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The Perceptions, Behaviors, and Experiences of Extended Persisters in the Florida Community College System

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THE PERCEPTIONS, BEHAVIORS, AND EXPERIENCES OF EXTENDED PERSISTERS IN THE FLORIDA COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM

By

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DEDICATION

This Dissertation is dedicated to my father and mother,
Oscar and Marian Washburn.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions, behaviors, and experiences of student who persisted in the Florida Community College system and accumulated credit hours beyond those required for graduation. The study was a theory-guided study utilizing qualitative methods associated with orientational qualitative inquiry, intended to clarify and elucidate Bean's Theory of Student Attrition. The data collection consisted of interviewing 18 students using a semi-structured interviewed based on variables derived from Bean's theory. The purposeful sample of respondents was selected from students who had earned an A.A. degree and accumulated excess hours. The excess hours ranged from 5 to 212 beyond the 60 required for an associate in arts degree. The sample was further striated by the size of the community colleges from which the students were selected.

A cross-case analysis was done using the constant comparative analysis of data. The analysis found little difference among the respondents from different size community colleges. However, significant differences were found when a cross-case analysis was made based on the number of accumulated excess hours.

Family background was found to be a significant factor in influencing the accumulation of excess hours, in that students who expressed that they were "expected to go on to college" by their families were more strongly goal directed and as a consequence earned fewer excess hours. However, students that were vaguely goal directed reported having a life-altering event that changed their attitude and shifted them from vaguely to strongly goal directed and from that point on they completed their studies without accumulating excess hours. Students that had family responsibilities also tended to stop out, withdraw, and fail courses more due to those responsibilities than students who did not have families. Finally, two other themes emerged as major findings that contributed

to the accumulation of excess hours: Changing majors and earning more than on degree. The students that changed majors more often had the greatest number of excess hours. In addition, students whose ultimate goal was to earn a bachelors degree, would typically earn an associate in science degree to provide them some employment options and then go back and earn an associate in arts in preparation to transfer thereby accumulating excess hours. The major variables that influenced the accumulation of excess hours were: strong goal commitment, family responsibilities, major certainty and earning more than one degree.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Recent national studies have shown that undergraduate students are taking longer than four years to complete a degree (Blanco, 1994; Clarkson & Roscoe, 1994; Gillmore & Hoffman, 1997; NCES, 1993; NCES, 1996; NCES, 2003; NCES, 2004). State and educational policy-makers have focused on the time it takes to earn a baccalaureate degree, believing that the longer it takes for students to obtain a baccalaureate degree, the more a state invests in the student's education (Blanco, 1994; Gillmore & Hoffman, 1997). However, the length of time it takes to earn a degree does not necessarily directly impact the cost of education nor measure an institution's effectiveness with the same efficiency as the number of credit hours accumulated for the awarding of the degree (Gillmore & Hoffman, 1997). Few studies have been undertaken that explore the phenomenon of excess hours accumulated by students prior to graduation.

Since the end of World War II, enrollment in higher education has increased from 1.5 million to over 15 million in the 1990s (Johnson, 2001; Lucas, 1994). Higher education has gone from serving the elite, to serving the masses, to near universal access (Aper, 1993; Lucas, 1994). College attendance by high school graduates has increased from 8% in 1940 to 50%, and by some accounts as high as 62%, in 1995 and is expected to continue to increase (Johnson, 2001; Lowman, 1996). The increase has been attributed to a number of factors besides the obvious growth in the general population and the baby boomers' children reaching college age. Factors such as the changing workplace, the advent of the community college system, the G. I. Bill, the inclusion of women and minorities, and the culture of transformation from one based on industry to one based on information and the return on investment education holds for those who attend have all

contributed to the expanding demand for higher education (Cohen & Brawer, 1989; Dolence & Norris, 1995; Johnson, 2001; Lucas, 1994).

In the early 1990s, the expansion in the demand for higher education was coupled with declining or stagnant revenues and conflicting demands for limited resources (Aper, 1993; Astin, 1993; Gillmore & Hoffman, 1997; Institute for Higher Education Policy; 2001; Jenkins, 1988; Layzell & Caruthers, 1995). This resulted in an increased emphasis on program viability, cost efficiency and accountability. During the latter part of the 1990s (Johnson, 2001) the revenues did not decline as significantly. However, now, in the beginning of the third millennium, the increased demand has once again brought the conflict between demand and limited resources to the forefront, challenging federal and state legislatures to find ways to pay for increased access. According to Johnson (2001) the three broad issues facing higher education include: determining how much higher education does the nation need and will it support; who should pay for it; and how much should it cost (p. 4-5).

Along with the demand and need for increased revenue has come a cry for greater accountability (Aper, 1993; Astin, 1993). While other sectors of the economy have been perceived as becoming more productive and efficient, education has been seen as inefficient, unproductive, unaccountable, and, even more damning, as entrenched and unwilling to change (Volkwein & Lorang, 1996). Astin (1993) found that "Economic pressures have forced legislators to look for programs in which public spending can be cut, and the high level of federal and state investments in higher education underscores the need for better information on how college affects students" (p. 2). The assumed benefits of and right to higher education are no longer being taken for granted. Some observed that higher education has "lost sight of its lofty purpose to educate the American people and is now perceived as any other special interest group" (Jenkins, 1988, p. 12). As a result, accountability measures and policies, similar to those being required of business and other special interest groups, are being imposed on education, holding education accountable for the expenditures of public funds.

The converging forces of supply and demand with an emphasis on accountability have resulted in the creation of a number of initiatives intended to assess institutions' effectiveness and efficiency and, thereby, hold them accountable. The creation of

measures of efficiency, such as performance based funding, where institutions earn funding by meeting certain standards or outcomes, are intended to change institutional behavior. The goal is to make them more productive. Other measures, such as graduation rates, number of library books, and faculty to student ratios, were instituted to assess institutional effectiveness and are intended to provide assurance to policy-makers, parents, students and the tax-paying public that institutions are cost effective and productive (Volkwein & Lorang, 1996). Further, the higher education system as a whole was being challenged and studies were being conducted to assess how colleges were affecting students, their values, behaviors, life-styles, aspirations and career opportunities (Astin, 1993). As competition for students increases and the funding and evaluation of institutions shifts to performance, the institutional emphasis has shifted to include, effective advising, access to courses and majors, and the time taken to earn a degree (Volkwein & Lorang, 1996). Institutions are reviewing established procedures to assess the effectiveness of recruitment, retention and graduation efforts.

One mechanism for measuring how well institutions are performing is the traditional graduation and retention rate. Institutional effectiveness can be assessed by how many students out of a given cohort have graduated or are retained. Numerous theorists, most notably Alexander Astin and Vincent Tinto, have developed theories on what influences students to remain in college. Based on theories, programs are implemented to retain students through to graduation. Most of these studies conducted on persistence are descriptive in nature and focused on students attending four- year institutions (Bean, 1985; Pascarella, Smart & Ethington, 1986) and most are quantitative in nature.

However, a shift has been occurring in terms of measuring effectiveness. Rather than looking solely at ways to retain and graduate students, policy-makers and administrators are also looking at how long it is taking students to graduate and how many credit hours they have accumulated by the time they graduate. The high demand for education and limited resources are forcing institutions and policy-makers to look for a means of finding more space to serve more students with little or no increase in funding. Accountability has expanded to include time-to-degree, i.e., how long it takes

students to graduate, and credit-hours-to-degree, i.e., the number of credit hours students have accumulated by the time they graduate.

In Florida, the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA), an office of the Florida Legislature, projected that Florida's higher education student population will grow 26% between 2002-03 and 2007-08 (OPPAGA, 2004). They went on to say "If the state allocates the same share of general revenue to higher education as it did in 2003, the growth in state funds for higher education will not keep pace with student enrollment" (OPPAGA, 2004. p. 3). They reported that during 2002-03, students "attempted 719,660 credits in excess of graduation requirements" (p.3) costing the state $62 million dollars. The message is clear—reduce the number of excess hours to help fund the increase in demand.

In 1994-95, a decade before the 2004 OPPAGA report, the Florida Senate Appropriations Committee, with assistance from the Division of Community Colleges and the Board of Regents, conducted an interim study on the number of credit hours students attempted and earned toward a degree. The study analyzed the transcripts of community college and university students who were awarded a degree in 1994-95. The analysis showed that community college associate in arts degree students had accumulated an average of 28.56 excess credits beyond the degree requirements. Baccalaureate degree students averaged an accumulation of 24 excess credits.

According to the Division of Community Colleges' review, the number of excess hours accumulated by community college students ranged from 6 to 246 (Florida Department of Education, Division of Community Colleges, 1996). Table 1 displays the number of students, the range of excess hours, the mean and standard deviations as derived from the Division of Community Colleges' review of the community college associate in arts graduates (see Appendix A for the complete review). The data show that a small percentage of students are responsible for the largest accumulation of excess hours. According to the 1996 report, students who accumulated from 6-24 excess credit hours, representing one standard deviation below the mean (i.e., 28.56 credit hours), referred to in Table 1 as Group A, account for 51.7% of the students, but only 24.8% of the excess credit hours. Students in Group B, who accumulated from 30-48 excess hours,

TABLE 1

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, DIVISION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES
STUDENT EXCESS HOURS REPORT – JANUARY 30, 1996

No. of excess credit hrs.	Number of students	Standard Deviation	Comments
0	174		
		3.7 Credit Hours - 1st STD	
6	920		GROUP A
12	1099		3,940 Students
18	1031		51.7% of population
24	890		24.8% Excess Hrs
		28.5 Credit Hours - Mean	
30	778		GROUP B
35	606		2,203 Students
42	489		28.9% of population
48	330		34.00% Excess Hrs
		53.4 Credit Hours - 1st STD	
54	292		GROUP C
60	237		1,305 Students
66	169		17.00% of population
72	149		40.9% Excess Hrs
78	96		
84	77		
90	74		
96	49		
102	35		
108	23		
114	16		
120	17		
126	14		
132	13		
138	7		
144	4		
150	3		
156	2		
162	2		
168	3		
174	1		
180	6		
186	2		
192	2		
204	1		
228	1		
234	1		
246	1		
	7,622		

Source: Florida Department of Education, Division of Community Colleges, January 30, 1996.

one standard deviation above the mean, account for 28.9% of the students and 34% of the excess credit hours. Group C students, who had accumulated 54 credit hours or more, had the smallest percentage of students at 17.1%, but the largest number of excess hours 40.9%. The 2004 OPPAGA report found the same trend, a small group of students, 20%, were responsible for 83% of the excess credits (OPPAGA, 2004).

The 1996 study also found degree program lengths for identical programs varied considerably. A number of baccalaureate degree programs offered by more than one of Florida's nine universities, which resulted in the same degree, had programs that varied in length by as much as 39 credit hours (Board of Regents, 1996). System-wide, the associate in arts degree varied by a maximum of eight credit hours, with programs ranging from 60-68 credit hours.

When institutions were unable to justify the wide variations in program lengths, Senate Bill 2330 was passed during the 1995 legislative session, which limited baccalaureate program lengths to 120 semester hours and associate in arts degrees to 60 credit hours. The State University System reduced the program lengths of over 80% of its programs (Goodman, 1999). Senate Bill 2330 also limited the general education core to 36 semester hours and established other policies to improve the articulation and advising of students (Florida Senate Bill 2330, 1995; Goodman, 1999).

Following the passage of Senate Bill 2330, a number of initiatives were implemented to increase graduation and retention rates and decrease time- and credit-hours-to-degree. The lengths of degree programs were shortened to decrease the time required to complete a degree. Sliding tuition rates were instituted in the proviso language contained in the 1996 General Appropriations Bill for credits taken in excess of 115% of a student's degree program requirements. However, the proviso language was not continued in subsequent years. Course repeat policies were implemented that limited the number of times a student could repeat a course to three and required students to pay the full cost of instruction on the third and any subsequent attempts (Section 240. 115(6) Florida Statutes). Similarly, withdrawal and forgiveness policies were changed to limit the number of times a student could withdraw from a course or have a grade forgiven for a repeated course (Rule 6A-14.030, Florida Administrative Code). Common prerequisites were also established, standardizing the course prerequisites required for

admission into upper level programs across the university system. According to Mike O'Farrell, Staff Director of the Senate Education Committee, and Ed Woodruff, Policy Specialist, Senate Budget Subcommittee on Education, the goal of Senate Bill 2330 was to reduce the number of credit-hours-to-degree (M. O'Farrell, March 3, 1999; E. Woodruff, March 6, 1999, personal communications).

In 2004, the same concerns are still being addressed in Florida. The OPPAGA report (2004) recommended that the Florida Legislature, look into various financial options that could be used to reduce the number of excess hours, including:

- charge higher tuition for excess hours
- provide tuition rebates for students who graduate with few excess hours; and,
- offer 'locked-in' tuition to encourage students to graduate in four years (OPPAGA, June, 2004, p. 4).

The policies noted in SB 2330 and in the OPPAGA report focus on establishing an infrastructure (e.g., program lengths) that would make it possible for students to complete a degree in a given amount of time or with a given amount of credit hours, and on creating disincentives for extending one's academic program (e.g., sliding tuition, block tuition and penalties for third attempts). The assumption is that if the program lengths are shortened or if there are disincentives for accumulating hours beyond a certain point, then students will complete their degree with fewer excess hours.

In addition to studying and theorizing ways to increase student persistence to a degree, researchers now have also begun to investigate reasons why students persist beyond what is required for a degree. Most research has focused on identifying institutional and student demographic factors that influence the length of time or credit hours it takes students to persist to graduation (Blanco, 1994; Clarkson & Roscoe, 1994; Goodman, 1999; Sugarman & Kelly, 1997; Volkwein & Lorang, 1996; Windham, 1999). While one might understand why a student accumulates 28 hours more than that required for a degree (e.g., a change of major or transferring institutions), it is the factors that cause a small percentage of students to earn the greatest number of credits that hold the greatest promise for reducing excess hours.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the phenomenon of extended persisters (a term derived by combining Volkwein and Lorang's term "extender" and Tinto's term "persisters") by studying the perceptions, behaviors, and experiences of Florida community college students who persist to graduation and, in doing so, accumulate credit hours beyond the number required to earn an associate in arts degree. The phenomenon was explored through the use of qualitative methods. As Bogdan and Biklen (1992) state, "Qualitative researchers' goal is to better understand human behavior and experience. They seek to grasp the processes by which people construct meaning and to describe what those meanings are" (p. 49).

The concepts of Bean's Student Attrition Theory study guided the inquiry, which Patton (1990) called an "orientational qualitative inquiry." As Patton (1990) explained, "Orientational qualitative inquiry begins with an explicit theoretical or ideological perspective that determines what variables and concepts are most important and how the findings will be interpreted. . . . Such qualitative inquiry is aimed at confirmation and elucidation rather than discovery" (p. 86). Qualitative methods of research were used including a cross-case analysis, emergent design, and purposeful sampling. The data was analyzed using the constant comparative method.

Significance of the Study

The results of this study in exploring the question, "What are the perceptions, behaviors, and experiences of Florida community college students who persist to graduation and, in doing so, accumulate credit hours beyond the number required to earn an associate in arts degree?" should provide information on the phenomenon of extended persisters, i.e., students who persist beyond what is required for graduation and accumulate excess credit hours. The findings should help to explain the perceptions, behaviors and experiences of extended persisters, thereby providing an increased understanding of why students extended their educational experience and earn excess hours. The results will provide decision-makers and institutional administrators with information on what changes in policy and practice, if any, could be made to graduate students with fewer excess hours. The findings could influence institutional decisions and operations, and the development of statewide policies that have the intent of reducing

excess hours to graduation. The study may also be of interest to students who want to reduce their expenses by providing them with insight into various factors and influences that may affect the amount of credit taken to earn a degree.

Assumptions and Limitations

It should be pointed out that when the study was initiated, the researcher was a staff member of the State Board of Community Colleges involved in academic and student services issues impacting community college students, including assessment of barriers to earning degrees. Currently, the researcher is the Executive Director for the Florida Center for Advising and Academic Support, a Center created by the State Board of Education to administer a statewide student advising web site with the mission to help students be more successful. The knowledge and experience that the researcher has acquired in these positions has been an enhancement in understanding the complexities of excess hours and the implications associated with the findings.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions are provided for clarification. The definitions have been gleaned in part from the literature and from the author's personal experience in working with the various terms.

1. Time-to-degree – the length of time it takes a student to graduate with a degree as measured by years.
2. Credit-hours-to-degree – the number of credit hours it takes a student to graduate with a degree, including attempted and earned credit hours.
3. Attempted Credit Hours – the number of hours attempted by a student regardless of whether credit was earned by receiving a passing grade on the course or no credit was earned due to a withdrawal or failure to complete.
4. Earned Credit Hours – the number of hours attempted by a student for which they earned credit. A student in Florida must earn a minimum of 60 credit hours to be awarded an associate in arts degree and 120 credits to be awarded a baccalaureate degree
5. Excess Hours to Degree – the number of hours, attempted or earned, beyond the number of hours required for a degree. (The number of hours required

for an associate in arts degree in Florida is 60. If a student earns or attempts 90 hours before graduating, he/she has accumulated 30 excess hours.)

6. Persistence or Persister – a term used to define students who persist (i.e. continue on) to complete a college degree.
7. Extended Persistence or Extended Persisters – terms used to describe students who persist (i.e. complete a degree) with an accumulation of excess hours beyond that required for a degree.
8. Stop out – A temporary withdrawal from higher education (Tinto, 1987, p. 9).
9. Dropout - A voluntary, permanent withdrawal from an institution (institutional departure) or from the higher education system (system departure) in which the student views their leaving as a failure (Tinto, 1987, p. 133).

Summary

The increased demand for higher education coupled with declining revenues has resulted in the benefits and rights to higher education no longer being taken for granted. Legislatures are calling for greater efficiency and accountability. Traditional methods of accountability such as graduation and retention rates are shifting to measuring time to degree and credit hours to degree.

A study done by the Florida Division of Community Colleges found that community college associate in arts degree students were graduating with excess hours ranging from 3.7 to 246 excess hours beyond that required for the 60-hour degree. The average number of excess hours was 28.5 with 17% of the population earning 40.9% of the excess hours. To become more efficient, community colleges would need to assess why students earned so many excess hours and what could be done to reduce the number of excess hours. The researcher has previously worked for the Division of Community Colleges and was involved with student services issues, including assessment of barriers to earning degrees and time-to-degree and credit-hour-to-degree issues and had an interest in studying the phenomenon of excess hours. The study was undertaken to answer the question: What are the perceptions, behaviors and experiences of extended persisters in the Florida Community College System?

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The researcher explored the phenomenon of extended persisters by studying the perceptions, behaviors, and experiences of students who persisted in a Florida community college and, in doing so, accumulate excess credit hours beyond that required for the awarding of an associate in arts degree. A review of the literature found that there are a number of studies that investigate time-to-degree, but few that assess credit-hours-to-degree. Further, the literature focuses on persistence versus attrition and the theories related to persistence (e.g., graduating in six years rather than four), rather than the reasons and theories for extended persistence. In this chapter, the researcher will explore the literature related to time-to-degree, credit-hours-to-degree, the factors attributed to influencing students' time- and credit-hours-to-degree and current theory related to persistence. The literature explores time-to-degree and credit-hours-to-degree from national, state and regional levels.

Graduation rates and retention rates have long been used as assessments of student and institutional success and as mechanisms for the efficient planning of cost-reducing institutional operations (Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington, 1986). Now, for many of the same reasons, institutions and policy-makers are also concerned about graduating students within a certain amount of time or with a certain amount of credits. While a number of studies address the length of time that a student takes to graduate, time-to-degree does not necessarily increase educational costs. A student completing a baccalaureate degree in six years with 120 credit hours does not cost the state or the institution added dollars. On the other hand, excess credits to degree directly result in increased cost to the state, the student, and the institution. However, a comprehensive

literature review must include time-to-degree as well as credit hour to degree research. Therefore, this literature review will look at the time-to-degree and credit-hours-to-degree; student characteristics and institutional factors influencing the time and credit-hours-to-degree; and, the current theories associated with persistence

Time-to-Degree

National Time-to-Degree Graduation Rates

The U.S. Department of Education, Condition of Education (2004) reported "a recent analysis of data based on high school seniors in 1972, 1981, and 1992 suggest that U.S. students access to college has increased over the last three decade, but rates of completion have not changed" (p. 64). The study shows that the same percentage (53%) of students that graduated from high school in 1989-90 and in 1995-96 completed a baccalaureate degree at the end of 5 years. The difference the study found is the percent of students that were retained had increased from 13% of the 1989-90 graduates to 17% of the 1995-96 graduates (U.S. DOE, 2004).

The 1996, U.S. Department of Education, Condition on Education, (NCES, 1996) also found that students are extending the time it takes to graduate. The study found that 45.4% of the 1977 graduates had graduated within four years and 75.3% in six years. Comparatively only 31.1% off the 1993 graduates had graduated in 4 years while 69.9% had graduated in six years. The study shown in Table 2 shows a national trend that students are taking longer to graduate.

Table 2

Percentage of college graduates completing a bachelor's degree within 4, 5, 6 years or more following their high school graduation: 1977, 1986, 1990, and 1993

Year of College Graduation	4-years or less	5 years or less	6 years or less	More than six years
1977	45.4	67.2	75.3	24.7
1986	34.5	60.2	70.8	29.2
1990	31.1	57.2	68.4	31.6
1993	31.1	58.7	69.9	30.1
Source: 1996, U.S. Department of Education, Condition on Education, 1996.				

Another study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics in 1993 looked at college graduates rather than tracking a high school cohort and found a similar trend. That study found that 43% of the 1990 college graduates had graduated within four years. Comparatively, 81% of the 1990 graduates had graduated within six year (NCES, 1993). The study also found that a larger percentage of women completed within four years than men (47% vs. 39%), Whites completed sooner than Blacks or Hispanics (44% vs. 37% vs. 31%, respectively) and, students at independent institutions graduated faster than at a public institution (58% vs. 36%) (NCES, 1993). Table 3 displays the results of the NCES study by number of years and students characteristics

Table 3

Percent of 1990 College Graduates Who Graduated Within 4 years and 6 years By Characteristics

Characteristics	Four or Fewer Years	Six or Fewer Years
Sex		
Male	38.9%	80.9%
Female	47.4%	81.1%
Type of Institution		
Public	36.1%	79.3%
Private	57.9%	84.5%
Race		
White	44.4%	81.5%
Black	37.0%	77.6%
Hispanic	31.1%	72.9%
Asian	44.4%	85.7%
American Indian	26.6%	59.0%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1993.

A study conducted by the National Institute of Independent Colleges and Universities (NIICU) (Porter, 1989) looked at over 5,000 1980 high school graduates over a span of six years. Of the 5,000 high school graduates, 3,957 enrolled as traditional full-time students in four-year institutions and 1,467 enrolled as nontraditional students. The study discovered a pattern similar to the NCES study. After four years, only 15.5% of all the students had graduated. The graduation rate however, increased to 29.3% after five years and 40.7% after six years. Of the 15.5% that graduated within four years, the study found that a higher percentage (25.6%) graduated from an independent institution than from a public institution (13.2%). The same trend occurred for the 40.7% who graduated after six years; 54.2% were from an independent institution and 42.7% from a public institution. The NIICU study also found that White students were more likely to graduate within 4 years (14% in public, 27% in independent) than Black (10% public, 15% independent) or Hispanic (6% public, 11% independent). Table 4 shows the graduation rate by year and type of institution reported in the NIICU study.

Table 4

Percent of Graduation Rates
By
Time and by Institution Type

Time-to-degree	Total % Graduated	% from Private	% from Public
1980-1984	15.5%	25.6	13.2
1980-1985	29.3%	36.2	27.6
1980-1986	40.7%	54.2	42.7

Source: Porter, O. Undergraduate completion and persistence at four year colleges and universities. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Independent Colleges and Universities, 1989.

State and Regional Time-to-Degree Graduation Rates

The Office of Education Research (Hill & Owing, 1986) identified differences in graduation rate based on regions within the United States and socioeconomic economic status (SES). The study found that 60% of the students from the Northeast region completed a degree within four years, compared to 47% in the North Central and

Southern regions and 34% in the Western region. The study found further differences in students based on their SES (i.e., their family income level). Fifty-two percent of the students from high SES families completed in 4 years compared to 41% from middle and 25% from low SES families.

Blanco (1994) conducted a comparative study of the time-to-degree status of a cohort of first-time, full-time students in public institutions from seven states: Florida, Kentucky, Illinois, North Carolina, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin. The study found completion rates were lower than that reported by NCES. Blanco's study found the percent of students who graduated in four years ranged from a low of 15% for Florida to a high of 33% in Virginia. The six-year graduation rate ranged from 42% at the regional institutions in Kentucky to 61% in Wisconsin. Table 5 shows the percentage of graduates for first-time, full-time students in the seven states at four years and six years.

Table 5

Percent of First-Time, Full-time Students Completing the Baccalaureate Degree Within Four and Six Years By State

State	Four Years	Six Years
Virginia (1983 Cohort)	33.4%	56.5%
Florida (1984 Cohort)	15%	49%
Kentucky	N/A	42% at Regional Universities 45% at 2 Doctoral Universities
Illinois (1984-85 Cohort)	25%	51%
North Carolina (1984-85 Cohort)	27%	56%
Texas (1987)	48.3% (after 5 years)	
Wisconsin (1985)	N/A	61%

Adapted from: Doing more with less: Approaches to shortening time-to-degree. By C.D. Blanco, 1994, Denver, CO: State Higher Education Executive Officers.

Florida Time-to-Degree Graduation Rates

In Florida, the data from the Department of Education Division of Colleges and Universities (2004) reflect a similar trend showing 33.15% of the 1997 FTIC graduating in four years and 61.66% in six years. A study of 1987 First-Time-in-College (FTIC) university students found 25.1% had graduated in four years. Subsequent cohorts in 1988 and 1989 showed 24.2% and 24.4% respectively had graduated in four years. In the sixth year, the percentages increased to 53.2%, 53.4% and 53.7%, respectively (Florida State University System, 1996). The Florida State University System study (1996) also found women graduating in larger percentages (30.2%, 29.3% and 28.7%) than males (19.5%, 18.2% and 19.3%) and Whites (27.8%, 27.7% and 28.3%) in a larger percent than Blacks (11.4%, 9.8% and 11.3%) or Hispanics (25.7%, 22.5% and 20.5).

Transfer Student Time-to-Degree Graduation Rates

A national longitudinal study of 1972 and 1980 high school graduates conducted by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, of the U.S. Department of Education (Knepper, 1989), found that native university students, i.e., those who began their education at the university, finished sooner than those who started at a two-year institution. While students who transferred from one institution to another completed at the same percentage, transferring added an additional eight months to degree completion (Knepper, 1989).

Another study looked at 1998 Florida State University System graduates and compared the time it took, as measured by semesters, for community college transfer students and native university students to complete the upper division course work of a four-year baccalaureate degree. The study found that "native students graduate nearly a half a semester faster than transfer students" (Harding, 1999, p. 122). Native university students completed the upper division of university work in an average of 5.64 semesters compared to 6.13 semesters for community college transfers.

A study by Lowman (1996) of 1995 University of Florida graduates looked at the time-to-degree in terms of the number of semesters it took students to complete their baccalaureate degree from the time at which they began their postsecondary education. Lowman (1996) found that the average number of total semesters to complete a baccalaureate degree, including associate in arts (A.A.) work and university upper

division work, was 18.23 for community college transfer students compared to 13.91 for native University of Florida students.

The Florida State Board of Community Colleges also found that students were taking longer than the traditional two years to complete an associate in arts degree. In a study of the 1996-97 Florida community college graduates, it was found that 36.8% graduated within 0-2 years; 31.6% within 3-4 years; and the remaining 31.6% took 5 to 10 years or more to complete their degree program (State Board of Community College, 1999; Windham, 1999).

It is interesting to note, that Lowman's study found it took community college students 4.32 semesters longer compared to native university students to complete a baccalaureate degree from the time at which they began their postsecondary education. Harding's study (1999), on the other hand, looked only at the length of time it took students to complete the upper division of a baccalaureate degree. Harding found that it took community college students only one-half a semester more to complete the upper division compared to the native university students. These two studies, along with the State Board of Community College findings, suggest the difference between community college and native university student time-to-degree is the time to takes to complete the lower division coursework.

Summary of Time-to-Degree Research

The data on time-to-degree varies across studies and reporting bodies, but they all report that students are taking longer to graduate. The data ranges from a low of 15.5% for a four-year graduation rate and 40.7% for a six-year rate as reported by the National Institute of Independent Colleges and Universities to a high of 49% for a four-year graduation rate and 82% for a six-year graduation rate reported by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (1996) reported a 31.1% four-year graduation rate and a 69.9% six-year graduation rate. States vary as well, ranging from 15% to 33.4% for a four-year rate and from 42% to 56.5% for a six-year rate in a seven state study (Blanco, 1994).

Regardless of the method of calculating graduation rates or the varying ranges, research studies have consistently found that women complete sooner than men, Whites

sooner than Blacks or Hispanics, and private school students sooner than public school students. The studies also show that the gap tends to close the longer the graduation rate is tracked. In addition, in recent years, the studies have begun to look at institutional and student factors, such as type of program, region, and the socioeconomic status of students; all of which appear to impact the length of time it takes to graduate. The following section discusses the factors influencing time-to-degree.

Factors Influencing Time-to-Degree

The U.S. Department of Education **(**Hill & Owings, 1986**),** in a longitudinal study of high school students who graduated in 1972, looked at the length of time to graduate, the characteristics of the graduates, geographical region, fields of study and social economic status (SES). The study found that of the 1972 high school graduates, "49% graduated [with a baccalaureate degree] within four years, 27% within five years, 6% within six years, 5% within seven years, and another 10% took up to 12 years" (Hill & Owings, 1986). The average time to earn a baccalaureate degree was 4.5 years. Women finished sooner than men (52.7 months vs. 55.6 months) and White students finished sooner than Black students or other minorities (54 months, vs. 55.8 months vs. 56.9 months). Regional location and SES also influenced graduation rates; fifty-two percent of the students from high SES families completed in four years, 41% from middle SES, and 25% from low SES. Regional differences were noted with 60% of the students from the Northeast region of the United States completing within four years and 47% from the North Central and Southern regions and 34% from the West.

In addition, the type of major or program influenced completion rates. The highest percentage of four-year completers (58%) was students who majored in science, mathematics, or social science fields. Students in education (52%); humanities (48%) business or marketing (45%), and engineering (42%) were next (Hill & Owings, 1986). The study did not discuss the program lengths (i.e., how many semester credit hours were required to be completed before awarding the degree) of each of the programs studied. Different program lengths might account, in part, for the variation in the percentage of students completing their programs within four years.

Student and Institutional Factors

Several investigations (Blanco, 1994; Clarkson & Roscoe, 1994; Sugarman & Kelly, 1997) explored the impact of student and institutional factors (beyond gender, ethnicity, and type of institution) on time-to-degree. The studies looked at institutional factors such as program requirements; transfer problems; poor advising; and, student factors, such as the average number of credit hours taken per semester, number of major changes, high school and college grade point average (GPA), and readiness for college level work. Other factors included such influences as working full-time or part-time and the availability of financial aid.

Clarkson & Roscoe (1994) designed a study to better understand the factors that contribute to students taking four years to graduate as compared to the factors influencing students who take longer. They found the type of program made a difference in time-to-degree. For example, 57% of the business majors completed a degree within 4 years compared to 25% of the education majors. Higher grade point averages, both in high school and college, were also characteristic of students who completed in 4 years. Students with higher high school grade point averages (3.27 vs. 3.07) graduated faster, as well as students with higher grade point averages in the first semester of college (3.05 vs. 2.55) and at graduation (3.12 vs. 2.86).

Through a survey of college alumni selected randomly from all alumni at a comprehensive public university, Clarkson & Roscoe (1994) found other factors that influenced students to graduate within four years. Of the alumni who graduated in four years: 84.3% said planning one's course load very carefully was a condition that influenced time-to-degree; 59.9% indicated attending summer school as a condition; 34.6% said receiving academic advising early was an influence; and, 17.1% said earning credit through College Level Examination Program (CLEP), correspondence courses or other means was an influencing condition. Respondents who graduated in more than four years noted a variety of factors that extended their time-to-degree, including: changing one's major field of study; carrying a lower course load; and, inability to enroll in a required course (Clarkson & Roscoe, 1994).

Clarkson & Roscoe (1994) had two surprising findings that did not influence time-to-degree: employment and career advising. They found there was no significant

difference between those who worked and those who did not, nor did the number of hours worked influence the time-to-degree. Similarly, there were no differences between those who used career-advising services and those who did not. Both of these findings appear to go against an intuitive sense that working full- or part-time would influence the time-to-degree as well as receiving career advice.

Volkwein and Lorang (1996) conducted one of the few theory-based studies, using a combination of several models, developed by Cabrera (1993), in a study of students who persist beyond four years. Cabrera and his associates developed

> an integrated model of student retention, while relying heavily on Tinto's concepts of academic and social integration, institutional and goal commitment, also incorporates concepts from Bean's student attrition model and from Hanson's ability to pay model and from Nora's models that address the role of friends and parents (Volkwein & Lorang, 1996, p. 46).

Volkwein and Lorang (1996) coined the term "extenders" for students who took longer than four years to complete a baccalaureate degree. They conducted a study of undergraduate students at a research university with over 10,000 undergraduate students and 5,000 graduate students. Volkwein and Lorang compared the variables in theoretical models of retention and attrition to see if the variables would account for the longer time to graduation. Of the 30 measures that Volkwein & Lorang (1996) analyzed, only three were significantly associated with students who take longer to graduate: financial need great enough to qualify for grants, possessing a high GPA, and completing fewer than 15 credits in multiple semesters. The researchers found that students who become "extenders" did so primarily because they took fewer than 15 credits per semester. They also found two dominant reasons for completing fewer than 15 credits in a semester: "(1) they want more time to enjoy college life and protect a high GPA; and, (2) they need more time for work and family responsibilities" (p. 63). Volkwein and Lorang (1996) concluded that students who take longer than four years to graduate are not significantly different from students who graduate in four years based on Cabrera's conceptual model.

Number of Earned and Attempted Credit Hours Accumulated at Graduation

Sugarman and Kelly (1997) looked at time-to-degree, by semesters to graduate, and the number of earned and attempted credit hours accumulated by graduates of

Kentucky's state-supported universities. They found the average number of credit hours earned by students in their study was 141.75 credit hours. Fifty-eight percent of the graduating students earned between 120 and 140 credits, 29.5% earned 141-160, and 11.9% earned more than 161 credits. However, the number of attempted hours was even higher. On average, graduates attempted 156.61 credit hours, with 30.6% attempting 120-140; 33.7% attempting 141-160; and over 35.8% accumulating more than 161 attempted hours. Sugarman and Kelly found that across all baccalaureate programs, students attempted an average of 28 credit hours beyond the degree requirements. Sugarman and Kelly (1997) also found that while time-to-degree varied for full-time versus part-time students and traditional versus nontraditional students, there was little difference in the two groups between the average number of credit hours earned or attempted. As shown in Table 6, full-time students took on average 4.65 years and 10.82 semesters to complete a degree compared to 6.81 years and 14.92 semesters for part-time

Table 6

Time and Credit to Degree Information for Selected Student Groups

Student Groups	Average No. of Sem. Hrs.	Average Time-to-degree in Yrs.	Average Earned Credit Hrs.	Average Att. Credit Hrs.
Full-time	10.82	4.65	141.82	155.52
Part-time	14.92	6.81	141.01	157.58

Source: Sugarman, R. & Kelly, P. 1997.

students. On the other hand, full-time students earned on the average 141.82 credit hours and attempted 155.52 credit hours compared to 141.01 and 157.58 respectively for part-time students. Changing majors, transferring from another institution, stopping out, and having a low ACT score were all factors associated with the accumulation of excess attempted hours. In addition, males, African Americans, and traditionally aged students were more likely to have accumulated excess attempted hours.

Seven variables: changing majors, transferring, stopping out, low ACT scores, male, African American, and being a traditionally aged student, accounted for 18.7% of the "variance in the number of credit hours students attempt beyond what they earned" (Sugarman & Kelly, 1997, p. 16). Sugarman and Kelly (1997) cited the need for further studies to look at "course availability, the role of academic advising, the quality and delivery of remedial education, availability of financial assistance and a variety of psychosocial factors" (p. 16). Accounting for only 18.7% of the variance in the number of credit hours students' attempt leaves considerable room for the identification of other factors.

A descriptive study by the Florida Board of Regents had similar findings. The study found that the 1997-98 graduates had an average of 23.73 excess hours (Goodman, 1999). The type of program and the number of major changes were factors in the amount of excess hours students accumulated. Students who did not change their majors had on average 22.34 excess hours; students with one major change had an average of 22.67 excess hours.

However, students with two or more major changes had excess hours above the mean. Students with two major changes had 26.86 excess hours; students with three major changes had 30.85 excess hours; students with four major changes had 33.06 excess hours; and, students with five or more major changes had an average of 46.24 excess hours. In addition, the discipline from which the degree was granted influenced the number of excess hours.

The study, conducted after 80% of the program lengths had been reduced under the mandate of Senate Bill 2330, ranked degree programs by the average number of excess hours students had earned, from the highest 44.49 for engineering technology to the lowest of 12.19 for library and archival sciences. Other disciplines whose students had above the average number of excess hours included: engineering (38.39); parks/recreation (36.07), computer and info sciences (34.83); health professions (28.84) and life sciences (28.18). On the other hand, "communication graduates [13.94], protective services [16.15], letters [18.34], psychology [18.40], social sciences [20.54], and business graduates [22.12] were all below the average" (Goodman, 1999, p. 13).

The 2004 OPPAGA report found that the factors that contribute to students accumulating excess hours were:

- Students who change their majors frequently take excess hours because some classes taken to pursue their first major do not count toward their eventual degree.
- Students sometimes want to take courses they do not need for graduation.
- Students may withdraw from or fail courses they enroll in, and may retake such classes (p.3).

Theoretical Frameworks for Persistence

Several theories have been advanced to explain college retention, persistence and attrition, but no theories have been brought forward to explain why students take longer than normal to graduate. The theory-guided study conducted by Volkwein & Lorang (1996) compared the completion rate of persisters with extended persisters found no significant difference between the two. However, the Volkwein and Lorang (1996) study focused on time-to-degree and was conducted on traditional four-year university students who were "expected to graduate in four years" (p. 65). In conclusion, they suggested additional studies should be undertaken to assess the differences with students who are non-traditional students. Others have also recommended further exploration of psychosocial factors and other institutional and student factors to assess the affect on the accumulation of excess credit hours (Sugarman & Kelly, 1997).

Astin's Theory of Involvement

Many of the theories on persistence have been based on earlier work done by Alexander Astin (Volkwein & Lorang, 1996). Astin's Theory of Involvement, in Achieving Education Excellence (1985), asserts that the greater the amount of time on task and effort spent on educational pursuits and involvement with other educational related activities (i.e., sororities, student government, etc.) the greater the persistence. What the students actually do or their behavior is key to Astin's theory because it is easier for practitioners to measure student behavior rather than motivation and intent. Some of the factors that Astin found that influenced student persistence included: residing on campus; belonging to social groups or participating in extracurricular activities; holding a part-time job on campus; and, faculty-student interaction. Astin's work provides a conceptual framework from which institutions can work to foster student

involvement. The downside to Astin's work is that it is mostly associated with traditionally aged students and does not take into account adult learners who do not have the same level of campus involvement as traditional students (Fleishman, 1991).

More recently, two theories have dominated the research on student persistence: (Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda, 1993). Tinto's Theory of Integration and Bean's Student Attrition Model Tinto (1987) assumed that persistence is a combination of involvement and integration. Persistence results from a combination of a student's commitment to the institution, the goal of attaining a degree, and his/her integration into the social and academic activities of the institution. The more students are integrated into the academic and social areas, the more likely they are to persist.

Tinto's Theory of Student Integration

Tinto's model is primarily centered on the "fit between the individual and the environment of the institution attended" (Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington, 1986).

> Given individual attributes and dispositions at entry, the model further argues that subsequent experiences within the institution, primarily those arising out of the interactions between the individual and other members of the college, are centrally related to further continuance in that institution (Tinto, 1987, p. 115).

Five different constructs or variable sets are evident in Tinto's model presented in Figure 1. The first consists of *pre-entry attributes* or background characteristics (i.e., family background, individual skills and abilities, high school GPA, SAT/ACT scores, and pre-college schooling). The second series of variables include the *goals and commitments* that students bring to the initial enrollment (i.e., their commitment to college graduation and to the institution at which they initially enroll). The third set of variables includes *academic and social integration* as measured by GPA and contact with faculty and/or administrators and participation in extracurricular activities and interaction with peer group. The fourth set of variables includes the students' *subsequent goal and institutional commitments* (i.e., satisfaction with the institution). Finally, the fifth set of variables is *persistence/withdrawal behavior* (Pascarella, Smart & Ethington, 1985; Tinto, 1987).

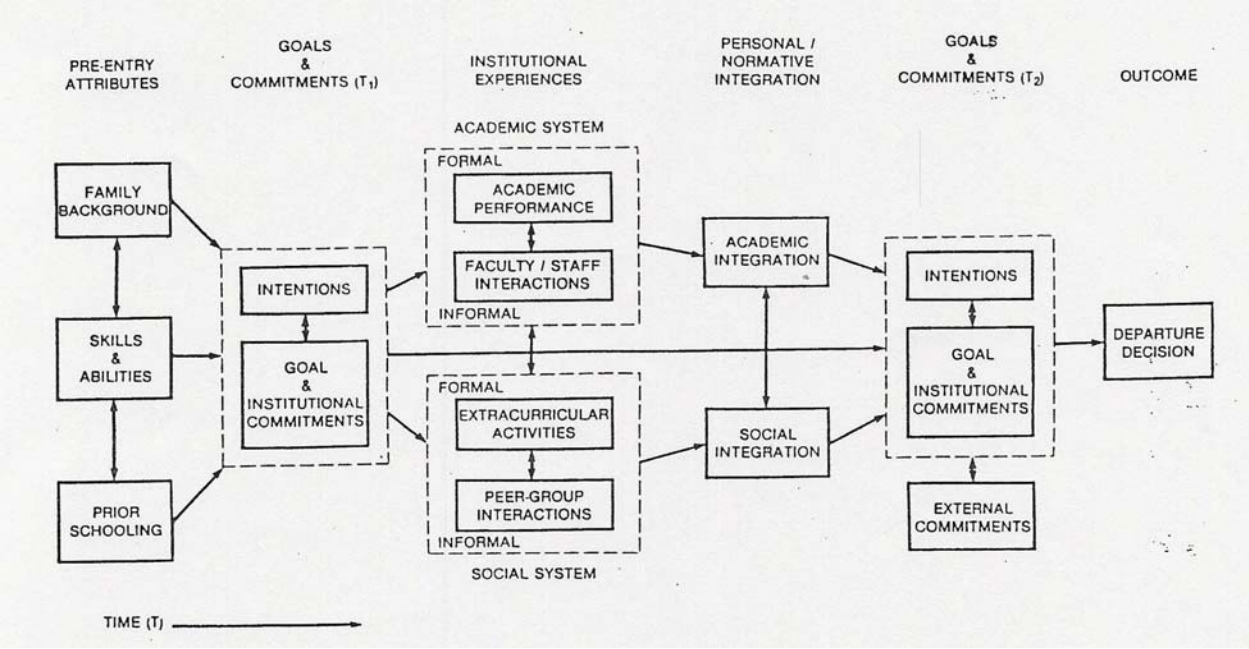


Figure 1. Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure

Note. From Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition (p. 114), by Vincent Tinto, 1987, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Tinto (1987) also includes the impact that external environments have on one's decision to persist, but contends that it is secondary to the impact of one's experience with the institution. Volkwein & Lorang (1996) in discussing Tinto noted that indeed he had "expanded on his theory of student departure to include the anthropological perspectives of Arnold Van Gennep" (1960). This perspective views student adjustment to college as moving through distinct passages or rites of passage from membership in one community to another" (p. 64). They [Volkwein & Lorang] go on to say that the findings in their study "may be consistent with this perspective. Extender behavior may be a needed coping mechanism that assists some students in successfully making the transition into and through college" (Volkwein & Lorang, 1996, p. 64).

Numerous studies have been conducted using Tinto's model. However, most of the research has been conducted at four-year universities (Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington, 1986; Volkwein & Lorang, 1996). Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington conducted a study of two-year college students using Tinto's student integration model. The study was

conducted over a nine-year period on 825 students who began their education at a two-year institution. Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington found three variables that directly accounted for persistence in men: social integration, academic integration, and satisfaction with the institution. For women, the three variables that had direct effect were: social integration, academic integration, and socioeconomic status. The 14-variable model accounted for 19.7% of the variance in persistence. The study found that Tinto's model was successful in accounting for the persistence/withdrawal of student who begin their education in two-year institutions.

Bean's Theory of Student Attrition

Bean's Student Attrition Theory (1982) builds on organizational models and models of attitude-behavior interactions. Bean's model assumes that behavioral intents are shaped by attitudes, which in turn are influenced by beliefs. Beliefs are affected by the experiences that the student has with the institution. Bean and Metzner (1985) developed a conceptual model, shown in Figure 2, specifically for the attrition process for non-traditional students. The model differed from a model based on traditional students in that it recognized that external environment played a larger role in the lives of non-traditional students than the social integration variables, which affected traditional students.

> Students with poor academic performance are expected to drop out at higher rates than students who perform well, and GPA is expected to be based primarily on past (high school) academic performance. The second major factor is intent to leave, which is expected to be influenced primarily by the psychological outcomes but also by the academic variables. The third group of variables expected to affect attrition are the background and defining variables – primarily high school performance and educational goals. These effects, however, may be mediated by other endogenous variables in the model. Finally, the environmental variables are expected to have substantial direct effects on dropout decisions (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 490).

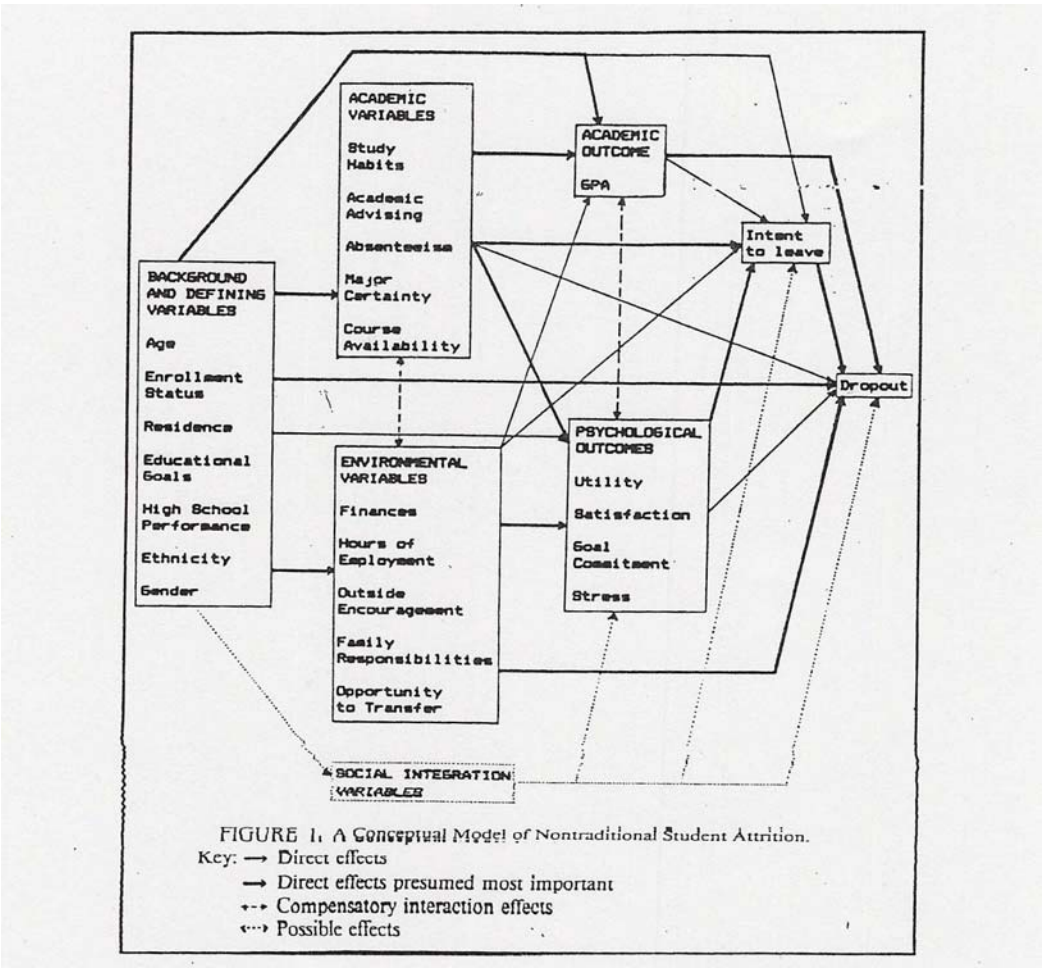


Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition

Note. From "A conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition," by J. P. Bean and B.S. Metzner, 1985, Review of Educational Research, 55 4, 485-540.

The variables that Bean and Metzner (1985) identified were considered to be those most associated with the attrition of non-traditional students. Bean and Metzner also go on to say that for non-traditional students environmental factors should outweigh the academic variables. In other words, when both factors are good, the student will persist, when both are poor, the student will drop out. When the environmental factors are good, but the academic factors are poor, the student will persist. Conversely, when the academic factors are good, but the environmental factors are poor, the student will drop out (p. 491).

Similarly, Bean and Metzner (1985) find a compensatory relationship between academic outcome and psychological variables. If both are high, the student will persist. However, if both are low, they would be expected to drop out. If the psychological factors are low and the academic factors are high, students may drop out. Conversely, they might continue if they have low academic outcomes, but perceive high psychological outcomes.

Cabrera, Nora and Castaneda (1993) found there was considerable overlap in Tinto's and Bean's theories. They conducted a study to merge the two models into one and found "when the two theories were merged into one integrated model, a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay among individual, environmental, and institutional factors was achieved" (Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda, 1993, p.135).

Theory-Guided Research

The theories provided a framework from which the researcher looked at various factors that influence persistence, i.e., the completion of a degree program. However, researchers applying the literature and the supporting theories have found no significant differences between persisters and extended persisters when applying the above theories to certain variables (Harding, 1999; Lowman, 1996; Volkwein & Lorang, 1996). In other words, there is no significant difference between students who graduate in four years compared to students who take longer to graduate or between students who graduate with 120 credit hours compared to students who graduate with excess hours. They are all persisters. Persisters and extended persisters have met the basic premise of the theories; they have completed their degree program.

Therefore, utilizing a theory or theories on persistence in an attempt to explore the behavior, perceptions, and experiences of extended persisters, would result, one would hypothesize, in no significant differences between persisters and extended persisters. Both groups have persisted to completion; so any of the theories on persistence noted above would find a high correlation on variables associated with the theories.

However, the theories do provide a basis from which an exploration of phenomenon of extended persisters can begin. Consequently, the researcher elected to explore the phenomenon of extended persisters using and orientational qualitative inquiry based on Bean's conceptual theory. This study suggests differences do exist between

students who complete a degree within a given number of credit hours and those that continue to accumulate excess hours. An orientational qualitative inquiry allowed the researcher to utilize the variables known to influence students to persist, while providing the ability to examine and discover areas of differences.

Further, this study looked at community college students who met Bean and Metzner's definition of non-traditional, which have not been included in theoretical studies of extended persisters. Bean and Metzner (1985) identified a non-traditional student as a student who is

> . . . older than 24, or does not live in a campus residence (e.g., is a commuter), or is a part-time student, or some combination of these three factors; is not greatly influenced by the social environment of the institution; and, is chiefly concerned with the institution's academic offerings (especially courses, certification, and degrees) (p. 489).

Summary

The literature has explored the issue of time-to-degree primarily from the length of time it takes most students to complete. Little has been done in looking at credit-hours-to-degree. There are a number of theoretical frameworks that focus on persistence versus attrition. However, no theory focuses on extended persisters, i.e., those who complete their degree program but accumulate excess hours beyond the program requirements. Some studies (Harding, 1999; Lowman, 1996; Volkwein & Lorang, 1996) have applied the persistence theories to students who have completed their degree (i.e., persisted) to see if there were differences between those who completed at different times or those who completed with different amounts of accumulated hours. The studies have found no significant differences. In other words, using the quantitative methods of these researchers, there are no differences between persisters regardless of the time they take to complete or the number of credit hours accumulated. However, most of these studies have focused on students attending four-year institutions and two have used Tinto's model exclusively.

Given the findings of the literature review, it was decided to base this study on an orientational qualitative inquiry using Bean's Theory on Attrition to guide the research. An orientational qualitative inquiry allowed the researcher to clarify and elucidate the

phenomenon of extended persisters based on existing theory. The study resulted in a greater understanding of the perceptions, experiences, and behaviors of students who have persisted to the completion of the degree and, in doing so, have accumulated an excess number of credit hours beyond the degree requirements. The following chapter outlines the methodology that was used to investigate the perceptions, behaviors, and experiences of extended persisters.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Through this study the researcher explored the phenomenon of extended persisters by assessing the perceptions, behaviors, and experiences of students who persisted in the Florida Community College System and accumulated credit hours beyond those required for graduation. A literature review found few studies had been conducted on extended persisters. Further, the few that were conducted using a theoretically-guided methodology found no significant difference between persisters and extended persisters.

In addition, the literature review did not find any qualitative studies based on current theory specifically related to extended persisters. Therefore, the underlying purpose of this study was to conduct a theoretically-guided qualitative study to expand current knowledge on the perceptions, behaviors, and experiences of students who extend their persistence beyond the requirements for graduation. In this chapter, the methodological steps used in conducting the research will be discussed, including: selecting a sample, determining the interview instrument, study resource groups, trustworthiness of research, and data analysis.

The question – What are the perceptions, behaviors and experiences of students who extend their persistence beyond the requirements for graduation? – was broad enough to allow for discovery yet narrow enough to provide focus. The focus of the study was limited to Florida community college associate in arts graduates who have accumulated excess credit hours beyond those required for the receipt of the associate in arts degree. The questions that were used to guide the study focused on actions and processes, including questions related to: background and defining factors, academic

factors, environmental factors, and psychosocial factors. Student perceptions and situational context were also explored.

The study was an "orientational qualitative inquiry" a term coined by Patton (1990), which describes a research methodology that has an orientation or is based on a known theory. In this case, the theory used was Bean's Student Attrition Theory. In-depth interviews of individual subjects were used to collect data. A cross-case analysis was conducted using the constant comparative methodology, beginning with the theoretical conceptual categories. It was anticipated new categories would be uncovered during the analysis.

The model of analysis was primary inductive, but allowed for deductive analysis as well. Inductive analysis and creative synthesis is described by Patton, (2002) as

> Immersion in the details and specifics of the data to discover important patterns, themes, and interrelationships; begins by exploring, then confirming; guided by analytical principles rather than rules; ends with a creative synthesis (p. 41).

In qualitative research, the researcher must be free to explore a phenomenon and to go where the data leads (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Strauss and Corbin (1990) found that sometimes a researcher is not able to "find evidence of process in the data" or there "is insufficient data to bring it out" (p. 148). When this happens the researcher can "hypothesize possible potential situations of change" and go back to the data to look for evidence. Patton (1990) also found that in practice, qualitative research may move back and forth between "inductive approaches to find out what the important questions and variables are (exploratory work), to deductive hypothesis testing aimed at confirming exploratory findings" (p.46).

Any phenomenon must be described within the context of its occurrence to have any meaning. Schwartz and Ogilvy as reported in Guba and Lincoln (1985) ascribe even greater importance to context, stating "objects and behaviors take not only their meaning but their very existence from their contexts" (p. 302). Merriam (1998) explained, "experiences are rooted in context, as is knowledge in case studies" (p. 31). Context in this case, was meant to be the context in which the subject exists and in which they derived their meaning.

Another source of information was the analysis of the data collected from a 1994-1995 transcript analysis conducted by the Florida Division of Community Colleges. The analysis provided information on the range of excess hours, the distribution of hours by categories (i.e. failure, withdrawals, etc.), and an analysis of the range of excess hours by institution.

The primary data of this study were the result of interviews with graduates who extended their persistence in Florida's Community College System and, in doing so, accumulated excess hours beyond the requirements for graduation. A series of interviews were conducted to explore students' perceptions, behaviors and experiences that might account for, explain, and bring understanding to their extended persistence.

The qualitative researchers' goal is to better understand human behavior and experiences; how the subjects of the study perceived their situation and constructed meaning and to unveil those meanings (Bodgan & Biklen, 1992; Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Mirriam, 1998; Patton, 1980). Several theorists believe that there are multiple realities (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Patton, 1980) constructed by the individual. In an attempt to understand the meaning of multiple realities the research explored the students' attitudes, behaviors, and experiences.

Perceptions are relative and mean different things to different people and can mean different things to the same person in different situations. Students' perceptions form the very foundation of how they see their world and therefore how they would move through and react to the educational experience. Bean's theory is based on an organizational structure that finds beliefs as the foundation, similar to perceptions, which lead to attitudes, which lead to behavior. The researcher in looking at the students' perceptions is seeking to discover their beliefs. Unveiling the students' experiences with the institution provided insight into factors, which might have influenced the students' perceptions and attitudes and, therefore, may have had an impact on the accumulation of excess credit hours. Noting students' behavior is intended to reflect how they behaved towards the educational experience given their perceptions (i.e. beliefs) attitudes and experiences. Behaviors explain how people react to their perceptions, experiences and environment. The purpose of this study was to unveil the meaning that extended

persisters, who accumulate excess hours, gave to their educational experience. Therefore, it was appropriate to approach it qualitatively.

Selecting a Sample

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with students who had persisted to graduation but in doing so, accumulated excess hours. In addition, the researcher talked to the Dean of Student Affairs at the selected colleges to assist in the identification of the sample, establish logistics, and triangulate the data. The selection of students was based on purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to select "information-rich cases for study in depth" (Patton, 1990, p. 169), which provided the researcher with the opportunity to learn about the central issues at the core of the study.

The initial sample was based on the 1996 Division of Community Colleges' transcript analysis. Students were chosen from each of the groups identified through the analysis, (see Chapter 1, Table 1) representing the widest range of excess credit hours. Glaser and Strauss (1967) found that a maximum variation of sampling was most useful in providing a variety of cases related to the phenomenon being studied. Patton (1990) also found that maximum sampling of a small sample with wide diversity had the potential of revealing "important shared patterns that cut across cases and derive their significance from having emerged out of heterogeneity" (p. 72). Since it was the intent of the study to uncover students' perceptions, behaviors, and experiences as it related to the accumulation of excess hours, it was determined that having a wide variation in the sample would allow for the uncovering of shared, as well as, divergent patterns among the different samples. Therefore, a maximum variation of sampling was selected based on each of the groups identified in the Florida community college transcript analysis.

In 1996, a transcript analysis was conducted of Florida community college associate in arts graduates who received their degree in 1994-95. The 1996 analysis found that the average number of excess hours to degree for a community college associate in arts degree graduate was 28.5. As represented in Table 1 on page 5, one standard deviation below the mean is 3.7 credit hours and one standard deviation above the mean is 53.4 excess credit hours. The number of excess hours earned by the students in the study ranged from 6 to 246 (Florida Department of Education, Division of Community Colleges, Spring 1996).

The Division of Community Colleges report classified students into three groups. Group A represented the students who had accumulated excess credit hours that ranged from the mean to the 1st standard deviation below the mean (i.e. 3.7 to 28.5). Group B consisted of students who had accumulated excess hours that ranged from the mean to the 1st standard deviation above the mean (28.5 to 53.4). Lastly, Group C consisted of students whose excess credit hours ranged from the 1st standard deviation above the mean to the extreme of the range (> 53.4). The Division of Community Colleges' transcript analysis provided the foundation from which the sample for this study was derived.

A further analysis by the researcher of the individual institutional transcript evaluations found a relationship between the range of excess hours accumulated by students to the size of the college as determined by headcount; the smaller the size of the college; the smaller the range of excess hours. Table 7 displays the results of the compilation of the individual institutional transcript evaluations in relation to the size of the institution. Most of the smaller colleges with headcounts below 5,000 had students with a range of 0 to100 excess hours (represented on Table 7 by the number 1). Most of the medium-sized colleges with headcounts from 5,001 to 10,000 had students with a range of 0 to127 excess hours (represented by the number 2). And, most of the larger institutions with headcounts of more than 10,000 had students with a range of 0 to more than 127 excess hours (represented by the number 3). This data suggested that the amount of excess credit might be influenced in some manner by characteristics dependent on the size of the institution. As a result, the researcher elected to use two variables in selecting the initial sample: the number of excess hours they had accumulated and the size of the institution from which the students had graduated.

The Florida Department of Education, Division of Community Colleges, does not classify institutions as small, medium or large based on headcount or on full-time equivalent (FTE) (Fahs, R., July 14, 2000, personal communication). Consequently, the researcher created a classification system based on what appeared to be a correlation between the size of institutions based on the Fall headcount as reported in the Division of Community Colleges FACT Book (2000) and the range of excess hours accumulated. Fall headcount data was used as opposed to an annual headcount, because a Fall headcount is more representative of the size of an institution. An unduplicated annual

Table 7

Analysis of Florida Community Colleges by Fall 2000 Headcount of Students and Range of Excess Hours

Community College	Headcount	Size of Institution[a]		Range of Excess Hours[b]
North Florida CC	1,432	small		1
Florida Keys CC	1,711	small		1
Chipola JC	1,940	small		No data
South Florida CC	2,076	small		1
Lake City CC	2,108	small		1
Lake-Sumter CC	2,625	small		1
St. Johns River CC	4,473	small		1
Pasco-Hernando CC	4,895	small	8	1
Gulf-Coast CC	5,569	medium		2
Polk CC	**5,751**	**medium**		**3**
Central Florida CC	5,854	medium		2
Okaloosa-Walton CC	6,730	medium		2
Manatee CC	7,078	medium		2
Seminole CC	**8,582**	**medium**		**1**
Edison CC	8,953	medium		2
Pensacola Junior College	**9,653**	**medium**	**8**	**3**
Daytona Beach CC	10,622	large		3
Tallahassee CC	**10,736**	**large**		**2**
Santa Fe CC	12,588	large		3
Indian River CC	12,589	large		3
Brevard CC	**13,110**	**large**		**2**
Palm Beach CC	**16,962**	**large**		**2**
Hillsborough CC	17,319	large		3
Florida CC at Jacksonville	19,645	large		3
St. Petersburg CC	19,964	large		3
Broward CC	24,710	large		3
Valencia CC	26,376	large		3
Miami-Dade CC	47,152	large	12	3

Source: Institutional headcount and size based on Fall Enrollment presented in Florida Community College System, FACT Book, Table 2, February, 2000.

a) Institutions with under 5,000 students = small; 5,001-10,000 = medium; above 10,000 = large.

b) Institutions with students with a range of excess hours from 0-100 = 1; 0-127 = 2; 0-above 127 = 3.

c) Miami-Dade CC is the largest college in the country and is not typical in terms of size. MDCC has six campuses which function as independent entities from the Central Office. The campus enrollments range from 2,083 to 21,730. Consequently, M-DCC did not influence the classification of institutions. Large was defined as institutions with enrollment ranging from 10,000 to 26,376, which would incorporate the breakdown of M-D campuses. (MDC, 2005).

Note: Bolding denotes institutions where the range of credit hours accumulated by their students was greater than or less than that recorded by institutions of the same size.

headcount does not clearly represent the universe of students attending class or being served by the institution at one time. For example, the annual headcount of Tallahassee Community College is 19,047. The Fall headcount is 10,736 or almost one-half the annual unduplicated count. A student enrolled at the institution during any point in the year will experience an institution serving 10,736 students, not one serving 19,047 students.

Based on the Fall headcounts, the researcher classified institutions with headcounts below 5,000 as small institutions. Those with headcounts from 5,001 to 10,000 represented medium sized institutions and those with 10,000 students and above represented large institutions. Miami-Dade Community College (M-DCC) is the largest community college in the nation and for classification purposes is in a classification all its own. M-DCC has five autonomous campuses, each with a President and separate administration and faculty, which enrollments range from 2,083 to 21,730. Consequently, for purposes of classifying institutions for this study, the researcher elected to consider the size of Miami-Dade Community College campuses, not the college as a whole.

An institution from each of the classifications was selected so a small, medium and large institution was represented. The researcher selected institutions based on the researcher's ability to travel and on the willingness of the institution to participate. Chipola Junior College with a Fall 2000 headcount enrollment of 1,920 was selected as the small institution. Gulf Coast Community College with a Fall 2000 headcount enrollment of 5,569 was selected as the medium institution, and Tallahassee Community College with a Fall 2000 headcount of 10,736 was selected as the large institution. All of the institutions were willing to participate in the study.

During the Fall 2000 and Spring 2001, the researcher contacted the Dean of Student Services at each of the institutions to assist with providing a list of graduates from which to pull the sample. The researcher requested a list of their most recent A.A. degree graduates, their addresses, telephone numbers and the number of credit hours earned. Chipola Junior College provided a list of A.A. degree graduates for Fall 1999 and Spring 2000. Gulf Coast provided a list of Fall 2000 and Spring 2001 graduates and Tallahassee Community College provided a list of A.A. degree students who had

graduated in December 2001. The lists contained the names of the students, their addresses and phone numbers and the number of total hours earned. Gulf Coast also provided the number of excess hours earned and TCC provide the type of degree (i.e. A.S. or A.A. earned, even though the researcher had asked for A.A degree graduates only. It was anticipated that the students, who had graduated most recently, would be the easiest to locate, the most receptive to be interviewed, and the most likely to recall their educational experiences.

Based on the Division of Community College Transcript analysis, the researcher elected to interview at least two students in each of the three groups identified in Table 1 at each of the three schools, for a total of 18 subjects. Using the list of graduates the researcher placed the students in either Group A, B, or C, based on the number of hours they had accumulated at graduation.

An analysis was done on each of the samples provided by the institutions. (See Appendix B for the analysis of the institutional samples). Chipola Community College has 212 students in the sample. The excess hours ranged from 0 to 63 with a mean of 9.6. Gulf Coast had 293 students in the sample with a range of 0 to 152 excess hours and a mean of 24.5. Tallahassee had 361 students in the sample with a range of excess hours from 0 to 69 and a mean of 10.8. The analysis of the institutional samples did not reflect the same range, mean or standard deviations as the findings from the initial credit hour analysis contained in the Division of Community College Transcript Analysis. However, for consistency the researcher elected to derive the sample of students to interview from each of the institutions in accordance with the groupings presented in the Statewide Transcript Analysis.

From the sample list, the researcher randomly selected students in each of the groups to contact and interview. If a number had been disconnected, the researcher selected another student. If the student was no longer living at the number provided the researcher attempt to get a forwarding number and contact the student. In some cases, the person answering the phone would not give out a forwarding number, but arranged to have the person call the researcher back. If the researcher reached a dead-end another subject was selected.

The researcher secured a room at each of the institutions on a particular day that could be used for the interviews. Consequently, students were asked to come to the institution on a particular day at a time that was convenient to them. If the subject was willing to be interviewed, but was not available on that day or it was inconvenient to come to the institution, the researcher met the subject at a location and time convenient for the subject. That resulted in several meetings at restaurants, two at Barnes and Noble, and two at the respondents' place of employment. The remaining interviews were done at the institution.

The sample consisted of a total of 18 students. Group A, B and C, each had a total of six students. However, the researcher interviewed six students at Tallahassee Community College, but only five students at Gulf Coast Community College and seven at Chipola. All attempts to secure an interview with two respondents from Group A at Gulf Coast were unsuccessful. Gulf Coast, being the most distant college from Tallahassee, the home of the researcher, was the last College at which the researcher tried to arrange interviews. Several attempts were made to locate students in Group A, but many of those had disconnected phone lines, or were no longer in the area or were too busy to be interviewed. The same problem did not occur with respondents in Group B or C. After many unsuccessful attempts to locate an additional student in Group A from Gulf Coast Community College, the research elected to proceed with the interview and use an additional interview that had been secured from a student at Chipola.

The range of the sample provided different views of the phenomenon of excess credit, thereby yielding "shared patterns" among different cases (Merriam, 1998). Using this rubric, the initial sample selected provided a variation in the number of excess hours students accumulated and also provided an opportunity to identify the differences that occurred due to the size of the institution.

After interviewing 18 respondents it was found that redundancy was occurring. Lincoln and Guba (1985) in discussing purposeful sampling recommended the selection of a sample be done "to the point of redundancy….In purposeful sampling the size of the sample is determined by informational considerations. If the purpose is to maximize information, the sampling is terminated when no new information is forth-coming from

new sampled units; thus redundancy is the primary criterion" (p. 202). Patton (2002) found that

> In the end, sample size adequacy, like all aspects of research, is subject to peer review, consensual validation, and judgment. What is crucial is that the sampling procedures and decisions be fully described, explained, and justified so that information users and peer reviewers have the appropriate context for judging the sample" (p. 246).

After 18 interviews the researcher determined that no new information was forthcoming and the data began to be redundant; no new categories or concepts were revealed and there were few gaps to be explored in the theory.

The researcher completed the Florida State University Human Subjects Application Form and agreed to abide by the provisions contained in the procedures. Approval was received from the Human Subjects Committee. Each interviewee was guaranteed confidentiality to the extent allowed by law and signed a consent form. (See Appendix D.)

Determining the Interview Instrument

Guided-theory studies develop through an emerging design guided by theory with the researcher serving as the research instrument. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews using categories of information derived from Bean's Theory on Student Attrition. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the researcher to vary the order of the questions, retain structure if needed, and provided for deviations to explore emerging themes. The semi-structured interview allows "the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam, 1998, p. 74).

The interviews were conducted face-to-face and were tape-recorded, with the consent of the interviewee. The tapes were transcribed as soon after the interview as possible. The interviewee was assured anonymity and precautions were taken to ensure the security and confidentiality of the data by storing the tapes and transcripts in a secured private location.

An interview guide (See Appendix C) was derived from the concepts delineated in Bean's Theory of Student Attrition and from literature relating to excess credit hours

and time-to-degree. Bean's Theory of Student Attrition is designed to address persistence or attrition for nontraditional students, which constitute the make-up of this study's sample (Bean and Metzer, 1985). Bean's theory is based on organizational process models. The Model contends that "behavioral intentions are shaped by a process whereby beliefs shape attitudes and, attitudes in turn, shape behavioral intent" (Cabrera, et al, 1992, p. 142). The theory has several premises, including: regarding persistence as the result of a complex set of interactions overtime; that a student's defining characteristics will affect how well they adjust; that persistence is the fit between a student and the institution and that external factors play a role in affecting beliefs and attitudes and subsequently behaviors (Cabrera, et al, 1992).

The categories in the interview guide were extrapolated from Bean's Theory on Student Attrition. Bean (1987) found that persistence decisions were made based on four sets of variables.

> Students with poor academic performance are predicted to drop out at higher rates than students who perform well academically, and GPA is expected to be based largely on past (high school) academic performance. The second major factor is intent to leave, which should be influenced primarily by the psychological outcomes but also by the academic variables. The third group of variables expected to affect attrition are the background and defining variables – mainly high school performance and educational goals. Finally, the environmental variables are predicted to have substantial direct effects on dropout decisions (p. 18).

Unlike Tinto, Bean did not anticipate that social and institutional integration would play a role in the retention of non-traditional students (Bean, 1987, p.18). Consequently, he did not include social integration variables in his model. However, for purposes of this study, the researcher did ask a limited number of questions related to social integration.

Proposed open-ended questions were developed to elicit responses that provided information related to each of the conceptual categories or factors identified above. The interview guide delineated the information that would need to be attained to find answers to the following general questions:

1. What are the background and defining factors that have influenced the students' perceptions, behaviors, and experience thereby impacting the accumulation of excess hours?
2. How have various academic factors influenced the students' accumulation of excess hours?
3. How do the students perceive their education and their social integration with faculty, administrators, and other students?
4. How do the students perceive various environmental factors in the context of their education?
5. What experiences did the students have with the institution, the faculty, administrators, other students, and other like-minded people?
6. How are the students' perceptions and experiences exhibited in their behaviors and why did they behave the way they did?
7. How have the psychosocial factors influenced the students' accumulation of excess hours?

The variables and factors that comprised the interview guide (See Appendix C) were derived from the interview concepts above.

Study Resource Guides

The researcher used the expertise of the Deans of Student Services at Chipola, Gulf Coast and Tallahassee Community Colleges in conducting the study. The Deans, individually, served as study resource guides. They did not meet as a group. The purpose of the guides was to: (a) act as a college facilitator, helping to coordinate the logistics for identifying the interviewees and arranging the interviews on their campus; (b) assist in the development of the study by providing their insights and perspectives on why students become extended persisters; (c) serve as a point for triangulation; and, (d) serve as a peer debriefing group. Meetings with study resources guides began shortly after the approval of the prospectus in order to identify the sample and to establish a schedule of visits to conduct the interviews. After the data had been collected and analyzed, the researcher met with the Deans to review the findings for their institutions and to talk about the perceptions, experiences and behaviors of the respondents at their

institutions and the emerging themes the researcher had uncovered. Each of the resource guides triangulated the findings, indicating that what the researcher had found was in keeping with their experience with students who had accumulated excess hours at their institutions. None of the resource guides expressed disbelief at the findings and some found insight in what was uncovered.

Trustworthiness of Research

Validity is the process of reducing uncertainty and reliability is the expectation of consistent results or the extent to which the results can be replicated. Both are accounted for in qualitative research by looking at trustworthiness (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Corbin & Strauss; Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). Validity can be enhanced utilizing some basic strategies discussed by Guba and Lincoln (1985) and Merriam (1998). These strategies were utilized to enhance the trustworthiness of the proposed study. They include the following:

1. *Triangulation* is the process of using multiple sources of data to confirm findings. Triangulation was accomplished by utilizing the academic resources group to provide another angle or approach to looking at the phenomenon of extended persisters. In addition, the interview technique repeated the same questions to look for consistency and probed when responses were inconsistent.
2. *Member checks* include asking the subjects if the findings or results appear accurate or plausible. Verification from the respondents is the most valid method for assuring the accuracy of the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). The interviewer often restated what the respondent had said during the interview to ensure that the correct interpretation was being made. In addition, the interviewees were asked if future contact with them could be maintained after the initial interview, so the researcher could recheck the data for accuracy. However, transcription of the interview tapes provided very accurate data collection. Consequently, no rechecking was necessary.
3. *Peer examinations* or peer debriefing is the inclusion of colleagues in commenting on the results of the findings as they emerge. The researcher

used the resource group for this purpose. The findings were shared with the student services vice presidents at each of the institutions for the purpose of providing triangulation. In addition, as elements of the study emerged other colleagues were consulted. Finally, the doctoral committee was used to ensure that a careful audit trail and a trustworthy process had been followed.

4. The researcher maintained a careful *audit trail* by documenting the processes taken in conducting the research and collecting and reporting on the data. To ensure an audit trail, the following steps were taken: (a) each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim; (b) member checks were recorded by written notes; and, (c) memos and notes on how categories and concepts were developed were kept. Utilizing these strategies helped ensure the study's trustworthiness.

Reliability or the ability to replicate the study does not apply to qualitative research in the traditional sense that it is used in quantitative research. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) described reliability in the following context:

> In qualitative studies, researchers are concerned with the accuracy and comprehensiveness of their data. Qualitative researchers tend to view reliability as a fit between what they record as data and what actually occurs in the setting or study, rather than the literal consistency across different observations. (p. 48)

The ability to generalize the findings of this study to others is limited. Trustworthiness, in terms of reliability, is therefore limited to this study.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using a cross-case analysis. Cross-case analysis is the process of grouping "together answers from different people to common questions or analyzing different perspectives on central issues" (Patton, 1990, p. 376). The interviews and other recorded data were analyzed using a constant comparative method. Constant comparison of the data is used in grounded theory providing the researcher with a process for uncovering theory from data. However, Merriam (1998) stated:

> Because the basic strategy of the constant comparative method is compatible with the inductive, concept-building orientation of all qualitative research, the constant

> comparative method of data analysis has been adopted by many researchers who are not seeking to build substantive theory. (p.159)

The constant comparative method assesses data, placing it in categories and requires the researcher to constantly be "redesigning and reintegrating his theoretical notions as he reviews his material" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 101). Using this method the researcher was jointly coding and analyzing the data. Through this process the researcher began to see consistencies and integration in the data within the category and among categories. Glaser and Strauss (1967) identified four stages in the constant comparative method: "(1) comparing incidents applicable to each category; (2) integrating categories and their properties; (3) delimiting the theory; and, (4) writing the theory" (p. 105).

In stage one, the researcher coded incidents into the categories, using the interview guide. While coding, the researcher compared the incident with previous incidents coded in the same category, hence, the constant comparative method. In conducting the constant comparative analysis, the researcher recorded "memos" of ideas that formed the basis for any cross-case analysis of categories, reduced the number of categories, or created new categories.

In stage two, *integrating categories and their properties*, the researcher's efforts at constant comparative analysis shifted from comparing incidents to comparing incidents with properties within the categories. The analyses eventually lead to an integration of the properties of one category with another category.

Delimiting the theory or stage three consists of limiting the inclusion of incidents because they don't expand on the current theory. It also consists of "clarifying the logic, taking out non-relevant properties, integrating elaborating details of properties into the major outline of interrelated categories and – most important—reduction" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 110). Reduction is the discovery of underlying properties or uniformities in a set of categories, which "means that the researcher can "formulate the theory with a smaller set of higher level concepts" (p. 110) or in this case, formulate new categories or concepts.

The fourth and final stage consists of *writing theory*. However, this study was not intended to develop a theory, but rather to be a theory-guided study; the method of constant comparison allowed the researcher to theorize or "think about the data"

(Merriam, 1998, p. 188). LeCompte, Preissle, and Tesch (1993) defined theorizing as "the cognitive process of discovering or manipulating abstract categories and the relationships among those categories" (p. 129). Through the constant comparative method, the researcher was be able to classify the data according to existing theoretical concepts in accordance with the interview guide and to discover new concepts or categories.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of extended persisters through an orientational qualitative inquiry analyzing the perceptions, behaviors, and experiences of Florida community college associate in arts degree graduates who have accumulated excess hours. The orientational qualitative inquiry used Bean's Theory of Student Attrition to theoretically guide the study. Focused interviews were conducted on a purposeful sampling of students with varying degrees of excess hours. The data was then analyzed using a cross-case analysis and a constant comparative methodology.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions, behaviors, and experiences of students who persist in the Florida Community College system and accumulate credit hours beyond those required for graduation. Chapter Four is a cross-case comparison of the interviews conducted of respondents from different size community colleges that had accumulated varying number of credit hours. The respondents were selected based on a purposeful sampling that used the maximum variation methodology. Consequently, it was anticipated that the findings would provide an in-depth look at the factors related to the accumulation of excess hours. Additionally, it is anticipated that the findings would support Bean's Theory of Student Attrition, because all of the respondents had persisted through graduation.

The interviews were analyzed using the constant comparative methodology. The transcribed interviews were analyzed and each relevant piece of data was placed into one of the interview guide categories, which were derived from Bean's Theory on Student Attrition. Initially, there were 45 sub-unit categories within the five broader interview guide categories. As the analysis progressed some of the categories were eliminated because they did not provide any viable data, others were subsumed within remaining categories, until the final 15 categories were derived. What follows is the synthesis of the 15 categories.

The first section of Chapter Four describes the findings by the three different sizes of community colleges. A small, medium and large community college, as determined by headcount in Fall 2000 (See Chapter 3, Table 6), were selected to assess if the size of the institution may have accounted for, or attributed to, the perceptions, behaviors, and

experiences of the students influencing the accumulation of excess hours. Chipola Junior College was selected to represent a small institution; its headcount enrollment was 1,940. Gulf Coast Community College, with a headcount enrollment of 5,569, was selected as the medium-sized institution and Tallahassee Community College, with a headcount enrollment of 10,736, was selected as the large institution.

The second section of this chapter describes the findings by interview group based on the number of excess hours accumulated as discussed in Chapter 3. Group A represents students with excess hours ranging from 3.7 to 28.5 (total degree hours of 63 – 88.5); Group B represents students with excess hours ranging from 28.6 – 53.4 (total degree hours of 88.6 – 113.4); and, Group C represents students with excess hours of 53.5 and above (total degree hours of 113.5 and above). A synthesis of the findings by community college and by the number of excess credits earned is presented at the end of each section.

All but two of the 18 respondents are those Bean and Metzler (1985) define as non-traditional students. A non-traditional student is one that is

> . . . older than 24, or does not live in a campus residence (e.g., is a commuter), or is a part-time student, or some combination of these three factors; is not greatly influenced by the social environment of the institution; and, is chiefly concerned with the institution's academic offerings (especially courses, certification, and degrees) (p. 489).

None of the respondents lived on campus. However, this is typical of community colleges in general. Most derive their student body from the surrounding community; consequently, the majority of students are commuters, living at home, and coming to campus only to attend class. Two of the respondents were under 24 years of age and went to school full-time, while working part-time, placing them more in the category of traditional students. Both of these students were in Group A. However, as with the other respondents, they were not "greatly influenced by the social environment of the institution and were chiefly concerned with the institution's academic offerings (Bean & Metzler, 1985, p. 489)."

Findings by Community College

Chipola Junior College

Institutional Description

Chipola Junior College is located in Marianna, Florida, 70 miles north of Tallahassee, the capital of Florida. Marianna has a population of 10,000 residents and the only postsecondary educational institution is the community college. The primary economic base is agriculture and forestry (Chipola College, May 2004).

Chipola Junior College serves five counties: Jackson, Washington, Holmes, Calhoun and Liberty. It offers postsecondary programs leading to an Associate in Arts, Associate in Science, Associate in Applied Science and College Credit Certificates. In January 2004, Chipola Junior College became eligible through legislation to offer four-year baccalaureate programs in secondary education in mathematics and biology. They have since changed their name to Chipola College (Chipola College, May 2004).

In Fall 2000, Chipola had a student enrollment of 1,940 (Division of Community Colleges, FACT Book, February 2000). The enrollment size placed it in the category of small institutions, defined as institutions with a student enrollment under 5,000. There were seven respondents from Chipola Junior College that were interviewed for this study. The amount of credit hours earned by the respondents ranged from 65 to 123, with an average of 97. The only two non-traditional students in the entire sample that did not meet Bean and Metzlers (1985) definition of non-traditional students were Chipola students. That may be attributed to the fact that there is no university within the immediate vicinity as an alternative for students, compared to the other two community colleges that have universities in their backyard.

Background and Defining Variables

Age, race, gender, and marital status. The age of the respondents ranged from 20 to 43, with the average age being 30. There were five male respondents and two female respondents. Two out of the seven respondents were married (both male) and one had children. Two were Black and the remaining respondents were White.

High school performance. Five of the seven respondents self-reported they had a 3.0 Grade Point Average (GPA) or better in high school with three of them graduating with a 3.8, 3.98, and a 3.9. One was named salutatorian from her school and four

received academic scholarships, two of which were Bright Futures scholarships, a scholarship given by the State of Florida to students who achieve certain academic levels. One respondent graduated with a 1.79 GPA; he claimed to have "messed around a lot." The final respondent received a GED two years after he dropped out of high school. Several were in the Honor Society and participated in high school athletic activities.

Family background. The backgrounds of the respondents varied. Two of the respondents were first generation college graduates. Two of these respondents came from very rural families who made their living farming; their parents were dropouts or high school graduates that didn't go on to postsecondary education. Their attitude towards education was reflected in the need to work. One commented,

> It wasn't that they [parents] disliked it [education], but they grew up in a rural county, when it was hard times and they were needed on the farm. Both of my parents' families farmed large plots of land. They were needed to be farm hands. So, they opted out of the opportunity to be educated because it was daylight to dark, literally.

The second respondent said, "He was from the old school and I guess I am, too. You know, where you worked and supported your family. I think work came before education. Unfortunately, back then, you got out of high school and went to work."

One first generation college graduate came from a family with marginal postsecondary education; the father had earned a certificate and then had gone to work when the children were born. However, the family's attitude towards education was more supportive. "They wanted you to have it. We weren't like normal kids. We didn't get a dollar every time we got an A. Either you got A's & B's or you didn't get anything. [It was] negative re-enforcement."

The remaining respondents came from fairly well educated families with varying levels of postsecondary education. Their attitude towards education was that it was essential. One commented, "My mom says if you want to get anywhere you need to go to school. She was always sitting there, pushing us. If we take a semester off, she was like, 'You're going to get back into that right?'" Another respondent said, "It was assumed that we would all go [to college]." Similarly, "Education was a must in our family." The respondent continued, "They always stressed that as far as like any

extracurricular activities that we wanted to do depended on how our grades were. Homework had to be done first. They were a little more than supportive!"

Educational goals. The respondents had varying levels of educational goals. Some indicated they didn't have any goals and weren't focused coming out of high school. Others only knew they wanted to get an education to be able to provide for their families but not what they wanted to major in until later. One respondent said, "Well, I always wanted a nice job and to be able to provide for my family. In this day and time, it is hard to get a decent paying job without a college degree." He continued, "There are opportunities around here, but if I wanted to move to a larger city and get some of the better paying jobs, I knew I was going to have to have a college education."

Environmental Variables

Finances. Two of the respondents had high enough high school GPA's that they qualified for and received a Bright Futures scholarship, which helped defray most of their educational expenses. One of the respondents thought her parents could have paid for her education without the scholarship. The other respondent claimed they never worried about how to pay for college, "My parents never paid for any of the kids to go to school. They left it up to them to pay for it. Like my sisters and me, we all got scholarships so we never worried about it."

One respondent paid for his entire education because his high school grades were too low to qualify for a scholarship and his income too high to qualify for a grant. Another received the GI Bill and two others received grants. Another had most of his tuition paid for by two employers, in exchange for a commitment to work off the cost of tuition over a certain length of time. He remained working at both of these jobs through the A.A. and the B.S.N. programs.

Employment. Several of the respondents (6 out of 7) worked full-time, whether it was one job or two part-time jobs, and went to school. Four of these respondents also went to school full-time, some working 60-70 hours a week and taking 14 hours a semester. One respondent commented,

> I'm working full-time, midnights, and coming to school full-time during the day. Back in 1997, I decided that I wanted to get my degree because I've helped support my parents and my younger brothers and sisters, and all three of them

were given a chance to go to junior college. I was working two jobs, and I figured, if I can work two jobs, I can go to school full-time and work a job. So, I started off at Chipola Junior College.

Some respondents found it difficult to manage working and attending school full-time. "[I was going] both full time school and full time working and it was rough. There were times when I had to back off on the load. I was supervising a shift of 15 people at times and to try to work and stay on top of the job and schoolwork was difficult. I had to bring it down to part-time before I finished."

The remaining respondent worked part-time and went to school full-time. This respondent had the fewest number of hours earned towards the degree.

Outside and family encouragement. The respondents in the Chipola group received encouragement and support from their families and in a couple of cases, from their employers. The interviewer found that overall the respondents families had instilled in them the importance of education at an early age that stayed with them during their college enrollment. One respondent said,

> I would have to really give it [credit] to my parents, cause I knew I could do it, but sometimes I had to be pushed and like my mom was always there pushing me saying 'you know you can do it'. So, I would give it [credit] to my parents. [They are] the reason why I made it through school. They showed me that if you want nice things in life you have to work for them and you have to have a college education and I understand that some people can do it without it, but it's a lot harder.

Similarly, another respondent said,

> They [my parents] were very supportive. And, it aggravated them that I played around so much, but they were very supportive. Because at any given time, they could have told me to hit the road, I've had my chance. But if it wasn't for them, I probably wouldn't have gotten here.

A couple of respondents indicated that their places of work were also very supportive. One had two employers that paid the tuition for him to attend college in exchange for his commitment to work for the company after graduation. Others had employers that made some shift concessions and one was employed by an institution that

supported education for all the staff. He said, "They allowed me to stay on certain shifts so I could continue gong to school during the day." Another respondent commenting about his employer's support said, "Yes, they really worked with me as far as my schedule. . . . Sometimes when I had to take off or when I had a big test coming up, they would rearrange the schedule to give me time."

One respondent credited the Army with creating such a negative experience, that it woke him up and prompted him to return to college. This example was not encouragement in the traditional sense, but as the respondent's father explained to him, "My daddy told me when I was young that from every job you can always take away one thing and that is what you don't want to do."

Family responsibilities. The Chipola respondents were an unusual group in that only two of the respondents were married; one of whom was married with children. (In general, the student body of a community college consists of more non-traditional aged students, which increases the likelihood of marriage and children.) Therefore, family responsibilities for the whole of the group were nominal and didn't significantly impact their educational experience. However, respondents often referred to work responsibilities (i.e., providing for one's family) as synonymous with family responsibilities. One of the single respondents experienced considerable family responsibilities when his dad got hurt and couldn't support the family. "My dad got hurt in 1988 and was out of work. So, I took on a full-time job and paid the majority of all the bills. . . . I helped put them [his five siblings] the rest of the way through school."

Academic Variables

Enrollment status. Only one respondent went to school part-time. All of the other respondents went to school full-time and, as stated under the Employment section, four of the respondents who attended full-time, also worked full-time. Once the respondents in this group began to study for their A.A. degrees at Chipola, whether they were full- or part-time, they stayed with it continuously until it was completed. Three of the respondents started in 1997 and completed their A.A. degrees in 1999. One started and then stopped out for a career in the military but when he reenrolled, he completed two degrees within two years. He said,

> I started and went for a semester at Chipola and I was like, 'This isn't for me, I need to do something different'. So I went to the military. I went to the U.S. Army from 92-96. After I got out of there . . . I came back and started going to school in '98. In 2000, I graduated with two degrees from Chipola.

A couple of the students were dual enrolled students, i.e. they took college credit courses in high school that counted for credit toward both the high school diploma and the college degree. One of these respondents said,

> I actually started with them [Chipola Junior College] when I as in 10th grade. I was dual enrolled. I took two classes in 10th grade. Biology and then three a semester for the rest of the time I was there. Eleven hours a semester for the rest of my time there. I had approximately 44 hours by the time I graduated from high school. And, then when I went on to Chipola, I did it part-time because I worked full-time and I went for two years.

Academic and career advising. Four of the respondents with hours ranging from 65 to 88, indicated that they received advising and followed a curriculum guide prepared for them by the college. In most cases, it appears that the curriculum guide is what kept them on target to complete the A.A. degree in two years. One respondent followed it directly, "I did not veer from it. I like things being set. I don't want someone saying, 'Well, maybe you should take this and maybe you should take that.'" Another respondent said,

> They gave me the curriculum guides that I needed from FSU. Well, actually, the requirements for FSU/TCC and FAMU. And, I basically planned my schedule around those that I needed to take for my goals. They [Chipola] did that. They sat down with me and said, 'OK you can take this amount of hours and this would give you say 15 hours and you could graduate in this time'.

The remaining three respondents had advising, but also did a lot of self-advising, which may have contributed to their excess hours. One respondent with 107 hours said,

> I had career guidance advising early when I started at Chipola, but I basically did it on my own. They put them [curriculum guides] in a big fold out thing and I kind of figured it out. Being a coach, I had to enroll these kids in school. I'll go through the curriculum guide and every semester they'll bring it back to me and

say ‘ok what else do I need to take?’ I’ve done that for three years, so I’ve gotten use to what I need or don’t need for what I want.

Major certainty. The Chipola respondents fell into two distinct groups: those that changed their major and those that did not. The group that changed their majors for various reasons did so mostly in an attempt to find the right program to match the circumstances of their lives at the time. They all acquired more than one degree. They would earn a degree to fit their life situations at the time and then go on to seek another as the situation changed or as they sought to change it. One respondent said,

> I changed my major like my socks. I went physical therapy. I went physician assistant. I went nursing. What else was there? There were several others in between. I just changed it every year, because [I wasn’t sure what to do]. I went all the way to about 50 to 55 college hours. I then took off a semester. Then during the spring semester of 1994, I went to EMT class and got my certification. [When that didn’t work out], I [went] into the military. [When I got out] I decided that I would go back to Chipola and pursue a pharmacy degree.

Another theme that was identified was the changing of one’s major to maintain a particular situation or prolong the educational experience. One respondent said,

> I’ve gotten an A.A. and an A.S. from Chipola. I’ve gotten my A.S. in recreation technology and my A.A. was towards sports therapy. I kept changing my major, because I wanted to keep getting my coaching experience at the same time as I am going to school. [That way] I don’t have to wait after I’m done with my schooling to get the experience and I can move up. I had to change my major. I changed it to criminal justice because I have to get a Master’s anyway. The program runs through Chipola on campus, so I can take classes here on campus and coach at the same time. So, I’ll go back and get that [Master’s degree] in Ed. Leadership and they offer that here on campus, too. Right [I can keep coaching and] keep getting experience. I want to coach at a college level and you just have to have a Master’s and something towards education.

The other respondents all had a focus and stayed with the major selected until they completed their course work. These respondents had the least amount of hours. A respondent said, “I wanted to go to law school. Actually, I wanted to do three different

majors, but there wasn't enough time. At Chipola, I majored in political science and started psychology. When I came to FSU, I went with psychology and criminology."

Reason for excess hours. The Chipola respondents did not earn excess hours due to withdrawals from courses or a lot of failures that had to be repeated. The hours they earned were due to changing majors, earning multiple degrees, and in some cases, the students wanted to stay in the program longer for personal reasons, such as the coach. Another respondent had a dual reason to acquire excess hours: to keep her financial aid and to stay in one place to be with her fiancé. She said, "Mainly because I was having to take so many hours to keep my scholarship . . . [and] I was engaged to someone and I was going to stay there two years."

Social Integration Variables

Student and faculty interaction. The interaction with faculty and students was typical of a community college that is a commuter institution. Most of the students expressed they felt older than the other students, but they related well to them and to the faculty. There was not much socializing because most would come to class, go to work, and go home. One respondent said,

> I got a long good with them. I mean I felt like a daddy to some of them. I tried not to act that way towards them, but [I didn't see them much] outside of a friendly relationship when I see them in a store or Wal-Mart or something like that.

Another commented, "I had my friends that I went out with outside of class, but I didn't really make friends in class. I just went to school part-time and then went to work and didn't [socialize with the other students].

> Another responded similarly, I never had any problems, as far as being mistreated. Everybody was pretty much friendly and respectful. I have not had a bad relationship with any fellow student.

Psychosocial Variables

Utility and satisfaction. Some of the Chipola respondents felt a real sense of accomplishment with earning the A.A. degree. Others saw earning the A.A. as a halfway mark or a stepping-stone. In that regard, their sense of accomplishment wasn't as great. One such respondent said, "It was really nothing until you got your B.S. It didn't seem

like much of a goal. I mean, I didn't walk or anything, I just got the diploma and went on. [I'm] halfway there." Another respondent said,

> I was happy, but I guess I knew that I was only halfway there. As far as when I got my bachelors, I felt like I had really accomplished something, because I knew that [when I got my A.A.] in the Fall I was going to be starting over, it was like a minor break. So, I would say, like when I graduated from high school and [from] here, I'm not saying it was the least important, but it wasn't my ultimate goal. I just felt like I got one obstacle out of the way. I'm halfway finished.

One respondent did feel a sense of accomplishment. She said,

> Oh gosh, I was ecstatic when I got my A.A., because it was an accomplishment. Being that in my family everyone graduated from high school, so that was pretty much . . . you know you were going to graduate from high school, but to go on further and get some kind of college education, it was wonderful. I really boosted my self-confidence. It concreted [sic] that I could do anything that I wanted to do. So, it was really, really a great accomplishment for me. It made me feel really good.

Goal accomplishment. As noted above, many of the respondents felt satisfied that they had achieved their goals. An emerging theme for this group, and the others as well, was the degree to which a student became goal-oriented. That is to say, they had a goal towards which they were striving versus goal-seeking, which means they had not determined their ultimate educational goal and were in fact seeking a goal. The respondents with the fewest number of hours were goal-oriented; the ones with excess hours were goal-seeking. A number of factors seem to influence the respondents and shift them from a goal-seeker to being goal-oriented. Most commonly mentioned was the elusive quality of reaching maturity. One respondent said, "Maturity and having to actually get out there and work and pay the bills and knowing that it's not easy. It's hard." Another respondent said,

> I would describe it [the thing that woke him up] as Fort Polk, LA. I went with the Army on a deployment here on a training exercise. Spent 30 days living out of a tent, no shower, 110 degree weather with long sleeves, flak jacket and helmet and what they call miles gear, which is about 20 pounds of stuff strapped to me, for

about a month. I decided that at that time, I didn't need to be doing this. . . . The actual military thing was to help me clear my mind. Of course, it was kind of a longer period just to clear your mind.

Similarly, another respondent said,

I realized that I was just spinning my wheels, doing nothing. I think it was August of '98 I started back. I decided, 'Well, I'm ready to go back to school.' .. I guess [I was] dissatisfied with the job. . . . So, I decided well, 'I'm ready to do something.' decided that, you know, I wanted to get my degree because I've helped support my parents and my younger brothers and sisters, and all three of them were given a chance to go to junior college. . . . I was working two jobs, and I figured, well, if I can work two jobs, I can go to school full-time and work a job.

Gulf Coast Community College

Institutional Description

Gulf Coast Community College is located in Panama City, Florida, in the panhandle region of Florida, approximately 98 miles West of Tallahassee. Panama City has a population of 317,676 residents. In addition to the community college, Florida State University has a branch campus in Panama City. The primary economic base is tourism and the military. The city also acts as a distribution center for manufactured goods (Gulf Coast Community College, May 2004).

Gulf Coast Community College serves Bay, Gulf and Franklin Counties and offers programs leading to degrees in Associate in Arts, Associate in Science, and Associate in Applied Science, as well as Career Certificates. In Fall 2000, Gulf Coast had a student enrollment of 5,569. The enrollment size placed it in the category of medium-sized institutions, defined as institutions with a student enrollment between 5,001 and 10,000 (Gulf Coast Community College, May 2004).

Background and Defining Variables

Age, race, gender, and marital status. There were five respondents from Gulf Coast Community College that were interviewed for this study. The credit hours earned by the respondents ranged from 86 to 212, with an average of 125. Their ages ranged from 27 to 50 with the average age being 41. The group was composed of three females and two males. They were all married with children. Three of the respondents were

White, one Black and one was an immigrant from Thailand. Both of the male respondents were formerly enlisted men, one in the Army for 10 years and the other was in the Air Force for 22 years.

This is the only group in which all the respondents were married and had children. Other than that the group was just as diverse. There were similar numbers of ethnic representatives and ages as seen in other groups.

High school performance. One of the respondents immigrated to the United States from Thailand and was placed in the 10th grade in high school. This respondent completed high school in three years with a self-reported B (3.0) average. The other respondents also self-reported average to high GPA's with one achieving a 3.8 high school GPA. The final respondent dropped out of high school at 17, but completed a GED by the time she was 19.

Family background. Only one of the respondents indicated that his parents had gone on to higher education. He said, "Learning in my family is a big thing. My mom got her Master's. My brothers have Bachelors. One has a Masters or is working on it. I'm not sure if he is finished. It's a big deal in our family." However, in spite of this background this respondent had earned 212 hours by the time he received an A.A. degree and had not pursued the degree until after 22 years in the Air Force.

The other respondents' were all first generation college graduates, whose parents had not gone on for a postsecondary education. The respondent from Thailand indicated that his mother could not read or write. Additionally, he stated that in Thailand it was understood that children would stay with their parents much longer and, in that time, complete a college education. In America, however, students leave home to pursue an education and that proved to be difficult for him.

Several indicated that their families were not very supportive of education. One saying, "My dad didn't go to college. He worked at the Post Office since he was seventeen. And, my mom graduated high school and she was a homemaker basically." The respondent continued, "She was going to school for nursing, but dropped out, because they got a divorce. [The expectation was that] you are going to get married." Another reported, "My mother didn't feel it was important for a girl to go to school."

Educational goals. The educational goals of the Gulf Coast group were varied. However, while one of the respondents indicated education was a "big thing" in his family, none of the respondents came from an environment or a family that expressed an expectation that it was assumed the respondent would go on to get a postsecondary education.

The respondents were not goal-oriented and were somewhat uncertain about their abilities and opportunities to get an education. One reported that he "always wanted to get a degree in something." But, only after he discovered that the military would pay for it was he able to begin his education. Another initially enrolled in pre-med only to drop out, and spend 22 years in the military and, eventually, get a nursing degree on the GI bill.

Three other respondents knew early on what they wanted to be in, but weren't very sure about their ability to achieve it. In some cases, it took years before they even began their education. However, once they had a goal, they stayed on target and eventually graduated with the degree they initially were seeking. A respondent said,

> I wanted to get into the PIMS program, the medical science program. I wanted to go to medical school. I got married and pregnant and decided to stay home with the kids. It was never convenient to go to school. I thought one of us needed to be home with the children.

This respondent graduated from high school in 1969, initially enrolled in college in 1972 and then stopped out until 1997. At that point, she remained continuously enrolled and went on to earn an A.S. in nursing and an A.A. by May 2000. Two years later, she earned a BSN from FSU. A similar respondent said,

> I always planned to go to college. In high school, I had no interest [in college]. I had a lot of problems when I was growing up. I never had any interest [in school]. Then, as soon as I had my daughter, I pretty much knew that no matter what happened, I was going to go to college. I was single, so I had to reorganize what I was going to do. I realized that I wasn't going to make enough money doing what I was doing without an education. That was when I decided to get my GED, and start thinking long term goals.

This respondent dropped out of high school at the age of 17, went on to earn her GED at 19, enrolled in college in 1994, stopped out until1998, re-enrolled at Gulf Coast Community College, completed, and anticipated graduating from FSU in Spring 2003.

No respondent in this group expressed that there was a strong family expectation to earn a college degree. They didn't have a clear perception of their ability to get a degree, yet they continued to try to achieve it. They all shared a goal to earn a degree. Life intervened. However, they persisted in holding on to their goals to eventually earn a degree.

Environmental Variables

Finances. The Gulf Coast group relied mostly on financial aid in the form of the Federal Pell Grant and, in the case of the two male respondents, the GI bill to pay for school. None of the respondents were eligible for a scholarship. Two of the respondents paid for their education themselves. In most cases, without the financial assistance, they would not have had the opportunity to attend college. One respondent said, "The financial aid has helped a lot. I think without that I would have to work and not go to school."

Financial constraints were also mentioned by some of the respondents as the trigger that helped them realize they had to invest more in their education or they were going to miss an opportunity. A respondent said, "I ran out of money and I realized that this [partying during school] is getting me nowhere and I need to do more. I had to turn my GPA around and ran out of money in the process. So, I went to the Air Force." Another said,

> Well, when I first started I didn't know anything about that [how dropping courses affected her financial aid]. So, I would drop and they would say well you don't get financial aid. And, I didn't know that. So, I learned that if I'm going to do that I better realize right in the beginning that's not for me and drop it.

Employment. Most of the Gulf Coast respondents did not work while they were going to school. One respondent did however help out in her husband's business. This was not the case with the other institutions. For the most part, all the respondents worked while attending college and some respondents even worked full-time while going to school full-time.

The two women that didn't work had children that they took care of and husbands that worked. In one case, the woman's mother took care of her children, which freed her to attend classes. The other respondent waited until her children were grown and had left home before attending school. However, none of these respondents worked while attending college.

The two male respondents went to school full-time and did not work. They both expressed that they had health problems that prohibited them from working, and in one case, from continuing to get his bachelors degree. This respondent said,

> The reason [didn't finish at FSU] is I had back surgery and after I had surgery, I take a lot of medication. And, it makes you foggy. And, I had my choice I can either cut it off now or go on. And, I say let me hold it for now. It is good to have a degree and a certificate, but to me it was so difficult. You have to have the SAT and ACT and you have to take a CLAST test and everything. It was so hard. Plus, my condition and everything, like right now I have a headache. I have Ankylosing Spondylitis and arthritis back here [in his back]…."

Outside and family encouragement. The Gulf Coast respondents did not have much encouragement from outside influences and family. Only one indicated that education was important in his family, yet his interaction and continued support from his family was not mentioned. The other respondents said their family expectations were that they "get married" or that women do "not go to school." These also expressed little to no encouragement from their families. "No, I didn't have anyone to push me."

Another expressed that her husband "wants me to keep going." But doesn't credit him with helping to keep her on track.

Only one respondent credited her spouse with having influenced her to return to college, without which she might not have gone.

> My husband sold his last grocery store. I used to work with him some. He sold it almost 8 years ago. When we closed that, we were going to do all this traveling. He fishes, so we bought a boat and we went fishing. We took a trip to the Bahamas and I said 'This is not my thing.' So, one day we were in Panama City, actually going to pick up some fishing lures and we were right in front of Gulf Coast Community College and he dropped me off and said 'Don't call me until

> you've taken the entrance exam and registered.' He said, 'This is always what you've wanted to do, so DO IT.' And, he said, 'You keep putting it off, because you say well, I need this or the kids need that.' [Now] one's a senior at FSU and Michelle's gone; she's graduated from college. If he had not forced me, [I would not have gone]. Even though I knew I was halfway intelligent, you walk on this campus and here's all these little kids. It's intimidating.

Family responsibilities. All of the Gulf Coast respondents had family responsibilities. They all were married with children. In some cases, having children was the major reason for the respondent not pursuing an education until later in life.

One respondent stated, "So, I decided to stay home with the kids and Mike worked 60-70 hours a week. It was never convenient to go to school. I thought one of us needed to be home with the children."

Another said, "To be honest [I wound up going into the military], because I was married with a child on the way and school just wasn't going right and I wanted to get out."

Family played a significant role in the respondents delaying their pursuit of a higher education. Family also played a significant role in promoting the pursuit of education, because the respondents wanted to be positive role models for their children. One female respondent stated,

> I always planned to go to college. In high school, I had no interest. I had a lot of problems when I was growing up and I never had any interest [in going to college]. Then, as soon as I had my daughter, I pretty much knew that no matter what happened, I was going to go to college.

Similarly a male respondent said,

> I have two girls, who have graduated from high school. They are not with me. They are with my ex-wife. So, it [going to college] is good, because my wife didn't go, so I'm glad I had a chance to pass that a long to my girls.

Academic Variables

Enrollment status. All of the respondents at Gulf Coast went to college full-time. The enrollment pattern exhibited by the respondents was one of starting college fairly close to high school graduation and then dropping out for various lengths of time

before returning. Once the respondents returned to the classroom, they attended on a full-time basis and completed their degrees within two years.

> I came to Florida to go to Florida State, where I met my husband. [I] wasn't suppose to have children, [but] wound up having two and stayed home with the kids. So, when our son was a senior at college at FSU, I decided to go back to school. So, I have been going to school for five years.

Similarly,

> I started going to college right after I got my GED [at age 19], but only …went two semesters. Then I got married when I was 21 and I went to Japan right away cause it was military and I didn't go to school over there. I just worked part-time. Had my son and then when we got here [at age 23], I started going to school and have been going every since.

The single best way to describe the respondents' enrollment patterns would be stop outs. The respondents would stop out and then return to get the degree.

Academic and career advising. All of the respondents received assistance in some form in determining what courses they needed to take to complete their degrees. However, many of the advisors were faculty members and the advising was done informally. Most of the respondents said they self-advised. None of them, including the one respondent with 212 hours, seemed to make any connection between the lack of formal career and academic advising and the number of hours they had accumulated.

> I did and I didn't [get academic advising]. I knew my transcript inside and out, because I had to manipulate it for such a long time. So, when I came here, I looked at their program and talked to Craig. He walked me through the program and showed me all the paper work and everything. When I looked at that, I realized that what I needed to do was jump in and go with it.

Major certainty. There were some respondents, namely two women, that knew what they wanted to major in when they enrolled in college and stuck to that major. However, they did not take the most direct path to the Bachelor's degree. Rather than take the A.A. degree and transfer, one got an A.S. degree in nursing, then an A.A. degree, and transferred to receive the B.A. in nursing. The other followed a similar path. So,

while there was certainty about the major they took an indirect route to the ultimate goal and accumulated more credit hours as a result.

Another respondent enrolled in several programs that were related. Starting with an A.A. degree program in pre-med out of high school, then a Physician's Assistant program in the military, then earned a paramedic certificate at Hillsborough Community College, and finally an A.A. degree in nursing.

Another respondent wanted to major in Elementary Education, but was convinced because of his language skills to go into a certificate program in electronics. After completing 45 hours in electronics, he enrolled in an A.A. degree program, so he could ultimately transfer and earn a baccalaureate degree in elementary education.

Many of the students elected to get an A.S. degree so they would have employment skills, should they not be successful in earning the A.A. degree and ultimately the B.A.

Reason for excess hours. The majority of excess hours accumulated by the Gulf Coast respondents can be directly attributed to the acquisition of multiple degrees. For three of the five respondents the excess hours are directly attributed to earning more than one degree.

> No. What happened is I didn't get the A.A. first. I decided after the first semester I would probably go into the nursing program, so I checked into it. So, the second semester I took other classes that I needed for the nursing program, so when I graduated I got my ASN first and then got the A.A. the next year.

The respondent with the fewest number of excess hours (26) had credits carry over from another institution that did not apply to her current program and she had a significant number of withdrawals.

> Yeah, I [had a lot of withdrawals] when I first started out, especially at Clark College in Washington. I would take a lot [of courses] and be all gung ho and then would drop out. I think it helps when students have someone to talk to about the classes and the teachers. I didn't know anything and I would get in these classes and I wouldn't be ready for it.

The respondent with the greatest number of excess hours (152) had credits due to major changes, withdrawals, failures, and re-takes, as well as, credits that carried over

from another institution, that did not apply to his program. Ironically, this respondent, when asked about whether he had availed himself of the college's academic adviser, responded, "I did and I didn't. I knew my transcript inside and out because I had manipulated it for such a long time. So, when I came out here I looked at their program and … looked at what I had, and realized that what I needed to do was just jump in and go with it."

Social Integration Variables

Student and faculty interaction. Most of the respondents expressed having positive, but limited interactions with the faculty and students for various reasons. Family and employment responsibilities played a part, as did the students' age. "For the most part, I would come to school, go home, eat and do homework." Others attributed their interactions, or lack thereof, to their age.

> I don't know [why I didn't have much interaction]. Maybe because I'm a little older and not like the traditional student right out of high school, I felt like the programs were geared toward the younger students. In my classes, I saw a lot of older students, but I just felt like the program and the stuff [were more for] the younger kids.

"I think, at first, it was a two way [street]. They looked at you and thought 'Oh God an older student' [and we looked at them and thought 'oh God a younger student'], especially in math classes. For the most part, [I found] school was intimidating."

"I had a great relationship with the faculty, because we were the same age. I was their friend. We would talk and they would ask me a lot of questions and give the kids practical experience."

"Initially, they [the students] would look at me like I was a two-headed monster. But, after a few classes, when they see who gets the good grades, then they get to be your friend."

For the Gulf Coast respondents, age or the perception that they were older and therefore different, may have played a bigger role in the quality of their interactions with faculty and students rather than the commuter-school phenomenon of not being on campus except for classes.

Psychosocial Variables

Utility and satisfaction. The respondents for the most part were very satisfied with completing the degree. There was a sense of personal accomplishment. One respondent exclaimed,

> Good, really good. I thought this was so good. I didn't get my high school diploma and this is huge. As the time got closer and closer, I thought this is stupid, I'm so much older and I should wait until I get my bachelors. And, everyone said you are putting it down and you should feel really good, so afterwards I felt really good, cause it was a lot of hard work. It was a real sense of accomplishment.

Another stated, "This was an accomplishment for me. It gave me a feeling of 'Yeah, I can do this.'"

However, several expressed that the A.A. degree, in terms of utility was simply a stepping-stone to the baccalaureate degree.

"It [the A.A.] was just a stepping stone to the Bachelor's degree. It was just jumping through the hoops. It didn't have the same value as the A.S. degree."

Goal accomplishment. One of the women respondents had a desire for a degree, but elected to wait until her family was completely grown. Nonetheless, it took prodding from her husband who dropped her off at the college door and told her not to call him, until she had registered to get her started. She received her courage from her husband. After completing the A.A. degree she felt differently.

> I think I matured and got my confidence. Before I thought I would never graduate. I never thought I would get my bachelors. I thought really small and I would always be scared when I went into a class. I didn't think I would make it and now my attitude is totally different.

Another woman was influenced by the birth of her daughter and becoming a mother. The experience was a revelation about the extent of the responsibility she had to take care of and provide for her daughter and to set an example. Motherhood became her motivator to go back and earn a degree. The incidents that motivated people to shift from merely desiring a degree to actually pursuing one varied, but in the end, they all persisted and accomplished their goal.

Tallahassee Community College

Institutional Description

Tallahassee Community College is located in the city of Tallahassee in North Florida. Tallahassee has a population of 150,624 residents and has two other public degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the same area: Florida State University and Florida A & M University. The primary economic base is State Government. Tallahassee Community College serves Leon, Gadsden, and Wakulla Counties and offers programs leading to degrees in Associate in Arts, Associate in Science, and Associate in Applied Science (Tallahassee Community College, May 2004).

In Fall 2000, Tallahassee Community College had a student enrollment of 10,736 (Florida Community College System, FACT Book, Table 2, February, 2000), placing it in the category with large-sized institution, defined as institutions with a student enrollment over 10,001.

Background and Defining Variables

Age, race, gender, and marital status. There were seven respondents from Tallahassee Community College that were interviewed for this study. The credits earned by the respondents ranged from 87 to 123, with an average of 104. Seven respondents made up the Tallahassee group. Their ages ranged from 28 to 48, with the average age being 37. Five of the respondents were female; two were male. Two of the female respondents were Black the others were White. Three of the five females were single. Two of the single females had children. One of the married females had children. The two males were both married and both had children. One of the male respondents migrated from England where he had received his elementary and high school education.

High school performance. Most of the respondents reported that they were average high school students with B averages. One indicated she was an A student and another dropped out, but got a GED 3 years later. The respondent from Britain described himself as an average student, but indicated that they did not give grade point averages or high school diplomas in Britain, rather they tested students at an early age and the top bracket went to the academy, which was preparation for University and the others when into local high schools. High school completion resulted in the awarding of a certificate. He had been assigned to the local high school.

Family background. All but one of the respondents is a first generation college student. The sole respondent whose parents had gone to college reported that his mother had "some college." And, he believed that his dad graduated, "but I think he graduated from seminary. He's an ordained minister. I don't know if he actually got a Bachelor's degree. I don't know to be perfectly honest."

The other respondents had very similar family educational backgrounds. Several had fathers that had graduated from high school and mothers that had not. Two had parents that had gone on to earn a GED and one had just recently finished her high school diploma. Three of the respondents indicated their families were supportive and that education was "very important."

"My father graduated from high school, but his family was very poor and he didn't have the opportunities and that is one of the reasons why he kept trying to give me the opportunities."

"There were six children in my family, so I had to put myself through school the whole time. However, they're really supportive of anything we do, but they didn't push me to do anything."

Educational goals. The respondents in the TCC group initially had educational goals. However, they seemed vague, undefined and not very committed to their goals. Several respondents changed majors more than once.

> I started off as wanting to be a nurse, then AIDS came out and I got terrified. So I switched to a business major and I wasn't too pleased with business courses, cause I always wanted to help people. So I switched my major back to the health field and I was taking science courses cause I wasn't sure what I wanted to do.

Others knew generally speaking the field they wanted to be in, but not necessarily the program that would meet their needs. One respondent had an interest in museums and followed a course from an A.A. to an A.S. back to an A.A. and finally to a B.A. trying to find the right fit with a program that would get her into employment related to a museum.

> I got an A.S. in Graphic Design at Santa Fe Community College in'95. Then in Fall of '99, I went back to school to finish my A.A. I had started that [A.A.] prior to my A.S. when I thought, 'I'll just get the A.S.', because what I wanted to do

was graphic design. Then, I decided I wanted to study art history. So, I went back and finished my A.A. when I got here [Tallahassee].

Another respondent didn't have any aspirations whatsoever except to get an education just to increase her socio-economic status. "I wish I could say I was focused on one particular career. I would like to get into computer programming, but like I said [the reason I'm here] is more to improve overall my monetary lot."

Environmental Variables

Finances. Five of the six respondents received some form of state or federal financial aid in the form of grants or loans or tuition waivers to help defray the cost of education. The remaining respondent's parents paid for her entire education. They all expressed that without assistance they would not have had the opportunity to go to college.

"I never would have got here. Either that or I would have been even more in debt than I am now. I mean, I've still got student loans from when I first started. But no, I would not have continued."

"Initially yes [finances were an issue], because I was trying to pay for my education. But, shortly after we moved back to Tallahassee, Tony got employed at TCC, so he got the six free hours for his dependents. And, that is really what paid for my education."

Employment. Five of the respondents worked full-time or part-time while going to school part-time. One respondent went to school full-time and lived off of financial aid, not working at all.

Several respondents mentioned initially working full-time while trying to go to school full-time and their grades dropped dramatically or they had to drop a class. Eventually, these respondents wound up completing their educations by dropping their academic course loads to part-time. All of the respondents had to work to support themselves.

"I've always gone part-time. I've always had to work and bring in a full-time paycheck. There was just about a year, maybe a year and a half where I was able to quit work and focus on school full time. But other than that, I've had to take one or two classes a semester."

Outside and family encouragement. Of this group of respondents, all but one, were first generation college graduates. They received varying degrees of support from their parents ranging from tremendous to little or none. One single woman, when asked if her father, who was a single parent caring for her and her siblings, was supportive of education said, "He didn't have time to be supportive. He was always working to support us."

Conversely, one respondent indicated that his family was very supportive of education.

> My father said that there was no way that I was going to into the garden [his father's occupation]. I was going to be an engineer. My mother believed that the sky was the limit. When I told her I wanted to be a doctor, she supported me 100%."

One respondent qualified her remarks about family encouragement, particularly about how supportive her husband was.

> He thought it was great, too. He got resentful because, I mean, going to college meant that, while I was working full-time, meant that I was either doing homework, preparing for tests, or working. So it was stressful on our marriage. And a lot of times, if I dropped out of school, it was because of something going on as far as with the family.

The support from outside influences was similar ranging from tremendous to very little or none, but overall was encouraging. One respondents' experience exemplified the others. Her employers were supportive in terms of providing time off from work and flexible scheduling.

> Both of the supervisors I have now are very flexible. I take classes during the day if I need to. I can say, 'Can I just skip lunch and take a class?' and, neither one of them have had a problem with it. And, they always ask me about how my classes are going.

Family responsibilities. Family responsibilities played a big role in influencing students course taking patterns. As one respondent stated above, "So it was stressful on our marriage. And a lot of times, if I dropped out of school, it was because of something going on with the family."

Regardless of whether the respondent was male or female, if they had a family, there was pressure trying to do both well. One female respondent stated,

> Part of that time, I was trying to work two jobs and take classes. That didn't work well. And, I've always found that when I had a conflict, a serious conflict between family and work and school, school lost out. I mean you've got to pay the bills. And, it's really hard to tell a toddler they have to leave Mommy alone. That's hard. So that's just not where my priorities are.

Similarly, another stated,

> He's [her husband] very supportive. But again, it takes time away from the family. If I'm going to classes and trying to work a full-time job, I'm not home. It's difficult. It puts stress on the relationship and on the family as a whole.

Academic Variables

Enrollment status. All of the respondents, except one, attended school on a part-time basis. The one respondent that attended full-time was also the one that didn't work, but relied on financial aid grants to pay for college and her living expenses.

Stopping out occurred in some of the respondents' academic career. Work and family impacted the consistency with which the respondents were able to attend college.

"Yeah, I was working, so [I attended college] part-time. I would take a lot of summers off so I could make up money for the next semester."

Two findings became apparent in looking at enrollment status. The first is some respondents credited a sudden revelation as the reason they became committed and eventually completed their degree. They started out attending multiple institutions, changing majors, moving from one type of degree program to another, they stopped out and then a revelation occurred and they enroll and go continuously until they graduated with a degree. This enrollment pattern was seen frequently. However, the ability to capture what happens to these individuals that results in the change in behavior is difficult to pin point. Some attributed it simply to maturation.

"Yeah, you can actually look at my transcript and see when I matured. It took me a long time to grow up."

"Then for about two and a half years on and off, I attended TCC. Sometimes getting good grades and sometimes getting bad grades, until I pretty much got my act together and finished strong the last two semesters in order to get my A.A."

Another finding that also impacts excess hours is that these students completed more than one degree and those hours are being calculated in determining whether or not the student has excess hours.

Academic advising and career advising. Most of the respondents reported that they were self-advised. However, upon further probing it became apparent that most had seen or been advised by a counselor at some point in time and were following a "checklist" of courses they needed to complete. It was not uncommon for the respondents to go along self-advising until nearing the end of the program and then go in to see what they had left to complete.

> In the beginning, I was just kind of signing up and doing what I wanted to do. When you first start it is easy to take things, because there are certain things you have [to take]. So, it is easier to do it on your own when you are starting. Once it gets on towards the end you kind of have to have someone guide you, so that you can finish.

"Yeah, [the counselors had] sort of checklist they would go over. They would look at your transcripts and see what you'd have that would either be comparable to what they had or the equivalent to that."

"Yes, it worked fine and if I had done well in all my classes I would have been done then. Yes, it was pretty much straight forward and got more fine-tuned the closer I got. It worked out."

A couple of respondents reported that they were required to see counselors, but didn't go and evidently the college didn't block registration.

Major certainty. None of the respondents started out having a definite major and staying with the major through completion. All the other respondents changed majors some as many as six times.

> I started off as wanting to be a nurse, then AIDS came out and I got terrified. So I switched to a business major and I wasn't too pleased with business courses, because I always wanted to help people. So, I switched my major back to the

health field and I was taking science courses, because I wasn't sure what I wanted to do.

Another respondent, who changed majors several times, said he landed on another major all on his own accord. "I have not really sat down and talked to somebody." However, earlier in the interview he had said "And, not finding a major I really enjoyed led to a couple of problems of being on academic probation for about a year and a half."

None of the respondents availed themselves of tools that exist to help them determine a career path. They seem to flounder around without using any professional career advising service offered by the institution until something occurs to them or grabs their interest or influences them to select a particular major.

Reason for excess hours. The respondents reported a variety of reasons for accumulating excess hours. Among the reasons cited were: having to re-take a course because of a bad grade; withdrawing from courses to protect a good GPA; credit earned at another institution that would transfer but would not count towards the program; completion of duplicate programs with the hours being counted towards the A.A. as well; changing majors; and finally just interested in other courses that didn't apply to the major program. No one reason appeared to account for the excess hours. However, changing majors and changing institutions and getting duplicate degrees were the primary reasons cited.

"I never did any excess hours [at Tallahassee Community College]. They were all from CCC [Cuyahoga Community College in Ohio]."

"Some of them [excess hours] were credits that didn't transfer from Texas, but actually most of them, the last 24 hours, were all in the programming certification that I took there."

> It [excess hours] was a combination of switching schools and having classes not counting from one school to another. I would have to say that when I got bad grades in Gordon Rule classes, I got a D when you need a C, that probably carried over and there were some classes I repeated. . . . So, I would say switching schools and having some classes not count and having to repeat some classes, probably gave me the reasons why I had such high credit hours.

Social IntegrationVariables

Student and faculty interaction. The respondents from the Tallahassee group all expressed having limited interactions with students and faculty. Most expressed that they drove into campus for class and did not get involved with other extra-curricular activities or with fellow students or faculty outside of the class. "No, [I didn't get involved with the students.] I didn't even get there until 6 o'clock at night. There was nothing going on."

> I thought I was going to be the oldest person in the class, but that wasn't the case. There was a grandmother in the class, and I'm not a grandfather yet. And, I find a lot of other people my age and a little younger that had been out in the world and worked a little and I had a really good time [with them]. I didn't spend any social time with them. All of the time I was in class but, even with younger students, I found a lot of them to be really pleasant."

Faculty interaction was limited to the classroom or passing in the hallway, but no social interaction outside of the classroom was mentioned. However limited, the response that the students gave to their interactions was very positive.

> It [the relationship with the faculty] was a very positive relationship. I wasn't the kind of person that visited the faculty very much, but you know in the classroom there was a real bond. And I noticed even later that crossing between classes that there was an acknowledgement and even stop and talk for a few minutes.

Psychosocial Variables

Utility and satisfaction. For the most part, the respondents expressed satisfaction with their efforts at earning the degree. However, a couple expressed that the A.A. degree was simply a stepping-stone to the baccalaureate degree.

"It [earning the degree] was marvelous. It took a while for it to sink in."

"I felt real proud, like I had finally accomplished something. It was a 20-year process. . . . Yes it did [signify a personal change]. It [getting the A.A. degree] was a starting point. I felt like I could accomplish something."

"I've got my little piece of paper. I mean I'm glad I finished it, and it has opened my eyes to a lot of things. And, I feel like I am a more well-rounded person, I guess."

"[How did finishing make me feel?] Great. It made me feel like I can accomplish anything."

"To me finishing the A.A. was sort of just a stepping stone to get really where I want to be."

"Satisfying. I'm glad I did it. I'm surprised that I did. All in all it is very satisfying."

Goal accomplishments. The Tallahassee respondents expressed similar goal achieving ambitions as the other respondents from the two other institutions. The respondents were goal seekers, but had many distractions such as family and work and difficulty getting the classes they need at a convenient time or difficulty in establishing a major.

One respondent indicated that the time at Tallahassee Community College was "damage control" just trying to take courses to get his GPA up so he could graduate with something, because, he has "seen people with degrees be successful and people who didn't have degrees struggle."

Finally, one respondent never did declare a major and just simply kept going until she had earned an A.A. degree. She accumulated 123 hours for a 60-hour degree.

> By the time I went back, it was just something to do. I can't say I was pursuing anything at that point. I really couldn't even see getting the A.A., because I was doing it in such small segments at a time. When I was at TCC, I think I went in as a general transfer student. I took a lot of accounting at one point because that is actually what I had done before, but as far as actually declaring any kind of major, I didn't."

Synthesis of Findings by Community College

The respondents were selected from a small, medium and large institution to try to capture variations that might arise from different size institutions. This study found several variables distinguished the institutions from one another. Chipola, the smallest institution, had the highest number of second-generation in college respondents, whose families expected them to go on to college. They were also the youngest age group with the highest high school GPA's and limited family responsibilities. Chipola respondents also had the fewest number of average credit hours earned. Gulf Coast Community

College was the exact opposite. They had the oldest age group with the lowest high school GPA's and the respondents from Gulf Coast were all married with children and significant family responsibilities that influenced their courses-taking patterns. Tallahassee Community College, the largest institution, fell somewhere in between Chipola and Gulf Coast.

There were other variables where the institutions differed, particularly in the areas of *Employment, Outside and Family Encouragement*, and *Family Responsibilities*. The respondents from Chipola Junior College, the institution with the lowest average number of credit hours, all worked while going to college. Only two of the respondents were married and only one of those had children. This group also received the strongest family encouragement. Gulf Coast respondents had the highest average credit hours. Further, most of the respondents did not work while attending school. In addition, they were all married and they all had children. They also reported receiving less encouragement from family and outsiders.

Tallahassee Community College, the largest institution, was between Chipola and Gulf Coast on most of the variables. The average number of hours earned was 104, four of the six respondents were married, four had children, five worked while attending school and they reported receiving some family and outside report. Consequently, the size of the institution did not seem to influence the accumulation of excess hours.

Findings by Number of Credit Hours Accumulated Toward Degree

Group A – Respondents with 63.7 – 88.5 Hours

Group Description

Group A respondents are comprised of students who had accumulated 3.7 to 28.5 excess hours or 63.7 to 88.5 hours toward their degree [One respondent had 89 hours and was included in this Group. A total of six respondents make up this group. Their credit hours ranged from 65 to 89 with the average being 82.

Background and Defining Variables

Age, race, gender and marital status. The respondents ages ranged from 20 to 36. Two of the respondents were under 24 years of age, with the average age being 28. Two students attended college part-time. The other four were full-time students. Three of the respondents worked full-time, two worked part-time and one did not work.

Two of the respondents were Black females, one married with children; the other single with no children. Four of the respondents were White, two females and two males. Two of the White respondents, a female and male, were unmarried with no children. The remaining two respondents were married and had children.

High school performance. The respondents in Group A had varying successes in high school. Two dropped out of high school and went on to get their GED. One dropped out and eventually returned to high school to get a diploma with a grade point average of 1.79. One of the younger respondents had a 3.9 grade point average, which qualified her for the Florida Bright Futures Scholarship. The other two had high school GPA's in the 3.0 – 3.5 range.

Family background. Two respondents were second generation in college. One's mother had a Master's degree and her father a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration. The other respondent's mother had a Bachelor's degree in education and her father had a B.S. in psychology. Both respondents indicated that the attitude of their parents towards education was that it was "a must" or it was "just assumed that we would all go [to college]."

"It was assumed that we would all go."

"Education was a must in our family. They always stressed that as far as any extra-curricular activities that we wanted to do depended on how our grades were. They were a little more than supportive (joking)."

The other respondents' families had for the most part completed high school and some college. Only one reported that his father had quit in the 6th grade to go to work to support his family. All of the respondents, except one indicated that their families were supportive of education.

One respondent explained,

> It aggravated them that I played around so much, but they were very supportive. At any given time, they could have told me to hit the road. I've had my chance. If it wasn't for them, I probably wouldn't have gotten here.

The one dissenting respondent whose parents were not supportive of education responded when asked: "Were there any expectation about you going on to college?"

"No, it was 'You are going to get married.'" This respondent had a daughter out of wedlock at 17 and dropped out of high school before returning to complete her degree.

Educational goals. Almost without exception the subjects in Group A had determined before enrolling what their major was going to be and they did not change majors, while at the community college. Their reasons for going to school in the first place and the events that triggered the decision were varied. A couple indicated it was assumed by their family they would go to college, some indicated it was a simple matter of maturity and others had life changing events that motivated them to go to college. However, for the most part, they knew what they wanted to major in when they enrolled and they did not change their majors.

> I always panned to go to college. In high school, I had no interest, I had a lot of problems when I was growing up and I never had any interest. Then as soon as I had my daughter I pretty much knew that no matter what happened, I was going to go to college.

Another respondent explained,

> When I started at Chipola, I wanted to go into physical therapy. In the course [of transferring] between Chipola and FAMU, that changed. That summer [before I transferred], I shadowed [someone in respiratory therapy], just in case I couldn't get into the [physical therapy] program, which was limited access. I came to college knowing that I wanted to do something in the medical field and pretty strong in physical therapy. (During the period of transferring between Chipola and FAMU, the respondent changed to respiratory therapy.)

Five subjects reported that they eventually enrolled in a community college to help change their jobs and improve their lot in life.

> I wanted more. I wanted an education. I mean, a cashier's job in a retail store was not what I was looking at. I wish I could say I was focused on one particular career. I would like to get into computer programming, but like I said, 'it was more monetary aspirations.'

Similarly,

> As I said, I had been working for the State [for 11 years]. Sometimes the State is not always fair in the things they do. I received a written reprimand for violating

> a procedure that I didn't violate, but yet, they can get away with what they do. I just decided, you know, I'm ready to get out of prison. I wanted to do something else. So, that's why I went back. I majored in political science and started psychology.

And,

> Well, I guess I have seen people with degrees be successful and people who didn't have degrees struggle and I didn't want to be in the position of having to raise a family or bills being past due and not be able to pay them. Better educated better career opportunities.

Environmental Variables

Finances. What role finances played in the Group A behavior, perception and experience while in college varied extremely. Two students received the Florida Bright Futures Scholarship, which paid for at least 75% of their tuition costs. These two students indicated that because of the Bright Futures scholarship, they didn't worry about funding their college regardless of their family financial situation. These two students accumulated the fewest number of hours in the group, 65 and 77. These two respondents were also single women that did not have any children.

One respondent also went to school on the State tuition waiver program. This respondent had a family and also worked full-time, while attending college. She expressed significant conflicts with family and other obligations that caused her to withdraw and drop out often. Three other students paid for their education by funds received from the Pell Grant.

One respondent was working full-time and getting financial aid. However, he believed that in order to qualify for financial aid he had to take a full load of credits. Doing that caused him to fail a lot of courses. He finally came to TCC and paid for the courses himself, rather than receive financial aid and be required to go full-time.

Employment. All but one of the respondents worked. The one that didn't work went to school full-time and took care of her children. The two youngest respondents age 20 and 23, who were on Bright Futures Scholarship, worked part-time and went to school full-time. The other respondents all had full-time jobs and varied between going to school part-time or full-time.

Outside and family encouragement. Several respondents mentioned outside encouragement from their families and from work colleagues as inspirational and something that they attribute to keeping them on track and in college.

> When I first started going back, you know, my mom was like my personal cheerleader. Even like on test days. I just felt like I did the worst, she was there to keep the spirits up. My dad was always the quiet one, until she passed away and now he stays on me constantly. He's the manager, the cheerleader. . . . [My employer] they've allowed me to stay on certain shifts so that I could continue going to school during the day.

Most student's motivation, appeared to be primarily self-directed, with outside encouragement verifying their beliefs in themselves, or providing the opportunities needed for the subjects to take classes. However, for one respondent in particular, it was the outside encouragement that actually influenced her belief in herself and her abilities to succeed at college.

Family responsibilities. Three of the six respondents were single with no children. The remaining three respondents were all married with children. Family responsibilities, contributed to some of the subjects withdrawing from courses or taking bad grades and having to make up the courses at another time, but for the most part, because the respondents were single, there were limited family responsibilities.

> Part of the time I was going to school, I was trying to work two jobs and taking classes. That didn't work well. And, I've always found that when I had a serious conflict between family and work and school, school lost out. I mean, you've got to pay the bills. And, it's really hard to tell a toddler they have to leave Mommy alone. That's hard. So that's just not where my priorities are. [My husband] got resentful because going to college and working full-time, meant that I was either doing homework, preparing for tests, or working. So, it was stressful on our marriage. A lot of times, if I dropped out of school, it was because of being something going on as far as with the family.

Academic Variables

Enrollment status. The enrollment status did have an influence on the number of credit hours earned for at least two students who started out going to school full-time and working full-time and after having to drop several courses, started enrolling part-time.

> [I always took] three to six credit hours a term. Sometimes I'd attempt more, but I found that if I attempted more than six hours that I ended up either losing or having to drop out of all courses. Or, I'd fail a course and have to make it up later. My transcript should bear that out.

Another respondent had a similar experience.

> I think working and going to school full-time, I got burned out. But, now what has helped is going back to part-time status. Instead of dealing with four or five classes, I only deal with one or two.

Stopping out was another enrollment pattern. However, those respondents that stopped out tended to start a program at one institution, stop out before completing that program, then transfer to a community college where they completed the A.A. degree program.

All of the students in Group A completed their A.A. degree program at the community college awarding the degree within two years from the date of enrollment. The excess hours that they accumulated were for the most part transfer credit from other institutions that did not apply to the degree at the community college. Once at the community college the there were few excess hours earned either from having to repeat courses due to poor grades or from withdrawals.

Academic and career advising. None of the respondents in Group A received any formal career advising in high school or before attending college. While the respondents exhibited a limited amount of stopping out, generally from one institution to another, they did not do a lot of changing majors. They were focused on what they wanted to do and what programs they wanted to take and their selections appeared to be a good decision for them, because none of them changed majors once they started their program at the community college. If they changed programs, it was when they enrolled at the transfer institution.

One woman reported that she talked to an advisor about what major to take at FSU and from that discussion she made a decision about what to take at the community college and eventually to major in. But the decision was based on the difficulty of the courses she would have to take and on what courses she had already taken, which would be a better fit in her program.

Another subject reported something similar.

> I landed on another major on my own accord, on what I wanted to do. I have not really sat down and talked to somebody. I like computers, but I really didn't want to deal with the high math, so a TCC counselor told me that FSU has a degree called Information Studies, which deals with programming and information retrieval and archiving, some web design, some systems set-ups and I thought that I could probably get into the program at FSU.

In terms of academic advising, one-half of the respondents talked with counselors and received academic counseling, including receiving curriculum guidelines or advising sheets. Those that received academic advising credited it with keeping them on track and getting them out in a short amount of time.

> In the beginning when I first went back, they had advisors standing out in line and you come in and talk to the person. I had really good advice from that. Once I got further a long I didn't really need much more advise, because they would give me an outline of what I needed and they would check it on the sheet, so I would know that once I finished this then I needed to finish that.

Similarly a respondent stated,

> I spoke with guidance counselors there and they pretty much guided me through my courses sat Chipola. They gave me the curriculum guides that I needed from FSU, the requirements. Well, actually FSU/TCC and FAMU, and I basically planned my schedule around those that I needed to take for my goals. So, they sat down with me and said 'OK, you can take this amount of hours and this would give you say 15 hours and you could graduate in this time.'"

Of the respondents that self-advised, they knew what they had to take for their general education, but they did not report trying to take courses that were pre-requisites to the program/major at the university to which they intended to transfer. In other words,

their A.A. degree was seen as a general degree, not one that was directed at a specific major. Consequently, as long as they got their general education out of the way, the remaining hours could be electives and they would still graduate and be able to transfer.

> No [they didn't help me pick the courses], because I don't think there are a whole lot of pre-requisites from TCC. My last four semesters at TCC, which were part-time status, were pretty much damage control, to finish the requirements and get my GPA back up where it needed to be. The only class I think they recommended that I take that would help me was the computer literacy, which I took here at TCC.

Major certainty. While the respondents exhibited a limited amount of stopping out, generally from one institution to another, they did not for the most part change major. The respondents were focused on what they wanted to do and what programs they wanted to take and their selections appeared to be a good decision for them, because none of them changed majors once they started their program. Only one respondent changed his major and he did that when he transferred from one institution to another. At the community college, the credits he had earned from the other institutions were applied toward the general A.A. degree program, so in the end, he did not wind up with a significant number of excess hours, even though he had changed his major.

> I didn't start classes [at FIU] until spring of 1991. I went there as a full-time student and a full-time worker and I guess because of the combination of the two my grades didn't do well. And, not finding a major, I really enjoyed, lead to a couple of problems of being on academic probation for about a year and a half. After that, I transferred to St. Thomas University also in Miami and they had a program called sports administration. I was very interested in that. After that I got married and moved to Tallahassee. Then for about two and a half years on and off, I attended TCC. Sometimes getting good grades, sometimes bad, until I pretty much got my act together and finished strong the last two semesters in order to get my AA.

The respondent eventually graduated with 87 credit hours and enrolled at FSU in Information Systems program. Another student also appeared to work on a general AA degree without identifying a major until she transferred to a university.

> I started with wanting a degree in psychology and that is what I started with at Chipola. And you didn't really focus on anything [pre-requisites], but when I transferred to FSU, I changed it to English.

Other respondents, however, indicated that they were certain about their major or at least the program area, while at the community college.

> When I started at Chipola, I wanted to go into physical therapy. And, in the course [of transferring] between Chipola and FAMU that change. As a matter of fact, that summer I had off, I shadowed, just to get a plan B, just in case I couldn't get into the program because I knew it was limited access. But, I came to college pretty much knowing that I wanted to do something in the medical field and pretty strong in physical therapy.

Similarly,

> I was leaning towards criminal justice classes and criminology. I always had been. I pretty much leaned toward that, but I was still open to changing my mind." This respondent didn't change her mind, but transferred to FSU and received a degree in criminal justice.

Reason for excess hours. The Group A respondents are those in the study that had the fewest number of excess hours. The respondents hours ranged from 65 to 89 within the first standard deviation below the mean.

The reasons stated for the accumulation of excess hours varied. For one respondent, it was a personal decision, based on the status with her fiancé. This respondent had taken 44 hours of dual enrollment courses in high school and only needed 16 hours to graduate with an A.A. degree. When asked why she earned 17 hours more than required for the A.A. degree (i.e. 77), she indicated that she was simply taking hours to maintain her load so she would be qualified to receive the Bright Futures scholarship, but also she reported that her fiancé was enrolled at the same institution and so she was "wanting to stay at home because of my fiancé and I was waiting for him to graduate and we were going to move on together."

One theme that emerged is that students would enroll for several hours a semester and then withdraw without any fiscal penalty from the classes, if the course load was too heavy due to family or work demands. Students who were on state waivers (not paying

for up to six credits per semester) were more inclined to withdraw or drop out than students who had to pay their own way.

> Shortly after we moved back to Tallahassee, Tony got employed at TCC, so he got the six free hours for his dependents. And, that is really what paid for my education. He got resentful because, I was either doing homework, preparing for tests or working. So, it was stressful on our marriage. And, a lot of times, if I dropped out of school, it was because of something going on with the family.

Another respondent similarly stated,

> I went there as a full-time student and a full-time worker and I guess because of the combination of the two my grades didn't do well. And, not finding a major, I really enjoyed, lead to a couple of problems of being on academic probation for about a year and a half. Because I had to work full-time and needed financial aid and the only way you could do that with grants is to be a full-time student. So, I took the full-time and if I had known that I should have gone part-time and I probably would have done better.

And,

> It was a combination of switching schools and having classes not count from one school to another. I would have to say that when I got bad grades in Gordon Rule classes, I got a D when you needed a C, that probably carried over and there were some classes I repeated. There was one class where I completely made a mistake. I don't know if it was me or I wasn't paying attention to my advisor. I had an A the first time and I took it over again and failed it. It took some effort to have them erase the F and give me the A. But, I would say switching schools and having some classes not count and having to repeat some classes, is probably the reason why I had such high credit hours.

One respondent accumulated nearly 24-26 excess hours because his employer would monetarily reward him for taking certain courses, but the college would not apply the credits toward the AA degree. Other than those excess hours, he only had to repeat one course.

Social Integration Variables

Student and faculty interactions. As reported earlier, most of the students worked full-time or part-time and went to school or had families. Consequently, most were interested in the academic offerings of the institution and not the extra-curricular offerings or interactions outside of the classroom.

"I had my friends that I went out with outside of class, but I didn't really make friends in class. I just went to school part-time and then went to work and didn't [socialize]."

"At Chipola I did the black student union and I did volunteer work and activities, but I wasn't as involved as in high school, because I was working."

"I was in Phi Beta Kappa and Honor Society. . . . But, I just went to school part-time and then went to work and didn't [socialize]. I pretty much didn't have any relations [with faculty]. I pretty much just came, did the work, and left."

Some of the students indicated that they had marginal relations with faculty and students, mostly in sharing and discussing course work.

> Oh it was close, because the classes, they were small. So I'd say there wasn't more the 25-30 students per class. And, you know, you get more one on one with the instructor, plus you get close with the students that are in the class. You know, you share notes. You get in little study groups and just talk about any and everything. So, it was nice.

There were similar findings with the faculty.

> As far as the faculty, I've enjoyed almost all of my instructors. All of them were willing to work with you. All of them were willing to help you if you needed assistance. I ran across a couple, one in particular that was, you know, just a fruitcake. But I made it through her class and just won't take another one.

Another respondent had similar observations.

> It [relationship with faculty] was good. As students we could go to them and talk to them about anything if we had a problem with the course, or if we missed the course, or didn't understand anything. We could go to them any time. They made their office hours known to the class at the beginning and they were basically free to talk to us about anything. So, it was a good relationship.

Psychosocial Variables

Utility and satisfaction. A number of the respondents spoke to the utility of the degree and the education when asked about their educational goals. Most were attending the community college to ultimately improve their livelihood and employment opportunities. However, several saw the A.A. degree as a stepping-stone to getting the baccalaureate degree. Group A, overall was very satisfied and celebrated their accomplishment.

> [It's] satisfying. I'm glad I did it. I'm surprised that I did it. All in all it is very satisfying. It made me feel like I can accomplish anything. But every day I think 'Man, if I had it to do over again.' If I was 19 again, and knew what I know now, [I'd do it differently]. I try to tell all the young kids I see if you go to school, stay in school, don't think 'Oh I'll get a job and I'll make good money.' I'm sorry, those are peanuts you're working for, and eventually it is going to come to you that this isn't working. So, I'm just glad I did it.

Another student was pleased with completing her program, but saw it as only being halfway through.

> I was happy, but I guess I knew that I was only halfway there. As far as when I got my bachelors I felt like I had really accomplished something. . . . I'm not saying it was the least important, but it wasn't my ultimate goal. I just felt like I got one obstacle out of the way. I'm halfway finished. . . . I was happy . . . when I finished here. I proved to myself that I was able, that I can handle this, that I can be a productive citizen, giving me self-confidence.

More succinctly another respondents said, "It was really nothing until you got your BS."

Goal accomplishment. Most Group A respondents were very goal-directed. They had determined what major they wanted either prior to enrollment or shortly thereafter, they figured out what curriculum they needed to take to achieve the goal, and they consistently pursued it, working through any barriers that got in their way.

> I felt like when I finished here, that it helped me know that I can handle college. Because, even though I did very well in high school, I was intimidated. Although my parents and some of my friends said 'You shouldn't worry about it. You'll do fine.' I just always had a kind of intimidation about college. And, I think that

> when I finished here, I proved to myself that I was able, that I can handle this, that I can be a productive citizen, giving me self-confidence.

Another found,

> One thing would be the family and people that helped push me and another thing would be TCC's ability to work with my schedule. The night classes the afternoon classes were the key to me being able to do it. . . . If it wasn't for those night classes, I don't think I would have finished.

Another credited attaining maturity.

> I think I matured and got my confidence. Before I thought I would never graduate. I never thought I would get my bachelors. I thought really small and I would always be scared when I went into a class. I didn't think I would make it and now my attitude is totally different. I walk in and think this is nothing. So, I just think my confidence came over me and I'm a lot more secure in what I am doing and I have a lot of support from my husband.

Group B - Respondents With 90 to 108 Plus Hours

Group Description

Group B respondents had accumulated a range of 30 to 53.4 excess hours or 90 to 108 total hours earned toward their degrees. Group B respondents, as with Group A, were also non-traditional students as defined by Bean and Metzler (1985). There were a total of six respondents in Group B. Their credit hours ranged from 100 to 109 with an average of 105.5. The respondents are all non-traditional students as defined by Bean and Metzler (1985).

Background and Defining Variables

Age, race, gender and marital background. The six respondents ranged in age from 30 to 50 with the average age being 42. Four of the respondents were married with each having two children, one was divorced with two children and the youngest respondent, was single with no children. Two of the respondents were female and four were male.

Four of the respondents were White, one was Black and one was an immigrant from Thailand. One of the White respondents was also an immigrant from Scotland. The immigrant from Scotland had finished high school in his native country before

immigrating. The Thai immigrant did not complete high school and was placed in the 10th grade when arriving in the United States and went on to complete his high school diploma.

High school performance. The respondent, who immigrated from Scotland after high school graduation, was not able to provide a comparable high school grade point average. However, he indicated that he was an average student. The Thai immigrant did not supply a high school GPA, but also indicated he was an average student. One of the respondents received a GED. The remaining three respondents were all B students with GPAs of 3.0 or higher.

Family background. Five out of the six respondents came from family backgrounds where their parents had limited or no education. One respondent said his mother "didn't have any education, she doesn't read or write." Another, "No one in my family has pursued any type of higher education, except for my half sister." Only one respondent's parents had any postsecondary education, reporting that his mother had an Education Specialist Degree and his father completed a community college track through the sophomore year, but did not result in the awarding of a degree.

While the parents did not have strong educational backgrounds, most were highly supportive of education.

> My mother went back and got her GED when she was in her 40s. My father graduated from high school, but his family was very poor and he didn't have the opportunities and that is one of the reasons why he kept trying to give me the opportunities.

The respondents also had sibling or other relatives that did have an education.

"My mom doesn't read or write, but my sister went on to college in Thailand and became a teacher in Thailand."

> I haven't seen my father since I was 6. I think he had a high school diploma, maybe some vocational. I know my mother had some business school. My mother didn't feel it was important for a girl to go to school to be honest with you. My grandmother was actually an RN. She was a public heath nurse."

The respondent received an A.S. degree in nursing, an A.A. degree and was pursuing a baccalaureate degree in nursing from FSU when interviewed

Educational goals. All of the respondents in Group B, initially started their postsecondary education shortly after high school, stopped out, and then restarted it at a later point in time, in some cases 20 years later. Two of the men had military service in between stopping out and starting again.

Two respondents had strong goal commitments starting their postsecondary education. One respondent, started in the medical program, dropped out for 20 years and then eventually returned to complete within 5 years an A.S., A.A. and B.A. in nursing. The other has been interested in a job in coaching and after taking one semester in sports programs, stopped out for ten years then returned and earned an A.S. and A. A. in two years. However, he has changed majors within the A.S. and A.A. often in an effort to extend his coaching job at the college.

The other respondents did not have specific education goals early in their educational career and one respondent never did identify a major but was a general transfer student the entire time.

> I can't say I was pursuing anything at that point. I really couldn't even see getting the A.A. because I was having to do it in such small segments at a time. . . . Actually, when I was at TCC, I think I went in as a general transfer student. I took a lot of accounting at one point because that is actually what I had done before, but as far as actually declaring any kind of major, I didn't.

Another interesting issue with this group is all of the respondents had an educational goal of an A.A. degree, but first got their A.S. Only one respondent got their A.A. first and then went back and got a program certificate. All of the respondents in Group B had two degrees.

Environmental Variables

Finances. Two of the respondents financed their educations on the G.I. Bill. One paid for everything himself with no assistance of any kind. Two financed their educations with their own money and student loans. The final respondent reported that her parents paid for her entire education. None of these respondents were on any type of academic scholarship.

The only consistency among the Group B respondents in terms of financing their education was that none of them received any financial aid or scholarships, except the G.I. Bill, to pay for their community college education.

Employment. All but one of the respondents worked. Four worked full-time; three of the four full-time respondents went to school part-time; the fourth worked full-time and went to school full-time, until the load became too much and he reduced school to part-time. One respondent worked for her husband in a grocery store and went to school part-time. The only respondent that didn't work was not able to work due to health reasons.

> Yes ma'am, both full-time school and full-time working and it was rough. There were times when I had to back off on the load. I was supervising a shift of 15 people at times and to try to work and stay on top of the job and schoolwork was difficult. I had to bring it [school] down to part-time before I finished.

Outside and family encouragement. The respondents received varying degrees of encouragement from their families, employers or others outside the family. However, all of them in one area of their lives received encouragement to continue and eventually complete their educations.

The non-working respondent indicated that his wife was very supportive of him completing his education. [She said] "You don't have to do this or do that, just concentrate on staying in school and getting your degree."

One respondent indicated that his mother and father weren't very supportive of education when they were growing up, due to their rural upbringing and the need to work in order to provide for their families. Nor was his supervisor at work supportive of his education. However, during his employment he began taking credits that applied to his job and eventually completed an A.S. degree in fire science. The work he was doing as a fire fighter, created a desire in him to pursue a medical degree. Eventually he found work as a paramedic and completed an A.A. degree in pre-med. Consequently, it would appear that the culture of the county fire department where he worked was supportive of him receiving an education even though he perceived his immediate supervisor as being non-supportive.

Another respondent had received negative encouragement as a young man, which impacted him negatively in a dramatic way, in spite of his family being supportive of him pursuing an education. Eventually he was able to overcome that and complete his education.

Two respondents indicated that their employers, as well as their families, were very supportive of their pursuing an education.

> My mom says if you want to get anywhere you need to go to school, basically. And, she was always like sitting there, like pushing us. If we take a semester off, she was like, 'You're going to get back into that, right?

The remaining respondent worked for her husband, who she credits with encouraging her to success.

> My husband sold his last grocery store. I used to work with him some. He sold it almost 8 years ago. When we closed that, we were going to do all this traveling. He fishes, so we bought a boat and we went fishing. We took a trip to the Bahamas and I said 'This is not my thing.' So, one day we were in Panama City, actually going to pick up some fishing lures and we were right in front of Gulf Coast Community College and he dropped me off and said 'Don't call me until you've taken the entrance exam and registered.' He said, 'This is always what you've wanted to do, so DO IT.' And, he said, 'You keep putting it off, because you say well, I need this or the kids need that.' [Now] one's a senior at FSU and Michelle's gone; she's graduated from college. If he had not forced me, [I would not have gone]. Even though I knew I was halfway intelligent, you walk on this campus and here's all these little kids. It's intimidating.

Family responsibilities. One respondent was single and had no immediate family responsibilities to impact his education. Another was married without children and had few family responsibilities that impacted his education. Another respondent had two children who resided with his ex-wife; he was on disability and had no direct family responsibilities that influenced his educational career or course taking patterns.

The remaining three respondents did have family responsibilities, some that greatly influenced their educational status.

One respondent graduated from high school in 1969, started at TCC in 1972, got married and became pregnant. She subsequently dropped out and had another child. Her family responsibilities kept her from returning to school until after her children had graduated and were gone.

> I withdrew because I started having some health problems, and it turned out I had cancer and my tumor turned out to be my daughter. I had a tumor years before and they said I would never have children. And, so, then I had two. So, I decide to stay home with the kids and Mike worked 60-70 hours a week. It was never convenient to go to school. I thought one of us needed to be home with the children. I didn't have that kind of home life and I thought one of us needed to be home with the kids.

The divorced mother of two moved to Florida to be near her parents, so they could assist with taking care of her two children. This respondent's parents also paid for her entire education.

One respondent was married with two children. He was unable to find work and eventually enrolled at the community college, where he received financial assistance and a loan to go to school and help support his family.

Academic Variables

Enrollment status. All of the respondents earned more than one degree. The data request was for students who had earned only an associate in arts degree. However, all three institutions provided samples that had students who had earned two degrees. In Group B, this accounted almost entirely for their excess hours. It also skews the reporting of the students' enrollment status. Consequently, the students enrollment status includes starting one degree (e.g. an A.S. degree in 1991), stopping out for a number of years, and eventually come back to complete the Associate in Arts degree.

The interesting finding was that for the most part, once the stop outs decided to return to get their education, they went on a full-time basis. In Group B, four of the respondents started college and dropped out for a significant period of time. However, when they returned they completed the program within two to three years.

> I started and went for a semester at Chipola and I was like, 'This isn't for me, I need to do something different.' So I went to the military. I went to the U.S.

> Army from 1992-1996. After I got out of there I was engaged at one time and I stayed up there an extra year and then I came back and started going to school in '98. In 2000, I graduated with two degrees from Chipola.

Similarly, another respondent said,

> Yes, I enrolled for respiratory care, which I completed in 1991. I completed my A.S. degree in two years, but before I completed it, I was working for Tallahassee Memorial and I revisited [going into] nursing. But, I was working the night shift full-time and going to school at TCC and I thought I had either to quit or go full-time and I decided at that time to quit. But, I still had an interest at that time in more education. So, the hospital offered to pay for classes as long as it fell in the category that was useful to the hospital. And, at that time, I decided to become a social worker for various reasons. So, I went back to TCC, I think about a year or two ago and I completed my A.A. degree.

Two respondents went on and off for a number of years until they finished their program.

> I was employed by the county for a number of years and having taken those vocational type courses, it interested me to pick up some credit courses for the profession and some of those courses were not offered on a regular basis. So I would take them when they were offered and gain credit that way and eventually finished the AS degree in fire science. After I finished the fire science degree, I had a yearning to go to medical school . . . so I pursued an A.A. in chemistry and completed that.

The other respondent explained,

> Well, I came to Florida in 1985 from Texas and I started at TCC then actually. And, I went on and off again, until I got my A.A. degree, until December 2000. And, I went back after that and got a program certification.

Academic and career advising. All of the respondents except for one had a fairly clear idea of what they wanted to major in before they started their course work for the A.A. None of them received any career advising. However, they all received academic advising about what courses to take or self-advised using the curriculum

guidelines created by the college. One student followed what the university had laid out for the program he was taking at the community college.

Overwhelmingly though, the respondents in Group B, all received information about what courses to take and they followed it.

> Yes, I knew the program I wanted to get into was Elementary Education. I want to teach kids and stuff. I know the topic. I know what I wanted to do, I just told him that's my goal. And, he said here is what you need. . . . Yes, I followed that until I got out of here.

Another respondent had the same experience,

> In the beginning, I was just kind of signing up and doing what I wanted to do. When you first start it is easy to take things cause there are certain things you have to take. So it is easier to do it on your own when you are starting and once it gets on towards the end you kind of have to have someone guide you, so that you can finish. At this point in time, I'm thinking about going to FSU and before I ever start that I want to see a counselor so they can tell me what I need to do, because you know you need some direction to tell you what to do.

Major certainty. All of the respondents changed majors at least once. However, the trend with all the respondents was to get an associate in science degree first and then go back to get an associate in arts degree.

Only one respondent maintained her original goal of becoming a nurse. However, she decided to get an associate in science in nursing first, so she could immediately get a job, then return and get the associate in arts before transferring to get a bachelor in arts in nursing.

One respondent started out with a specific major in mind and when she didn't succeed in that, simply went back, but never declared a major.

> By the time I went back it was just something to do. I can't say I was pursuing anything at that point. I really couldn't even see getting the A.A. because I was having to do it in such small segments at a time.

Another respondent was simply changing majors to keep from graduating so he could continue to coach. He claimed that what his major was didn't matter; it was the coaching experience that he was getting, which would help him achieve his ultimate goal.

> I kept changing my major cause I wanted to keep getting my coaching experience at the same time as I am going to school, so I don't have to wait after I'm done with my schooling to get the experience, so I can move up.

The remaining respondents started out wanting to get an associate in science degree in a specific major and their experience in the work force exposed them to other career opportunities which motivated them to change their major and pursue the associate in arts degree.

> After I finished the fire science degree, I had a yearning to go to medical school, having had exposure to pre-hospital emergency medicine. . . . So I pursued an A.A. in chemistry and completed that.

Reason for excess hours. All of the excess hours that the respondents in Group B accumulated were a result of acquiring two degrees -- an associate in science and an associate in arts. The general education component of the associate in science degree is typically the only portion that is transferable and can be brought forward into the associate in arts degree. The Southern Association of Colleges (SACS) regional accrediting agency requires that twenty-five percent of the associate in science degree consist of general education courses. Consequently, if a student earns 60 hours towards the associate in science degree, 15 hours will transfer into the associate in arts, meaning they have to take an additional 45 hours. The total is approximately 105 hours, which is the average number of credit hours taken by the respondents in Group B.

Social Integration Variables

Student and faculty interaction. All of the respondents indicated that they had a positive relationship with the faculty and students at the community college. They all also mentioned that their relationship with both the students and the faculty was influenced by their age. They considered themselves "older" students. They also all indicated that while they had positive relationships with the faculty and students there was minimal contact outside of the classroom.

> I got a long with everyone. I did. I mean I feel like I'm a personable type individual. I just talked to them, when I needed help and they were accessible for help. And, at first they don't expect that from an older student. They expect the goof off straight out of high school, who can catch everything the first time. I

> guess that's what they are used to. But, I presume that they don't expect anyone to press in and basically demand extra help. Like I got to have it and do whatever it takes to get it.

Another respondent reported a similar experience,

> I thought I was going to be the oldest person in the class, but that wasn't the case. There was a grandmother in the class and I'm not a grandfather yet. And, I find a lot of other people my age and a little younger that had been out in the world and worked a little and I had a really good time. I didn't spend any social time with them . . . all of the time was in college. But, even with younger students I found a lot of them to be really pleasant.

Psychosocial Variables

Utility and satisfaction. All of the respondents, except for one, expressed their satisfaction with the community college and their time there as enjoyable.

"I enjoyed it. It was a wonderful school with wonderful instructors. The environment was great."

The lone respondent, who had at the outset wanted to be a nurse and did not change her major, described her Gulf Coast Experience as follows:

> I finally eased up. To me, it was me putting pressure on me, not anyone else. Nurses' school is not easy. It is a hard program. They set the expectations high. And I have these standards. It was a lot of pressure.

This respondent was also the only one that attended graduation. The experience was "an accomplishment for me. It gave me a feeling of 'Yeah, I can do that.'" She was also the only respondent who did not describe the associate in arts degree as a stepping-stone towards the baccalaureate degree. The other respondents while having a sense of accomplishment at completing the A.A. degree viewed the utility of the degree as a stepping-stone to the B.A. "It is a stepping-stone. Certainly because of my background, it allows me to be able to relate to different people in an area that I could not before." Another respondent felt the same way,

> My A.A.? I didn't walk because the A.A. wasn't the reason why I was in school. The B.A. was the reason why I was in school. And, [the thought] of getting my Masters has grown cause I finally figured out what I wanted to do. But, I looked

at it like I'm a third of the way home. I was kind of relieved, but I was like well the job's not done yet, so to speak.

Goal accomplishment. The respondents in Group B exhibited strong goal commitments by completing both associate in arts degrees and associate in science degrees. However, three of the respondents did not go on to pursue a baccalaureate degree, thereby not completing their ultimate goal.

None of the respondents expressed their commitment to earning a degree as related to an event that opened their eyes. Rather the respondents in Group B all expressed a plodding resolve towards the goal of completing their degree. It was a goal that in several cases remained with the respondents for some time.

One of the respondents had a goal of a degree coming out of high school in 1969 and stopped out when she became pregnant with her first child. Twenty years later, she returned to college with the same goal and completed the associate in science, associate in arts and the bachelors in nursing within five years. Two other respondents had similar long-term goal commitments.

> I started and went for a semester at Chipola and I was like, 'This isn't for me, I need to do something different'. So I went to the military. I went to the U.S. Army from 92-96. After I got out of there . . . I came back and started going to school in '98. In 2000, I graduated with two degrees from Chipola.

Another respondent graduated high school in 1971, wanting more education particularly in the medical field. He enrolled in respiratory therapy in 1991. Four years later with an associate in science in respiratory therapy and an associate in arts degree in social work, he is enrolled at FSU working towards a Bachelor's degree in social work.

Group C - Respondents With 53.5 Plus Hours

Group Description

Group C respondents had accumulated 113.5 credit hours or 53.5 excess hours beyond that needed to earn the degree. Group C respondents, as with Group A and B, were also non-traditional students as defined by Bean and Metzler (1985). There were a total of six respondents in Group C. Their credit hours ranged from 114 to 212 with an average of 135.

Background and Defining Variables

Age, race, gender and marital status. The respondents in the extreme category of excess hours, over 53.5 plus ranged in age from 28 to 48, with an average age of 36. There was no discernible pattern relating to marital status; four were married with children, one was single with children and one was single with no children. Three were men and three were women. One was Black and five were White.

High school performance. All but one stated that they had B grade point averages in high school. The remaining one, said health reasons kept her from maintaining a good GPA in high school, but prior to her health problems she had a B grade point average. One was the salutatorian from his high school.

Family background. Four respondents were the first generation in their family to attend college**.** Family educational backgrounds ranged from a GED to a Masters degree. They all received varying levels of family support in terms of encouraging them to go on to school or viewing schooling as something of value.

> Learning in my family is a big thing. My mom got her Master's. My brothers have bachelors. One has a Masters or is working on it. I'm not sure if he is finished. It's a big deal in our family.

Another reported in his family work came first.

> Mother, she graduated from Vigor High School in Mobile, Alabama and did not go on after that. My father graduated. . . . Let's see if I can get this right. He was from the old school. And, I guess I am, too, where you worked and supported your family. I think work came before education and unfortunately, back then, you got out of high school and went to work. It was, as far as my family goes, you went straight to work, and you just sort of worked around education to get to your ultimate goal.

Another reported a slightly different background.

> My dad graduated from high school. My mother did not. My sister got an A.A. and an A.S. at Santa Fe Community College. My little brother just finished his A.A. two weeks ago. There're six children in my family and, really, my sister and my little brother are the only two people that have graduated and got college degrees.

One respondent from a single parent family reported,

> [My folks] were divorced ever since before I could walk. I think my dad said that when I was six months old my mom and him got divorced and he was a single parent. He took care of me and my brothers. He went back to night school and got a GED. He didn't have time to be supportive; he was always working to support us.

Educational goals. All but one of the respondents had educational goals after high school that involved getting a postsecondary degree. However, consistently, they all changed their majors and changed their educational plans several times.

> I changed my major like my socks. I went physical therapy. I went physician assistant. I went nursing. What else was there? There were several others in between. Actually it was even pre-med for a little while. I just changed it every year just because . . . So, I finished that semester of school and went on to EMT school, so that I could actually have a job where I could do something else …

Similarly,

> I started off as wanting to be a nurse, then AIDS came out and I got terrified. So I switched to a business major and I wasn't too pleased with business courses, cause I always wanted to help people. So I switched my major back to the health field and I was taking science courses cause I wasn't sure what I wanted to do.

The lone respondent who did not have an educational goal out of high school first went to work on the oil rigs and then returned to get an education. He also changed his major.

> What happened when I graduated from high school, as most kids, you're not focused. You don't know what you want to do. And, I decided not to go to school, even though he [his father] would have paid for it. So, I went and played for a few years on the oil rigs. Then I got smart, and thought, 'I'm not going to get anywhere without an education.' So I came back to Chipley, believe it or not. My sister worked there as a respiratory therapist at the time. And, I started to work as an orderly in the emergency room there. This was in about 1984. . . . The best I can remember, I was going to get an A.A., and then you had what was called police standards that you had to take. And, I was working on my A.A.

> while I was working on taking the actual law enforcement course, which at that time, they had it at the college. And, then about a year through it, I changed my major to nursing.

Environmental Variables

Finances. The respondents in Group C all received some type of financial assistance to help pay for their postsecondary education and they all worked while attending school.

One respondent was the salutatorian from his high school and received a one-year scholarship. One received the Stanford loan, which had to be paid back. Eventually, she got a job with the State of Florida and was able to attend classes on a tuition free waiver program. One respondent paid for his education through programs at the local hospitals that would pay for tuition in return for a commitment to work at the hospital for a certain amount of time.

> It doesn't cover books or any other fees or anything, just strictly tuition. And, . . . the way the foundation has it is you work it off at $100 a month. And what it is, once you graduate, every month [you work for them], they deduct $100 from what they paid in.

One respondent used financial aid like a welfare program, going from one program to another. She had been going to school since 1981 and was just finishing up a baccalaureate degree from FAMU. The only employment she mentioned was a summer job she had briefly held. Her stated intentions were to continue through her J.D. and Ph.D.

> You get financial aid if you are in a certain stratification. It is very important that while you are in that level you maintain it, because if you don't, 5 cents above it and God forbid, everything is out the door. It's a shame but its true. And, also I had help from [names of counselor at the college] and began exploring the New Directions Program. It was called the Displaced Homemakers Program. . . . [After this,] I am moving on to get my J.D. And, after I get my J.D. from Harvard or Yale, I am going to go back to get a Ph.D. It is something that I have always wanted to do and I finally have the opportunity to do it and I'm going to

do it right. I am going to make my own grant proposals and make the type of money I want to make as part of community services.

One respondent also used the Pell Grant and the GI Bill to support his educational goals after retiring from the military.

Employment. The employment status of respondents in Group C ranged from not working at all and going to school full-time to both working and going to school full-time. Two respondents went to school full-time and did not work; one used financial assistant like welfare, the other relied on the GI bill and his wife's income to support the family and pay the cost of school.

Of the remaining four respondents, two worked full-time, while attending school full-time, which placed some stress on their academic success and the remaining two worked full-time and went to school part-time.

> I was salutatorian from our school and I got a one-year scholarship and that did OK, but I wasn't able to take as many hours as I wanted cause I was working a full-time job I was working and going to school at the same time. Fourteen (14) hours a semester and working 60-70 hours a week. … And, I kind of just said. OK that's it and I as going to school too much and working too much, and I rolled my truck over on the interstate gong 80 mph, after falling asleep at the wheel. So I finished that semester of school and went on to EMT school so that I could actually have a job where I could do something else and I cut down on my work for while.

The following respondent cut down on classes instead of work.

> Yes. I've worked [full-time] all a long. I stayed full-time [in school] the whole time. . . . Well, I was getting behind in college algebra and English has never been a good subject for me, and I was taking full loads the whole time. So it was easier for me just to back out of a class, because the only time I had problems with my grades was in the nursing program.

Outside and family encouragement. All of the respondents indicated that they had received positive encouragement both from their families and from others outside of their family circle. However, none of the respondent indicated that it was "expected" that they would go on to school. Outside encouragement was apparent and welcomed, but it

did not seem to be a major influence on whether or not they continued their education. Their families did not inculcate in them that it was expected they go to college and the outside encouragement was simply another factor that had to be taken into consideration.

"My counselor at Cuyahoga CC. I was always asking him about colleges out of state. . . . He told me about FAMU and how they had a very good physical therapy program. . . . He was a very helpful and motivational individual."

"So, five years went by before I decided to get going again. And, my friend Ron Moore kind of talked me into it. Time goes by and you're just sitting there complaining; might as well do something about it."

"Both of the supervisors I have now are very flexible. I can take classes during the day if I need to. I can just skip lunch and take a class and neither one of them has had a problem with it."

Family responsibilities. Five of the six respondents had family responsibilities. In addition, all of the respondents were stop outs; that is they stopped and started college at various times throughout their academic careers. Volkwein & Lorang (1996) found in their study that "extender behavior may be a needed coping mechanism that assists some students in successfully making the transition into and through college" (p. 64). The stop-out-behavior for the respondents appears to be a needed coping mechanism. Family responsibilities came first and were the contributing factors that required respondents to stop out for a time; eventually to return to complete their degrees.

> I think work came before education, and education, unfortunately, back then, you got out of high school and went to work. As far as my family goes, you went straight to work and you just sort of worked around education to get to your ultimate goal.

This respondent stopped out for 22 years before returning to get an A.A. degree and A.S. degree in nursing and transfer to FSU.

> I got an A.S. in Graphic Design at Santa Fe Community College in 1995. And, my husband and I moved here (Tallahassee). And, I couldn't find a job in graphic design when I got here and I needed to work to pay my bills, so I got a job at a frame shop and I worked there until I got this job in 1998 (works for FSU). Then

I decided I wanted to study art history. So I went back and finished my A.A. when I got here. And I started that in 1999 and I finished that last Fall 2000.

Academic Variables

Enrollment status. All of the respondents in Group C, except one, earned two degrees, an A.S. and an A.A. degree. The one respondent earned an A.A degree, but changed majors several times, jumping from an A.S. program to an A.A. program.

Four of the six respondents worked full-time while attending classes. Two of four attended full-time, the other two respondents attended part-time. The remaining two respondents attended school full-time and did not work. The interviewer had anticipated that more students would attend part-time over an extended period of time, thereby accumulating excess hours. However, that was not the case. Several were in fact attending full-time, stopping and starting their academic programs and accumulating excess hours.

Academic and career advising. When asked if they received any academic advising and to elaborate on the nature and quality of the advising, all of the respondents indicated that they had received academic advising and all found it very helpful.

Yeah. . . . I did it every semester. . . . I would say, 'Okay, here's what I'm trying to do. Here's what I need.' She'd go to the FSU book and see what they had and what I needed to qualify for them. And then she'd come back to what I had, and then she'd say, 'Okay, you need to take these this semester, and then next semester, take that.' I mean they were really good. I couldn't have probably done it without [them].

In response to following a curriculum guide for his A.A. degree program, another respondent who had changed majors and earned more than one degree stated, "Yes, I followed that [curriculum guide] and it helped. I never did any excess hours."

Finally, another respondent reported:

Yeah. Sort of a checklist they would go over. They would look at your transcripts and see what you'd have that would either be comparable to what they had or the equivalent to that.

While the respondents indicated they benefited from the curriculum guides and academic advising provided by the institutions, none of the students received any career

advising, which could in part account for the number of times they changed majors. Ironically, the respondents are utilizing the academic advising and giving it credit for keeping them on track, but they are changing tracks often.

Major certainty. They also all expressed that they had educational goals coming out of high school. However, the goals were not very fixed and as the interviews would show changed over the course of their educational history.

> It wasn't quite that cut and dried, because I originally was going into law enforcement. . . . So, I had a year of criminology from 84 to 85 and that's when I changed (interviewee changed to get an A.D.N. degree in nursing).

Another subject answered the following when asked if he had gone directly into postsecondary education after high school and what goal he was pursuing.

> Yes, Miami-Dade Community College in pre-med and frittered away the time. Basically, I was a party-animal, a long with a few of my friends. But, my major did not lend itself to that type of life style, to say the least. Like I say, I ran out of money and I realized that this is getting me nowhere and I needed to do more. My wife was pregnant and I had a friend who had already graduated from FSU and joined the Navy. So, I went to look at the Navy and didn't like everything that they said so I went to the Air Force. I liked the Air Force.

Another said,

> I started off as wanting to be a nurse, then AIDS came out and I got terrified. So I switched to a business major and I wasn't too pleased with business courses, cause I always wanted to help people. So I switched my major back to the health field and I was taking science courses cause I wasn't sure what I wanted to do.

All of Group C had initial educational goals, which changed as they pursued their degrees. However, they all exhibited strong goal commitment when they finally "found" the right major and typically finished in the allotted time (i.e. two years for a 60 credit degree). The researcher was operating under the premise that each of the interviewees had only received one degree but during the course of their work had acquired excess hours. In fact, according to the interviewees, they typically had acquired several degrees, which could account for the excess hours. One interviewee with 212 credit hours earned an A.A. and an A.S. in nursing, an AA in electronics and a 40-hour certificate in

paramedics, over a span of approximately 20 plus years. Stopping out did not have a direct effect on the number of excess hours that they accumulated; most of the hours earned transferred and were applied to the degree, if the respondent stayed in the same program and if they had good grades.

Only one interviewee reported that he had accumulated excess hours that were withdrawals or bad grades that had to be made up. Others reported successful completion of courses, but at other institutions that could only be carried forward as elective credits.

Reason for excess hours. Only one of the five respondents indicated that he had withdrawn or flunked several courses (up to 100 credits worth), which accounted for his excess hours. All of the other respondents were enrolled in specific programs and subsequently changed majors. In doing so, some of the credit hours would transfer and apply to their new endeavor and some would not and would therefore become excess hours. In some cases, the respondents were accumulating hours that would apply towards two degrees, an A.S. and an A.A., and they would go back and forth between the two tracks, eventually finishing both degrees.

Social Integration Variables

Student and faculty interaction. These students were non-traditional students, older than 24 years of age, commuting to and from the institution and were primarily interested in the institutions' academic offering. They had minimum contact with the faculty. Although without exception they thought that faculty was supportive and "nice." The same is true for fellow students.

> I had a pretty good [relationship with the instructors]. Because I'm coming back to school when you're in your late 30s, you have a whole different focus. You're there because you want to be. Where 90 percent of the kids there are there just to play. So, you come in, you come prepared. You do your assignments. You know? You do good on your tests. And you ask questions. You know, I won't say intelligent questions, but you ask the good questions. And then you've got these kids around you, you know, dropping classes and making 60s on tests that were really easy. [After class], I got to know some of the instructors, and they're pretty good. They were always helpful. I never had a problem. I never had one not help me.

Another respondents reported,

> I think if I had been in search of that person [an instructor who was a mentor] there would have been someone, but I was not in search of [such] a person and I pretty much knew what I had to do. Most of the instructors were wonderful. Of course, there are some instructors that are prejudiced. But, I just tried to work through that.

Another respondent reported the interaction very succinctly, "Only in the nursing program, [did we have a cohort group, but] for the most part, I would come to school, go home, eat, and do homework.

Psychosocial Variables

Utility and satisfaction. Overwhelmingly, the respondents saw the A.A. degree as a means to an end, not an end in itself. Therefore, being satisfied with the goal attainment of the A.A. degree was muted because the ultimate goal was the Bachelor's degree. "The main [goal] is the Bachelor's. [The A.A. degree] is a stepping stone." Similarly, "Well, to me, finishing the A.A. was sort of just a stepping stone to get really where I want to be. . . . It served its purpose. [It was] functional."

The A.A. degree was not viewed by the respondents as utilitarian in terms of providing entree into the job market or into a specific job. It was utilitarian for entree into the Bachelor's program. However, all of the respondents did believe that an education was the way to improve their status in life with a better job, or a specific type of job that they "liked" and subsequently into a position that provided a better standard of living.

Goal accomplishment. The respondents in Group C, without exception, changed majors and stopped out often. They were vaguely goal-directed. However, when they eventually realized their goal of getting an A.A. degree, they became strongly goal-directed and completed within a short amount of time following a direct path. Some respondents reported having a dramatic "Aha" experience with finding what interested them and subsequently motivated them to complete the degree. Others just continued to methodically plod through to the end. Regardless, all the respondents conveyed that they had a goal, that it was something that they liked, that it was worthwhile and that it was seen as either producing a positive outcome or as reducing a negative situation.

After working on the oil rigs for two years, one respondent said to himself, "I'm not going to get anywhere without an education." Subsequently, the respondent moved back to his hometown, enrolled in a criminology program and was working as an orderly at a local hospital. The orderly work encouraged him to change his major to nursing. He graduated in two years with an A.S. in ADN. After a decade of working and traveling, he again came home and realized he was "spinning his wheels." He again enrolled to become a nurse practitioner. At that time in order to realize this goal, he enrolled in the CJC Bridge program and completed the A.A. degree, while concurrently enrolled in the B.A. program at FSU.

Another respondent stated:

> I didn't want to be just a stay at home mom. I always felt that there was something better that I could do. I had a job at the State Post Office and I thought 'No, I shouldn't be a blue-collar worker. I'm too smart for that. I don't want to be in that stratification.' I said, 'Education is the key. It is the way out.'

She subsequently moved to Tallahassee, enrolled at TCC in 1996. She didn't graduate until 2000 due to a one-credit course she hadn't completed. In the meantime, she enrolled in the physical therapy program at FAMU, but decided to take a criminal justice course as an elective. "I just loved it and I had no idea that I would love it so much. . . . The next semester I changed my major and enrolled in 21 credit hours and I got all A's and one B."

One respondent had an interesting story about his experiences that helped him become goal-directed.

> I would describe [my awakening] as Fort Polk, LA. I went with the Army on a deployment there on a training exercise. Spent 30 days living out of a tent, no shower, 110-degree weather with long sleeves, 20 pounds of stuff strapped to me for about a month. I decided at that time, I didn't need to be doing this. . . . I went down to Hickum Airforce Base and they were having a pharmacology class. It was for 2nd & 3rd year med school students. I decided to take it and see if I liked it. Then I said, 'Well, I won't be out in the sun all day. I won't be sweating all the time. And, the [work is] most probably 8-9 hour days, with decent pay.' So, I decided to go for that. And, I got a direction, which is the hardest part for me.

Once I find a direction, I am able to go at it and I am very stubborn. It is rough finding that direction.

Synthesis of Findings by Number of Credit Hours Earned

The maximum variation form of purposeful sampling was used to allow the researcher to assess factors that are present within widest range of excess hours. In this study, the number of excess hours in the sample ranged from 5 to 212. The differences between the three groups identified by the number of excess credit hours is considerably more distinct than the differences between the groups separated by college. The groups were comparable in terms of gender, race, marital status and children. In other words, there were Blacks in the group with the fewest number of hours and Blacks in the group with the largest number of hours. Similarly, there were male and female, married and single respondents in all groups. So the gender, race, martial status and number of children were equally represented among the groups and therefore, did not appear to be a factor in the accumulation of excess hours.

The high school performance of the groups was also very similar. Every group had students with a high GPA and also respondents that had earned a GED. Group A, B and C respondents were very similar in terms of employment. The respondents either worked part-time and went to school full-time or vice versus. A few (five out of 18) worked full-time and went to school full-time. However, these respondent were spread across the groups, consequently, no conclusion can be drawn in terms of employment affecting the number of excess hours earned.

There were also similarities among the groups in the area of marital status and those with children. Three of the six respondents in Group A were single with no children; two in Group B, and two in Group C. In terms of finances, the only difference among the three groups was that some Group A respondents received scholarships. None of the other respondents received scholarships, but used a variety of methods to pay for college.

Group A had the most (3) second-generation-in-college respondents compared to the other two groups. Group A also had more respondents that reported their families "expected" them to go on to college, which was not expressed by any respondents in the other two groups. In terms of educational goals, Group A was strongly goal directed; for

the most part they determined their major before enrolling and did not make any changes. Group B respondents were vaguely goal directed, starting school and then stopping out for a long period of time before returning to complete their programs. Group C were also vaguely goal directed, changing their majors and educational plans several times. Group A had the youngest respondents and the most attending school on a full-time basis, which was an indirect impact on family responsibilities. The older students tended to be married, the younger ones were single without children.

In the area of Academic Variables the primary difference among the groups is the Group A respondents only earned one degree. They enrolled in an A.A. degree program with a major in mind and went straight through without changing degree or major, while the other respondents earned more than one degree, changed majors, stopped out, and withdrew from courses. The reason for excess hours in Group B and C was attributed to earning more than one degree and changing majors. The respondents in these two groups were vaguely goal directed until they found the right program at which point in time they became strongly goal directed.

All of the groups expressed positive but very limited interaction with faculty and students. With the exception of two students, they were all non-traditional and came to the college mainly for the academic programs and not to socialize or participate in extra-curricular programs. All of the respondents in the three groups also saw the A.A. degree as a stepping-stone to the bachelors and they had differing senses of accomplishment. Group A was more strongly goal directed than the other groups, which did have an influence on the number of excess hours accumulated.

Summary

Chapter 4 presented the findings from interviews with 18 respondents. A cross-case comparison of data was conducted. The respondents were grouped according to the amounts of excess credits they had accumulated and by the enrollment size of the community college at which they earned their degrees. The findings were analyzed using the constant comparative methodology.

The analysis found little difference among the respondents from different size community colleges. But, significant differences were found when a cross-case comparison was made based on number of accumulated excess hours. The key

differences were found with variables such as: strong goal commitment, family responsibilities, major certainty and earning more than one degree.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

This chapter re-visits the purpose of the study, discusses the theoretical connections, the emerging themes, the recommendation and implications, and the suggestions for further research.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of extended persisters by studying the perceptions, behaviors, and experiences of Florida community college students who persist to graduation and, in doing so, accumulate credit hours beyond the number required to earn an associate in arts degree. A qualitative research approach was used to gain insight into the perceptions, behaviors, and experiences of extended persisters by providing answers to the following questions:

1. What are the background and defining factors that have influenced the students' perceptions, behaviors, and experiences thereby impacting the accumulation of excess hours?
2. How have various academic factors influenced the students' accumulation of excess hours?
3. How do the students perceive their education and their social integration with faculty, administrators, and other students?
4. How do the students perceive various environmental factors in the context of their education?
5. What experiences did the students have with the institution, the faculty, administrators, other students, and other like-minded people?
6. How are the students' perceptions and experiences exhibited in their behaviors and why did they behave the way they did?

7. How have the psychosocial factors influenced the students' accumulation of excess hours?
8. What implications do the findings have for the accumulation of excess hours?

Eighteen in-person interviews were conducted with community college associate in arts graduates to determine their perceptions, behaviors, and experiences in relation to the questions above. The study compared responses from students who were one standard deviation below the mean and had earned 3.7 to 28.5 excess hours; one standard deviation above the mean with 28.6 to 53.4 excess hours; and, two standard deviations and more above the mean with over 53.5 excess hours. Comparisons were also made based on the size of the institution.

Theoretical Connections

This study was an orientational qualitative inquiry, which is aimed at "confirmation and elucidation rather than discovery" (Patton, 1990, p. 86). The inquiry was intended to confirm and elucidate Bean's Student Attrition Theory. Bean's Student Attrition Theory assumes that behavioral intents are shaped by attitudes, which in turn are influenced by beliefs. Beliefs are affected by the experiences that the student has with the institution (Bean, 1982).

The literature and other supporting theories on persistence and attrition have found no significant differences between persisters and extended persisters when looking at various factors (Harding, 1999; Lowman, 1996; Volkwein & Lorang, 1996). In other words, there is no significant difference between students who graduate in four years compared to students who take longer to graduate or between students who graduate with 120 credit hours compared to students who graduate with more. They are all persisters. Persisters and extended persisters have met the basic premise of the theories; they have completed their degree program.

Therefore, in utilizing Bean's theory on attrition in exploring the perceptions, behaviors, and experiences of extended persisters the researcher is comparing the findings of this study against the codifications Bean used to develop his model. One could hypothesize, that the differences would be minimal because all of the respondents have persisted to completion. Consequently, the findings of this study on excess hours

will serve to clarify and elucidate Bean's theory as it would apply to the accumulation of excess hours.

Bean's Theory on Attrition (1987) proposed that background and defining variables, academic variables, and environmental variables would affect four sets of variables that would lead to dropout decisions. (See Figure 2). He hypothesized that:

> Students with poor academic performance are predicted to drop out at higher rates than students who perform well academically, and GPA is expected to be based largely on past (high school) academic performance. The second major factor is intent to leave, which should be influenced primarily by the psychological outcomes but also by the academic variables. The third group of variables expected to affect attrition are the background and defining variables mainly high school performance and educational goals. Finally, the environmental variables are predicted to have substantial direct effects on dropout decisions (p. 18).

Bean's model, because it is dealing with attrition, includes factors, such as *drop out* or *intent to leave*. The researcher revised Bean's model for the purpose of looking at excess hours, eliminating the *intent to leave* as a variable along with the end result of *dropping out.* The Excess Hours Model is presented in Figure 3.

The researcher found that the academic variables, in particular major certainty, and two environmental variables, family responsibilities and employment, influenced the academic outcomes leading to withdrawals, failures and stop out behavior, which in turn led to excess hours. The psychological outcomes were influenced by all three groups of variables, family background, academic and environmental, which influenced the level of goals commitment. If the goal commitment was strong the student finished in a direct manner with few excess hours. In some cases, students possessed a strong goal commitment early in their academic careers and finished with few excess hours. In other cases, after students had earned a number of hours they found their goals and at that point their commitment became strong and they finished from that point forward with few excess hours.

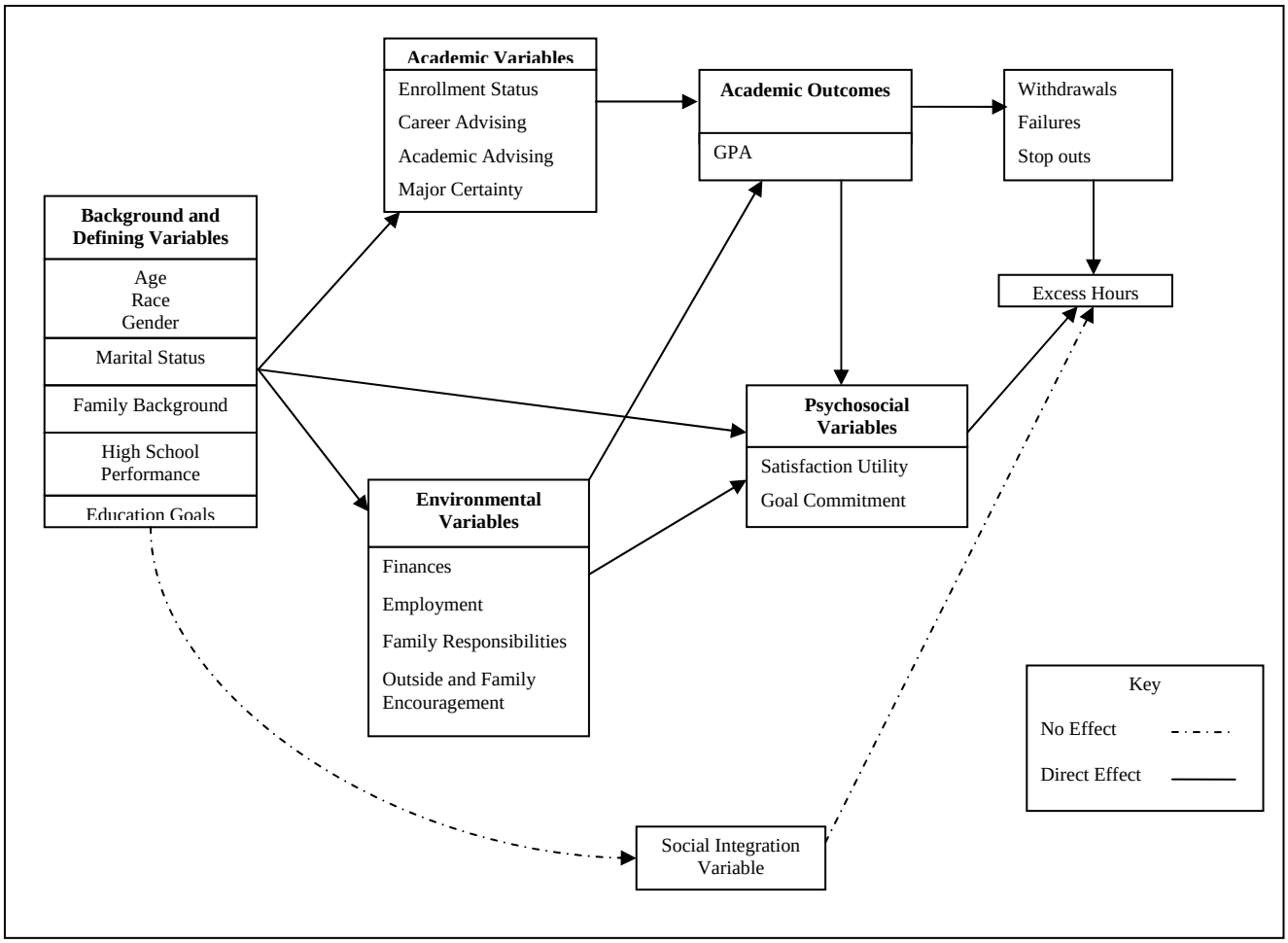


Figure 3. Excess Hours Model

The specifics variables and how they influenced the accumulation of excess hour is discussed in the following section on emerging themes. Some variables have an indirect effect on the accumulation of excess hours, influencing other variables (e.g. goal commitment), which has a direct impact on the accumulation of excess hours. Additionally, some variables have a positive effect in keeping excess hours at a minimum (e.g. major certainty). These relationships and how they relate to Bean's theory are discussed in the following section.

Emerging Themes

After the data were analyzed and categorized, the following themes emerged as it related to confirming and elucidating Bean's theory in terms of extended persisters accumulating excess hours toward the degree:

Background and Defining Variables

1. **Age, race, gender and marital status**: Unlike U.S. Department of Education (1990) findings on time-to-degree that found White students finished sooner than Black students and women finished sooner than men, this study found that race and gender had little effect on the accumulation of excess hours. However, age had an indirect effect. Overall, younger traditionally aged students with no family responsibilities were able to complete the degrees with fewer excess hours. Conversely, older students with family responsibilities interrupted their education, stopped out, and dropped courses to lighten their academic load in order to take care of their families, thereby accumulating more excess hours. Bean found that the "majority of codifications that addressed the relationship of students' age to attrition concluded that age, per se was not a major factor, although some correlates of students' age, such as family responsibility and hours of employment, might be significantly associated with attribution" (p. 494). Therefore, in his model Bean "assumed that older students will have more family responsibilities, hours of employment, and higher levels of absenteeism than younger students. The indirect effects of age on dropout should be through these variables" (p. 494). This study supported the hypotheses, as shown in the Excess Hours Model, that age directly influenced family responsibilities, which in turn influenced GPA, withdrawals and stop out behaviors, and that directly impacted the accumulation of excess hours. Because employment is so closely aligned with family responsibility, whether you are a family of one or many, providing an income through employment is part of one's responsibility. Therefore, employment and family responsibilities were found to influence GPA, withdrawals, failures, and stop out decisions and consequently contribute to the accumulation of excess hours.

   This study, in opposition to Bean's model, found no direct impact on the accumulation of excess hours based on race or gender. However, in Bean's model ethnicity played an indirect effect through high school GPA. It was assumed that

minority students would have received a poorer education at the secondary level. Therefore, their GPA would have a negative effect on attrition. This may be true for attrition, but did not have any impact in terms of excess hours. Minorities were represented in all of the groups and the same held for gender.

2. **High school performance**: Time-to-degree studies found that students with a higher high school GPA graduated faster than students with a lower GPA (Clarkson and Roscoe, 1994). In terms of extended persisters, in this study the high school GPA of students or whether they earned a GED or a diploma, did not impact the accumulation of excess hours. All groups, including Group A, which had the lowest number of excess hours, had respondents that earned a GED. Group C, which had the most excess hours, had a class salutatorian. While studies found that high school GPA played a role in attrition, it was not a factor in terms of accumulation of excess hours. This study did not support Bean's (1987) model which proposed that the "indirect effect of high school performance on attrition would occur primarily through its influence on college GPA" (p. 497). Indeed, many of the studies he reviewed found that high school GPA was the best pre-enrollment predictor of persistence.
3. **Family background**: In this study, 13 out of the 18 students were first-generation-college-graduates. Of the five students that were second generation in college, three were in Group A and they earned the fewest excess hours. The second-generation respondents reported that their families had instilled in them an expectation that they would go on to college. They had strong family support and expectations, which appeared to result in them being strongly goal directed or having a strong goal commitment, which is the term Bean uses. They knew what they wanted to take when enrolling in college, stayed enrolled continuously, and ultimately accumulated fewer excess hours than those with little or no family support for education when they were growing up. This study provides evidence for the view that family background contributes to goal commitment, which impacts directly the accumulation of excess hours. The more a student is goal directed the fewer excess hours they accumulate. However, the finding needs further exploration because it doesn't apply to all second-generation students, as evidenced by the two respondents who were second-generation in college respondents that earned excess hours. One in Group B earned

107 credit hours and one in Group C had 212 credit hours, which was the highest number of credit hours earned for the entire sample. It is possible that while they are second-generation college graduates, they were not instilled with the expectation that they would go on to college. Bean's model did not include family background as a factor. He reasoned (1985) that most commuter and older students, as opposed to traditional students are "first generation college attenders" (p. 498). As such, he didn't find any studies that looked at a "parents' educational level on the persistence of students who had been independent of the primary family for a substantial period" (p. 499). Due to his focus on nontraditional students, which are over 24 years of age and are commuters, he elected to eliminate parental education from his model.

4. **Educational goals**: All the respondents indicated they had a goal to go on to postsecondary education. What became a significant emerging theme was the differences the groups exhibited in terms of the drive to achieve their educational goal. Those with fewer excess hours were very strongly goal-directed or goal committed. They also knew before enrollment the major they wanted and did not change majors. They also knew the type of degree (e.g., A.A.) they wanted, did not change it, and remained continuously enrolled through to completion. Students that at one point had been vaguely goal-directed reported experiencing incidents in their lives that changed their beliefs and shifted their attitudes from vaguely goal direct to strongly goal directed [i.e. goal committed]. Respondents had attributed the change to "maturity" or realizing the importance of education. At that point, regardless of what had transpired previously, they made a commitment and stuck with it until the completion of the degree in the most expedient manner. Therefore, this study suggests that some environmental factors, such as finances or family responsibilities or dissatisfaction with their employment influenced their goal commitment and ultimately the accumulation of excess hours. In accordance with Bean's theory, this study found that the educational goals influenced the major certainty and goal commitment, both of which directly influenced the accumulation of excess hours. Bean (1985) also included educational goals in his model, based on previous studies that found they had a direct and indirect effect on persistence. In addition, Bean wanted to account for those students that did not intend to earn a degree. He

proposed that, "educational goals should have a significant indirect effect on dropout through major certainty, opportunity to transfer, goal commitment and intent to leave" (p. 496).

Environmental Variables

Finances: The type of finances used to support students' educational efforts varied. However, the only scholarship winners were found in the group that had accumulated the fewest number of excess hours. Students that had accumulated the greatest number of excess hours were on financial aid or tuition waivers and would drop out if family or work responsibilities became too much. It was not an uncommon pattern to have students on financial aid or waivers register for a full load then drop courses half way through the semester if the load proved too heavy. While the researcher didn't find conclusive results, the impression from the interviews is that students that had a personal investment in their education or were attending based on an academic scholarship, which they could lose if they did not maintain a certain GPA, were less likely to withdraw from classes, fail, or stop out compared to students that were using financial aid or waivers. Several respondents indicated that they could not have gone to school without some type of financial assistance. Bean (1985) hypothesized that finances would be a variable that would influence a student's decision to dropout. His hypothesis that finances were significant in impacting persistence is consistent with this study's findings that finances or the lack of adequate financial support resulted in withdrawals, thereby influencing the accumulation of excess hours.

5. **Employment**: Clarkson & Roscoe (1994) found no significant difference in time-to-degree between those students who worked and those that did not and those students that used career advising services and those who did not. Similarly, this study found that employment, whether full or part-time, did not play a role in the accumulation of excess hours. All of the groups had respondents that were employed either full or part-time. However, those respondents in the group that accumulated more excess hours appeared to not be able to deal with the demands of the workplace and family and stopped out or withdrew from courses to ease the load more often. This could be related to a combination of work and family responsibilities. Several codifications that Bean reviewed found that the number of hours employed time was negatively

associated with persistence. In other words, the greater the number of hours of employment, the less likely one would persist. This study did not find any association between excess hours and the number of hours employed.

6. **Outside and family encouragement**: All of the respondents received different levels of family support. Even those that had accumulated excessive amounts of excess hours said their families were supportive and that had contributed to their continuing on through graduation. However, a related factor that did have a bearing on the number of accumulated excess hours was family support (i.e. family background) instilling in the respondent that it was expected that they would go on to college. This expectation appeared to be internalized by the students and resulted in stronger goal direction and fewer excess hours. In this study, family and outside encouragement did have an impact on persistence. Several studies that Bean reviewed found a positive relationship between outside encouragement and student persistence in college. Bean's model (1985) proposed that "external encouragement is more important [than internal institutional support] for non-traditional students because their reference group of peers, friends, family, and employers is thought to be largely external to the institution" (p.506). In this study, students in all the groups received different levels of family support. In that regard, it would not support Bean's hypothesis. However, Bean did not elaborate on the degree of support and this study found that students from families that expected them to go to college had fewer excess hours.
7. **Family responsibilities**: Bean's (1985) theory proposed a positive relationship between family responsibilities and drop out. Those students with greater family responsibilities would tend to drop out more frequently. This study supports Bean's hypothesis. The group with the smallest number of excess hours had limited family responsibilities. Conversely, the group with the highest number of excess hours often reported conflicts between school and family, indicating that family responsibilities impact educational outcomes influencing failure, withdrawal or stop outs that in turn impacted the accumulation of excess hours.

Academic Variables

8. **Enrollment status**: Bean placed enrollment status in the category with background and defining characteristics. He did not explain the placement of that variable with background and defining characteristics, but the researcher elected to place enrollment status within the group of academic variables. Treating their enrollment status the same as major certainty, and academic advising, etc. Respondents in all of the groups attended college both part-time and full-time. Consequently, enrollment status, whether part-time or full-time had no impact on the accumulation of excess hours. However, stopping out played a significant role in students' accumulation of excess hours; the reasons for stopping out were varied but most had to do with employment and family responsibilities. Those students with the greatest number of excess hours had all stopped out. Another theme emerged that also had an impact on number of hours accumulated and it had to do with being a part of a cohort group. In programs such as nursing, a group of students are enrolled in the program at the same time and stay together in lock step through the completion of the entire program. While this came up several times, it was in discussion with completion of the A.S. degree program, which was not a focus of the study. Bean defined enrollment as the number of academic credits for which a student was enrolled. He assumed that students who enroll part-time had other responsibilities and those would most likely be older students. He also thought that part-time students would spend more hours employed than full-time students. Enrollment status was a defining variable that he anticipated would have a positive relationship with other variables, such as family responsibilities and hours of employment. This study found no relationship between enrollment status and other variables and, therefore, it had no impact on the accumulation of excess hours in this study.
9. **Changing majors**: Another theme that was identified was that changing majors contributed to the accumulation of excess hours. Clarkson & Roscoe (1994) also found that changing one's major field of study contributed to extending one's time-to-degree. Students that accumulated excess hours may have had a specific major in mind when they enrolled, but they often changed majors using course taking as a way of exploring alternate programs. They were not strongly goal-directed when they started their program. Supported by the literature, Bean's theory hypothesized that

students who were certain of their major were more likely to persist. The findings from this study support that proposition; those respondents that had only one major accumulated that fewest number of excess hours.

10. **Reason for excess hours**: In addition to changing majors, the majority of students who accumulated excess hours had earned more than one degree. In this study, even if the ultimate goal was to earn a bachelors degree, the respondents typically earned an associate in science degree and then went back and earned an associate in arts degree. This resulted in the accumulation of approximately 40 or more excess hours according to the how the students were reported. The two degrees were sought by the respondent to fit their life situation, namely to earn a degree for which they could secure a job, then after varying lengths of time, returning to college to seek an A.A. degree so they could transfer and eventually go on to receive a bachelors degree. Bean's theory did not address excess hours.
11. **Academic and career advising**: None of the students in this study availed themselves of career advising. While Clarkson & Roscoe (1994) found that career advising did not impact persistence, the same might not be true of the accumulation of excess hours. In terms of academic advising all the respondents indicated that they had followed some form of curriculum guides. A few indicated that they had seen an advisor; but it was the curriculum guides that students credited with keeping them on track. Bean (1985) found what he called "equivocal results" when looking at the research on academic advising and persistence. In a later multivariate study (1987) he found that academic advising was one of seven variables that had a significant positive relationship with utility; that is the advising helped students see that education had a positive effect on their employment. This study also shows that academic advising has "equivocal results" because all of the respondents utilized advising services and yet they accumulated various amounts of excess hours.
12. **Faculty and student interaction**: All the students expressed having a positive relationship with both the faculty and students at the institutions. However, the level of interaction was nominal and took place primarily in class and did not have an impact on the accumulation of excess hours. Bean expected that students who were nontraditional and commuters would not have the same level of student and faculty

integration that traditional students would. His study (1987) confirmed that hypothesis. He found that "social integration variables failed to create significant effects on psychological outcome variables, GPA, intent to leave, or dropout" (p. 28). In fact, his only finding on this variable was a negative relationship between intent to leave and faculty contact, which he indicated should be treated with cautioned due to the small correlation. In terms of this study, social integration, which plays such a significant role in Tinto's theory does not appear to play a significant role for extended persisters.

13. **Utility and satisfaction**: All respondents expressed satisfaction with their education at the community college and to varying degrees with themselves for finishing the degree. However, the perception of the utility of the degree was consistent across all groups, who saw it as a stepping-stone to the baccalaureate degree. It was not an end in itself but a means to an end. This sentiment was expressed by all groups, but did not have an impact on the number of excess hours accumulated. Bean's theory anticipated that utility would have a negative association with attrition.
14. **Goal accomplishment/commitment**: An emerging theme was the degree to which students were strongly goal-directed or goal committed. That is, they had identified a career goal and/or a major, figured out the curriculum they needed to reach that goal, and then consistently pursued it, working through any barriers that got in their way. Those students with the fewest number of hours were strongly goal-directed. Conversely, students that changed their majors often, didn't follow a curriculum guide, and stopped out, were considered vaguely goal-directed. However, students that were vaguely goal-directed, which describes the students in Group C, at some point in time were influenced by a life altering event that changed their attitude and shifted them from vaguely goal-directed to strongly goal-directed. From that point in time, they stayed consistently enrolled and completed the degree. A number of factors seem to influence the respondents and shift them from vaguely goal-directed to strongly goal-directed. Most commonly mentioned was the elusive quality, which respondents described as reaching maturity. However, it is difficult to assess if the students reached maturity and then became goal-directed or if attending college and becoming educated resulted in advancing their maturity. Goal commitment in Bean's

theory (1985) “refers to the amount of personal importance that a student ascribes to obtaining a college education, typically defined as the importance of graduating from college” (p.524). Studies that he looked at noted a positive relationship between a student’s goal commitment and persistence. This study would support that hypothesis.

Summary of Major Findings

Family background became a significant factor in influencing the accumulation of excess hours. Most students who expressed that they were “expected to go on to college” by their families were more strongly goal directed and as a consequence earned fewer excess hours. Those students whose families did not have the same expectations, were vaguely goal directed, changed their majors often, didn’t follow a curriculum guide and stopped out, tended to earn a greater number of excess hours. However, several students that were vaguely goal directed did, at some point in time, have a life-altering event that changed their attitude and shifted them from vaguely goal directed to strongly goal directed. From that point on, they completed their studies without deviating from their chosen major and without taking excess credits.

This study also found that the group with the smallest number of excess hours had limited family responsibilities, conversely, the group with the highest number of excess hours often reported conflicts between school and family, indicating that family responsibilities greatly impact educational outcomes with students dropping or failing classes, or stopping out to return at a later date; that in turn impacted the accumulation of excess hours.

Finally, two other themes emerged as major findings that contributed to the accumulation of excess hours: Changing majors and earning more than one degree. The more students changed majors the greater the number of excess hours they accumulated. Similar to changing majors is changing degree tracks. This study found that one of the major reasons for the accumulation of excess hours was that respondents had earned more than one degree. Even if the ultimate goal of the respondents was to earn a bachelors degree, those with excess hours typically earned an associate in science degree to provide them some employment options and then went back and earned an associate in arts degree in preparation to transfer.

Recommendations and Implications

Strong family support played a crucial role in students being strongly goal-directed and completing with few excess hours. The stronger the family background/ support the more goal-directed the student, resulting in the accumulation of fewer excess hours. However, institutions can do little to influence the family support one receives.

Changing majors had a significant impact on the accumulation of excess hours. Those respondents in Group C all indicated that they had changed majors often. One said he had changed majors "like changing socks." Many of the students used course taking as a way of determining what subject areas they didn't like. Community colleges in Florida enroll students just in an A.A. degree program, not in an A.A. degree program with an emphasis in a particular major. While they advise students to take program pre-requisites in preparation for transferring to a university to complete the baccalaureate degree, the community colleges do not require students to declare a major early in their academic career. Consequently, students can take an excessive amount of hours before being asked to decide a major. Requiring students to take career assessments prior to enrollment in postsecondary education or prior to acquiring a certain number of credit hours (e.g., 18 hours) and requiring students to declare a major early in their academic lives could help them acquire a better understanding of their abilities and interests and focus on an appropriate major.

Many of the respondents in this study also acquired more than one degree. Group B with 30 to 53.4 excess hours all had two degrees. Many of the respondents in Group C also had two or more degrees. Most of these were students that acquired an associate in science degree first in order to become employed in a specific field and then went back to acquire an associate in arts degree so they could go on to get a baccalaureate. The A.A. degree was a "stepping stone" necessary to achieve the baccalaureate degree. Facilitating the transfer of A.S. degree students directly into baccalaureate degree programs without requiring them to take an additional 40 hours for the A.A. degree would help reduce the number of excess hours accumulated.

All of the respondents indicated that they had benefited from a curriculum guide. However, many of them self-advised, using guides or catalogs, until they reached a certain point in their program at which time they went to see a counselor to be assured

that they were taking the right courses to graduate. Establishing a guide or academic plan is key to the reduction of excess hours. While most of the respondents used these tools, they were not required. Institutions did not have a system set up whereby students that got "off track" had a stop put on their registration until they saw a counselor and declared a new major or established a plan to get back on track.

Another theme that emerged had to do with cohort groups of students. Cohort groups of students that enroll in a specific program and follow a specific academic track, such as an associate in science in nursing, were kept on track and completed with no excess hours and in a set amount of time. In programs such as these, a group of students are enrolled in the program at the same time and stay together in lock step through the completion of the entire program. While this came up several times, it was in discussion with completion of the A.S. degree program, which was not a focus of the study. However, institutions might look at forming cohort groups by majors for associate in arts groups that would start together and stay together through a lock step program.

Recommendations for Further Research

Volkwein and Lorang (1996) recommended further studies on psychosocial factors that influenced students time-to-degree and hours to degree. This study recommends the same. The overwhelming factor that presented itself in several cases was the phenomenon that students who were strongly goal-directed completed with fewer hours. These students knew before enrollment what they wanted to major in, enrolled in a degree program and did not change it, and remained continuously enrolled through to completion. Respondents that had excess hours and were vaguely goal-directed in the beginning of their pursuit of education at distinct points in time, had experiences that influenced them to become strongly goal directly. From that point on, they did not change majors or stop out, and they remained continuously enrolled through to completion. Some referred to this phenomenon as the elusive quality of reaching maturity. Whatever influenced the person, the study of the phenomenon of goal commitment and how students reach that point could assist in better understanding the degree-taking patterns and what factors could reduce the number of excess hours.

Changing majors was also another major factor that influenced the accumulation of excess hours. None of the respondents in this study received career advising or career

assessment. Studies linking career assessment to the accumulation of excess hours might find that those that received career assessment determined what major suited their abilities and interests and stayed with that major, thereby earning fewer excess hours.

A final recommendation for further study would be to look at cohort groups and the accumulation of excess hours. While some programs lend themselves more to a lock step program, which appears to reduce the number of excess hours, it may be that other areas could also be adapted to simulate this course-taking pattern, thereby reducing excess hours.

Conclusion

The three major studies that found factors that influenced time-to-degree were Clarkson and Roscoe (1994), Volkwein and Lorang (1996), and Sugarman and Kelly (1997). Clarkson and Roscoe (1994) found that students with higher GPAs graduated faster and planning one's course load carefully and receiving academic advising early also influenced time-to-degree. One of the factors that extended time-to-degree was changing one's major, while career advising and employment did not affect time-to-degree at all.

Volkwein and Lorang (1996) compared the variables in theoretical models of retention and attrition to see if the variables would account for the longer time to graduation. Only three out of 30 were significant: financial need great enough to qualify for grants, possessing a high GPA, and completing fewer than 15 credits in multiple semesters. They concluded that students who take longer than four years to graduate are not significantly different from students who graduate in four years.

Sugarman and Kelly (1997) looked at time-to-degree versus the number of earned and attempted credit hours accumulated. They found that while time-to-degree varied for full-time versus part-time students and traditional versus nontraditional students, there was little difference between full-time and part-time students or traditional and non-traditional students in the average number of credit hours earned or attempted. Changing majors, transferring from one institution to another, stopping out and having a low ACT score were all factors associated with the accumulation of excess attempted hours.

This study looked at accumulation of excess hours using qualitative methods of research. Respondents were compared based on number of credit hours accumulated and

on institution size to confirm and elucidate on Bean's Theory of Student Attrition. In comparing the data based on the size of the institution, the only variable that appeared different was respondents from the smaller institution were younger and had limited family responsibilities. Otherwise, the institutions were the same on all the other factors. However, in comparing the respondents by the number of credit hours accumulated some differences did occur. Among the three groups of respondents who earned different amounts of credit hours, the following factors were identified as being responsible for increased excess hours:

- Changing majors;
- Earning more than one degree;
- Stopping out;
- Family responsibilities;
- Being vaguely goal-directed; and
- No family expectation of going to college.

These factors elucidate the theoretical connections of Bean's Theory of Student Attrition and confirm the studies noted above.

In the 2004 legislative session, in another attempt to reduce excess hours and thereby reduce the cost incurred by State government for excess hours, Florida Governor Jeb Bush proposed legislation that would require students who earned credit above 115% of their degree requirements to pay additional tuition. The bill however, did not address any positive actions that could be taken to reduce the number of excess hours, such as promoting more A.S. to B.S. articulation or requiring career orientation activities that might help students focus on their skills and interests and reduce the number of major changes. The proposed legislation did not pass.

A question that needs to be discussed is the effect this type of legislation has on student persistence. The intent appears to be to limit the state investment by encouraging quicker degree completion through limiting the number of hours a student takes. Results of this study indicate that excess hours may be the result of students fulfilling multiple goals on the way to successful degree completion. The unintended consequence of legislation such as that proposed by Governor Bush in 2004 may be that students do not persist to completion and therefore do not earn a degree. This raises the question: What

is the cost to the State of more individuals who enter higher education and leave without the sought after degree or credentials.

In the 2005 Florida legislative session a bill is being introduced that addresses some of the issues uncovered in this study. The bill would require students in middle and high school to get career guidance to help them identify a career path. The public schools would also be required to outline the academic steps needed to achieve the career goals. This approach could be what is needed to alleviate excess hours because it provides for better career advising which could result in students selecting majors more in line with their interests and skills thereby reducing the number of hours to degree completion. Further, this bill would not dissuade persistence because of fiscal penalties.

As State government revenues for higher education are whittled away by competing demands and lower tax revenues, the result is greater demand on the government and educational institutions to be more efficient and on students to take fewer hours while earning their degrees. This trend shows little evidence of reversing itself in the future, rather the trend is toward finding ways to be more efficient and reduce excess credit hours. Education is still seen as a tool that improves one's economic standing and overall quality of life. Therefore, the demand for higher education will continue to increase. Consequently, a balance needs to be struck between providing students access to higher education and demands for student efficiency in reaching academic goals.

APPENDIX A

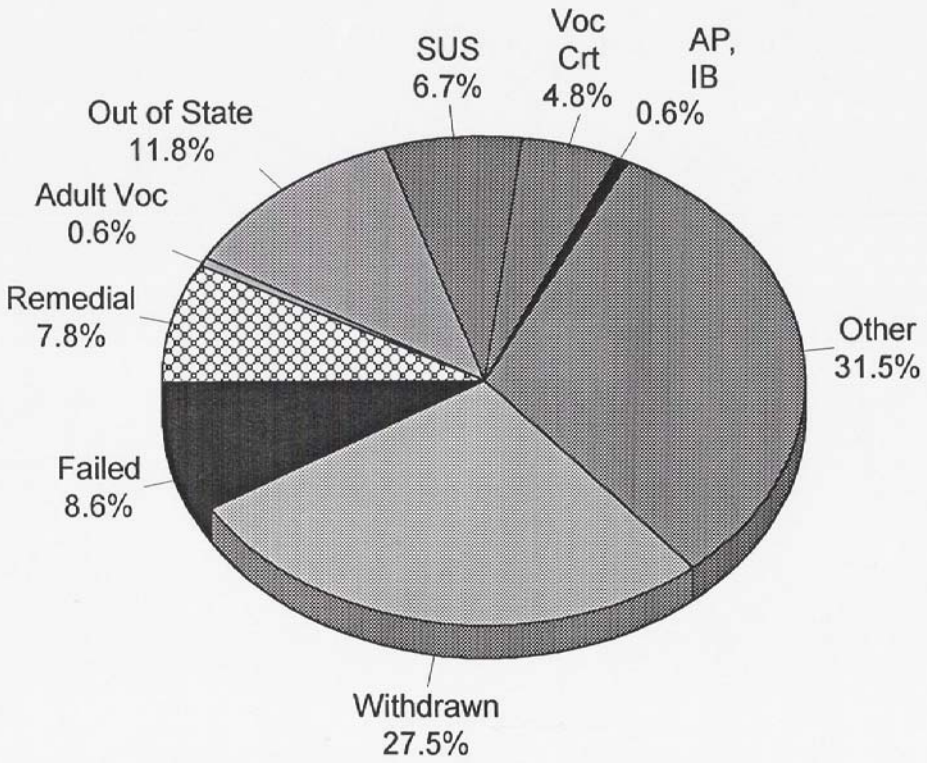
FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

DIVISION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES

STUDENT TRANSCRIPT ANALYSIS REPORT

JANUARY 3, 1996

CATEGORIES OF AVERAGE EXCESS HOURS ATTEMPTED

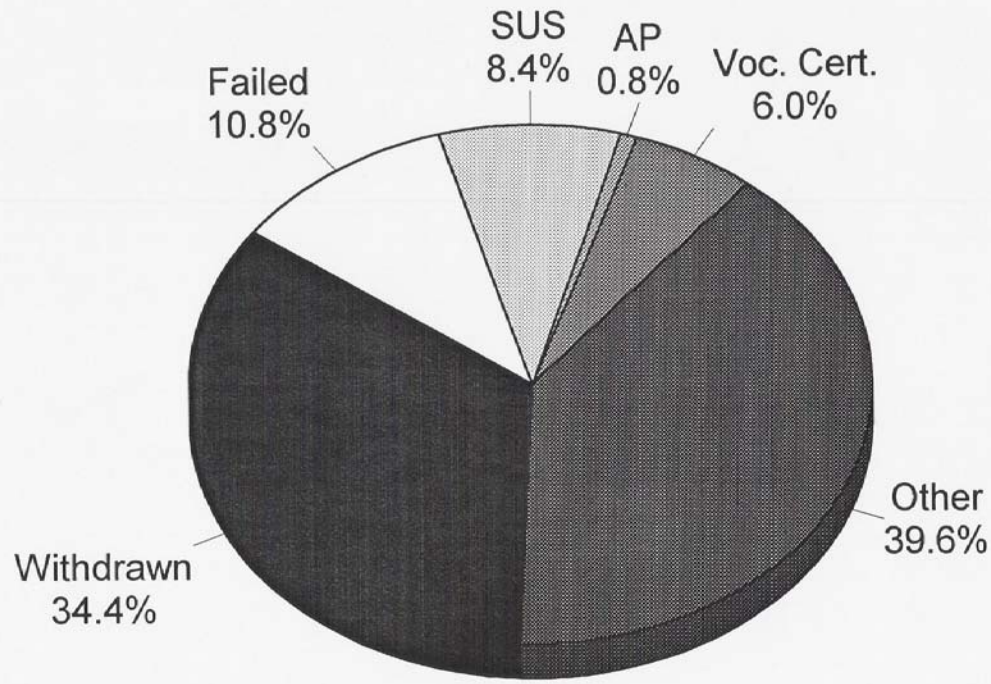


TOTAL AVERAGE ATTEMPTED HOURS PER STUDENT = 28.5 (100%)

SOURCE: STUDENT TRANSCRIPT ANALYSIS FOR 1995 GRADUATES WITH ONE ASSOCIATE IN ARTS DEGREE SYSTEMWIDE TOTALS FOR THIS DEGREE PROGRAM

March 7, 1996
c:\cg\exhours\sjw

CATEGORIES OF AVERAGE EXCESS HOURS ATTEMPTED EXCLUDING REMEDIAL, ADULT VOCATIONAL, AND OUT-OF-STATE HOURS



TOTAL STUDENT AVERAGE WITH EXCLUSIONS = 173,431.6

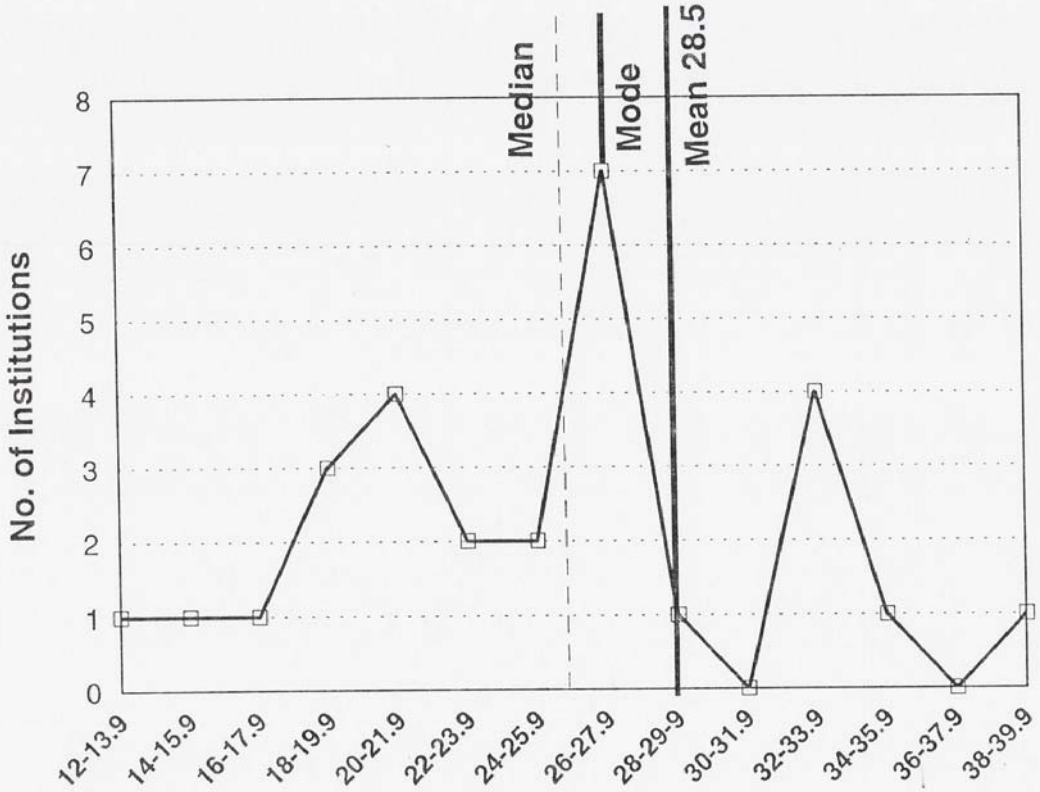
Source: Florida Community College System Transcript Analysis, Spring 1995

March 7, 1996
a:\cg\cat.prs\sjw

Figure 4:

DIVISION OF COMMUNTIY COLLEGES

AVERAGE EXCESS HOURS BY INSTITUTION
1995 GRADUATES WITH ONE AA DEGREE

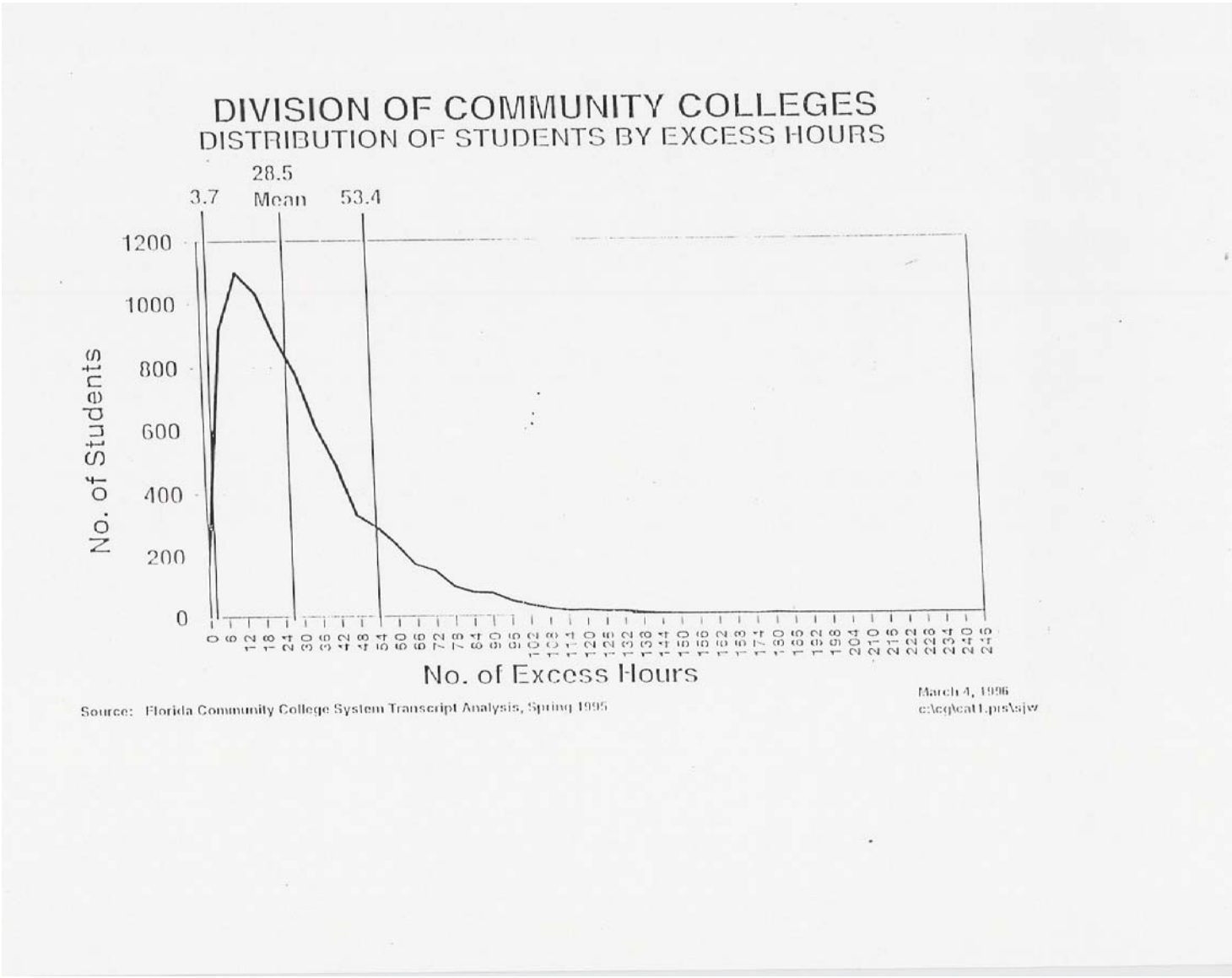


SOURCE: STUDENT TRANSCRIPT ANALYSIS FOR STUDENTS WITH ONE ASSOCIATE OF ARTS DEGREE SYSTEMWIDE TOTALS FOR THIS DEGREE PROGRAM

January 31, 1996
c:\cg\averinst\sjw

Table 3
TOTAL EXCESS HOURS BY INSTITUTION

College	*Mean 28.5*
Chipola	12.31
North Florida	15.64
St. Johns River	17.57
Edison	18.48
Lake-Sumter	18.68
Lake City	18.85
Pasco-Hernando	20.52
Florida Keys	20.66
Okaloosa-Walton	21.40
South Florida	21.66
Valencia	22.60
Indian River	23.38
Central Florida	24.53
Polk	24.65
Tallahassee	26.11
Pensacola	26.97
Seminole	27.07
Manatee	27.19
Brevard	27.23
Hillsborough	27.83
Palm Beach	27.91
Mean 28.5	
Florida CC @ Jacksonville	29.07
Gulf Coast	32.05
St. Petersburg	33.19
Daytona Beach	33.75
Santa Fe	33.96
Broward	34.60
Miami-Dade	39.03


DIVISION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES
DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENTS BY EXCESS HOURS
28.5
3.7
Mean
53.4
1200
1000
800
600
400
200
0
No. of Students
0 6 12 18 24 30 36 42 48 54 60 66 72 78 84 90 96 102 108 114 120 126 132 138 144 150 156 162 168 174 180 186 192 198 204 210 216 222 228 234 240 246
No. of Excess Hours
Source: Florida Community College System Transcript Analysis, Spring 1995
March 4, 1996
c:\cg\cat1.pis\sjw

FLORIDA COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM
STUDENTS EXCESS HOURS

0	174		
		3.7 1st STD	
6	920		GROUP A 4,659 Students 61.20% of population 29.00% Excess hours
12	1099		
18	1031		
24	890		
		28.5 Mean	
30	778		GROUP B 1,903 Students 25.00% of population 34.00% Excess hours
36	606		
42	489		
48	330		
		53.4 1st STD	
54	292		GROUP C 1,052 Students 13.80% of population 37.00% Excess hours
60	237		
66	169		
72	149		
78	96		
84	77		
90	74		
96	49		
102	35		
108	23		
114	16		
120	17		
126	14		
132	13		
138	7		
144	4		
150	3		
156	2		
162	2		
168	3		
174	1		
180	6		
186	2		
192	2		
198	0		
204	1		
210	0		
216	0		
222	0		
228	1		
234	1		
240	0		
246	1		
	7,614		

03/08/96 c:\work\cgraunke\grouplst.wk4\sjw

EXCESS HOURS WITHIN GROUPS

	Group A 0 - 28.5 Excess Hours		Group B 28.6 - 53.4 Excess Hours		Group C 53.5-END OF RANGE	
	Average	Percent	Average	Percent	Average	Percent
Other	4.4	32.5%	12.7	32.6%	22.8	29.8%
Withdrawn	3.8	27.9%	10.8	27.9%	20.5	26.8%
Failed	1.0	7.6%	3.5	9.0%	6.9	9.0%
Remedial	1.5	11.0%	3.1	8.0%	3.9	5.1%
Out-of-State	1.3	9.3%	4.2	10.7%	11.4	14.9%
Adult Voc.	0.0	0.3%	0.1	0.4%	0.8	1.0%
Voc. Cert.	0.7	5.0%	1.7	4.3%	3.8	4.0%
A&P	0.1	0.9%	0.2	0.6%	0.3	0.4%
SUS	0.7	5.4%	2.5	6.4%	6.2	8.1%
Total	13.5	99.9%	38.8	99.9%	76.6	100.0%

Note: *.04

Source: Florida Community College System Transcript Analysis, Spring 1995

03/08/96 c:\work\cgraunke\group2.wk4\sjw

APPENDIX B

STUDENT TRANSCRIPT ANALYSIS FOR CHIPOLA COMMUNITY COLLEGE, GULF COAST COMMUNITY COLLEGE, AND TALLAHASSEE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Student Transcript Analysis
for Chipola Community College
1999-2000 Associate in Arts Degree Graduates

No. of credit hrs.	Number of students	Standard Deviation	Comments
		58.8 Credit Hours - 1st STD	
60	24		**GROUP A**
61	20		**133 Students**
62	20		**62.7% of population**
63	14		**57.1% Credit Hours**
64	11		
65	11		
66	6		
67	13		
68	9		
69	5		
		69.6 Credit Hours - Mean	
70	4		**GROUP B**
71	7		**54 Students**
72	11		**25.5% of population**
73	2		**27.2% Credit Hours**
74	6		
75	5		
76	4		
77	3		
78	7		
79	2		
80	3		
		80.4 Credit Hours - 1st STD	
81	3		**GROUP C**
82	3		**25 Students**
84	4		**11.8% of population**
85	2		**15.7% Credit Hours**
88	2		
90	2		
93	1		
101	1		
103	1		
107	3		
109	1		
114	1		
123	1		
	212		

Student Transcript Analysis
for Gulf Coast Community College
2000-2001 Associate in Arts Degree Graduates

No. of credit hrs.	Number of students	Standard Deviation	Comments
60	7		
61	2		
63	9		
		63.4 Credit Hours - 1st STD	
64	9		**GROUP A**
65	3		**162 Students**
66	10		**55.3% of population**
67	10		**47.8% Credit Hours**
68	11		
69	13		
70	9		
71	9		
72	11		
73	5		
74	8		
75	13		
76	6		
77	3		
78	8		
79	3		
80	8		
81	11		
82	2		
83	4		
84	6		
		84.5 Credit Hours - Mean	
85	5		**GROUP B**
86	3		**75 Students**
87	6		**25.6% of population**
88	5		**28.4% Credit Hours**
89	1		
91	8		
92	5		
93	7		
94	5		
95	2		
96	5		
97	2		
98	1		

99	5		
100	4		
101	2		
102	1		
103	2		
104	2		
105	4		
		105.5 Credit Hours - 1st STD	
106	2		**GROUP C**
107	3		**38 Students**
109	2		**13.0% of population**
110	1		**19.3% Credit Hours**
111	2		
112	3		
114	3		
117	1		
118	1		
120	2		
121	1		
123	2		
125	1		
126	2		
127	2		
130	1		
132	1		
134	2		
139	1		
156	1		
157	1		
159	1		
191	1		
212	1		
	293		

Student Transcript Analysis
for Tallahassee Community College
Fall 2001 Associate in Arts Degree Graduates

No. of credit hrs.	Number of students	Standard Deviation	Comments
		59.1 Credit Hours - 1st STD	
60	2		**GROUP A**
61	48		**233 Students**
62	24		**64.5% of population**
63	28		**58.9% Credit Hours**
64	20		
65	22		
66	19		
67	22		
68	14		
69	27		
70	7		
		70.8 Credit Hours - Mean	
71	11		**GROUP B**
72	12		**88 Students**
73	7		**24.4% of population**
74	11		**25.7% Credit Hours**
75	20		
76	8		
77	6		
78	3		
79	4		
80	1		
81	2		
82	3		
		82.5 Credit Hours - 1st STD	
83	2		**GROUP C**
85	3		**40 Students**
86	3		**11.1% of population**
87	1		**15.4% Credit Hours**
89	2		
90	2		
91	1		
92	4		
93	2		
95	2		
96	1		
99	1		
100	3		
104	1		

108	3
109	2
112	1
113	2
119	1
121	1
127	1
129	1
	361

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide

A. Background and Defining Factors
   1. Age
   2. Race
   3. Gender
   4. Enrollment status
   5. Marital status, children
   6. High School GPA
   11. Parents' level of education

B. Academic Variables
   1. Date started college
   2. Reason(s) for going to college/education goal
   3. Full-time or part-time status
   4. How long attending college
   5. Program major/how many changes
   6. College GPA
   7. Membership in clubs, etc.
   8. Reason(s) for persisting beyond the number of hours required for graduation
   9. Factors that encourage accumulation of excess hours
   10. Factors that discourage accumulation of excess hours
   11. Factors in institutional procedures that enhance or detract from goal attainment
   12. Reasons for course taking patterns (i.e., withdrawals, repeats, failures, course availability, etc.)
   13. Reason, ultimately, for graduating
   14. Career/Academic advising

C. Social Integration Variables
   1. With faculty
   2. With other students/like-minded people
   3. With institutional personnel

D. Environmental Factors
   1. Employment
   2. Finances
   3. Outside encouragement (Importance of schooling to self, husband/wife, children, or significant others)
   4. Importance of schooling to profession/occupation and work colleagues
   5. Family responsibilities

E. Psychosocial Factors
   1. Perceived utility of the degree/certificate/education
   2. Sense of satisfaction with the college experience

3. Sense of connection with the institution/other like-minded people
4. Sense of goal accomplishment/goal commitment
5. Impact on how one felt about self

APPENDIX D

FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

HUMAN SUBJECT APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

AND

CONSENT FORM

Florida State
UNIVERSITY

Office of the Vice President
for Research
Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2763
(850) 644-8673 • FAX (850) 644-4392

APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

from the Human Subjects Committee

Date: **December 20, 2000**

From: **David Quadagno, Chair** DQ/ph

To: Connie W. Graunke
1530 Goodwood Drive
Tallahassee, FL 32308

Dept: Educational Leadership

Re: **Use of Human subjects in Research**
Project entitled: The Perceptions, Behaviors, and Experience of Extended Persisters in the Florida Community College System

he forms that you submitted to this office in regard to the use of human subjects in the proposal referenced above have been reviewed by the Secretary, the Chair, and two members of the Human Subjects Committee. Your project is determined to be exempt per 45 CFR § 46.101(b)2 and has been approved by an accelerated review process.

The Human Subjects Committee has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals which may be required.

If the project has not been completed by December 20, 2001 you must request renewed approval for continuation of the project.

You are advised that any change in protocol in this project must be approved by resubmission of the project to the Committee for approval. Also, the principal investigator must promptly report, in writing, any unexpected problems causing risks to research subjects or others.

By copy of this memorandum, the chairman of your department and/or your major professor is reminded that he/she is responsible for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in the department, and should review protocols of such investigations as often as needed to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

This institution has an Assurance on file with the Office for Protection from Research Risks. The Assurance Number is M1339.

cc: B. Bower
APPLICATION NO. 00.419

INFORMED CONSENT

I freely and voluntarily consent to be a participant in the dissertation research project entitled *The Perceptions, Behaviors and Experiences of Extended Persisters in the Community College System.*

This research is being conducted by Connie W. Graunke, a candidate for the Ed.D in Higher Education at Florida State University. I understand the purpose of her research is to explore the phenomenon of students who accumulate excess hours beyond that required for graduation. I understand that if I participate in the project I will be asked questions about my person and about my educational experience and how various factors influenced my educational experience.

I understand that I will participate in an interview by the researcher, which will last approximately one hour. I understand that the researcher may need to have a follow-up phone conversation should further clarification of information be required. I understand that the researcher will give me the option to decline tape recording of the interview. Regardless of whether or not the interview is tape recorded, I understand that the researcher will provide me with a transcript of the interview if I so request it. The researcher will keep these transcripts and tapes in a locked cabinet in her home. I understand that only the researcher will have access to these transcripts and tapes and that they will be destroyed one year after completion of the dissertation (December, 2002).

I understand that the only benefit to participating in this study is the satisfaction that I have contributed to the body of knowledge and research on higher education policy by providing my insight to my unique perceptions, behaviors and experiences in the Florida community college system. I understand that there is minimum risk to me.

I understand that my participation is totally voluntary and that I may stop participation at any time. I understand that my participation will remain confidential to the extent allowed by law. I understand that my consent may be withdrawn at any time. I have been given the right to ask and to have answered any inquiry concerning the study. Questions, if any, have been answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that I may contact Connie Graunke (850-422-3502) or Dr. Beverly Bower, Department of Education Leadership, Florida State University (644-4706) for answers to questions about this research or my rights. Upon completion of the dissertation, it will be available to participants through Strozier Library at Florida State University.

I have read and understand this consent form.

Print Name _____ Initials/Consent to Tape Record _____

Signature _____ Date _____

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Connie Washburn Graunke graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay with a Bachelor of Science in Human Biology in 1973 and from Florida State University with a Master of Science in Higher Education in 1994. She is currently the Executive Director for the Florida Center for Advising and Academic Support, under the Florida Department of Education. The Center is responsible for the development of the Florida's statewide student advising web site called FACTS.org.

Prior to assuming her current position in 2001, she was the Director of Student Services and Articulation for 15 years with the Division of Community Colleges, Florida Department of Education. Her responsibilities included overseeing policy related to articulation, admissions, registration, student development and accountability, which included issues related to credit-hour-to-degree and time-to-degree.

Connie resides in Tallahassee, Florida and continues to be involved with student services and extended persister issues in her current role.