff I experienced or
> gone through half the things stuff I would have went through.

Academic experiences was one of the aspects of college that was associated with

producing adult maturity. Nairod described a math class as something that motivated him

to learn to do the work expected in college: "Math was never really my thing. I had to

take the Pre-algebra class, but I don't know, it was just one of those classes I actually

start getting better, start applying myself more, and I just didn't back down." Koby had a

wake-up call during his sophomore year when he was placed on academic probation:

I was kinda disappointed in myself, but at the same time, I knew it was gonna happen because I didn't do as well as I should have, and I didn't put the time and effort that I know I am capable of to be successful here. I take full responsibility for my actions, and I've already accepted the consequences.

Dwight described a type of growing up that took place during First Year Seminar (FYS). Unlike high school where you are expected to give the right answer, in FYS he was able to develop his own views: "My first research project, my topic was if the death penalty was a deterrent or not. That was interesting 'cause I did the project, and I had opinions."

Some students also attributed their growth to participation in the Alpha Program. Elena said that Alpha "taught me leadership skills and how to take initiative and how to talk to your classmates about different group projects and ideas. It's definitely taught me about responsibility." Tyler shared, "I wouldn't be the person I am today without it [Alpha] 'cause . . . I feel like it has shaped me into this great academic student at Western." Nairod found that his spring Alpha class was particularly valuable:

[Alpha] was helpful I would say more so that second semester taking that Leadership class 'cause I learned a lot through the books we read and just him as a teacher generally. . . . It was helpful for my growth and development.

Dwight found Alpha impacting him through the Western Success Prep (WSP) Program, before the fall semester had even started. He said, "WSP was a good experience for me. It was like, 'Yeah, you're an adult now. You got to do this, to be able to do this.'"

When you are an adult, you see things differently. One other aspect of adulthood that was mentioned by a number of participants was seeing the world differently as an adult. Being an adult is associated with greater awareness and understanding. Dwight described himself as "a more conscious adult" as the result of some of his experiences in his major. Raven commented, "I've just been through a lot

within the last two years that made me a stronger person and opened my eyes a little bit

better." Nairod also talked about his eyes being opened:

> When you look at all the good that has happened [in college] and all the growth and development, it's like I'm a completely different person than I was three years ago. I still got some of the same tendencies from time to time, but I just feel like I grew up a lot more. My understanding of life, everything is different. . . . I wasn't too aware of everything and didn't always understand what's going on, but now I have my eyes open. I see everything. I know what's going on. . . . I don't know, it just changed me.

Moe depicted her awakening in this way:

> I went through a lot in college because in high [school] . . . I wasn't exposed. College exposed me to a lot of things because before college I wasn't exposed to anything. When I got here, when I was on my own, I was exposed to a lot and it taught me a lot of things, about myself, about other people, my environment, everything. So it definitely put everything into perspective. . . . It taught me to be more aware about more issues that affect my generation.

Alyce also compared her current self to how she was in high school:

> It's definitely changed a lot of how I was when I was in high school. In high school, I knew a lot of different things were wrong, but I didn't exactly understand why they were wrong. . . . But being in college really helped me branch out and understand my part in the world and what I can do as an individual and how I can advocate for people.

While developing financial and familial independence both were associated with

becoming an adult, this "eye opening" experience is described by participants in the

context of being in college.

Hard work. Participants shared that being an adult is hard work and that adults

work hard. Hard work is both a responsibility of adults and a sign of adulthood. This

was mentioned by every participant with the exception of Koby. Notice how Dwight

connects hard work with both the Alpha Program and becoming an adult:

> When I got on campus, I was like, "You know what? This [Alpha] isn't bad. I can work my way up, and I can prove to people that I am not incapable of doing certain things. I am capable, and I just have to work hard like every other adult."

Nairod realized when he chose his major that it was going to require hard work:

> [My aunt] was just telling me that you don't have to be elite at math to be in finance, and you just have to apply yourself hard. It's something I'm passionate about. Because I am not good at math, I just have to apply myself harder. If I have to study more than other students, I have to study more than other students.

Hard work is part of the identity of some participants. Raven said,

> I won't let myself give up. I tell myself, "*/Raven/,* why don't you just stop now? Why do you keep doing this to yourself?" But then it's like my mama said, "You never quit anything you start." So, get through it, make the best of it, and make memories. Try to live life the best way you can, and use your experiences and take the positive out of it.

Moe found that the results of hard work impacted her emotional state:

> I work hard. This Gender and Women's Studies essay I had to do, I worked so hard on that essay, and I got an "A." I was so happy. Any time I work on an essay or work on an assignment or a project, and I know I've worked so hard on it and I get an "A" or I get the grade I want, I'm so happy.

And James shared, "I give all of that [the credit for my success] to me, just me buckling [down] . . . a lot of times I would have to do things on my own." Dwight also found hard work to be lonely at times, saying that his friends did not understand why he would spend time on his academics rather than with them.

By far, though, hard work was the main thing these students wanted others to know about them. When asked what they wanted friends, family, professors, or others to know about them, they said, "I worked hard . . . and it wasn't easy." (James) Or, "I've been trying really hard, and that it should be taken seriously." (Alyce) Also, "It's been hard, but doing pretty well." (Elena) Others went on to elaborate, like Jeanice who said,

> Where I am now, it took hard work to get here. . . . It's hard work, and I'm trying my best to make it through because it's not easy. Every day it is a rollercoaster . . . . It's hard but it helps me mentally get through it, and knowing that I can go through college, I can really do anything.

Dwight answered,

> I want you to know that I like working hard. I like working towards my future because that is vital, because now in today's times . . . you can't get a factory job anymore . . . you can't do these things anymore and then expect to live off of them because it's just not the way it was. So [I] always strived for self-betterment and strived to just to be a good person. That's what I'm working on.

Similarly Tyler responded,

> I would just say that I worked my butt off to get where I'm at. It's not easy. It may look easy at times, but I definitely put in work to get where I'm at. The material definitely isn't easy at times, but I just want them to know how much work that I do to get where I'm at today.

In summary, these students want you to know two things about them. One is that they are adults. The other is that they work hard.

Alpha Experiences

This section will take a look at how the participants responded to interview items related to the second research question, "What were the experiences of these students while they were in the conditional admission program, and how do they see those experiences as having impacted their subsequent college experiences?" Firstly, the students will explain in their own words what Alpha was. Next the metaphors they used to describe Alpha will be explored. Both those aspects of Alpha that were found to be positive and those they viewed as negative are presented. The fifth part of this section will look at the experiences of stigma and confusion students had as relates to Alpha. Then, because one of the biggest impacts students saw from Alpha was its influence on their confidence, the last part of this section will address the interaction between Alpha and confidence.

What Alpha Is

  The Alpha Program is a conditional admission program for first time, traditionally aged students at Western Michigan University. While all ten participants took part in the same program, they often had differing views of what the program entailed and the appropriateness of different aspects of the program. As James said, "My experience does not reflect everybody's." In addition to the Alpha program that takes place during the student's first year at Western, some students come a week early for the Western Success Prep (WSP) Program. Additionally, three of the ten participants have continued to be involved in Alpha through mentoring, working with WSP, or being a student instructor for an Alpha section of First Year Seminar (FYS). Table 3 shows whether or not each student participated in WSP and continued to be involved in Alpha beyond the first year that is required. In general, the three students who are still involved seem to have a better understanding of the "whys" of different interventions.

Table 3

Participant Involvement in Alpha

Pseudonym	Cohort	WSP	Continued Involvement
Alyce	2012	yes	no
Dwight	2013	yes	yes
Elena	2013	no	no
James	2012	no	yes
Jeanice	2013	no	yes
Koby	2012	no	no
Moe	2013	yes	no
Nairod	2012	no	no
Raven	2012	no	no
Tyler	2013	yes	no

Four of the participants described Alpha as some version of Nairod's comment of, "it wasn't anything extra." When Elena was asked how her first year of college would have been different without Alpha, she replied, "Not a whole lot would have been different 'cause it was just like one class or two classes. You meet with an advisor twice a month, nothing really." Similarly, Raven said, "I think it was just the FYE [First Year Seminar] class. Alpha students were required to take it, and to me that was really about it." Jeanice was the one participant to compare Alpha to the other conditional admission programs to which she was accepted. She said one of the reasons she chose Western was

> because of the fact that there was less restrictions opposed to the other schools that I was thinking of, and so I felt like I'll still be a college student, I just have a class and an advisor I have to meet with, which isn't much.

Dwight described himself in relationship to Alpha by saying, "I really wasn't a student that depended too much on the Program." James didn't think he needed Alpha, saying, "I felt like it was beneath me." Neither James nor Dwight really spoke to the difficulty of meeting the conditional admission requirements. However, Alyce and Tyler both found the requirements to be too much at times. Moe used the word "hate" to label her early feelings about Alpha. Koby described Alpha as "mundane" and "repetitive."

Alpha Metaphors

In addition to their general comments on Alpha, many of the participants used metaphors to describe what Alpha was like or how they imagined students who did not go through Alpha experienced the transition to college. All four of the male participants used at least one metaphor to describe Alpha, while three of the six female participants did so. The male participants were also responsible for 15 of the 22 metaphors shared by participants.

A number of the metaphors were water-based images. Koby spoke of Alpha as a chance to get his feet wet. Similarly, James said he was able to put his feet in a little bit to get used to the water, and he was not just thrown into the water right away. This image of being thrown is also found in Jeanice's comment that by being in Alpha she was not going to be just thrown out there and in Tyler's observation that those not in Alpha were tossed into the woods.

Alpha was compared to both stepping-stones (Koby and Nairod) and a stepping-stool (Koby). Other nouns that were used to describe Alpha were a solid base (James), a cushion (James), bicycle training wheels (Koby), a family (Jeanice and Koby), and a helpful tool (Raven). A few of the metaphors used were more abstract in nature. James said Alpha was an easy start, a better start, and a support system. Jeanice said that Alpha was a network and opens doors. Some metaphors were used to say what Alpha was not. Nairod said that Alpha was neither a roadblock nor a hurdle to jump over. Jeanice said an Alpha student does not have to fend for herself. Dwight imagined those who were not in the Program as deer in the headlights. What all of these metaphors share in meaning is that they speak positively about Alpha, comparing it to things that are helpful and effective.

While use of metaphors was more common among the male participants, a certain idiom was used by three of the female participants – that Alpha is something that gets students out of their "comfort zone." Tyler said that Alpha "took you out of your comfort zone, but sometimes you have to be uncomfortable to grow." Raven found that specifically FYS "gave me the extra push that I needed to get me out of my comfort zone because that's what college is about, stepping outside of your comfort, finding who you

are." For Alyce, Alpha was "about being in a situation that's not exactly comfortable that you make comfortable," and she wanted prospective Alpha Students to know that they need "to be prepared to be put in a situation that may not exactly be comfortable but is definitely helpful."

Positive Alpha Experiences

In order to understand the full range of experiences conditionally admitted students had with the Alpha program, they were asked about what was helpful, what was not helpful, and what they would change about the Alpha Program as a whole and specifically about one aspect of the Program: First Year Seminar (FYS). Despite the evenness of questions, 138 statements about Alpha were coded as positive, 46 as negative, and only 33 as suggestions for improvement. Here we will focus on the aspects that were considered positive including supportive people, First Year Seminar (FYS), the spring semester Alpha class, resources, getting into college and transitioning, and the other positive Alpha experiences only mentioned by a couple of participants.

Supportive people. By far the most common positive aspects of Alpha cited by the participants were the relationships that they developed with other Alpha Students and the Alpha Advisors. Jeanice illustrated the positive aspects of relationships when she talked about what she would tell prospective Alpha Students:

> They should definitely come here [to Western], and that they would be given a great amount of resources, and that they're not gonna be just coming here alone. You're gonna have a family that's gonna be . . . there when you need them. You're gonna have that network that you need. You're not just gonna be thrown out there and have to fend for yourself, but you're gonna have people there that are gonna be willing to work with you when you need them and someone always to call on.

Other Alpha Students. A number of the participants described their relationships with their fellow Alpha Students as a way to fulfill a need for social connection in those first days on campus. Students attend Fall Welcome with the students who will be in their FYS class, so they have an additional opportunity to get to know those students. Koby pointed out, "You meet a lot of friends, a lot of cool people through the Alpha Program." As Nairod explained, sometimes these relationships last beyond the first semester of classes: "I still talk with some people that were in my class. We have a good relationship." Moe estimated, "About 90% of people I would have met, I probably would have never met them if I wasn't in Alpha."

However, relationships with fellow Alpha Students also provide something deeper. There are other students who are going through the same things, navigating the same campus, and facing similar challenges. Tyler put it this way: "It wasn't comfortable doing it [Alpha], but once you met other people that were just like you, it's like, 'Oh, then I'm not alone in this.' So I'm more comfortable to do it." Jeanice shared, "This group that I was with, we were similar in a sense, and I knew that we all somewhat had, not had the same backgrounds, but we were the same. It made me feel like we were all connected." Similarly, Dwight said, "Just being in the Program with other students, it was realizing that I'm not the only one in this situation. We all have to prove ourselves. It was just being able to realize that I'm not alone."

Alpha Advisors. All of the participants, with the exception of Dwight, spoke highly of their relationships with their Alpha Advisors, and Dwight did not speak negatively, he just did not comment on his relationship with an advisor. Most expressed sentiments along of the lines of what Koby shared:

/Alpha Advisor/ is pretty cool and very fair and decent. I had him for one of my classes, and he used to just call me, check up on me, see how classes were going, or email me see if everything's okay. If I had a question about a class or about a professor, he would just handle it right on the spot.

Alpha Students are required to meet with their advisor twice a semester. Some of the participants in this study described meeting with them more often than that. Nairod said that he "went to *Alpha Advisor/* all the time. It's really just good comfort to have someone there for you." Koby estimated that he met with his advisor every other week during his first year. The "biggest thing" about Alpha for both Alyce and James was being able to meet with their advisors. James said, "For me [it] was just having someone to talk to about my concerns. I had that, and for me that was everything." Alyce shared,

> I freaked out with */Alpha Advisor/* so many times . . . about my grades, about something, and I was pretty good standing my first year, but I was still freaking out because I don't even remember why, but it was really minimal. And they had to calm me down about every little thing.

Moe also admitted to seeing her Alpha Advisor more than she needed to: "I remember */Alpha Advisor/*, I would just go to her office and not for class stuff, but outside of class, just to talk to her about stuff."

Participants met with their Alpha Advisors not only because it was required but also because they wanted to. Tyler said, "I feel like people in that program actually care to help you out and see where you're going to be within years to come." Jeanice also commented on the caring nature of the advisors: "It's not [that] they're just here because of the Program; they really care about us and really invest their time into us." Nairod thought his advisor "really understood me." James pointed out the advantage an advisor has over other sources of advice: "It doesn't help to talk to a friend that doesn't know what they are doing either."

Whatever the reason the participants went to their advisors, this was a relationship nearly every participant saw as an important part of their experience in Alpha. Some of these relationships last beyond the time students are in the Alpha Program. For Jeanice this means continuing to seek out her advisor for advice:

> Whenever I had a question, whenever I have questions now, I still talk to */Alpha Advisor/*. He's a great resource. Whenever I had any type of questions about class, school, just anything, I go to him and talk to him.

Nairod has continued to follow the advice of his advisor even if he no longer meets with him: "He even gave me life tips I even use to this day."

First Year Seminar. While the participants' comments about relationships with other Alpha Students and the Alpha Advisors were overwhelmingly positive, their thoughts on First Year Seminar (FYS, sometimes called FYE which stands for First Year Experience) were more mixed between positive and negative, although still skewed toward the positive. FYS is a two-credit course offered to first year students at Western Michigan that was developed to help students transition to college. Each year, about half of the incoming first class takes the course during the fall semester. Some of those students are required to take FYS because they are part of a certain program or because of their major, and others choose to do so. Alpha Students are not only required to take FYS, they must take a section specifically for Alpha[2]. FYS is one of the better-recognized components of the Program. For example, when Jeanice was explaining Alpha and she said, "I just have a class and an advisor" – FYS is that class. James describes FYS by saying, "It wasn't really a class where they were testing your

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[2] There are a few exceptions to this requirement. However, all the participants in this study took an Alpha section of FYS.

knowledge; it was more of a class where they were giving you knowledge to use immediately."

What participants liked about FYS differed from person to person, but three specifically mentioned their course instructors. Each FYS section is taught by two individuals: a faculty instructor and a student instructor. For Alpha sections of FYS, the student instructor is a former Alpha student. For Koby, the relationships with the FYS instructors fostered "a family environment":

> They're coming up to me, and they're asking me, "How is school going, and how life's going?" It's pretty cool to have someone that you haven't talked to in a year and a half or two years, you just see them on campus. It's like they remember me like your first year here.

For Raven, the FYS student instructor "really helped set the tone. She was this high-energy, positive, excited about just everything about the Alpha Program." Tyler said it was helpful "Seeing how the teacher cared about you, why you were there and what was going on in your other classes and did you need help with anything." With a caring instructor, caring was then evident among the students: "We had some days where we just did homework, and some people had the same class, same homework as other people. We just worked together and help each other."

FYS was also described as the place where participants learned how to navigate college and learned about the resources available at WMU. For James FYS "taught me more about Western, specifically where I could get tutoring help. It really taught me where things are on campus, how to do certain things, and it was really helpful. . . . It just made me more knowledgeable about campus." Elena said that FYS

> helped me writing stuff down in my planner, making sure that I knew due dates and to mark it on my calendar. Time management, working with groups, and meeting on campus 'cause in high school we'll just talk about it the next class.

> Whereas [in college] you have to figure out, "Okay, we can meet at the library at this time."

Jeanice also mentioned the practical lessons of FYS: "Staying on top of things as far as like syllabus and reading, which you have to complete for the day, and not relying on a professor like we did in high school. Really just adjusting to college." Both Moe and Raven specifically mentioned how helpful it was to connect with the Writing Center through FYS. Raven and Elena both appreciated being introduced to community service.

Three female participants mentioned that FYS was a class that helped them be more comfortable in social interactions and public speaking. Jeanice said that her FYS class helped her to

> really to talk and get out of my shell. My professor, she was really funny, so we had to interact with each other. Trying to start to get out of my shell in a sense because in high school I was really shy. In that class she really enforces like, "Oh, you guys, you need to talk a little bit more because the upcoming years or next semester, you're gonna have PowerPoints and all this you have to do in front of the class."

Raven also mentioned the importance of interactions in her explanation of how FYS helped her:

> [FYS] made us do presentations. That's one thing that in high school you could not get me to do, and especially in college when you're in front of like 20 students that you have no clue about. . . . They made you feel comfortable with each other. We always had to do group activities, and we always had to work as a team, and learning how to present, that gave me the extra push that I needed to get me out of my comfort zone.

Tyler also said that FYS helped her in "opening up to other people, branching out, just talking to people."

Other positive aspects of FYS were only mentioned by one person. FYS taught Jeanice to go to her professors' office hours. Moe mentioned that the visit to her class by

Career Services was helpful and that she really enjoyed reading *Anatomy of Injustice* in

FYS.

  Spring semester Alpha class. After taking a two-credit FYS class in the fall,

most Alpha students in the 2012 and 2013 cohorts were required to take a one-credit

Alpha class in the spring. There were three different options: Leadership, Personal

Development, and Academic Recovery. Both Leadership and Academic Recovery are

in-person classes that meet for 50 minutes each week, whereas Personal Development

takes place mostly online. Students with a GPA lower than 2.0 after their first semester

were required to take Academic Recovery. Students with GPAs in the 2.0 to 2.5 range

were allowed to choose between Academic Recovery and Personal Development. A

student with a GPA of 2.5 or higher could choose either Personal Development or

Leadership. If a student had a GPA above 3.5, he or she was allowed to opt out of the

spring Alpha course requirement. Table 4 shows the class each of the participants took.

Table 4

Spring Alpha Class Taken by Each Participant

Pseudonym	Class
Alyce	none
Dwight	none
Elena	Personal Development
James	Academic Recovery
Jeanice	Leadership
Koby	Leadership
Moe	Personal Development
Nairod	Leadership
Raven	Leadership
Tyler	Leadership

Of the five participants that took the Leadership course, three mentioned it as a significant class during their first year of college. Jeanice described her Leadership class as something

> that really got me to talk more and to get out of my shell because . . . I know that I wasn't the most sociable person. I knew that I would have to put myself in a vulnerable place and have to force myself to do that because I know that I'm a leader. I knew taking that class would enhance my leadership abilities, and I would be able to help people in any way that I can 'cause that's what I love to do. Taking that class really stuck out to me just due to the fact of all the positions that I have and things that I'm involved in now.

Nairod described his Leadership class as one of the most helpful aspects of Alpha. "It [Alpha] was helpful I would say more so that second semester taking that Leadership class 'cause I learned a lot through the books we read and just him [Alpha Advisor] as a teacher generally." He said the class taught him about "empathy. . . . Relationship building in that class actually did help me out." Raven said, "The Leadership class actually gave me that extra push to apply to be an RA, and I actually got the job to be an RA. I did apply some stuff that I did learn to my RA position." Tyler and Koby both recalled taking Leadership, but neither commented further about the class.

One of the goals of the Leadership class is to identify and train future Alpha leaders, students who will become mentors and FYS student instructors for the Alpha Program. Of the five participants that took Leadership, only Jeanice went on to become an Alpha leader. The other two participants who became leaders in Alpha took either Academic Recovery (James) or no spring semester Alpha class (Dwight). However, the Leadership class is not only about training leaders for Alpha. As Raven's quote illustrates, the lessons from Leadership can be applied to other positions of leadership on campus and off.

James was the only participant in the study to take Academic Recovery. He spoke highly of the class,

> Because the way */Alpha Advisor/* had Academic Recovery, if we had a test, she would say, "Get 20 hours of studying in, maybe 10. Go to these studying sessions late at night and you get 10 you won't have to take a test." It's like, "What? I got to study anyway, and you give me a place to study, and saying I get an 'A' on the test?" I was there every day.

The two students who took Personal Development did not say much about the class, positive or negative. Dwight, who didn't have to take one of the spring classes because he had a good GPA from his fall semester, expressed some regret that he didn't take one of these classes because he believed it would have improved his GPA.

Resources. Like many universities, Western Michigan has a range of resources available for all students to help them be academically, socially, and emotionally successful. Four of the participants in this study acknowledged that Alpha helped them both know about the resources that were available and feel comfortable utilizing those resources. This is in addition to the two students who mentioned that their First Year Seminar classes helped them learn about specific resources.

When asked what was helpful about Alpha, Dwight answered, "Learning resources because resources are a big part of campus life." Jeanice had a similar response:

> [Alpha] was helpful due to the fact that they give a lot of resources. There's just a lot of things, especially with freshman. We don't know where all these things are as far as like Writing Center, Tutor Lab, just a lot of things.

Koby expressed doubt that he would have been able to find those resources without Alpha:

> Instead of having help or trying to find help, I wouldn't have that help available. I'd have to find the resources by myself. Alpha really helped me out with the

resources, and if I need help or I didn't know where something was, I can just email */Alpha Advisor/,* and he'll just let me know.

But knowing about resources is not enough; students also have to use them. Two participants also noted that Alpha helped them overcome barriers to taking advantage of resources. James explained, "That's the one thing that I think people really need to understand about the Alpha Program and that's something I think */Alpha Advisor/* really pushes, fighting that stigma." The stigma about which James is speaking is that of asking for and receiving help. Dwight also spoke to this idea by saying, "Don't be afraid to use your resources, and I think the program preached that a lot, and I'm the first one to admit that I'm not afraid to use resources even though it kinda sucks."

Both James and Dwight also expressed concern that students outside of Alpha are not exposed to the same emphasis on what resources are available for students and how to access them. Dwight said,

> In not being an Alpha student, certain students didn't know what resources they had. . . . They didn't know where to go, or they didn't have anybody just to talk to. . . . Just being a regular student, it wasn't preached that you had these resources 'cause they assume that you didn't need them, but everybody needs help at some point.

According to James, "Other people don't get the same knowledge or same information that Alpha students get, and information if you use it right could be extremely beneficial." Most of the participants in this study knew their resources and had actually made use of them at some point.

Getting into college and transitioning. The Alpha Program allows students who did not meet the admissions requirements to attend college. A couple of the participants in this study recognized that they would not have been able to be admitted without the Program. Koby said, "I don't think I would have got into Western if it wasn't for the

Alpha Program, to be honest." Nairod actually applied to WMU, was turned down, and

applied a second time with help from an alumna before being accepted through Alpha.

Moe said, "I was honestly just happy to get into Western. Like, 'Well, okay, I guess if I

have to be in this [Alpha] to be in Western, I'll do it.'" Tyler described getting admitted

through the Alpha Program in this way:

> Because I couldn't get in the college under regular conditions, I thought it was
> actually special because . . . other schools don't give you the option to even get
> admitted into a school within the program to succeed. It's a special feeling. It's
> like, "Oh, I got in," and like, "They actually care."

> In addition to helping students get in, a few participants were happy to be given

the extra help. When Alyce learned she was in the Alpha Program,

> I was just excited because I was like, "I don't think this [preparation I've done] is
> enough. I don't think this is enough to help me for this giant college experience."
> . . . I was just excited to be in it, excited to be a part of something and be able to
> prepare for college 'cause I was so nervous.

Raven also said that just getting admitted through Alpha helped her feel less anxious

about starting college:

> I was a little on edge. I was a little nervous about starting the college classes. Am
> I going to be able to transition? . . . [The Alpha Program] gave me that extra
> confidence. . . . It really made me feel like I could succeed at Western.

> Looking back on their first year, some participants were happy with the help they

got in transitioning to the life of a college student. This is how Koby talked about how

Alpha helped him transition:

> [Alpha] made me a little bit more comfortable, a little bit more acceptable to how
> professors teach and customs here at Western. It allowed me to see what my
> strengths are here at a college and what my weaknesses are, and being able to
> attack those weaknesses.

At another point in the interview, Koby said, "I will forever be grateful for the Alpha

Program accepting me and giving me the tools and giving me guidance to come to

Western 'cause I don't think I would have made it." Tyler was the only student who

attended Western Success Prep (WSP) who also expressed appreciation for it helping her

transition to being a college student:

> I honestly don't know if I'd still be here 'cause of the transition. I know it was difficult that first week [in WSP], but if I wouldn't have went through that first week, I probably would have been like, "Mom, I'm ready to come home."

Raven also mentioned that Alpha was responsible for keeping her in school: "There's

people who weren't a part of the Alpha Program, and it's like, 'Where are you?' I feel

like without the Alpha Program, honestly, I don't think I could be here or would still be

here." There are more references to Alpha helping the participants be successful at

Western, but these were more oblique and involved the instillation of confidence. This

will be explored in more depth in the section on "Alpha and Confidence."

Other positive Alpha experiences. There are a few other positive experiences

mentioned by only a few people. Because of the nature of this qualitative study, if only

one or two individuals bring up a particular experience, this does not mean that others did

not experience something similar or have a different take on it. If a participant does not

mention a particular experience, that experience just did not come to mind during the

interview process.

Along the line of resources, another way at least two students saw being in Alpha

as different than not being in Alpha were the campus tours. Just after talking about the

way Alpha promotes resources, James went on to say, "Another thing, a lot of people say

they never went on tours with whatever program they are part of. Alpha Program you get

walked around all over the place." Moe expressed appreciation for her tour of campus:

"If I would have came in not an Alpha Student, I wouldn't have gotten that tour. I

wouldn't have gotten familiar with the campus." She did get lost on campus after going on the tour, but she felt like she was less lost than if she had not had the tour.

Some participants mentioned specific things they learned by being part of Alpha. Time management was something Alyce, Raven, and Koby all mentioned they gained in the Program. Koby also talked about learning to balance academics and a social life, while Raven got a lot of helpful information money management workshop put on by Alpha. Elena mentioned growth in the areas of leadership, interpersonal functioning, and responsibility as a result of being in the Program.

Some of the positive statements were simply general statements about liking the Program. Nairod shared, "I was able to go to class, be more focused, have to prove myself. I actually did like the experience." James had the following thoughts: "It's a good program, and I think the University is doing something good with the Alpha Program." Koby said,

> I've been through so much, the up and down, down and up. I'm just thankful for Western for allowing me to still be enrolled, take heed of all the knowledge I'm given, and make an impact in society. Now I'll forever be grateful for Western. I'll forever be a Bronco. I really appreciate Western and Alpha Program for getting my feet wet and also allowing me to obtain a collegiate degree from a university.

Overall, participants shared that the far more appreciation for Alpha than they had both negative comments and suggestions for improvement combined.

Negative Alpha Experiences

Every participant shared at least one negative experience with the Alpha Program. Some concerns were specifically about the First Year Seminar (FYS). The negative experiences associated with FYS will be addressed in some detail before looking at the negative experiences mentioned by only a few participants. The most common negative

experiences related to Alpha were those of stigma and confusion but they will be treated

on their own rather than under the heading of "Negative Experiences."

First Year Seminar. Enrolling in First Year Seminar (FYS) as explained above,

is a requirement for Alpha Students. While the participants had many positive things to

say about FYS, there were also a number of negative comments. The most complaints

were about the textbook. There are two books used in FYS. One is the school's

Common Read for the year. For the 2012 cohort the Common Read was *The Immortal*

Life of Henrietta Lacks, and the 2013 Common Read was *Anatomy of Injustice.* These

books are both non-fiction but sometimes fiction works are chosen. There were no

concerns raised about the Common Read. In fact, Moe loved *Anatomy of Injustice,* and

Elena was disappointed that in her FYS section it did not end up being covered. The

other FYS book is more of a textbook that covers topics deemed helpful for new college

students like study skills, money management, and choosing a major. Elena said,

> I remember the book we had to buy, and then we all had to present the chapter
> and stuff on how to study and stuff like that, but I'd already known how to study.
> So I felt like it was kind of wasting my time a little bit.

Moe simply said that the textbook was "not helpful." James was just upset that he bought

the book and they only ended up using it once during the whole semester.

Other participants were not happy with the workload of the class. Tyler thought

that FYS "was just really time-consuming. It was one of those classes you don't want to

go to, but it's one of those easy classes that you don't have to go to but you have to go to

it." Alyce called the work "a bit more excessive for a two-credit class." Nairod said, FYS

"always seemed like a lot of work. . . . It almost seemed like another class 'cause I know

we had to read all these chapters. We had quizzes every time we went in. It got a little

tedious." He later added, "You probably have to do that in order for it to be a course." He was looking for "a mentorship and leadership type of program" rather than something so overtly academic. Jeanice called FYS "boring" and then added, "Everything is very intentional. It's for a reason, and I probably didn't understand it at the moment, but it's for a reason, and it makes sense later down the road."

All FYS sections have some common activities and assignments in addition to having the two books. However, the instructors also have a great deal of flexibility in how to teach the class. This means that some of the negative comments about FYS were unique to that section. Dwight remarked, "I think my co-instructor had senioritis." Raven said, "All I can remember [about FYS] is he [the instructor] kept presenting these PowerPoints, and one of them was about like precipitation and rain and clouds. It was just like, 'Huh?'" Elena did not appreciate having to meet outside of the classroom while she was still learning to navigate campus:

> [FYS] did have us do little field trips and stuff, but I wasn't very familiar with campus. I remember walking to the Office of Sustainability and not really knowing where it is. My thinking was, "Well, why don't we all meet somewhere and walk over together?" I guess it wasn't too helpful just saying, "Oh, just meet here," and I was like, "Agh! I don't really know where anything is."

Other negative Alpha experiences. In terms of other negative experiences, some were about Alpha more generally and others were very specific to particular aspects of Alpha. Of three participants who spoke about negatively about Alpha as a whole, all shared that they did not find Alpha to be necessary for them. Unlike Koby and Raven who did not think they would have done well enough to stay in school without the Program, James, Tyler, and Alyce thought that they did not need Alpha to be successful. James said, "I felt like it was beneath me, and it was." Tyler said,

> If I had to go back and do it again, I probably wouldn't . . . go through the Program . . . we had to meet up with /the Alpha Advisors/ twice a semester. It was something would be avoided if we didn't have to. It was like some little petty requirements that we had to do.

Alyce said that early in the Program, she thought, "I don't feel like this is something I need." However, Alyce also said that when she first found out about Alpha that she was glad because she did not feel fully prepared for college. And Tyler said while she would not have been involved with Alpha, she still would have wanted to take part in the Western Success Prep Program as she found that useful for transitioning to college. James also said that even though Alpha might not have been necessary for him, he was glad to have a first year where he could "build a solid base" for the rest of his time at Western.

Other negative experiences were very individualized. Elena would have liked to have been involved in Greek Life sooner, but she had to wait until her second semester because Alpha does not allow its students to join a sorority or fraternity during their first semester. Tyler had to leave home a week before the rest of her friends went to college in order to attend WSP, which meant she missed the big goodbyes and had a shorter summer. She also did not find the advising for her major while she was in Alpha to be adequate: "My advising freshman year, I could have been going to see my Criminal Justice advisor because I'm taking classes that could have took freshman year to get over my major."

Most Alpha Students live in one of two residence halls that are adjacent to each other; so many Alpha meetings are held nearby. Alyce recalled having knee problems as a result of walking there from her room on another part of campus. She also had concerns about the cliques that developed within Alpha. Moe said simply about the other

Alpha Students, "I didn't really care for them all that much." Along those same lines,

James did not like the emphasis that was placed on developing relationships with other

Alpha Students.

Changing Thoughts About Alpha: Stigma and Confusion

There were two common experiences related to being in Alpha that most

participants addressed. One was the experience of not wanting to be in Alpha because of

the stigma associated with it, which was expressed by seven of the participants. Then

there was a theme of confusion. All but two of the participants talked about not

understanding at first why they were in Alpha and/or what the Alpha Program was about.

Both the experiences of stigma and confusion related to Alpha dissipated as the

participants began their first semester of college. Between these two experiences, all but

one participant noted a change in their understanding of Alpha that occurred primarily in

the course of the fall semester of their first year. Each of these two experiences will be

explored in detail. There were also some misunderstandings about Alpha that appeared

to continue at the time of the interviews, and those will also be addressed in the section

on confusion.

The stigma of Alpha. Seven of the ten participants told a similar story about

Alpha. They said at first they did not like Alpha and did not want to be in the Program,

and then at some point they grew to like and appreciate it. Notice how Nairod describes

his experience:

> First, I didn't have the most positive outlook on it [Alpha]. I thought it was
> pigeonholing you in a certain category, but the more I stayed in it, talked with my
> advisor and everybody, the better outlook I got out of it.

There is a pattern here that is repeated with the other participants. In the beginning, Nairod's view of Alpha was negative because he thought the school or the program was making certain assumptions about him as a student. Then though experience with the program and talking with people, his view of Alpha became more positive. Raven's story also contains these elements:

> In the beginning, it [Alpha] made me feel bad. It made me feel like I wasn't smart enough for college because of the title they put on it or this stereotype that's placed with it. But talking to */the Alpha Advisors/,* they really just made everything better.

James explained it this way:

> At first, to be honest, I was upset having a condition to my acceptance, and I let my advisors know that. . . . They both really talked, "Well, it's not something to be ashamed of. It's just an extra step you have to take. It's no big deal." And honest, they made me feel comfortable about it 'cause I remember the first couple, maybe the first month or so, I was really talking about them about it, and then after that I felt fine.

Moe also expressed a change in her thinking about Alpha: "I didn't like it [Alpha], but now that I think back on it, I'm like, 'Okay, I like it.' Now I think, 'Okay, they're [the Alpha Advisors are] pretty awesome people for doing all this good stuff.'"

The negative thinking about Alpha appears to mostly be about stigma. Dwight said that when he first learned he was in Alpha, he thought, "They think I'm like stupid or something? Already they think I'm not smart enough." Jeanice thought, "Oh, they think this about me. This is why I'm in this program. . . . I didn't really want people to know that I was in the program." Raven tells the story of talking with the WMU admissions representative during onsite admissions at her high school: He "kept telling me, 'It's [admission through Alpha is] not to make you feel bad that you can't be accepted like "normal,"' and he did the hand quotations, 'like "normal students."'" While

Raven was somewhat comforted that she would be receiving extra help for college, the admissions representative's words suggest that Alpha students are not "normal." Elena describes her initial reaction as one of anger, thinking, "Oh, this university didn't want me. . . . Why am I even here then?"

This experience of stigma appears to be strongest during Summer Orientation and Fall Welcome and then dissipates as the fall semester gets underway. In the quotes above, Nairod, Raven, and James all mention that talking to an Alpha Advisor helped mitigate the initial hard feelings. Nairod also said, "I was able to go to class, be more focused, kinda have to prove myself." The act of being involved in campus and being successful were also key to how he started thinking differently about the Program. James also mentioned that growing comfortable with the Program was from more than just interacting with the advisors: "[Alpha is] a stigma that you're a lesser student, and it takes a shot at the ego. But once the semester gets started, you're just a student." Dwight also shared,

> As the first semester progressed, I'm like, "You know, being in Alpha isn't that bad. I know my resources. I have people to talk to, and I have people in the same situation as me. Why not succeed at some things?"

Raven received an explicit message from the Alpha Advisors that helped her overcome the stigma she felt: "They told me, 'Why be ashamed of something that's helping you succeed? Why be upset or ashamed? You just need an extra boost? Who doesn't? So there's no need to feel the way that you feel about it.'" For Jeanice, overcoming the stigma also involved getting to know other Alpha Students: "I think maybe with the classes starting, maybe in Fall Welcome. I'm just like, 'Oh, I don't want to be associated

[with Alpha].' But when the classes started, we started connecting, talking, having

commonalities with each other."

Participants also explained that some of the understanding and appreciating Alpha

came from their later experiences at Western. Raven explained,

> Some of the stuff for Fall Welcome was like, "Why are we doing this?" Like, "Why is this important?" Now that I look back on it, you needed that stuff because everything they do was for a reason. They wouldn't have you sit in these sessions for no reason.

Jeanice also expressed a sense of better understanding:

> I couldn't understand now, but later you will, and everything that I went through as far as the classes and the leadership and all the speakers that came to the class [FYS] really played an impact on my years of college. Over the years I understand more of what they did and why they did it.

Elena moved from angry that she was in Alpha to appreciative:

> Now that I've been able to be enrolled and in good standing with the University, I said, "Oh, yeah, they [Alpha] did help me out, and I am happy that I was chosen." I haven't been so negative about it. Like, "Ah, this program. What are they doing? Why do they even have me here?" Now it's been like, "Oh, because I guess it's like they saw potential in me."

James described a similar experience in learning to accept help from Alpha: "I knew they

[the Alpha Advisors] helped me, but as you're getting help, you rebel like that, but you

appreciate it after."

Confusion about Alpha. Many students expressed initial confusion as to what

the Alpha Program meant and what being an Alpha Student entailed. Most participants

eventually figured out the basics early in their first year, although some misconceptions

still lingered at the time of the interviews. All but two of the participants expressed some

level of confusion about Alpha initially. This confusion was mostly when first hearing

about Alpha or during Summer Orientation and Fall Welcome. The confusion then

dissipated once the fall semester started. Only Dwight and Koby did not describe a sense of confusion related to Alpha. However, Koby did say that there were parts of the Program that were "mundane" or "repetitive" that he later had a better appreciation for.

While not all of the participants in this study said that they experienced a sense of confusion, Alyce claimed that this feeling was universal: "Everyone who is admitted really doesn't know why they are there." It might not have been universal, but it was certainly common among the participants. Moe said, "First I was like, 'What is this?' I was confused and like, 'I don't know what this is but okay. We'll see I guess when I get here.'" Jeanice shared, "I'm sure that they [the Alpha Advisors] spoke about it [Alpha], but I don't think I really grasped what they were saying during that time [Summer Orientation and Fall Welcome] about the Program." James said something similar about Fall Welcome: "We were just called Alpha, but at the time I didn't really know what that meant." Nairod also said, "I didn't really know too much about Alpha Program except for you were admitted through it." Most of this confusion was cleared up early in the fall semester. First Year Seminar was a place where students learned more about Alpha. Elena also mentioned that having a roommate who was also in Alpha helped her understand the Program.

Even as understanding about the general goals of the Program were usually cleared up in the first semester, some misunderstandings about details of Alpha persisted at the time of these interviews, up to three and a half years after first entering the Program. Both Alyce and Tyler were under the impression that First Year Seminar was either a non-credit class or a developmental course that did not count toward graduation, when FYS is a regular, two-credit class. Tyler and Moe both believed that developmental

classes were somehow part of Alpha. Many Alpha students take developmental coursework, but it is not required of all Alpha students, and there are also many regularly admitted students take developmental coursework. Developmental coursework is more common among Alpha Students than regularly admitted students, but these classes are not connected to Alpha in any formal way. In her interview, Alyce asked for more flexibility in fulfilling Alpha requirements like meeting with advisors for students who were working 20 or more hours a week. However, one of the requirements is that Alpha Students limit their work to 15 or fewer hours because for this very reason. Alyce also said that she was in Alpha because she was for "social reasons." It is not possible to say why any one student was admitted to Alpha, but if a student has met the academic requirements for the college, in most cases they are regularly admitted. Alpha is set up to address academic needs, not social ones.

The connection between stigma and confusion. These two experiences – experiencing stigma and confusion – appear to be related. They were both most intense during Summer Orientation and Fall Welcome and then faded as students began their first semester of college. While none of the participants directly linked their experience of stigma with that of confusion, both stigma and confusion lessened as understanding about the Program increased. Also, the Alpha Advisors specifically are mentioned by some participants as being helpful in removing feelings of stigma and in increasing knowledge about the Program. The misunderstandings that create confusion also seem to increase feelings of stigma. Once students understand what the Program is about, the stigma goes away. A clear connection between these two constructs cannot be made based on this

study, but it would appear that it is possible to address both confusion and stigma simultaneously.

Alpha and Confidence

When participants looked at how they had changed since beginning college, confidence came up as an important impact of the Alpha program in six of the participant's accounts. All six specifically talked about how their confidence to be successful was directly linked to their participation in Alpha. However, four of the six also mentioned experiences outside of Alpha contributing to a sense of confidence.

Most of the comments participants made about confidence were related directly to the Alpha Program as a whole. Sometimes confidence was mentioned in how the students described Alpha itself. Dwight described Alpha as "a good force instoring [*sic*] confidence and letting students know like, 'Hey, you're not alone. You can do anything that you put your mind to, and always work hard.'" Nairod said Alpha

> was more about self-confidence. I know I'm not dumb or smart than other people
> . . . [Alpha is] just about kids that didn't really apply themselves. Just we weren't
> really applying ourselves in high school like we should have.

Confidence was also listed as an outcome of Alpha. Jeanice said,

> I'm glad that it [Alpha] allows students to really change what they could have
> done in high school, and to really see the growth in themselves as well as . . .
> develop more confidence in themselves, and just know that they can get through
> anything. That's the one thing for me. If I can do this, I know I can do anything
> 'cause I know everyone talks about how hard college is. So, yeah, really just
> develop the confidence.

Raven said Alpha

> made me feel a little bit more confident in that I can do anything that I put my
> mind to. I can say it gave me that extra boost that I needed because I'm pretty
> sure I'm not the only one that thinks, "Oh, I'm not smart enough for college," or
> "No college wants me," but when you have something like the Alpha Program it's
> like, "Shoot, who are you telling? You can do whatever you want." It gives you

that confidence and that great feeling that anybody can succeed, anybody. You can do whatever you want.

For Moe, "Alpha definitely allowed me to see that I can do more than what I think I can do. I can push myself to experience different things." James used water metaphors to explain the relationship between Alpha and confidence:

> I didn't get thrown into water right away. I put my feet in little bit. I got used to the water, and so me being able to get used to that water kind of made me get some self-confidence for future classes. And that's something that I do think that the Alpha Program helped with – gain that confidence.

Two students in talking about confidence also connected it specifically with one or more of the Alpha Advisors. Moe said this about her advisor:

> I would just go to her office and not for class stuff, but outside of class, just to talk to her about stuff, and she would always just push me to do different things, and that definitely helped me because I enjoyed experiencing different things, doing different organizations.

Jeanice talked about two different advisors and how they helped her develop confidence. For one she said,

> */Alpha Advisor/* tries to let us know that, although we're in this program, we're not any less than anyone else. We can do anything [that] any of the other students that are regular admitted to the college. It really just built my confidence in a sense. After I began to understand what the Program was about, it just made me think differently about what I'm capable of, and what I can do, and what I can change on campus. Yeah, confidence was really a big thing for me.

She also shared this story about another Alpha Advisor:

> She sent me an email recommending me for . . . [a] job and was just saying, "You know, I think you'd be a good fit for it." When you see or hear someone else tell you that, it's like, "Oh, I got this." I know that I have the leadership capabilities, but when someone else sees it as well, it's like, "Oh, I can really do this."

In addition to Alpha as a whole and the Alpha Advisors, there was also one student who connected FYS with her experience of confidence. Raven mentioned gaining confidence through her First Year Seminar: "It gave me the extra push that I

needed to get me out of my comfort zone because that's what college is about, stepping

outside of your comfort, finding who you are, finding what works and what doesn't

work."

Outside of Alpha and its components like advising and FYS, five students also

found confidence through their academic success. Dwight said,

> Just me getting extremely good grades first two years and being above a 3.1
> somehow, it was like, "Yes, I can be a good student." I think me getting a 3.5 my
> first semester was like, "Yeah, I can do this college thing. I can do this thing
> called college,"

Jeanice also found herself more confident when her first semester grades came back:

> I got a 3.2. It was definitely better [than high school]. I mean, I graduated with a
> 2.5, and never in any of my semesters of high school ever got over a 3.0. Ever. It
> was the happiest day of my life. . . . It was like, "You know, you can do this, and
> you could have done that a long time ago."

James described it this way:

> When I saw that I had to do those things, and I got an "A," and I really did strive,
> it kind of showed me, okay, I can really do it all. I just need to do it, take my
> time, do it.

Elena experienced an academic setback that caused her to lose some confidence before

academic success turned her thinking around:

> I ended up with a 2.1 last fall. . . . It was a very discouraging. I thought, "Oh my
> god, I shouldn't be in college." But . . . last spring I ended up getting a 3.25. . . .
> So, it's pretty good for going from a 2.1 to a 3.25. I was pretty happy with
> myself.

Raven also gained confidence through her academic successes, and then connected her

success back to the Alpha Program:

> I just did so well [academically my first year at Western], and I've always had
> doubt that I could excel academically because in high school I wasn't that great. I
> had a 2.8, but I felt like I could do better but it was just like (sigh), no. When I
> got here it was just like, "I don't feel like I'm smart enough, but I'm gonna get
> through this." And when I got a 3.0, I said, "What? Thank you Alpha Program."

Raven also used confidence language in describing her relationship with her

fiancé:

> That has had its ups and downs because sophomore year was rough because he was all the way back at home which is three hours away. So we were trying to balance this long-distance relationship. I still cannot tell you how I did it but I did. . . . It had so many ups and downs, but it really made us realize we can get through anything. We were pretty good for each other. We can get through anything, conquer anything.

Dwight reported that using the Math and Engineering Tutor Labs has helped build his

confidence as well:

> Those have been really helpful because I get to talk to people that took the classes and they help out. I ask for advice, and it's like, "Yeah, you can. It's possible. You can do it." Just me talking with other people that are in my same boat.

So, while confidence is an important outcome of the Alpha Program, academic success

and certain relationships can build confidence too.

Confidence appears to be an important factor in the success of these students. All

but one of the participants either talked about confidence or spoke confidently about their

abilities. No one was obviously lacking confidence. Of the three students not mentioned

so far in this section, one did not mention confidence at all, and two others portrayed

themselves as confident coming to college. Tyler described herself in this way:

> I've never really had a problem setting a goal and not achieving it. So when I came to college, I'm just like, "I got this. I got to do this, and I have to get this degree." I'm still in the same mindset. Nothing can stop me.

Alyce said, "I was an outstanding student in high school. So being in college, I found out

really quickly that it is basically the same as high school." These two had confidence

coming into college. Seven more gained confidence while in college, and most attributed

that gain at least in part to being in Alpha.

How Alpha helped students gain that confidence is not well defined by this data. Many of the students said something along the lines of "Alpha taught me that I can do anything" and did not explain any further. The encouragement of Alpha Advisors was cited by two students as one of the ways Alpha built their confidence. Others mentioned First Year Seminar, having a second chance, and not being alone as ways Alpha promoted confidence.

Five students also mentioned gaining confidence through academic success. Those stories shared about success and the way it promoted confidence were primarily from the first year of college when students were in the Program. It is possible that the support offered by the Program allows students to be successful, which in turn builds the student's confidence. Raven was the one participant to make that direct connection: being in Alpha led to her academic success, and her academic success led to confidence. These connections between participation in a conditional admission program, academic success, and confidence will need to be explored further in order to understand the relationships between them.

Alpha Experience Summary

Overall, the participants viewed the Alpha Program more positively than negatively. The relationships with the Alpha Advisors were particularly appreciated. What is concerning is the amount of stigma and confusion students experienced early in the Program. However, both stigma and confusion went away as students began their first semester at Western. The long-lasting effect of Alpha for most of these students was more positive: a sense of confidence that they can be successful college students.

Alpha Suggestions

The third research question this study was developed to address was "What recommendations do students who have completed a conditional admission program have for improving how conditional admission programs support conditionally admitted students?" The participants were asked about how they would suggest improving the Alpha Program in general and First Year Seminar (FYS) specifically. Most suggestions were individual to that student and what was useful to her or him. However, one suggestion was made by three participants: the recommendation that in the Program they have more contact with former Alpha Students either through mentoring or just coming into FYS to talk about their experiences. One thing several participants wanted to be sure they conveyed was that there was only so much the Program could be expected to do and some of the responsibility should be placed on the students themselves. Every participant with the exception of Dwight had a recommendation for changing at least one aspect of the Alpha Program.

The recommendations for ways to improve FYS included making the class more "interactive" (Jeanice) and "entertaining" (Alyce). Along with the idea of "interactive," Raven asked for more "hands on" activities related to the different resources, with the idea that it one thing to be told about the Writing Center and another thing to have an assignment that requires students to go to the Writing Center. Both Raven and Moe said that they did not get enough experience during the library tour to feel comfortable using it later. Moe also wanted additional information on the more social aspects of college. She felt activities like the "Sexpectations" presentation in the Health Center were more beneficial for students than the academic information. Similarly, Nairod thought FYS

should be more of a "mentorship and leadership type of program" than something so academic. In terms of the books for FYS, Elena suggested that if they are told they needed to read the Common Read for FYS, then they should do so. James said of the textbook, "If you're not really gonna use it, I don't think you should make people buy it." Moe thought that *Anatomy of Injustice* was far superior to the subsequent Common Read books and suggested more Common Reads like it.

Some of the suggestions participants made were directed at the Alpha Advisors. Tyler wished that the advisors were "stressing the fact that" developmental coursework would not count toward graduation, and that students need to be taking at least 15 credit hours a semester if they want to graduate in four years. Elena also mentioned the 15 credit hours recommendation for timely graduation, but she expected it from her high school counselor and did not mention Alpha Advisors. James thought advisors should

> Make sure they understand that no matter what educational background two students in the same class coming from a year ago, they're still getting an "A" in that class. It doesn't matter what the person sitting right next to you knows, it matters what you know, and you can know exactly what they know. Maybe you got to work harder, fine but you can know what they know.

In other words, James did not want Alpha Advisors to think that because a student comes from a certain high school or had a certain ACT score they know what that student is capable of. Jeanice suggested that advisors be "patient" with new Alpha Students, especially when they still have confusion about what Alpha is all about. She also recommended that advisors

> get to know every individual 'cause I know */Alpha Advisor/* literally gets to know everyone that comes through the Program. There's no one that he doesn't know. He makes sure that he knows everyone, and has a personal relationship with them, and knows what high school they went to, knows what sport they like. So getting to know the students and their background.

Alyce wanted to make sure advisors know "Nobody wants to be in Alpha who's in

Alpha. They see it as a punishment." She also thought students should be made aware

that "not knowing your major is not detrimental to your entire college experience."

Three participants mentioned that they would like to see some type of mentoring

or role modeling. Both Jeanice and Tyler suggested one-on-one mentoring. Jeanice went

on to say that mentoring should be required because she did not feel that students are

appropriately aware of their need for mentoring. Mentoring, it should be noted, is one of

the few differences between the two cohorts studied. The 2012 cohort had a mentoring

program that matched each student with a mentor. The 2013 cohort did not. Both Tyler

and Jeanice were members of the 2013 cohort.

Koby, a member of the 2012 cohort, asked for something similar, although not

mentoring *per se*. He specifically wanted

> More upperclassmen sharing their experiences or people that went through stuff,
> not just all the goody-goody stuff. People that actually went through stuff,
> actually went through turmoil and was able to party but also take care of business.
> Not always, "Hey, my name is Josh, and I'm a psychology student. I have a 4.0."
> That's not always what students want to hear.

This was something Koby was pretty passionate about. At another point in the interview,

he said,

> If you had more people who had real experience instead of having you know role
> models and stuff like that. . . . If they had real people come in and just talk to the
> freshmen. Like, "Hey, this is where I messed up. This is what I did wrong.
> These are the consequences on you not taking care of business, you partying too
> much. This is what can happen to you."

This recommendation for having students without a perfect academic record speaking to

students about their experiences makes sense in terms of the earlier observation made by

several participants that "everyone fails a class." The students who work for Summer

Orientation, Fall Welcome, First Year Seminar, and become mentors are

disproportionally students with stellar academic records that may not be similar to those

of most Alpha Students.

Other suggestions offered by participants to improve Alpha include this one from

Nairod: "I wish there was some more for afterwards [after the Program ends], maybe

aside from being a mentor 'cause I guess that is something, I just wasn't interested in

doing that." Alyce had a number of recommendations not already mentioned here. She

suggested more flexibility in fulfilling Alpha requirements for working students, greater

awareness and prevention of the formation of cliques within Alpha, more training on

social issues like how to handle roommate conflicts, and in response to recent shootings

in Kalamazoo, more information on the subjects of safety and security. Raven had two

additional suggestions. One was that there should be more "mixing and mingling" during

Fall Welcome, that Alpha Students not be "singled out." She also proposed the addition

of an "Alpha math class" saying, "If they just had that Alpha math class, I would have

probably passed that [math course] with flying colors 'cause that just gives you the extra

help you need." To make one generalization about these recommendations, they tended to

be about adding things to Alpha, not taking things away.

In talking about recommendations, three participants noted that to some extent the

success of the Program was not necessarily about the Program itself. Some responsibility

for success is on the students. Moe said, "If the student doesn't want to cooperate, then

everything else kind of falls. Then it doesn't really matter 'cause the student has to be

proactive too." Dwight described the situation like this:

> Some people drop out of the race. It is sad, but other people can continue 'cause
> they have that endurance or they have that little piece of edge or heart to continue,

and some people who realize that it is financial. They say it's financial for them, and some just don't put as much effort into it.

Similarly, Alyce shared, "The Program itself is what helps the student, but it has a lot to do with the student themselves and the personalities and what they're gonna take on, how interactive they're going to be with their Alpha Advisors." The message from these participants seems to be that no matter how perfect the Alpha Program might be, students need to take some responsibility for their own success.

Findings Summary

This chapter explored the findings for each of the three research questions. In looking at students' academic, social, familial, and financial experiences, connections were made between the academic and social experiences and between the familial and financial. Family was important to the participants, and family was described as being supportive financially. In terms of academics, most of these students had experienced an academic failure of some type and were able to come back from it. They noted that their social lives often got in the way of academics, which led them to choose their relationships carefully and attempt to find a balance between their academic lives and their social lives.

Another important finding most of the participants discussed was that while they were in college, they became adults, and that becoming an adult meant working hard. Becoming an adult also meant a change in relationships with family. Participants described becoming more independent from family members financially and taking more responsibility for things like making doctor's appointments. This independence usually led to stronger relationships with parents and other family members. Participants wanted their friends and family to know that they were working hard in college.

In terms of their experiences in and after the Alpha Program, participants described the Program overall very positively, although they also shared some negative experiences and suggestions for improvement. Relationships were recognized as an important strength of Alpha. Participants recognized their Alpha Advisors, fellow Alpha Students, and FYS Instructors as positive aspects of the Program. Some even compared Alpha to a "family." Participants also spoke positively about FYS and spring semester Alpha classes. They were especially appreciative about the way Alpha connected them with resources available through the University. Most participants acknowledged negative aspects as well, particularly a sense of stigma related to being in Alpha and confusion about why they were in Alpha and what the Program was about. Fortunately, both the stigma and the confusion lessened as they started classes and learned more about the Program. A lasting effect of Alpha reported by many of the students was a sense of confidence in being a college student.

The third and final research question addressed suggestions for improving the Alpha Program. Most of the participants had very different ideas about what would make the program better, and one student did not provide any suggestions at all. The most common suggestion was to have a strong mentoring program. Several participants also noted that not all of the responsibility for student success should be put on the Program, that some of the responsibility rests on the students themselves. The next chapter will look at the implications of these findings and suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to better understand the college experiences of college students who have participated in a conditional admission program with the goal of helping those programs be more effective in meeting the needs of these students. This study also proposed to provide data to assist counselors in advising and advocating for students. This chapter explores the key findings in five sections. In the first, some of themes noted in the last chapter are put in the context of the current literature and student development theory. The second addresses the implications these findings pose for college counselors and other student affairs professionals. The third section discusses the limitations of the study. The fourth contains recommendations for further study. The chapter concludes with a final reflection.

Current Findings in the Context of Counseling and Higher Education Literature

Many findings were addressed in the previous chapter, and five of those will be explored in this section. These five findings were themes that were endorsed by most of the participants and were described as having a particularly important impact on the students. These include two themes from the first research question, two from the second, and one from the third. The first theme to be explored is that of failing a test or exam or having to repeat class. Next is covered will be the theme of working hard and becoming an adult. Thirdly, the confusion and stigma of being in the Alpha Program will be considered. The fourth theme is the confidence students experienced as the result of Alpha and other college experiences. The last theme to be addressed is the recommendations students have for improving Alpha.

Resiliency in Academics

That so many of the participants failed classes or exams was surprising. Seven of the participants described some sort of academic failure while in college. Five went on to talk about retaking at least one class they did poorly in and getting the grade they needed. Two failed exams early in the semester and went on to turn their grades around. When most of these students experienced failure, at first they were disappointed in themselves, but then they were able to tell themselves that they were not alone in their experiences because other students had failed. They learned from their mistakes or spoke to the professor and did what they needed to pass.

Interestingly, overcoming failure seems to be related to Marcia's (1966; Marcia & Friedman, 1970; Schenkel & Marcia, 1972) work in identity formation. Students were not given an ego identity status interview, so an exact identity status cannot be determined. However, six of the participants have not changed their majors despite all of them experiencing at least one failure in a class required for their major and five of them have had to repeat one class for their major. This suggests a foreclosed occupational identity in that each of them has made a commitment to a certain academic path and has continued on it without exploring other options. Marcia (1966) even noted in his work, "Foreclosure subjects tend to maintain high goals in spite of failure" (p. 556). Instead of a failure triggering a crisis that leads to exploration and a change in identity status, these students maintained their commitment to a particular major and career path.

Of the four students who had come to college undecided or changed their major, only Alyce mentioned academic failures. Unlike the consistent-major students who portrayed failures as something they could overcome by working harder or changing

strategies, Alyce depicted her failures as the result of unfair practices on the part of her instructors. If the other three who changed majors or came in undecided experienced an academic failure, they did not mention this in their interviews. This may suggest that the identity status of foreclosure in the area of career is actually beneficial for conditionally admitted or academically underprepared college students, much like Marcia and Friedman (1970) noted that a foreclosed status could be "a particularly adaptive one for women" (p. 260). The qualitative nature of this study means that conclusions cannot be made. Further study in this area is needed to understand the relationship between career commitment and the ability to overcome an academic failure.

This finding also is consistent with Dweck's (2006) research on mindsets. She describes two mindsets: fixed and growth. A fixed mindset is one in which a person sees skills and intelligence as set and unchangeable. In this mindset, either you are naturally good at something or you are not. Those with a growth mindset understand intelligence and skills as things that can be improved with practice. A failure for a person with a fixed mindset is perceived as a sign that they are not good at that particular thing and to move on to another area where they may succeed. A person with a growth mindset experiences failure as motivation to work harder. These students appear to have a growth mindset. They did not give up when they failed, but they tried again and succeeded.

Additionally, the work of Astin (1984, 1999) and Tinto (2012) also applies here. Both theorists recognize student engagement or student involvement as an important part of college student retention. The students in this study remained engaged and involved academically after experiencing academic setbacks. Both Astin (1984, 1999) and Tinto (2012) recognize that student involvement is partly a characteristic of the student but that

it can also be influenced by institutions and programs. More research is needed to

understand to what extent the type of student involvement demonstrated here is a factor

of the individual personalities of students and what may be a result of being in the Alpha

Program.

Hard Work and Becoming an Adult

As mentioned in Chapter 2, many student development theories address the

formation of identity based on the work of Erikson. For participants in this study, all

spoke about being an adult and all but one spoke about working hard in the context of

their identities. This is similar to what was found in DeVilbiss's (2014) dissertation

involving conditionally admitted, traditionally aged college students. She identified six

themes while interviewing students twice in their first semester of college. Some of these

themes are similar to what students in this study shared, particularly "increasing

independence," "intensifying demands and difficulty," and "leaving loved ones behind

but keeping some in one's life." The students in the current study were further along in

their college careers, having either recently completed or recently started their third year

while in DeVilbiss' research students were in their first semester, but this sense of

independence is common for both. And while DeVilbiss (2014) separated out these three

themes, these ideas were more connected in the current study. Most students described a

change in their relationships with family members that involved both a growing

independence and a deepening of relationships. Also, the hard work implicit in

"intensifying demands and difficulty" was directly connected in the current study. In

other words, while all three of these themes DeVilbiss (2014) saw in her participants are

seen in the current study to some extent, the themes are more closely related in the current study.

In her work, DeVilbiss (2014) used Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012) as a lens through which she explored the transition experiences of conditionally admitted students. The current study was not set up to engage with Schlossberg's theory in the same way as DeVilbiss' (2014) was; however, students in both studies described many of the same experiences. This supports the use of Schlossberg's theory (Anderson et al., 2012) in understanding the experiences of conditionally admitted college students. This theory may also be helpful in structuring programs to aid these students in their transition to college.

The findings of this study are also in line with Chickering's seven vectors of development: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). In particular, when participants were talking about working hard and becoming an adult in their interviews, quotes reflecting each of the vectors were shared by at least one person.

Confusion and Stigma

Many of the participants in the current study commented that they had experienced stigma and confusion early in the Alpha Program. Both the confusion and the stigma went away, usually in the first semester. This sense of stigma is consistent with the experiences of other conditionally admitted students. For students in the University of Minnesota's General College (GC), "stigma and disappointment" was one of the four first impressions found in a qualitative study of their experiences (Lundell,

Beach, et al., 2006). Like with the Alpha Students, the GC Students views of their program became more positive with time (Lundell, Beach, et al., 2006).

A change in appreciation for the Springboard course for conditionally admitted students was noted in Clark's (2009) dissertation. Students described their early impressions about the class as "dread" (p. 145 &146), "nerve-racking" (p. 147), and "[not] good" (Clark, 2009, p. 148). While this is not exactly stigma or confusion, these first thoughts about the class improved as the class went on and students began to understand the reasons for the class.

Experiencing stigma in a conditional admission program or at least negative thoughts about an aspect of conditional admission, which later improves, is not unique to these former Alpha Students. The experience of confusion about the conditional admission has previously not been mentioned in the research in this area, probably because so few of the qualitative studies about conditional admission have directly looked at the experiences of the students shortly after completing the program.

Developing Confidence

Confidence was the most common long-term outcome from participating in the Alpha Program described by the participants. Although every student interviewed did not explicitly mention confidence linked directly to participation in Alpha, confidence is related to becoming an adult, which was common among the participants. A sense of growth in maturity and competency was described by all of the participants, and many of the interviewees credited Alpha for that growth.

Confidence has been described as an important aspect of academic success in at-risk students. House (1992) found that students who self-reported high academic ability

were more likely to be retained at the eighth semester. In another study, reading

confidence was a better predictor of retention and GPA than a test that measured reading

ability (Nisbet et al., 1982). Conditionally admitted students who did well in a required

English class scored higher on academic confidence on the College Student Inventory

than students who did poorly in that class (Morrison, 1999). Finally, special admission

students who were sent a letter that said they were expected to do well in college had

higher grades in liberal arts courses than students who did not receive a letter (Haynes &

Johnson, 1983). A relationship between confidence and academic performance cannot be

established with the current study. However, students did find that the Alpha Program

improved their sense of confidence, which may help explain the ability of these students

to persist in college.

Suggestions for Alpha

The suggestions participants gave for improving Alpha were varied and based

primarily on personal experience and interests. A couple of students did not feel that they

needed Alpha to be successful, but in general suggestions were about things to add to the

Program rather than take away. This suggests that none of the components of the

Program during the 2012 and 2013 cohorts obviously needs to be discontinued. Another

reading of this finding is that because students are unique, the Program needs to be able

to provide individualized support. Some are like Dwight who said, "I really wasn't too

dependent" on the Alpha Program. Others like Alyce and Tyler describe frequent

interactions with their advisors more for emotional support than academic support.

Nairod mentioned throughout his interview that he was most impacted by learning to use

a planner. By providing contexts for relationships with Alpha Advisors and First Year

Seminar Instructors, students may be able to dial into the level and type of support they need, which would not be possible without these personal interactions. This idea is strengthened by the fact that one of the most frequently cited positive aspects of Alpha were the relationships participants had established with Alpha Advisors.

The most consistent recommendation for Alpha was one for more formal interaction with older peers through mentoring or some other context. The literature generally supports the use of mentoring for improving outcomes with college students. Mentoring can improve student persistence (Salinitri, 2005; Vivian, 2005) and graduation rates (Vivian, 2005). Two studies showed an improvement in GPA as the result of mentoring (Salinitri, 2005; Vivian, 2005), although another study did not find that mentoring significantly impacted GPA (Parisi, 2012). Programs with mentoring as one of their components offered have also shown higher retention rates (Colton et al., 1999-2000; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Mangold et al., 2002-2003). The research supports the students' desire for mentoring.

Another idea that came up when students were asked about suggestions for Alpha was that some responsibility for outcomes should be placed on the students themselves. In other words, developing a perfect program that turns every student into a successful scholar is impossible. Both Astin (2005-2006) and Tinto (2012) mention this in their work. While their research is primarily directed at helping colleges and universities develop cultures and programs that support student success, they acknowledge that some student characteristics are outside of the ability of schools to impact.

Implications for Counselors, Program Administrators, and Student Affairs Professionals

The findings of this study offer information for professionals who work with conditionally admitted college students. Beginning in high school, school counselors who are working with seniors who are considering an offer of conditional admission may be able to prepare those students by becoming aware of the experiences of conditionally admitted students and sharing that with students. This may allow these students to make more informed decisions about whether or not to accept an offer of conditional admission. Also, by understanding the experiences of conditionally admitted students, school counselors may be able to help those students who will be involved in a conditional admission program in college to prepare academically, emotionally, and socially for that program. For example, school counselors could share that failure of exams and even classes is not uncommon among conditionally admitted students, and that by learning from the experience and talking to professors, they can bounce back from academic failures they might experience like having to repeat a class.

Mental health counselors working with conditionally admitted college students should learn about the program(s) in which their students participate. This is especially necessary if a student is in the early part of the program and experiencing stigma or confusion as part of their admission status. Experiencing stigma and confusion related to admission status should be evaluated to see if it is a common experience in that program or is unique to that individual. Helping a student learn more about a program he or she in involved in may be helpful for reducing stigma and confusion. Counselors may also want to advocate for clients by advising program staff about the developmental needs of

college students and helping to create an emotionally healthy environment that limits stigma and confusion.

While many people who work with college students may benefit from these findings, their most clear implications are for programs serving conditionally admitted or underprepared college students. First of all, conditional admission programs need to be aware of how they communicate to their new students in order to reduce confusion and stigma. Stewart and Heaney (2013) make this very point by showing the difference between a typical acceptance letter for an honors program compared to one for a conditional admission program. The major difference between an honors program and a conditional admission program is that honors is generally optional while conditional admission is mandatory. However, mandatory can be communicated without making it sound like a punishment. Given the interest of students in mentoring and hearing from "real" students, including testimonials from former students in the early communication about the program may also help reduce stigma and confusion.

Another way to address stigma and confusion would be to communicate with students the reasons why they were accepted into the conditional admission program if possible. This explanation should include both why the student was not admitted regularly and why she or he was not simply denied admission. For example, "Normally we do not offer admission to students with similar ACT scores. However, given that you have such a good GPA and you are currently taking an AP class, we believe you can be a successful college student." Not only would this reduce the confusion about the program, it also communicates confidence that the student can do well at the college level, therefore reducing the amount of stigma associated with conditional admission.

Regardless of the amount and type of communication a conditional admission program has with its students, assessment of stigma and confusion among new students should be one of the responsibilities of program advisors. Advisors can benefit from knowing when and in what circumstances students in their particular program may be experiencing stigma and confusion so that they can address causes or exacerbating factors. Also, by being sensitive to and asking about stigma and confusion, they signal to students that they are not alone in concerns or fears they might have.

Conditional admission programs may also want to consider the type of former students who are serving in leadership roles. Programs should examine if, for example, GPA cut-offs for positions as mentors or teaching assistants unintentionally only provide students with role models with unblemished academic records. Conditionally admitted students should have role models who can show them that they too can make the Dean's List or be accepted into the Honors Program. At the same time, they also need to learn that failures can happen, and that recovery from those failures is possible. The message that "everyone fails classes" is not accurate because there are many students that do not experience failure during college. However, these students also need role models that can demonstrate how to fail an exam and still do well in a class or how to go from academic probation to good standing.

Limitations

The qualitative methodology used in this study was chosen to allow former conditionally admitted students who have persisted in college to talk about their experiences in their own words. Because of the boundaries set for this study, some limitations exist. These limitations are noted here so that the reader may be able to assess

the applicability of these findings outside of the ten participants in this study. This study was limited to two cohorts in one particular conditional admission program. Programs vary significantly in the types of students they admit (i.e., a student who qualifies for conditional admission at one school may be regularly admitted at another), in the conditions they place on students, and in the services and supports they provide. An attempt was made to explain the details of the Alpha Program so that those reading from other programs may be able to recognize those areas where their students may have similar experiences and those where they may not. Also, as the Alpha Program continues to fine-tune its services, students in future cohorts may have different experiences in the Program.

This study only looked at students who were persisting in college at the time of the interviews. Students who took time off of school before returning or dropped out permanently were not invited to participate. Part of the reason for the focus on persisting students is in response to Tinto's (2012) criticism that historically too much of the literature on college student persistence has focused on attrition rather than retention. This leads to a focus on keeping students from leaving rather than understanding what helps students stay. However, in order to fully understand the experience of conditional admission, the voices of those students who did not persist will need to be heard as well.

Some limitations are a direct result of using a qualitative methodology (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Padgett, 2008). Those limitations and steps for reducing them are outlined in Chapter 3 in the section titled "Trustworthiness." Also note that all of the participants were ones who responded to an email invitation and may not

accurately reflect the diversity of persistent former Alpha Students. The interviews were retrospective in nature, which could also be considered a limitation.

Recommendations for Further Study

This section addresses recommendations for further study. With the current study, the researcher tried to constrain the limitations discussed above and yet certain boundaries were necessary in order to make the study workable. Therefore, replication with other programs is recommended to understand to what extent the experiences described here are unique to Alpha Students and what is common between programs. Like most qualitative studies involving conditional admission, this study has focused on the experiences of students at one point in time. Following students over the period of several years may provide new insights into how experiences like confusion change over time.

Another area for future research is the experiences of those students who do not finish their conditional admission program or drop out of college after finishing. The current study deliberately set out to understand the experiences of persistent students, and yet students who do not remain in school are also needed to understand the experience of conditional admission in its totality. Based on the findings from this study, researchers should specifically explore the development of confidence, the response to academic setbacks, and the experiences of stigma and confusion in students who were not retained in the school where they were conditionally admitted. Also, this study and most of the quantitative literature on conditional admission have looked at conditional admission programs as a unified whole. Additional research is needed into the component parts that

make up conditional admission programs in order to understand what aspects of the programs are particularly effective and how students experience those components.

The finding of resilience after academic failure warrants further study as well. Dweck's (2006) work has been useful in understanding the some aspects of perseverance in academic tasks despite failure and setbacks, and the students in this study who had come back and passed a class they had earlier failed do display some aspects of a growth mindset. However, these students also seem to be very committed to particular majors or career paths. More research is needed into the connections of the research by both Dweck (2006) and Marcia (1966) and the ability for students, especially underprepared college students, to respond positively to academic failure. This may lead to specific interventions for those students who fail a class they need to take again.

Finally, the experiences of stigma and confusion warrant further investigation. Experiences of stigma and confusion kept many of the participants from fully engaging in the Program early on. Better understanding of these experiences may lead to interventions that reduce stigma and confusion and help students to become involved in the Program in a way that allows them to access its resources and other benefits. This research likely applies to programs besides those for conditionally admitted students. Acceptance to any program early in college, even one that might be viewed as positive such as an honors program, may be seen by a student as separating them from "normal" students.

Final Reflection

As I close this dissertation, I would like to go back into first person as the researcher and reflect on this process. About four years ago I wrote a research proposal

for a course in qualitative research. That research proposal slowly turned into this dissertation. This process took me longer than I would have liked due to setbacks like breaking my fibula, but there is also a sense in which maybe I understand the experiences of conditionally admitted students better, not only because of the research but because of the process of completing the research. School had always been easy for me. My biggest challenge in college was writing my senior thesis, and even that was a completely different beast than writing a dissertation. And yet here I was, struggling through this process while talking to students who had persevered in an environment where, based on their ACT scores or their high school GPAs, they were not supposed to succeed. I have the greatest respect for these students and the hard work they have put to be where they are today.

I am honored to have worked with such an amazing group of participants. There is so much they shared that did not make it into this dissertation. Some of their stories were deeply personal and could not be reproduced here. Any improvements that may be made in conditional admission programs as a result of this study will be unlikely to impact them in any way, and yet they were generous with their time and their words. My goal here has been to value their words in such a way that what you see here impacts how we serve and support conditionally admitted students in an increasingly positive and meaningful way.

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APPENDIX A

Alpha Program Contract Fall 2012

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Alpha Program Contract
Fall 2012

Please return the signed contract as soon as possible and no later than May 1, 2012.
Failure to return this contract by the deadline may cancel this offer of admission.

As a condition of admission to the University, each Alpha student must agree to and meet the following program expectations, which apply to the first year only.

- Attend WMU Orientation to schedule classes with the Alpha Program Coordinator.
- Attend the Alpha Program Kickoff Meeting on August 28, 2012.
- Enroll in the 2-credit Alpha FYE 2100 class fall semester.
- Meet with your assigned Alpha Program Advisor twice per semester (Fall/Spring).
- Meet with your Alpha Program Peer Mentor throughout the first year.
- Participate in 1 Alpha advising session each semester to schedule classes.
- Participate in a 1-credit Alpha Engagement class spring semester.
- Complete the Alpha Reflection Activities each semester (Fall/Spring).
- Live in a Valley II or III residence hall unless living with a parent or guardian within 35 miles of the university or permission is granted by the Alpha Coordinator.
- Students may not join a sorority or fraternity during the first semester and are expected to limit employment to 15 hours or less per week.

I, _____ have read and understand all parts of this contract and accept admission through the Alpha Program. In compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, I permit my parent/guardian(s) to review with the Alpha Program Coordinator my academic record and any other information related to my academic progress at Western Michigan University during my freshman year.

_____

Student Signature   Date

_____

Student E-mail Address

As the parent or guardian, I have read and understand all parts of this contract and support my student's admission to Western Michigan University through the Alpha Program.

_____

Parent/Guardian Signature   Date

_____

Parent/Guardian Name (printed)   E-mail Address

Western Michigan University
Office of Admissions
1903 W Michigan Ave
Kalamazoo MI 49008-5211

(269) 387-2000 Office
(269) 387-2096 FAX

APPENDIX B

Preliminary Demographics Questionnaire

Preliminary Demographics Questionnaire

Name:

Pseudonym:

Age:

Gender:

Racial or Ethnic Identity:

Major:

Number of Earned Credit Hours:

Class standing: Freshman   Sophomore   Junior   Senior   Other:_____

APPENDIX C

Interview Script for First Interview

Interview Script for First Interview

In order to better understand your experiences with conditional admission, I am going to ask you about high school and your decision to come to Western, your experiences in the Alpha Program, and your experiences in college since you completed the Alpha Program. This interview is being audio recorded so that I can have an accurate transcription to analyze for my research. Do you have any final questions before we begin?

1. First of all, I see you chose [pseudonym] as your pseudonym. Tell me about your reasons and thoughts for choosing this name.

2. Take me back to when you first started thinking about going to college and walk me through your process of applying to schools and choosing to come to Western Michigan.
    a. What did you hear about college growing up?
        Probes: From parents and other family members? From friends? From teachers and others at school?
    b. What did you do to prepare for college?
        Probes: Academic preparation? Financial preparation?
    c. Please describe your college search.
        Probes: How did you go about learning about your options? What was the process of applying to schools like for you? What was it like getting accepted and/or rejected to schools?
    d. How did you decide to come to Western?
    e. Tell me about your last summer before college.
        Probes: What did you do to get ready to come to Western? If you went to Summer Orientation, tell me about your experience there.

3. Tell me about your experiences during your first year of college beginning with your experiences with Alpha.
    a. What was it like to be chosen for the Alpha Program?
        Probes: How did you first learn about Alpha? What were your initial thoughts about the Alpha Program? How did it impact your decision to go to Western?
    b. How did your first experiences at Western (Summer Orientation, WSP, Fall Welcome) impact or affect you?
        Probe: How did these experiences confirm or change what you thought about Alpha?
    c. Please describe your involvement in Alpha your first year.
        Probes: Besides first year seminar, how else did you interact with the Alpha Program during your first year? [Course registration? Student Organization of the Alpha Program (SOAP RSO)? Alpha advisors? Leadership, Personal Development, or Academic Recovery class?] How was Alpha helpful for you during your first year? What obstacles did being in Alpha put in your way? How could Alpha have been more helpful during your first year?

d. How did it feel to be part of the Alpha Program?
   Probe: In what ways do you think being an Alpha student was different than not being an Alpha student?

e. How did your experiences in your first year seminar class impact or affect you?
   Probes: What about FYS was helpful? What about it was not helpful? What would you suggest changing about your first year seminar?

f. Tell me about your academic experiences outside of Alpha during your first year.
   Probes: To what extent were classes easier or harder than you expected? What classes from your first year stick out to you most and why? How did you do academically your first year?

g. Please tell me how you experienced the Alpha Program impacting your sense of yourself academically.

h. What were your experiences like socially your first year of college?
   Probes: How easy or hard did you find it to make friends? How did your relationships change over the course of the first year? How did your friendships from high school change as you started college?

i. Please share how your relationships with family developed and changed as you as you started college.
   Probes: How did your family members support you, or not support you, as you started school? How did any changes meet or defy your expectations for how you thought these relationships would change?

j. Please describe your financial situation during your first year in college.
   Probes: How did you pay for school? What was your experience with financial aid?

k. What else is significant about your first year at Western I haven't asked about?

4. Tell me about your experiences in college since you completed the Alpha Program.
   a. Walk me through your process of declaring a major.
      Probes: How did you decide on a major? If you had to switch majors, tell me about that process.
   b. Tell me about some of the academic successes you have had as a student.
   c. Please tell me about any academic setbacks you have experienced.
   d. Who or what has been helpful to you in college?
      Probes: Who or what are the specific people, programs, services, or resources that have helped you stay at Western and be successful? What are some of the things you have done or habits you have developed to be successful in college?
   e. Who or what has been a barrier or obstacle to you in college?
      Probes: Who or what are the specific people, programs, services or resources that have made it a challenge to stay at Western and be successful? What are some of the things you have done or habits you have developed that have made it harder to be successful in college?
   f. Describe what college has been like for you emotionally.

Probes: How has how you deal with your emotions changed over the last three years? What do you or have you done when your emotions have become overwhelming? Who or what have you found to be emotional supportive?

g. Tell me about your friendships and other non-family relationships and how they have changed since your first year at Western.

Probe: How has your friendship group changed and why?

h. Please tell me how your relationships with family developed and changed since your first year.

i. Please describe your financial situation since you completed your first year.

Probes: How are you doing financially? How are you paying for school now?

j. What else is significant about these last two years of college I haven't asked you about?

5. I would now like to know how you experienced the Alpha program and its impacts on you now at this point in your college career.

a. How have your impressions about the Alpha Program changed over the last three years and what led to those changes?

b. How do you think your college experiences have been different than had you not been in Alpha?

c. How, if at all, have you been involved with Alpha after your first year [mentor, FYS student instructor, SOAP]?

d. Please share what you feel have been the most important influences and effects the Alpha Program has had on you and your college career so far.

e. If you had a friend or a sibling who was a senior in high school and they were accepted to Western through the Alpha Program, what would you tell them and why?

f. What else would you like to say about Alpha?

6. What do you want other people – friends, professors, university staff, school counselors, college counselors, and family – to know about you and your college experiences?

7. What else about yourself or your experience as a college student would you like to share with me today?

Thank you very much for meeting with me today and sharing your experiences as a student. Once I complete all of the first round interviews and have them transcribed, I will email you with a copy of your transcript and a summary of our conversation. We will then set up a time to meet from the second interview. In the meantime, if you think of anything that you forgot to mention today, please jot a note for yourself or record a reminder on your phone so we can talk about it next time we meet. Any last questions or thoughts for today?

APPENDIX D

Interview Script for Second Interview

Interview Script for Second Interview

Thank you for meeting with me again today. Today's interview should be much shorter than our last. Once again, this interview is being audio recorded. Do you have any questions or comments before we begin?

1. First of all, was there anything that came to mind after we met last time that you want to share today?

2. I'd like to hear your thoughts on the interview transcript and interview summary I sent.
      a. Were you able to read through the transcript and summary? What were your initial impressions?
      b. Is there anything about the first interview that you would like to correct or clarify?
      c. Did you feel like I had a sense of your experience as a student? What am I missing?

3. I have a few things I want to be sure I am clear on.
      [Use this section to clarify or elaborate on specific issues brought up by this participant during the first interview.]

4. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about yourself or your experience as a college student today?

Thank you very much for meeting with me again today. In a few weeks I will send you the transcript of today's interview. If you could let me know if there are any inaccuracies, I would appreciate it. Any last questions or thoughts for today?

APPENDIX E

Informed Consent Form

Western Michigan University
Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology

Principal Investigator:	Patrick Munley
Student Investigator:	Ashley J. Wildman
Title of Study:	The Lived Experiences of Conditionally Admitted College Students

You have been invited to participate in a research project titled "*The Lived Experiences of Conditionally Admitted College Students.*" This project will serve as Ashley Wildman's dissertation for the requirements of the Ph.D. in Counselor Education and Supervision. This consent document will explain the purpose of this research project and will go over all of the time commitments, the procedures used in the study, and the risks and benefits of participating in this research project. Please read this consent form carefully and completely and please ask any questions if you need more clarification.

What are we trying to find out in this study?
We are trying to learn more about the educational, relational, and personal experiences of students who completed a year in a conditional admission program.

Who can participate in this study?
Any person who was a member of Western Michigan University Alpha Program's Fall 2012 or 2013 cohort of students who has been continuously enrolled at Western Michigan University through the spring 2015 semester (for 2012 cohort students) or the fall 2015 semester (for 2013 students) and is not a former student of Ashley Wildman.

Where will this study take place?
Interviews will be conducted on the main campus of Western Michigan University at a location to be arranged by you and the interviewer. If another WMU campus (e.g., Grand Rapids or Detroit) is more convenient, meeting at an extension campus may be an option.
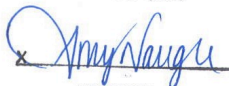
What is the time commitment for participating in this study?
Total time commitment is expected to be between two and three hours for two interviews and the time to review your transcript and summary of your first interview. The first interview is expected to last about 90 minutes. The second interview will take place between one to two months after the first interview and last about 30 minutes.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?
You will work with the interviewer to choose a time and place for two audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews. Before the first interview, you will also complete a demographic questionnaire. During these interviews you will be asked to share your experiences as a college

student. You will also have the opportunity to review the transcripts of the interviews and make any changes you feel are necessary to more accurately reflect your experiences.

What information is being measured during the study?
Your thoughts and experiences as a college student in a program for conditionally admitted college students is the information that will be asked of you.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?
Risk to participants is expected to be minimal. Possible risks include feelings of sadness, anger, or distress in talking about negative experiences. Participants may end the interview at any time if they are not comfortable answering the questions asked and choose not to continue. A referral to University Counseling Services will be made if the participant desires to work through emotions brought up while participating.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?
There is no direct benefit of participating in this study.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?
There are no costs associated with participating in this study.

**Is there any compensation for participating in this study?**
Participants will be compensated $20 cash for completing the first interview and $10 for completing the second interview.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?
The complete audio recordings and transcripts based on the audio recordings will only be accessible to the investigators. As a participant, you will be able to read and make corrections to the transcripts of your interviews. You will also be asked to choose a pseudonym that will be used in the dissertation and any other publications or presentations that result from the study. Pseudonyms will not be used for the program or the university, so both the Alpha Program and Western Michigan University will be mentioned by name in the dissertation.

What if you want to stop participating in this study?
You can choose to stop participating in the study at anytime for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. You will experience NO consequences either academically or personally if you choose to withdraw from this study. The investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent. If you choose to stop participating or you are not longer eligible for participation and you have already provided information to the investigator, that information may be used as part of the study. If you chose to withdraw from participating before completing the first interview, you will not
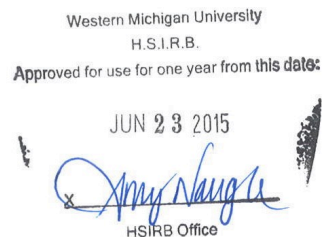
receive the $20 for the first interview or the $10 for the second interview. If you do not complete the second interview, you will not receive the $10 for that interview.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the primary investigator, Patrick Munley at 269-387-5100 or patrick.munley@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

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

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

_____

Please Print Your Name

_____   _____
Participant's signature   Date

APPENDIX F

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Letter of Approval

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Date: June 23 2015

To: Patrick Munley, Principal Investigator
        Ashley Wildman, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 15-06-10

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled "The Lived Experiences of Conditionally Admitted College Students" has been **approved** under the **expedited** category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may **only** be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., *you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under "Number of subjects you want to complete the study"*)." Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

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

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

Approval Termination: **June 22, 2016**