A Pathway Towards Persistence: A Grounded Theory of High-Risk First-Year Students

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A PATHWAY TOWARDS PERSISTENCE:
A GROUNDED THEORY OF HIGH-RISK FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

By

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A Dissertation submitted to the
Department of Educational Psychology & Learning Systems
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

2015
Courtney L. Barry defended this dissertation on April 24, 2015

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I never knew what I was capable of.
- Elsa
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I want to thank my major professor, Dr. Jeannine Turner. Since the first semester I met you in Fall 2008, you have been a constant support to me. You strongly encouraged me to start the doctoral program, challenged me to think analytically about my research, taught me how to write, and provided tremendous support to finish this degree. Thank you for your time, effort, and guidance throughout the past seven years.

I also want to thank all the members of my committee. Dr. Janet Lenz, thank you for providing excellent feedback and support. Dr. Losh, I appreciate your interest in my topic and encouragement. Dr. Robert Schwartz, thank you for always providing time to share your perspective and feedback. You have always been willing to provide me your honest opinions and support; I am deeply grateful for your time and willingness to serve on my committee.

This dissertation would not have been possible without the involvement of 14 students. I am thankful for the time each of you gave me to conduct this research and your willingness to share your stories and experiences.

A special thank you to Dr. Mary Coburn. You always encouraged me to complete this degree since I became a doctoral student in 2008. I will always deeply appreciate your encouragement and enthusiastic support. A special thank you to Dr. Laura Osteen. You were always willing to listen while providing feedback and love; I deeply appreciate our friendship.

Thank you to Dr. Tamara Bertrand Jones, Dr. Emil Cunningham, Dr. Allison Crume, Dr. Rebekah Dorn, Dr. Khadish Franklin, Dr. Juan Guardia, and Dr. David Pittman – at every step in the doctoral process, your time and friendship helped, and continues to help me persist daily.

A special thank you to my mom. You have always inspired me to do and be my best possible self. No matter what obstacle, you are the voice that spurs me on to achieve anything I dream possible. I strive to make you proud.

Most importantly, my deepest and most heartfelt thank you to Mike, my best friend and husband. I cannot sufficiently describe or acknowledge how much your love and support has meant to me. I am deeply grateful for being your wife and equally grateful for your support to let me complete this degree these past seven years. I could not have completed this journey without you. I know you have sacrificed a lot to see me complete this degree. Thank you.
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ABSTRACT

Retention research has been empirically studied for over 70 years (Attewell, Heil, & Reisel, 2011; Bowen, 2009; Braxton, 2000; Goldrick-Rab & Roksa, 2008; Nora, Barlow & Crisp, 2005; Turner, 2004), yet there is minimal research describing high-risk students’ perceptions and learning that occurred after being placed on academic probation after their first semester of college and mandated to complete an academic strategies course during their second semester. The purpose of this study was to explore first-year students’ perceptions of being placed on academic probation as they adjust to college and completing a mandated academic strategies course at a large public postsecondary institution in the Southeast. This study employed grounded theory methods to understand how students interpret their academic failure after being placed on academic probation and mandated to take an academic strategy course. The research framework was guided by Tinto’s (1975) theory of student departure that suggests students who connect both academically and socially in a college environment will persist to degree attainment.

College students may have negative experiences after entering college and experiencing academic failure (e.g., earning below a 2.0 GPA) during their first semester. Because these students are still transitioning into the academic environment, they may be at greater risk for attrition than students who have not experienced initial academic failure. This research explored 14 students’ perceptions of experiencing academic failure and their perceived learning that occurred in their second semester. Students who earn below a 2.0 GPA at this particular university are placed on academic probation and mandated to take a 1-unit (12 week) course that focuses on teaching students academic skills, such as learning strategies, time management, and
self-regulation strategies, and therefore provides a unique situation to explore students’
adjustment to college.

Data collection consisted of individual in-depth interviews conducted with a majority
Caucasian sample of 14 students in their second semester of college. The result was the
emergence of a theory of college transition grounded in the perspectives and experiences of the
students. Results identified ways students evaluated their experiences with academic failure and
identified how students may or may not be using strategies (e.g., learning or volitional) while
experiencing transition in college. The results also indicated the positive influence family
relationships and academic strategies course instructors had on high-risk first-year students’
motivation to persist towards a college degree.

The findings are relevant for prospective first-year and current students, as well as for
parents, college administrators, and faculty. This research also has implications for retention
services and student affairs practice. Finally, the findings inform both theory development and
future research, particularly transition theory.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

First-Year Retention

Entering college represents a significant life change in the lives of freshmen students and their intellectual development (Johnston, 2010). Indeed, students’ first year in college is potentially the greatest challenge in their pursuit of, and persistence in, the completion of their degrees (Dunphy, Miller, Woodruff, & Nelson, 1987; Tinto, 1988). Previous statistics have shown that high proportions of students either withdraw or fail because of inadequate adjustment to environmental factors during their first year of college (Alarcon & Edwards, 2012; Fowler & Boylan, 2010; Tinto, 1993, 1985, 1975). Among four-year institutions, one out of five graduates fewer than one-third of its first-time, degree-seeking, full-time, first-year students within six years (Carey, 2004). The American College Testing Program (2001) reported departure rates varied little between 1987 and 2001, with approximately one out of every four students departing from a four-year college or university. Most recently, the National Student Research Center reported 68.2% of all students, starting in college either full- or part-time, at a four-year public institution in Fall 2012, returned to the same institution. This percentage has dropped one percent since 2009.

Fortunately, students who are academically and socially involved are more likely to persist and graduate (Astin, 1993; Beil, Reisen, & Zea, 1999; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Assoc., 2005; Tinto, 1975; 1993; 2012). Because of this, Johnston (2010) suggested that “Institutions … need to recognize that the way students experience transition influences persistence, retention and success, and they should respond by prioritizing systematic efforts to scaffold transition in the first year with specific pedagogical and support measures” (p. 4).
Indeed, Tinto (1985) had asserted earlier “The question institutions should first ask themselves is not how many students they should seek to retain, but how to best meet the educational responsibility they have assumed in admitting these students” (p. 41). Regrettably, research has provided little investigation of students’ experiences during their transition, particularly their experiences with academic failure.

While researching the phenomena of first-year retention, Ryan and Glenn (2003) found that most research approaches have been “quantitative and objective rather than qualitative and subjective” (p. 319). This dissertation will attempt to address this gap in the literature by incorporating a grounded theory, using the theoretical framework of Vincent Tinto’s (1975) model of student departure. A detailed explanation of his theory is included in the next chapter.

Here, it is important to note that historically, Tinto’s early studies explored the problem of student attrition by proposing factors associated with reasons students dropped out of college. He developed a theoretical model of students’ retention, or dropout behaviors, to capture the complex processes that exist between students and the institution. The model posited conditions that contribute to students’ withdrawal from their respective institutions. Tinto (1975) believed that students modify their goal attainment, e.g., earning a college degree, and educational commitments according to how they perceive their experiences during their transition from their previous communities to the college environment. According to Tinto, as students become integrated into the academic and social structures of college, they are more likely to perceive their encounters as positive and will increase their levels of commitment. In contrast, students’ negatively perceived experiences and their consequent lack of integration could increase the likelihood of students’ withdrawal (Johnston, 2010; Tinto, 1975).
Because student success in the classroom can play a central role in significantly increasing retention and graduation rates (Tinto, 2012), colleges and universities have made attempts to implement strategies that mitigate student attrition. One strategy that many colleges and universities use is to provide students with initial academic supports. The following section describes developmental educational support, e.g., placing underperforming students in learning strategies courses, as a method to address students’ academic deficiencies. Although the 14 students in the current study had negative experiences, e.g., earned below a 2.0 GPA, they were at greater risk for attrition. An academic success course was required for these students to complete during their second semester so that they may learn academic study and time management skills. Postsecondary institutions offer a range of developmental courses, e.g., academic and co-curricular supports, to empower college students to succeed academically.

**Developmental Educational Support for College Freshmen**

Colleges and universities sometimes provide students with special developmental education programs to help incoming high-risk students achieve desired academic outcomes (Sriram & Vetter, 2012). Sriram and Vetter (2012) used the term “high risk,” as opposed to “at-risk,” to represent a student population that potentially may have academic difficulties, and may depart compared to other students at the same institution. The term, “high-risk” is appropriate for this dissertation study because the students placed on academic probation may be dismissed from college if they do not complete the mandated academic strategies course requirement and increase their academic performance to a 2.0 cumulative or higher during their second semester. Freshman students’ need for developmental educational support may be related to their previous educational setting, e.g., rural or under-funded schools, or their specific difficulty with a particular content area, e.g., mathematics (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006). According
to the U.S. Department of Education, 20% of all beginning freshmen in the 2007-2008 academic
year enrolled in at least one remedial reading, writing, or mathematics course (NCES, 2013).

In other instances, freshmen may have inadequate academic strategies that developmental
educational support could help remediate (Johnston, 2010). For example, students may have
difficulties with adapting to academic rigor, and may not know how to use time management and
self-regulation of learning processes. Additionally, students may struggle with feelings of
inferiority compared to their freshman peers who do not require remediation (Stout, 2000).
According to Levitz and Noel (1989), “Efforts to improve freshman persistence, then, must focus
on helping them make an academic, personal, and social adjustment to college” (p. 71).

Focusing on college students who were admitted in good academic standing and who also
receive help in improving their learning skills and academic efficacy, may improve retention
rates (Ryan & Glenn, 2003). Bettinger and Long (2009) asserted that there is not enough
research on developmental education programs’ effects on student performance in college, and
this study seeks to fill the gap in this related research. Thus, this study explored first-year
students’ who were required to take an academic learning strategies course due to academically
underperforming, and their perceptions of their experiences within the context of their transition
into college. This dissertation study explored not only first-year students’ experiences and
perceptions of their academic failures after their first semester in college, but also their learning
that occurred after completing the Academic Success course.

**Statement of the Problem**

Despite increases in enrollment rates at U.S. postsecondary institutions, weak academic
performance and high dropout rates remain problematic among undergraduates (Lloyd, Tienda,
& Zajacova, 2001). Poor academic performance can lead to difficulties in transitioning to college
and make student departure more prevalent (Gillock & Reyes, 1999; Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999). Retaining freshmen during their first year is critical to their persistence (Astin, 1984; Gardner, 1986; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1975). Student-retention, defined by Florida State University (2011) — the location of this study — is students’ successful ability to complete hours towards a degree and persist to graduation while enrolled at the same institution. The institution where the study was conducted placed an emphasis on increasing their student retention to graduation (Barron, 2013). However, the institution also recognized that first-year students’ sometimes experience initial difficulties. 

For example, according to Dr. Sara Hamon, Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies and Director of the Academic Success courses at Florida State University, several hundred of a freshmen student population of 6,000 failed a course during their first semester of enrollment at Florida State University (personal communication, May 17, 2013). Therefore, the administration mandated that first-semester students who earn less than a 2.0 GPA must complete a 12-week course that focuses on increasing their knowledge, skills, and abilities with learning and self-regulation strategies. This study explored what first-year students’ on academic probation and mandated to take an academic learning strategies course, perceived about themselves and learned their experiences on academic probation and mandated to take the Academic Success course. 

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to understand perceptions of first-year students who have experienced being placed on academic probation during their first semester of college and were mandated to take an academic strategies course. Florida State University provides an Academic Success course with the goal of teaching success strategies to academically struggling freshman college students. While first-year students’, and any currently
enrolled student at the institution, can voluntarily register for this course, this study focused only on the perceptions of first-year students’ who were required to complete the class. A grounded theory study was used to explore perceptions of those mandated first-year students’ after completing Florida State University’s academic strategies course. The research focused on first-year students’ perceptions and whether or not those students implemented strategies after experiencing academic probation while transitioning to their college environment. Within this study, particular attention was paid to students who had experienced initial failure (i.e., earned below a 2.0 GPA after their first semester) and might need resources and services to progress toward degree completion. According to Tinto (2003), even after experiencing academic failure, students who remain committed to the attainment of their goals and the institution are less likely to leave.

**Significance of the Study**

This study is important because it fills a gap in existing research about the transitional processes that first-year students experience when they go from academic failure through potential persistence, how they interpreted being placed on academic probation and whether or not they learned and changed behavior from a mandated academic strategies course. Administrators at postsecondary institutions are under increasing pressure to bolster retention and graduation rates. Current academic persistence research describes various curriculum models that target the transition of first-year and underrepresented student populations (Boe & Jolicoeur, 1989; Dunphy, Miller, Woodruff, & Nelson, 1987; Simpson, Hynd, Nist, & Burrell, 1997). However, departure from college often hinges on students’ perceptions of their overall experiences in their formal and informal academic interactions (Tinto, 1993), and there is a lack of research addressing the perceptions of students participating in first-year courses specifically
designed to retain first-year and underrepresented students (Boe & Jolicoeur, 1989; Davis, 1992; Dunphy et al., 1987; Ryan & Glenn, 2004; Montgomery et al., 2009; National Resource Center Research, 2008; Watts, 1999). While there is a wealth of research on first year programs (Boe & Jolicoeur, 1989; Davis, 1992; Dunphy et al., 1987; Ryan & Glenn, 2004; Montgomery et al., 2009; National Resource Center Research, 2008; Watts, 1999), there is little research using a qualitative methods approach to study academically high-risk, first-year students’ enrolled in a mandatory academic strategies course who have not already departed from their institution after experiencing academic failure.

In fact, while searching in ERIC (Proquest), only four studies were found with the key words included “freshmen,” “failure,” and “qualitative” research. Recently, Balduf (2009) claimed that underachievement of college students has not received significant empirical focus. The literature review for this research revealed many quantitative, first-year retention rate studies, but only a minimal number of qualitative studies that descriptively explored first-year students’ transition to college and their exposure to, and behavior in, utilizing retention strategies. Moreover, since the inception of the program, qualitative research has not been conducted on this student population at this institution (personal communication with Sara Hamon, August 2, 2012). Therefore, this research may help to improve the learning strategies curriculum and ultimately student retention.

During the Spring semester of 2014, a pilot study was completed with four first-year students who failed a math course and completed the Academic Success course while transitioning to college. Results from this pilot study provided evidence that these first-year students’ engaged in academic practices that enabled them to work toward their ultimate educational goal—earning a college degree. The results indicated that first-year students’, after
experiencing academic probation and the Academic Success course, learned skills and changed behaviors to be potentially successful while in college. The students also described that these changes had been a positive impact in helping them succeed in other courses. The sample was small ($n=4$) and therefore a larger study was needed to further compile qualitative data on first-year students’ perceptions of their transition to college after experiencing academic probation and transitioning to college while completing a mandated academic strategies course.

Many questions about why first-year students’ may remain or depart after being placed on academic probation in their first semester of college, and the possible effects of a mandated academic strategies course. Is such a course sufficient to address their academic difficulties? Do students have other needs that the university might address? Do students lack motivation or an interest in applying their academic skills? Are there ways that the university could have helped prevent their initial failures? Uncovering first-year students’ perceptions about their initial academic difficulties and the academic strategies utilized as they transition from initial failure to ultimate success can improve the body of research in this field by providing a more descriptive and documented understanding of this population’s reasons for persistence and retention. Findings from this study can help prompt and influence improvements to student services support that can aid students’ transition and integration into college.

**Research Questions**

This study fills a void in the research on first-year students’ perceptions of academic probation and their transition to college after having completed a mandatory Academic Success course. Using Tinto’s (1975) theory of college student departure, the study was guided by the following research questions:
1. What are high-risk first-year students’ perceptions about their initial academic probation?

2. In what ways does academic probation impact first-year students’ subsequent motivation and learning?

3. Following academic probation, what strategies do students use to persist for college completion?

4. What are high-risk first-year students’ perceptions of their experiences after completing the mandated Academic Success course?

5. What roles do family relationships have on high-risk first-year students’ motivation to persist towards degree attainment?

Summary

This chapter provided an introduction to the study, including the background and statement of problem, purpose, significance of the study, and research questions. In Chapter 2, a comprehensive literature review describes Tinto’s (1975) model of student departure as well as research studies that have expanded on his theory. This study explored what first-year students’ on academic probation and mandated to take an academic learning strategies course perceived and learned from their experiences. The review of literature will also summarize the historical implementation of first-year programs, as well as prior research on students’ experiences with failure, academic motivation, self-regulation, coping, and achievement goals. The third chapter describes the methods for this study. The fourth chapter depicts the findings analyzed from student interviews and presents a grounded theory model. The fifth chapter discusses the findings from the study and provides connections to extant literature. The fifth, and final, chapter also
includes discussion of limitations, implications, and recommendations to student affairs and academic affairs professionals.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review creates a foundation for the study and begins with an overview of the theoretical framework to guide the study. Next a synthesis and critique of research about student persistence including first-year programs, failure, academic motivation, self-regulation, coping, and achievement goals will be discussed.

Model of Student Departure

There are many reasons why students may leave college. For example, research has shown that students may not persist if they have inadequate academic skills in math (Bettinger & Long, 2009; National Center for Education Statistics, 2003; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; Tinto, 1975), reading (Bettinger & Long, 2009; National Center for Education Statistics, 2003; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996), and/or writing (Bettinger & Long, 2009; National Center for Education Statistics, 2003).

Students may also leave due to a lack of integration into the higher education environment (Tinto, 1975; Alarcon & Edwards, 2012), inadequate knowledge and use of study strategies (Elliot, McGregor, & Gable, 1999; Ferrett, 2000; McIntire, Pumroy, Burgee, Alexander, Gerson, & Saddoris, 1992; Nelson, Dunn, Griggs, Primavera, Fitzpatrick, Bacilious, & Miller, 1993), low self-efficacy (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Hagen & Weinstein, 1995; Wambach, 1993; Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005), and lack of self-regulation strategies (Bembenutty & Zimmerman, 2003; Wolters, 1998). When they do not have learning or volitional skills, they may leave (Kahn & Nauta 2001; Robbins, Lauver, Le, Davis, Langley, & Carlstrom, 2004). Previous retention research has stressed the predictive validity of entry characteristics such as standardized test scores, GPA, ethnicity, etc. (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997), yet
have not qualitatively explored students’ experience with academic failure. One aspect that has not been researched is students’ perceptions of their failures. Why do they think they failed and how do they adjust to the idea of having failed? How do they cope with the failure and, to what extent do they commit, re-commit, or relinquish their goal to obtain a college degree? This study explored what first-year students’ on academic probation and mandated to take an academic learning strategies course perceived and learned from their experiences.

For over four decades, retention researchers have centered their theoretical framing on an extensively published seminal researcher, Vincent Tinto. Tinto (1975, 1993) established a theory that focused on whether or not students integrate into their college environment. Tinto’s (1975, 1993) theory of student departure was developed from the works of Arnold Van Gennep, an anthropologist who studied tribal cultures, and Emile Durkheim, a 19th century sociologist (Tinto, 1993).

Arnold van Gennep (1960) identified a construct describing three stages of movement from childhood to adulthood (Tinto, 1993). These stages were separation, transition, and incorporation (Tinto, 1993). An individual will separate from past associations, explore the culture of a new environment, and ultimately integrate into this new environment. Tinto (1993) explained that van Gennep’s theory “provides us with a way of thinking about the longitudinal process of student persistence in college and by extension, about the time-dependent process of student departure” (p. 94). Tinto’s theory aligns with Van Gennep’s theory because a college student’s rite of passage begins when they enter college and separate from their familial environment as well as their norms and culture. After students enter a new college environment, they may have daily contact with, “both the formal and informal domains of institutional life by which incorporation may (or may not) occur” (Tinto, 1993, p. 99).
In addition, Tinto conceptualized his model using Emile Durkheim’s (1951) theory of suicide. According to Durkheim (1951) people who were not well integrated into society are likely to commit suicide. Specifically, he identified three types of suicide: altruistic, anomic, and egoistic. Tinto paralleled these types of suicide to types of student departure. First, altruistic suicide results from norms that view suicide as a morally desirable response to certain societal or religious conditions (Durkheim, 1951). An example of altruistic suicide was when Japanese military aviators flew their planes into enemy warships during World War II (Tinto, 1993). The analogy for this type of suicide is when students suspend their higher education efforts in the 1960s and 1970s to extol the virtues of leaving their education temporarily to “drop out and drop in” (Tinto, 1993).

Second, Durkheim defined anomic suicide as a response to the breakdown of norms resulting from reactions to societal chaos. Anomic student departure may then result from “disruptive forces on campus that undermine the daily operation of the institution and undercut the normal bonds which tie individuals to it” (Tinto, 1993, p. 103).

Third, egoistic suicide most accurately parallels student departure in higher education. Egoistic suicide results “from lack of integration of the individual into society” (Durkheim, 1951, p. 14). Similarly, students with “insufficient interactions with others in the college and incongruent values with the college community are likely to depart” (Tinto, 1975, p. 92).

Tinto (1975) credited William Spady for first applying Durkheim’s theory of suicide to student dropout. Spady (1970) asserted the dropout process involves “an interaction between the individual student and his particular college environment” (p. 77). The interaction a student has may result in assimilating successfully into both the academic and social systems of the college (Spady, 1970). If the rewards of the interaction are insufficient, the student may decide to
withdraw. The student’s decision to withdraw may be determined by two factors: normative congruence, e.g., attitudes and interests compatible with the environment and friendship support, e.g., close relationships with others (Spady, 1970). These two conditions described by Spady (1970) resemble the major components of Durkheim’s (1951) social nature of suicide.

Furthermore, Tinto’s model of student departure (1975, 1993) captures the processes that occur between college students and their postsecondary institution. Therefore, voluntary departure from a postsecondary institution is likely to occur if students are not able to connect or integrate with their academic and social environment. If students lack integration with the social system of the college, this may lead to a lack of commitment and therefore increase probability of them leaving the college. Tinto further asserted a student may integrate socially but not academically for example, poor grade performance and still dropout (Tinto, 1975).

Tinto (1975) noted that students enter college with varying individual characteristics, e.g., standardized test scores, high school GPA, socioeconomic status, and so on. His model recognized that students enter college with pre-entry attributes, e.g., family background, skills and abilities, and the like, and these attributes might contribute to the success of their integration process, in addition to their academic and social goals, intentions, and commitments (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Ryan & Glenn, 2003). He conceptualized persistence as an outcome of students’ interactions with, and integration into, the academic and social systems of the institution. Students’ characteristics, as well as intentions and commitments, can change through interactions between the student and members of the institution and/or the institution’s environment (i.e. academic or social). The greater the assimilation into the norms and culture of the institution, the more likely the student will increase his/her commitment to the institution.
Essentially, Tinto suggested the greater a student’s level of academic and social involvement during his/her first year, the more likely the student will persist.

As students increase the levels of their academic and social integration, their commitment to the institution is strengthened (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1975) further stated that, “commitment to the institution and a goal of college completion are most influential in determining college persistence” (p. 102). Pascarella and Terenzini (1983) further supported and affirmed this persistence behavior as being a result of a “longitudinal process of person-environment fit and goal commitment” (p. 224). Students’ commitment to persist is a pertinent aspect in determining whether or not a student will remain enrolled in college until graduation. Tinto (1988) asserted institutional commitment whether expressed as motivation, drive or effort, is “centrally related to departure from institutions of higher education” (p. 41). For many students, the adjustment period is challenging and may be too difficult for some to persist to graduation.

**Stages of Departure/Retention**

According to Tinto’s (1975, 1993) model of student departure, students must pass through three major stages to persist to graduation. The first stage requires students to *separate* from past communities (i.e., high school, place of residence). Students in this stage will experience separating from past habits and patterns of affiliation (Tinto, 1986). Understandably, students may experience stress (or not) when adjusting to the demands of new academic and social communities. The crux of students’ persistence depends on their ability to depart from their past norms of their former communities and establish membership in the new communities that exist at college (Tinto, 1986).

Students’ *transition* to college is the second stage of Tinto’s (1975) model and most likely occurs early in their first year. During this stage, students are responding to the separation
and transition of their college environment by coping and adjusting to educational goals and commitments (Tinto, 1986). “Without institutional assistance, they often flounder and withdraw without having made a serious attempt to adjust to the life of the college” (Tinto, 1986, p. 371). Students who can persist through this stage to graduation are able to commit to their educational goals and/or to the institution (Tinto, 1986). Tinto proposed that underserved students (i.e., racial minority, low socioeconomic status) or students who remain living at home during college are less likely to be prepared for their transition to college, especially without family members who are college-educated, and therefore more likely to experience problems with persistence to graduation (Tinto, 1986).

Once students can pass through the stages of separation and transition, they face becoming integrated in the intellectual and social communities of college by accepting norms and behavioral patterns. This third stage includes formal and informal practices such as establishing contact with faculty and peers as well as becoming a member of one or more student organizations (Tinto, 1986). Integration in this context means the “extent to which the individual shares the normative attitudes and values of peers and faculty in the institution and abides by the formal and information structural requirements for membership in that community” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 52).

**Empirical Support**

Tinto’s (1975, 1993) model has been tested and received strong empirical support as a reliable framework (Braxton & Lee, 2005) for exploring why students stay or depart from residential colleges and universities (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). Research on involvement supports Tinto’s theory that postulates students’ meaningful interaction is critical in their first year of college (Astin, 1993; Beil, Reisen, & Zea, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980;
Pike & Kuh, 2005). Astin (1993), Pascarella and Terenzini (1980), and Pike and Kuh (2005) have contributed research supporting the idea that engagement with the college environment contributes to learning and success in college. Students who are academically and socially engaged on campus are more likely to stay and graduate from college (Beil, Reisen, & Zea, 1999; Tinto, 2012). Furthermore, for students who perceive an institution has commitment to students (i.e., engaging faculty), the greater their level of social integration (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983). The greater the student’s commitment to the institution, the greater his or her motivation is to persist (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Conversely, some researchers have challenged aspects of Tinto’s model of student departure, claiming that it does not accurately represent family support systems and their influence on underrepresented students’ persistence (e.g., Cavazos et al., 2010; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011). In particular, several studies challenging Tinto’s model centered on high risk and/or underrepresented college students (e.g., Guiffrida, 2005; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011; Reyes, 2007; Tierney, 1992) and the findings demonstrated that students maintained and welcomed family support (Cavazos, Johnson, Fielding, Cavazos, & Vela, 2010; Guiffrida, 2005). Because the research challenging Tinto’s model have included studies that explored underrepresented students, the following section describes studies that explored aspects that may impact the academic development of underrepresented students, including familial support, motivation, and academic self-regulation.
Retention of Diverse Student Populations

The departure rate for ethnic and minority students differs notably compared to Caucasian students (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). When considering six-year graduation rates data from the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE) (2003), of the college students who enrolled in Fall 1994, 56.9 percent were Caucasian and graduated compared with 41.7 percent of Black and 41.7 of Hispanic (as cited in Seidman, 2005). This literature review includes research studies conducted with underrepresented student populations in various academic courses and remedial programs to highlight relevant information about students’ challenges with and approaches to persistence.

African-American students. Guiffrida (2005) conducted a study with African American college students to explore how their families impacted the students’ academic achievement and persistence. Guiffrida’s focus was to address a key area of concern with Tinto’s (1975) model of student departure. Guiffrida qualitatively analyzed phone interviews, face-to-face interviews, and small group interviews of 99 students from one predominantly White private institution located in the Midwest. Guiffrida (2005) divided the sample into three demographic groups that included leavers, low achievers, and high achievers. The low achievers, students with an average GPA of 2.17, reported notable differences (e.g., emotional, academic, and financial support) in their relationships with family members that affected their academic achievement and persistence. More particularly, high achievers reported positive, emotionally-supportive relationships with their family members when compared to low achievers, who described emotional strain, obligation to fulfill household duties, and lack of financial support as contributing to their attrition (Guiffrida, 2005). High achievers commented on receiving praise, encouragement, and inspiration from family members, as well as financial support that provided for tuition and living
expenses. Additionally, Guiffrida identified the importance of implementing support programs, staff resources, and even various transportation options on the college campus to further promote and encourage positive and healthy relationships between students and their families.

Palmer, Davis, and Maramba (2011) also focused on African American students. When compared to recent research on historically Black universities (HBCU), Palmer et al. noted a similar statistic from the institution where their study took place; only 35% of Black males, admitted in 1998, graduated from college within six years compared to 49% of Black females. The researchers conducted their qualitative study to determine factors impacting academically unprepared Black males at a public HBCU. The researchers conducted grounded theory research to challenge Tinto’s (1975) model of student departure.

The 11 students in Palmer et al.’s (2011) sample were students enrolled in a 6-week summer remedial program before matriculation and who persisted to graduation; the participants were traditional-aged and their average GPA was 2.7. The researchers discussed emergent themes that resulted from the student data, including the influence of college-educated family members and the perceived differences in students’ familial support. Palmer et al. (2011) found that all students’ families beneficially influenced them in ways that contributed to their ability to graduate. More specifically, students’ family members served as role models (e.g., pursuing schooling beyond baccalaureate), sharing knowledge from their previous experience, and providing emotional support to further motivate students to obtain their degrees. The encouragement and emotional support provided to the students was comparable regardless of family structure (e.g., college educated parents, single parent) or socioeconomic background. Based on their findings, Palmer et al. (2011) argued that Tinto’s (1975) model should be reconsidered in light of evidence that external influences and support systems are important
factors that facilitate students’ transition and persistence in college.

These studies differ from the current study because they focused specifically on African-American students; however, similar to Guiffrida’s (2005) research, the present study qualitatively explored the type of support students’ may describe in relations with family members and explored the impact family relationships had on students’ motivation to persist towards degree attainment.

**Mexican-American students.** Reyes (2007) conducted qualitative research using a case study with five Mexican-American students who participated in a support and retention scholarship program called the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP). Reyes’s (2007) study is unique from other research in that he focused on Mexican-American students who, he contended, experienced situational marginalization. School-focused situational marginalization occurs when individuals in a subpopulation have low academic achievement because they have experienced academic inequalities.

Reyes (2007) employed the use of interviews, observations, and document collection. Unlike the other two studies previously discussed, Reyes (2007) met with the students on four occasions. In the beginning, participants revealed varying levels of knowledge and comfort with their academic identity, as well as in their levels of academic motivation. Results revealed that, through campus involvement and improved self-confidence, the participants exhibited resilience (e.g., gained confidence relating to faculty and peers and completed coursework). Reyes’s (2007) research highlighted the need for further study regarding Hispanic populations because, even with rapidly increasing college enrollments of Hispanic students, fewer of these students are completing postsecondary degree requirements.

In order to further understand resiliency factors among Latina students exhibiting
academic improvement, Cavazos, Johnson, Fielding, Cavazos, Castro, and Vela (2010) researched 11 Latina/o undergraduate and graduate students. Students participating in this study maintained a grade point average (GPA) of 2.9 or higher at a Latina/o-oriented institution (Cavazos et al., 2010). Although their study did not focus on students taking a learning strategies course, they did explore factors that promoted Latina/o academic resiliency. Their qualitative findings were presented within a framework based on five resiliency factors: goal setting, interpersonal relationships, intrinsic motivation, internal locus of control, and self-efficacy. The findings revealed that these high-achieving students valued education. Consistent with the study conducted by Guiffrida (2005), a majority of the students identified their families as providing high parental expectations and encouragement for their educational goals, including degree attainment (Cavazos et al., 2010). Although Cavazos et al. (2010) only sampled students who maintained high grade point averages and identified as Latina/o, their research is relevant to the present study because it examined what support resources students, from diverse ethnicities and gender, identified during their transition to college and what they learned from participating in a mandated academic course that focused on providing students with skills for planning, studying, and self-regulation.

Among all student populations, the role of family may influence students’ decisions to either persist or depart from college. The next section will discuss what influences family may have on students’ persistence towards degree attainment.

Role of Family

Researchers have shown that the greatest departure of students occurs during their first year, especially their first semester (Rausch & Hamilton, 2006; Tinto, 1987; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). However, family context may influence persistence in college (Tinto & Pusser, 2006).
First-year students enter college with family socioeconomic and educational influences which shape their expectations and attitudes (Cole, Kennedy, & Ben-Avie, 2009). Research has shown family as a source of support for college students (Kirk, 2008).

New college students experience stressors coupled with their separation from familiar sources of support (MacGeorge, Samter, & Gillihan, 2005). Strom and Savage (2014) asserted students’ perceived support from family impacts academic decisions like persistence to college graduation. Tinto’s model (1975, 1987, 1993) includes student entry characteristics, e.g., parents’ education level and family socioeconomic status. However, his model does not address perceived support that students receive from family. “For example, a student who is struggling with a class may rely heavily on support from close others to continue in the class and subsequently towards the goal of graduation (Strom & Savage, 2014, p. 534). Strom and Savage (2014) surveyed 101 first-year freshmen (36 males and 65 females) twice during their first-year in college. Their first survey was completed one-week prior to beginning classes in Fall 2007, and the second survey was completed at the end of the students’ second semester, Spring 2008. Results revealed that students’ initial support provided by family and friends has a significant impact on students’ initial commitment to graduation, and family support, in particular, continues to influence the goal to graduate throughout their first year of college.

Students can have difficulty with adjusting to college and stressors. Stressors, such as family relationships, may influence their adjustment and satisfaction with college (Wodka & Barakat, 2007). Wodka and Barakat (2007) reported higher family support was linked to less anxiety among college students who experienced negative or positive life events. Their research is relevant to this dissertation study because they examined the role of family in students’ first and second year adjustment to college. Their sample consisted of 101 freshmen and sophomore
students enrolled in an undergraduate psychology course at a public university, where extra credit was provided for the students’ participation in their research. Their sample also included students with chronic illness compared with college students who experienced predominantly negative or positive life events, unrelated to their health.

In addition, researchers have also focused on understanding the role of family with minority students (Guiffrida, 2005; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011). The findings from both Guiffrida’s (2005) and Palmer, Davis, and Maramba’s (2011) research support the influential role family have on the success of Black students in college. Guiffrida’s findings support the importance of minority students not separating themselves from their families while in college. While Palmer et al.’s findings revealed how family involvement and support positively influenced minority college students’ experiences.

Postsecondary institutions are concerned with increasing retention rates and student success (Grant-Vallone, Reid, Umali, & Pohlert & 2005). Napoli and Wortman (1998) posited that students who have higher levels of social support from family and peers report higher levels of satisfaction with college and have higher levels of social and academic adjustment. Determining the “role of family context may help institutions more effectively configure their support programs for differing student situations” (Torres 2003a, 2003b as cited in Tinto & Pusser, 2006, p. 4) This dissertation study explored the role of families among high-risk first-year students who experienced academic failure (e.g., a negative event) while adjusting to college (e.g., being placed on academic probation and mandated to take an academic strategies course).

Although family support can influence college student commitment to academic performance and overall retention, universities also play a role in influencing students’
perceptions (Grant-Vallone, Reid, Umali, & Pohlert & 2005). Specific programs exist to assist students in their transition to college that have been shown to increase retention rates of students. The next section will discuss these student support services.

**First-Year Programs**

A movement to focus on freshmen and their transitions into college began over four decades ago. First-Year-Experience programs expanded in postsecondary institutions across the country during the same decade as Tinto’s (1975) student departure model was published. In 1974, the University of South Carolina’s president entrusted a general studies faculty member, Jon Gardner, to teach the first documented University 101 course (Watts, 1999). The course was developed as an extended orientation course and centered on improving student development and retention (Watts, 1999). By 1982, widespread popularity of the course among educators, administrators, and student professionals led Gardner to create an umbrella organization that fosters first year student success, also known as First Year Experience (FYE; Watts, 1999). Empirical research established that the course’s most essential impact was on freshman adjustment, academic performance, and retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Upcraft, 1989). Freshman courses have evolved and, depending on the institution, may be designed to address the needs of special student populations.

In addition to serving as early college transition tools for freshmen, the FYE seminars are designed to positively influence student development as they transition into their academic environment during their first-year of college (National Resource Center Research, 2008; Robbins, Lauver, Le, Davis, Langley, & Carlstrom, 2004; Watts, 1999). Freshman seminar courses were established to integrate new students into the academic and social aspects of the collegiate environment (Davis, 1992). Course emphases vary, but often include time
management, study skills, personal development, library orientation, and faculty-student interactions (Boe & Jolicoeur, 1989; Dunphy, Miller, Woodruff, & Nelson, 1987). Since the 1970s, seminars have expanded their curricula to include metacognitive and self-regulation skills (Montgomery, Jeffs, Schlegel, & Jones, 2009). Various curricula are offered to first-year freshmen; freshman seminars do not consistently emphasize the same content, learning outcomes, or degree credit value (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and there is little evidence of the effect on students’ academic behaviors related to academic performance once they have participated in FYE courses (e.g., Montgomery et al., 2009).

Freshman seminar courses were implemented to facilitate social and academic integration of new students to campus. Davis’s (1992) research demonstrated that academically proficient students benefited from the FYE courses more than the deficient students. In a study of 588 college students on a commuter campus where freshman enrollment in the FYE course was voluntary, the five-credit elective course taught basic “survival skills to students” (Davis, 1992, p. 80) and was conducted with emphasis on “high risk” students, identified as having an SAT mean score at or below 713. Students that did not meet “high risk” criteria were used as a control group. Davis sampled every third freshman who completed more than ten credits their first quarter (Davis, 1992). Student-groups were established based on their SAT scores (high/low SAT scores at the beginning of their Fall quarter) and whether or not they completed the seminar (seminar-students/control-students) from the Fall of 1984, 1985, and 1986. While Davis’ study was informative with regard to illustrating how a freshman seminar course enhances student retention, the control group consisted of students who volunteered to participate in the study, which limited the generalizability of the study.
Davis (1992) reported that, after one academic term, the GPAs of seminar-experiencing students were consistently higher than the students’ GPA in the control groups, e.g., no seminar. Each student’s GPA within each of the three separate semesters was used as an observation, while age and SAT scores remained constant throughout. Unfortunately, Davis (1992) did not clearly state at what time the observation intervals were captured, except that groups were compared for six quarters following admission and excluded summers. Furthermore, the results showed that the retention of seminar-experiencing students after two years was significantly higher for students with high SAT scores, but not for seminar-experiencing students with low SAT scores. Because the students in the seminar-experiencing group maintained higher cumulative GPAs than their nonseminar-experiencing peers during four out of six quarters after their first quarter, the results challenged the assumption that the course’s purpose was to impact only high risk students.

Overall, the data from Davis’s (1992) study provided evidence that college “survival skills” may be an important component for the academic success and retention of freshmen students. Davis’s (1992) study, however, did not explore or identify any qualitative aspects of the students’ experiences in the FYE curriculum, or ways the curriculum could be enhanced for students who entered with lower academic knowledge and skills. A qualitative component to Davis’ study could have illustrated what contents offered in the course resonated with students as well as the specific strategies they adopted or increased that aided in their academic degree pursuit.

In the literature on FYE courses, two types of freshman seminars are most prevalent: learning strategies and academic socialization models (Davis, 1992; Ryan & Glenn, 2004; Montgomery, Jeffs, Schlegel, & Jones, 2009). Ryan and Glenn (2004) concluded that a
socialization-focused course for first-year students, compared to a learning-strategies intervention course, did not improve students’ retention rates. Additionally, they found that the learning strategies course was more retention-effective for freshmen in either good standing or high risk compared to students who did not take the learning strategies course.

In the study conducted by Ryan and Glenn (2004), the topics for the learning strategies intervention course included time management, lecture note taking, textbook reading, test preparation, and test taking. Because the 77 students who completed the strategy-based seminar were significantly more likely to remain at the institution compared to the 66 freshmen who enrolled in the socialization-focused seminar, the strategy-based seminar was mandated for at-risk freshmen at the institution where the research was conducted. The course used in Ryan and Glenn’s study is aligned with the purpose of the Academic Success course at Florida State University (FSU) that will be used in the present study. The FSU course was implemented to assist first-year students’ wanting to enroll in a learning strategies course, but it is also mandated for students who are academically labeled high-risk after their first semester (GPA less than 2.0).

Research on first-year programs shows a positive impact on persistence and academic achievement (Cuseo, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Yet, students continue to need assistance with college-level study and academic expectations (Porter & Swing, 2006). This study explored students experience with academic probation and their learning after being mandated to complete an academic strategies course.

**Failure**

There are various reasons students may experience academic failure (e.g., lack of ability, task difficulty, lack of motivation) (Brophy, 1998). Tinto (1993) posited a student might
experience failure when he/she does not attain a desired and reasonable goal. Students may also experience “a mismatch between the abilities, skills, and interests of the student and the demands placed upon that person by the academic system of the institution” (Tinto, 1993, p. 51). This is important because as Getzlaf, Sedlacek, Kearney, and Blackwell (1984) explained, “If a student perceives too great a decrease in performance (i.e., evidence of lack of development), he/she is more likely to drop out” (p. 265). However, students who experience low achievement are likely to attribute failure to low ability and may lose motivation (Dweck, 2000).

In spite of this, Bandura (1986) proposed that students exhibiting self-efficacy will believe they can accomplish a given task or activity, and their beliefs in their ability enable students to expend effort and persist. For instance, students who think they can complete an assignment in class are more likely to choose to do it, even if they encounter difficulty, and still complete the assignment (Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998). Research has also shown that a person’s reaction to events is determined by his/her attribution of the causes of the events (Dweck, 1975). Depending upon how first-year students’ perceive their academic failures, they may (or may not) choose to use new approaches for achieving their goals. Relatedly, Weiner’s (1985; 2000) attribution theory asserted students attribute causes for events that occur, and their future behaviors, whether they persist or depart, will depend on what they attribute as the cause of their academic failure. For example, students may experience academic failure (e.g., earning below a 2.0 GPA) and may attribute their academic failure to a lack of effort. Students may then decide to put forth more effort in time management strategies or studying related behaviors and persist in college to improve their academic performance. People who believe their failures are due to situational factors, such as using incorrect strategies, are more likely to persevere when faced with challenges or failures than those who believe failures can be attributed to lack of ability.
Weiner (2000) asserted that causal attributions occur in three dimensions: locus of control (internal-external), stability (stable-unstable), and controllability (controllable-uncontrollable). He proposed that if people perceive failure to be due to internal, uncontrollable, and stable causes, e.g., lack of skill, then they will not try harder because they feel it is out of their control. Students are more likely to continue learning and developing competence if they attribute failure to internal, controllable causes, e.g., lack of effort.

According to Weiner’s (1985) theory, attributions that are most constructive are those that are internal, controllable, and not stable (e.g., students contributing minimal effort towards their academics, but believe they could be successful if they put in the effort). Research has shown that if students determined that minimal effort caused their academic failure, then they may maintain motivation and increase effort (Turner, Husman, & Schallert, 2002). Students’ approaches to learning after failure are also aligned with Dweck’s (2000; 2008) research that people showed an increase in motivation to learn and performed better with challenging tasks. Dweck (1975) research affirmed that “if a child believes failure to be a result of his lack of motivation, he is likely to escalate his effort in an attempt to obtain a goal” (p. 683).

In addition, when students learn from failure, they can be empowered by learning how to use self-control and efficacious cognitive strategies (Rohrkemper & Corno, 1988). Students may experience failure, learn from their mistakes, respond flexibly and proactively to stressful situations, and then initiate tasks that challenge their own abilities (Rohrkemper & Corno, 1988). Thus, when facing academic challenges, such as academic failure, students’ may seek challenging endeavors, even if those efforts reveal deficiencies (Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999).
To cope with academic challenges, e.g., failing a college course, students can set goals to develop personal and academic competence. Ideally, students who have goals that are compatible with the institution and whose commitments are sufficient to achieve goals will persist (Tinto, 1993). The higher the institutional commitment and persistence towards degree attainment, the greater the likelihood a student will persist in college (Jones, 2010; Tinto, 1975). Indeed, Turner and Husman’s (2008) research found that future goals can have a powerful influence for mitigating the intensity of students’ perceived failure. In their study, students were able to be resilient from failure if they had strong, clear goals that they were highly committed to attain. Relatedly, Sriram and Vetter (2012) conducted a phenomenological study with three academically successful seniors, e.g., had a mean cumulative GPA of 3.37 by the Spring semester of their junior year who were conditionally admitted into college on academic probation their first year in college. Semi-structured, 90-minute individual interviews were conducted with the three White seniors during a one-week period. Students described successful strategies that included setting academic goals, e.g., a future goal to enter a specific academic program and/or graduate, using academic resources, and employing and adapting learning strategies to help achieve goals.

Unlike the sample in Sriram and Vetter’s (2012) research, the first-year students’ recruited to participate in this study were placed on academic probation for obtaining below a 2.0 GPA during their first semester in college. This study explored first-year students’ perceptions after being placed on academic probation and whether or not they changed their learning and motivational behaviors while mandated to take an academic strategies course.
**Academic Motivation**

Motivation is defined as a process that directs individuals towards completing activities or tasks (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Motivation consists of factors that include a person’s needs, interests, and goal-directed behavior (DeLamater & Myers, 2011; Driscoll, 2005). Students’ motivation will increase when they perceive they are making progress in learning (Schunk, 1991). Not surprising, an important relationship exists between academic achievement and academic motivation (Alarcon & Edwards, 2012; Bandura, 1977; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Assoc., 2005; Schunk, 1991). “The best predictors of whether a student will graduate or not are academic preparation and motivation” (Kuh et al., 2005, p. 7; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2001; 2005). Recently, Alarcon and Edwards (2012) conducted a quantitative study with 584 freshmen to explore the role of first-generation college students’ abilities (ACT and SAT scores), motivation (conscientiousness, trait affectivity, and consecutive enrollment per semester), and parents’ education on their college retention. Their results indicated that ability and motivation were significant influences in students’ retention. If students do not have basic reading, writing, and math skills, then they are less likely to persist. Although, Alarcon and Edwards (2012) asserted “motivation is a more important factor for determining retention” (p. 6). If students display achievement-oriented and organized behaviors, then they are more likely to remain in college. The third variable, parents’ education level, was determined not to be a significant predictor of retention. Although research has shown parent’s education level may have a significant impact on retention (Hsiao, 1992; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996), only 30% of the sample (n=584) was composed of first-generation students which was “not large enough to run the analyses grouped by parent’s educational level” (p. 7).
However, students may need more than academic ability and motivation to succeed to graduation. Balduf (2009) conducted a qualitative study with a sample of freshmen enrolled in a small public college who had shown high previous achievement in high school, and yet after their first semester of college earned academic warnings or had been placed on academic probation. All students in the sample took challenging courses in high school, such as AP and honors courses, yet the students did not expend much effort to earn good grades in high school. Following their first semester, the students received an academic warning if their semester grade point average was less than 2.0, and academic probation when their grade point average was less than 2.0 and completed fewer than 9 credit hours. From an initial pool of 83 students, Balduf conducted on-line interviews with seven students who were placed on academic probation.

Her findings included several aspects of underachievement (e.g., lack of self-discipline, time management, etc.). Her results indicated three major findings about students’ reasons for underachievement: 1) lack of preparation, 2) problems with time management, 3) issues with self-discipline and motivation. The students reported having inadequate study skills and poor time management. Further analysis showed that students were not able to easily adjust to the rigor of college nor to the freedom college provides students. They did not prepare for class (i.e., read chapters assigned) or procrastinated when completing assigned work until the night before a deadline. The students were not able to schedule their time to adequately prepare for class. Once the students received poor grades, they recognized they lacked the skills necessary to succeed.

Balduf’s research focused on high-achieving, first semester students who were placed on academic probation, and did not include students who were also mandated to take an academic strategies course where the students were taught learning strategies. This dissertation study collected data from participants currently enrolled in the Academic Success course. Collecting
data during two different times in the semester helped identify if students were learning academic strategies and applying these learned strategies to change their behaviors. This study also explored first-year students’ motivation after being placed on academic probation and in what ways did academic probation impact first-year students’ subsequent motivation and learning.

**Goal Orientation**

Students are more likely to persist towards a college degree if they are motivated to set goals that direct their behaviors towards academic achievement. Dweck (2000) found that students who fear failure may find ways to avoid goals that are difficult. However, students with a learning goal orientation may set challenging and/or learning goals (Dweck, 2000). In general, the pursuit of goals give people a sense of purpose and goals constitute a central element of meaning (Park & Folkman, 1997). Locke and Latham’s (2002) empirical research has been discussed for over three decades and they explained, “A goal is the object or aim of an action, for example, to attain a specific standard of proficiency, usually within a specified time limit” (p. 705). People’s goals represent their future ideal selves or possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Relatedly, students may enter college with views and images about their potential and create a goal for their possible selves as incentives for future behavior (e.g., completing their academic tasks) (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Goal-setting theory was developed as a framework to predict, explain, and investigate the influences of a person’s motivation and regulation of a person’s behavior (Latham & Locke, 2007; Locke & Latham, 1990; 2002). For example, students may come to college with the goal to graduate. Yet, many students may leave college as a result of unclear goals, lack of connectedness to the institution, or academic underachievement (Coleman & Freedman, 1996).
However, students can learn to set a goal(s) for themselves, make a commitment to attempt the
goal(s), and engage in activities that may lead to the attainment of the goal(s) (Schunk, 1991;
Weinstein, 1988). Therefore a student’s goal orientation is the motive(s) that a student may have
for completing his/her academic tasks (Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986). Research shows that explicit,
challenging goals will enhance and sustain motivation (Locke & Latham, 1990). For instance,
Latham, Ganegoda, and Locke (2011) asserted a student can choose a challenging goal that will
focus attention on goal-relevant behavior, place effort towards accomplishing the goal, remain
persistent to attain the goals, and draw upon strategies to reach goal attainment.

Researchers have studied how goals could influence beliefs, affect, and cognition in
relation to the learning process (Ames, 1992; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Goal theorists believe
that setting goals and the types of goals chosen can have an influence on students’ motivation to
learn (Thrash & Elliott, 2001).

Furthermore, achievement goal theories have evolved and refer to behavior that
demonstrates how people think about themselves, their tasks and their performance on those
tasks (Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001). Achievement goal theory consists of four goal
orientations (i.e., mastery-approach, mastery-avoidance, performance-approach, and
performance-avoidance) (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Elliot & Murayama, 2008; Pintrich 1999).
Hsieh, Sullivan, and Guerra (2007) described the four goal orientations as “the motives that
students have for completing tasks, which may include developing and improving ability
(mastery goals), demonstrating ability (performance-approach goals), and hiding lack of ability
(performance-avoidance goals)” (p. 455).

However, although achievement goal theory may help in understanding students’
motivation (Ames & Archer, 1988; Wolters, 2004), this study only explored whether first-year
students’ created academic goals after being mandated to take an academic strategies course and how their goals may have changed, if at all. Ames and Archer (1988) stated that “Goal orientation, therefore, is determined by what is actually happening in the classroom, but, more important, it is defined by how the individual student gives meaning to these events and what motivational orientation he or she adopts” (p. 265). Whether or not students use goals, to achieve success or avoid failure, may impact their motivation to persist towards a college degree. “It is difficult if not impossible to understand students’ motivation without understanding the contexts they are experiencing” (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002, p. 128).

Therefore, the study explored whether or not first-year students’ continued to persist towards completing a college degree after being placed on academic probation during their first semester and being mandated to take an academic strategies course during their second semester. Whether or not students, who are placed in a mandatory academic strategies course, choose to learn and utilize the content taught in the class may impact their motivation to continue towards degree attainment. This study also explored whether students attribute being placed on academic probation to their ability, self-regulation strategies (or lack thereof) or possibly a non-academic reason.

If a student is placed on academic probation during his/her first semester of college, he/she may experience and view the failure as a stressful event. Finding meaning in stressful events may cause individuals to change their beliefs or goals (Park & Folkman, 1997). Meaning making can occur when individuals attempt to cope with stressful events (Park & Folkman, 1997). After evaluating the appraised meaning of a situation or stressful event, goals can also be modified and/or replaced with new goals (Folkman, 1984). How students evaluate the appraised meaning of failing a course and being mandated to take an academic strategies course may
determine their likelihood to continue persisting to the next semester in pursuit of their goal to graduate.

A student’s aptitude and capabilities contribute to his/her sense of academic efficacy that helps determine goal commitment (Bean, 1990; Tinto, 1993). Locke and Latham (1990) posited goals that are specific and difficult are strongly related to performance. When students experience transition, such as navigating their first year of college, goal-relevant performance (e.g., creating and accomplishing goals) will increase their self-efficacy and likelihood in maintaining their interests to pursue a larger goal (e.g., graduation).

“In classrooms, students are expected to engage in lessons and learning activities with the goal of achieving their intended learning outcomes, although students do not necessarily accept this goal and may pursue other goals in addition or instead” (Brophy, 2004, p. 7). Researchers have not systematically examined the influence of goal setting on academically high risk undergraduate students (Coleman & Freedman, 1996). Thus, Coleman and Freedman (1996) conducted an experimental group counseling study with 149 undergraduates (78 male and 71 female, majority European American), at a large Midwestern university, to determine if undergraduate students, who were placed on academic probation, “would demonstrate (a) higher rates of removal from probation status, (b) higher grade point averages (GPAs), and (c) a higher ration of academic credits completed” after voluntarily participating in a 10 session group (maximum of 15 students per group) seminar about goal setting and other learning concepts (p. 632). Students were not required to participate in the 10-session seminar treatment group, although they did receive one course credit and a grade after successful completion of the program. Participation in Coleman and Freedman’s (1996) research study was also not a requirement. Coleman and Freedman’s (1996) research included 70 students (of 149) who
completed the 10-session group intervention, scheduled twice a week for five weeks), and the results affirmed that students who completed the intervention were removed from probation status at significantly higher rates than students in the non-treatment condition and achieved significantly higher GPAs.

In contrast to the study conducted by Coleman and Freedman (1996), this study included a sample of first-year students’ who were mandated to take an academic strategies course and the course was not structured as a group counseling program. However, similarly to Coleman and Freedman’s study, the students who volunteered to participate in this dissertation study were placed on academic probation, voluntarily chose to participate in the study, and received instruction about goals while in the mandated course.

Tinto (1985) asserted that, “Commitments or motivations indicate the degree to which individuals are willing to commit themselves to that effort as opposed to alternative investments of time and energy” (p. 33). Balduf (2009) identified activity choices as dependent on what a student chooses to do and how much challenge exists. Activity level is determined by the amount of energy a student may expend on an activity (Balduf, 2009). Engagement behaviors are the types and quality of behaviors a student may display when working on a task(s) (Balduf, 2009). Persistence is the extent students will continue to work towards completing the task (Balduf, 2009). According to Balduf, continuing motivation is based on the extent to which students maintain an interest in and desire to go above and beyond what is expected of them.

Thus, the study explored high-risk first-year students’ perceptions and learning that occurred after being placed on academic probation and mandated to complete an academic strategies course. Data collected from this study also included whether or not first-year students’ learned and implemented learning strategies to improve their academic performance. Students
can learn and increase their studying related behaviors; students may utilize learning strategies (e.g., studying related behaviors) and feel capable of completing academic tasks.

**Self-efficacy**

Bandura (1993) posited students with self-efficacy beliefs will increase their motivation and persistence to master challenging tasks and foster use of their acquired knowledge and skills (as cited in Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005, p. 679). High or low self-efficacy has been shown to be a major factor in students’ motivation or lack of motivation (Bandura, 1977; 1986; Hsieh, Sullivan, & Guerra, 2007; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Schunk, 1991). Self-efficacy is a person’s perceived capability to succeed at a task through personal effort (Bandura, 1997). Students can make judgments of their capabilities that can give them a sense of self-worth (Bandura, 1997). For college students, self-efficacy is a feeling of being able to contribute to their own learning based on self-perceptions of ability, effort needed, and control of their learning (Smith, Walter, & Hoey, 1992). Researchers have shown that students’ self-efficacy correlates highly with their college achievement (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia 2001; Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005) and is pertinent to successful learning (Zimmerman, 2000).

Academic self-efficacy also predicts grades (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1993; Zajacova, et al, 2005) and persistence in college (Devonport & Lane, 2006; Schunk, 1981; Torres & Solberg, 2001; Wlodkowski, Mauldin, & Gahn, 2001). For example, a quantitative study conducted by Smith et al. (1992) revealed that college students’ academic efficacy can greatly impact whether or not they take responsibility for their education and persist to graduation. Students with self-efficacy have confidence in their ability to complete academic tasks (e.g., study for exams, write papers). Students demonstrate their academic self-efficacy when performing tasks such as asking questions in class and preparing for exams.
Chemers, Hu and Garcia (2001) reported freshmen’ academic self-efficacy was “significantly and directly related to academic expectations and academic performance” (p. 61). In a study including 256 freshmen, students reported trusting their capabilities and therefore they were able to view their college experience as a challenge to overcome and not a threat. Chemers et al. (2001) found that confident students were more likely to successfully adjust to their college environment.

Students with high-efficacy can feel confident in their ability to continue their pursuit towards a degree while adjusting to their college or university (Bean & Eaton, 2000). However, some students who have experienced academic failure upon their initial transition may experience a threat to their self-efficacy.

Research affirms self-efficacy is linked to academic motivation, performance, help-seeking behaviors, and cognitive strategies (Bandura, 1986; Lynch 2006; Maehr, 2001; Robbins, Lauver, Le, Davis, Langley, & Carlstrom, 2004). Self-efficacy strongly influences a student’s motivation to learn. After a student experiences academic failure in a new environment, his/her self-efficacy may change (i.e., become low). Whether or not students engage in their academic environment and utilize academic strategies, may determine whether or not a student persists in college.

In addition, Bean and Eaton (2000) suggested that students with high self-efficacy will feel confident in their ability to survive and adjust to social communities of their respective postsecondary institution (as cited in Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). Students may experience social integration when they are able to survive, adapt, and find compatible social
communities on campus (Braxton et al, 2004). “A general sense that one is loved and cared for by others, and that these others would help if really needed, contributes to psychological and physical well-being” (Jerusalem & Mittag, 1995, p. 181).

“The more a student perceives that the institution is committed to the welfare of its students, the greater the student’s level of social integration” (Braxton et al., 2004, p. 32). Greater the levels of social integration and institutional commitment increase the likelihood that students will persist in college (Braxton et al., 2004). Whether or not students recover from academic failure and utilize academic support services may aid in their likelihood to persist towards a degree.

People with a high sense of perceived efficacy may interpret demands and problems more as challenges rather than uncontrollable events (Jerusalem & Mittag, 1995). In contrast, individuals with low perceived efficacy may be prone to self-doubts and anxiety when confronted with difficult situations. Research has shown that efficacious students manage their learning environment more efficiently than students who identify having low self-efficacy (Pintrich & Schrauben, 1992; Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1988).

Self-efficacy can change, “especially in response to critical life events by young adults whose sense of efficacy is not yet as elaborated and stabilized as in older persons” (Jerusalem & Mittag, 1995, p. 179). Therefore the transition to college in a new academic environment may change a student’s academic self-efficacy particularly as he/she copes with complex demands in the new environment (Jerusalem & Mittag, 1995). “Self-efficacy acts on a broader level through the more effective use of metacognitive strategies, which involve planning and self-regulation – skills that become increasingly important as an individual progresses through educational levels to environments that are less ordered and constrained (e.g., college or university life)” (Chemers,
As long as students maintain attainable goals they are more likely to build a history of success that empowers them to engage in future tasks (Brophy, 2004).

**Self-regulation**

Students’ effort and motivation are integral in academic achievement or are determinants in failure to achieve when effort and motivation are low. Students need to identify areas of their academic strengths and deficiencies and then seek opportunities to ensure learning; hence, self-directed learning requires motivation (Bandura, 1997). When students are motivated to learn, either from intrinsic reinforcements (e.g., verbal affirmation after answering a question in class) or extrinsic reinforcements (e.g., receiving money for completing an assignment), they manage and accomplish tasks by actively engaging in their academic environment, conscientiously completing assignments, also known as displaying *self-regulation* behaviors.

Researchers have studied the social cognitive perspective of self-regulation (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998), and interrelation between learning and motivation is a central theme within this research. Zimmerman (1989) defined self-regulation as “the degree that individuals are metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally active participants in their own learning process” (p. 329). According to Zimmerman (1989), self-regulation exists when students are wholeheartedly engaged in their own learning process; research has shown that self-regulation is an essential element for the learning process (e.g., Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Jarvela & Jarvenoja, 2011; Pintrich & Zusho, 2002; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998; Zimmerman, 2008).

Students can use many different types of self-regulation strategies to achieve goals and evaluate their own progress to meet their goals. Accordingly, research illustrates that high-achieving students are more likely to be self-regulated than low-achieving students, because self-regulated learners establish goals (Wolters, 1998; Zimmerman, 2000, 2002; Zimmerman &
Martinez-Pons, 1986). In other words, students who are more motivated and self-efficacious, and who are also using self-regulation techniques, are more likely to achieve academically (Zimmerman, 2000). Indeed, research has shown students with self-regulation engage in appropriate academic self-monitoring and self-reflecting on their progress for high academic achievement (Pintrich & Zusho, 2002; Zimmerman, 2000).

Zimmerman’s (2000, 2002) model of the self-regulation cycle describes three phases: forethought, performance, and self-reflection. In the forethought phase, students decide how to meet their goals and make plans. Students in the performance phase obtain information that tells them if their plans were successful, and in the final phase, self-reflection, students compare their current performance level to what they need to meet their goals. Students who use the self-regulation cycle are more likely to adapt and continue their self-regulation behavior with learning. Eccles and Wigfield (2002) explained that, “The favorableness of one’s reaction to failure is determined by how individuals interpret their difficulties and failures (p. 124).

Once students engage in a task, they must monitor their behavior, determine its outcomes, and react to those outcomes to regulate what action they determine is best (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). For the purpose of this study, whether or not students are willing to learn about and/or use self-regulatory behaviors, after experiencing failure and enrolling in a mandated course, may demonstrate the potential effect the course has on students’ future learning, achievement, and retention.

**Volitional Strategies**

Another aspect of self-regulated behavior is the use of *volitional strategies*. Corno (1993) described volition as the will needed to complete a task and the diligence of pursuit. Students may use volitional strategies to initiate or maintain motivation for learning when they are having
motivational difficulties (Corno, 2004; Dewitte & Lens, 2000; Turner & Husman, 2008). As part of students’ goal-pursuit, not only do they have to use self-regulating behaviors to monitor their progress, they must also learn how to use volitional strategies to support their motivation and follow-through with their academic goals (Corno, 2004). An example of needing volitional control is when students study content in courses that they may not like or to persist on tasks they do not like (Dewitte & Lens, 2000). Thus, a volitional strategy is a strategy students may use to keep themselves on track. This strategy may remind themselves of their ultimate goal to graduate from college and support their persistence towards that goal (Dewitte & Lens, 2000), especially after experiencing academic failure (Turner & Husman, 2008).

Researchers have documented that students regulate their motivation by using various volitional strategies, including prioritizing (Corno, 2004), reminding themselves of their goal(s) (Turner, Husman, & Schallert, 2002), self-consequating (i.e., thinking about the consequences of one’s actions; Wolters & Rosenthal, 2000), providing rewards after completing study sessions (McCann & Garcia, 1999; McCann & Turner, 2004), or budgeting time (i.e., spending equal time on less interesting academic content (Corno, 2004; Dewitte & Lens, 2000).

Another type of volitional strategy is approach or avoidance self-talk (Dewitte & Lens, 2000; Turner & Husman, 2008; Wolters, 1998). Wolters (1998) stated students may engage in self-talk to reduce anxiety by using this self-efficacy enhancement strategy. Another example from Turner and Husman’s (2008) research found that upper division college students used both positive (i.e., “I can do this!”) and negative self-talk (i.e., “I will disappoint my parents.”) to stay engaged in their academic pursuits.

Although volitional strategies are important, they are not the only means to achieving academic success (Dewitte & Lens, 2000). Students not only need to use volitional strategies to
support their motivation towards academic success, but they also need to use learning strategies to learn information. Students may use volitional strategies to focus their attention towards learning, but they need to use learning strategies in order to comprehend and increase their knowledge. Whether or not students learn and employ volitional strategies or learning strategies could impact their decision to persist academically, especially if they experience initial failure.

Students’ ability to identify and change specific behaviors (e.g., application of academic study and volitional strategies) can aid in their academic achievement. For example, Turner and Husman (2008) used an exploratory, grounded theory method to investigate students’ self-regulation after students perceived they had failed an important academic assessment and felt shame. For the students who increased their scores on the next test, the testimonials shared by the students illustrated their personal stories about their emotional and motivational experiences, as well as their use of study strategies (strategies to support learning) and volitional strategies (strategies that support motivation such as rewarding one’s study efforts). The authors found that “using multiple study and volition strategies could facilitate students’ self-regulation of stressful emotions and perceptions of failure” (p. 166).

Furthermore, Turner and Husman (2008) asserted that, “Students should receive messages about the need to flexibly choose strategies to facilitate both short- and long-term goals and that the confrontation of failure requires changes of strategies or the initiation of volitional strategies” (Turner & Husman, 2008, p. 166). Indeed, first-year attrition intervention programs were implemented as a method to teach students various learning and self-regulation strategies (Davis, 1992; Ryan & Glenn, 2004; Montgomery, Jeffs, Schlegel, & Jones, 2009; Porter & Swing, 2006).
Fortunately, postsecondary institutions have responded to assist these students by offering academic strategies courses, such as the Academic Success course at Florida State University, that introduce learning strategies to first-year students. This study explored first-year students’ perceptions after being placed on academic probation and mandated to take an academic strategies course, as well as what behavioral changes they made (if any) (e.g., learning or volitional strategies). Data collected from the study demonstrated students’ process of learning and using academic strategies to further persist towards their academic goals.

**Coping**

Transitions are part of every student’s college experience. During their transition to college, freshmen enter a new and unfamiliar environment. Schreiner (2012), in her chapter about college-students’ thriving (i.e., students who are intellectually, socially, and emotionally engaged in their college experiences) affirms “Transition begins with an event or nonevent that is perceived as significant by the student: something occurs that was either anticipated or unexpected, or a significant event that was expected to happen does not” (p. 3). While transitioning from the familiar to the unknown, freshmen may experience a stressful event, such as academic failure, and not take steps to avoid or minimize the events before they occur (i.e., proactive coping). Freshmen students may experience academic failure, a stressor, and need to adjust. In order to adjust to a life situation, a person self-assesses a given environment and adapts to that environment (Bean & Eaton, 2000). In order to adapt, a person uses coping behaviors (Bean & Eaton, 2000).

Folkman and Lazarus (1985) defined coping as activities people can undertake to endure or minimize demands perceived as potential threats, existing harm or losses. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) also posited that the way people interpret the demands from an environment can
have a significant impact on their ability to cope with that environment. For example, when a freshman fails a course during his/her first semester in college, he/she may feel the academic environment is too rigorous and contemplate whether or not he/she has skills and resources to improve academically. Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) distinguished proactive coping from coping and anticipatory coping in three different ways. First, proactive coping can occur when a person accumulates resources and skills to prepare in consideration that stressors do occur. Second, proactive coping skills are different from coping due to present stressors. Third, proactive coping is always active to address nonexistent stressors.

People differ in the degree to which they have undertaken proactive efforts to manage stressful events (e.g., academic failure, Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). “Indeed, in many life domains, people experience good outcomes or avoid bad ones because of their proactive efforts” (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997, p. 417). Although academic failure is preventable, if a freshman utilizes proactive coping, he/she will anticipate stressful events before the events occur and use accumulated resources to prevent or modify before stressful events occur (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). When using proactive coping, a person is not sure what and when the exact stressor will occur, thus a person manipulates general resources in a challenge- or goal-oriented manner to tackle obstacles in the future.

Students who recognize potential stressors may conduct initial cognitive appraisals -- either primary or secondary -- to determine what proactive coping skills may be needed to prevent the stressor (Lazarus, 1998; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Primary cognitive appraisal is how a person views the transition, either positively or negatively (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). Following this primary appraisal, secondary cognitive appraisal occurs to determine if anything can be done to prevent or overcome harm or to improve
the prospects for benefit (Folkman et al. 1986). For example, students may self-assess whether they have resources for coping, such as, support, e.g., the Academic Success course, to handle the situation. In addition, Perry, Hall, and Ruthig (2005) asserted whether or not the student feels a sense of control over the situation is vital to a student’s academic success. When students feel they have some control during any transition, they are more likely to utilize healthy coping practices and problem-solving strategies, and remain engaged with changing their circumstances in positive ways, rather than withdrawal and disconnection from their new community (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Perry et al., 2005).

Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) asserted that five interrelated tasks of proactive self-regulation must occur to begin proactive coping techniques. For example, a student must collect his/her resources learned in the course (resource accumulation), realize in advance that academic failure may occur during the second semester (recognition), determine whether he/she can take action to avert academic failure (initial appraisal), utilize academic strategies several days before an assignment or test is due (preliminary coping efforts), and follow up with the instructor after receiving the grade on the assignment or text (elicitation and use of feedback) (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997).

Students with proactive coping skills will utilize organizational skills, time management skills, and establish a social support network (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). However, a busy environment, such as students starting their college education, may compromise their initial appraisal of an impending stressor (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). Therefore, students may experience academic failure when transitioning into college during their first semester. Whether or not students learn academic strategies and utilize their academic and/or social resources may determine if the academic failure is repeated. According to Schreiner (2012), “A student with a
strong repertoire of coping skills and a significant support system who perceives the changes as a necessary part of a positive new future will experience a less traumatic stress reaction that will a student who lacks adequate coping skills and sufficient support” (p. 3).

Coping research primarily focuses on three broad classes of coping responses: problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and the seeking and utilization of social support. (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; 1985). Problem-focused coping occurs when individuals attempt to change the stressful situation (Ptacek, Smith, & Zanas, 1992). Emotion-focused coping occurs when individuals regulate their emotions that are experienced by the situation (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). The third response, securing social support, can occur for either emotional or instrumental reasons (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Overall, cognitive appraisal involves a self-assessment of a person’s coping skills, available resources, and potential support networks, within the context of the demands required during a transition (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Moreover, Ptacek, Smith, and Zanas (1992) conducted research to determine if men and women cope with stress in different ways. Findings from their research concluded that even in similar stressful situations, men preferred to utilize problem-focused coping whereas women favored emotion-focused coping or seeking social support (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Ptacek et al., 1992). In their research, Ptacek et al. (1992) conducted a 21-day longitudinal study about stress and coping with undergraduate students. Students reported their answers each day on a coping questionnaire. The data collected included students having to score their perceived stressful event each day (e.g., rate on a scale from one to six with one being not at all to six as extremely). The information participants submitted also included the description of the type of life event that was experienced, as well as which of eight coping methods were used such as problem-focused, seeking social support, wishful thinking, and emotion-focused strategies. The
students’ responses aligned with previous research that women experienced more stressful events related to health and life while men reported more stressful events with job and finances. Overall, women reported experiencing more stress than men.

Thus the study explored first-year students perceptions of being placed on academic probation after their first semester of college and learning that occurred after completing a mandatory course during their second semester of college. Once students experience academic probation in their first semester, they may adjust their goals as part of their coping and they may use learning strategies that are taught in the mandated academic strategies course.

**Learning Strategies**

Multiple studies have shown learning strategies help students’ academic achievement (Pintrich, 1999; Turner & Husman, 2008; Weinstein & Mayer, 1986; Zimmerman & Schunk, 1989). College students who use learning and study strategies frequently are successful in learning and achievement (Albaili, 2006). Learning strategies include any behaviors that facilitate the attainment, understanding, or transfer of new knowledge and skills (Weinstein, Husman, & Dierking, 2000). McKeachie, Pintrich, and Lin (1985) described learning strategies such as basic memory strategies (e.g., repetition), comprehension strategies (e.g., paraphrasing material), monitoring strategies (e.g., self-questioning), and active reading strategies (e.g., writing notes). For example, students can learn strategies such as reading a textbook and monitoring their comprehension as they read, identifying their strengths and weaknesses, and acknowledging their motivation for completing tasks (Pintrich, 2002).

Varying program models have been “designed to serve college students: (a) learning-to-learn courses, (b) supplemental instruction, (c) required programs for underprepared students, (d) courses integrating the processes of reading and writing, and (e) learning assistance centers”
A reason academic assistance programs have been implemented in college is for freshmen who are known to not be self-regulated learners (Simpson et al., 1997). This study explored first-year students’ perceptions of their learning that occurred after they were placed on academic probation and mandated to take an academic strategies course.

“Developmental programs seek to build upon students’ current knowledge and skill level” (Simpson et al., p. 57). This model may be mandated by a postsecondary institution and requires students, who place below a certain Grade Point Average (GPA), to pass the course and maintain their GPA above a minimum standard. The Academic Success course is required of first-year students, who earn below a 2.0 GPA, also labeled as high-risk. The course was designed to assist students with how to improve their academic performance by learning strategies (e.g., study skills).

When students are using their meta-cognitive knowledge, they identify different strategies for different tasks (Pintrich, 2002). “For example, learners can know about different strategies for reading a textbook as well as strategies to monitor and check their comprehension as they read (Pintrich, 2002, p. 219). Learners can also identify their strengths and weaknesses as well as their motivation to complete a task (Pintrich, 2002). “Students who know about different learning strategies are more likely to use them when studying” (Pintrich, 2002, p. 222). “Future research efforts on programs designed for underprepared students should use more qualitative measures that investigate and describe students’ needs and perceptions” (Simpson et al., 1997, p. 60). This study explored what first-year students learned and utilized to change academic behaviors after being placed on academic probation and mandated to take an academic strategies course during their second semester of college.
At the postsecondary institution where the study was conducted, the Academic Success course has a structured curriculum that is centered on learning strategies, where research has shown students’ completing that type of course are more likely to persist and graduate (Ryan & Glenn, 2004). In their research, Ryan and Glenn (2004) concluded that a learning-strategies intervention course helped improve student retention rates more than a socialization course. Indeed, their study showed that the learning strategies course was more retention-effective for freshmen in either good standing or high risk. However, as demonstrated with the students in Ryan and Glenn’s (2004) study, whether or not students learn and utilize effective learning strategies can determine whether or not they succeed and persist to graduation.

In addition, the Academic Success course has developed 12-modules to assist students with developing or increasing their awareness with learning strategies such as utilizing study skills, note-taking, and planning their calendars to prevent procrastination. “Most learning strategy programs teach students about the importance of planning their study activities, regulating their attention, and monitoring their comprehension of readings and lectures” (McKeachie et al., 1985, p. 154). Although there is no assurance that students will internalize these strategies and become self-regulating, motivation impacts students’ transfer of learning strategies (McKeachie et al., 1985).

McKeachie et al. (1985) conducted a quantitative analysis with 193 students whose SAT scores were below the typical student at the University of Michigan. From this sample, a small sample was interviewed that revealed students had used learning strategies taught in an introductory psychology course geared to freshmen. Besides the authors’ notation about how the students in the course had slightly higher GPAs than their peers not enrolled in the course, the findings did not directly provide detailed information about what skills students identified as
helpful to their academic success. The study specifically explored what students learned after being placed on academic probation and mandated to take an academic strategies course during their second semester of college. When students are aware of their knowledge, skills and competencies they can feel confident (Bandura, 1997; Wood & Olivier, 2004). This confidence aids them when putting forth effort in performing well academically (Duckworth & Seligman, 2006).

### Summary

This chapter provided a review of the literature pertaining to college students and strategies that may or may not be used by students’ in their transition to college. Tinto’s (1975) model of student departure is the theoretical framework used in this study to explore students’ perception of their transition after experiencing academic probation and being mandated to take an academic strategies course within the first two semesters of their transition to college.

A review of the literature also suggested a gap in the research exists related to students’ perceptions about experiencing academic probation as they enter into their new college environment while also being mandated to take an academic strategies course. Students’ belief in their capabilities may change based on stressors, such as failing a course during their first semester, and their perceived efficacy may affect their likelihood of persistence, which ultimately may cause students to withdraw. Whether or not students utilize learning or volitional strategies can affect their motivation to persist. Strategies with empirical support such as self-regulated learning, goal-setting, and coping were also discussed. As such, the importance of this study was to learn how first-year students perceived their initial academic probation and whether or not this experience impacted their motivation to continue pursuing a college degree and what strategies the students identified using to persist to the next semester.
In chapter three, the methodological approach used in the study will be discussed. A
descriptive grounded theory methodology explored the topic of first-year students lived
experiences with being placed on academic probation after their first semester of college and
completing a mandated academic strategies course during their second semester of college. The
next chapter will also describe the methodological plan in depth including the research context,
design, participants, data collection and analysis procedures.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Overview

The purpose of this study was to understand first-year students’ perceptions after they were placed on academic probation due to earning less than a 2.0 GPA during their first semester and consequently required to enroll in an academic strategies course during their second semester. The researcher employed a grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In grounded theory, “the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12). Founded by Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory meant theory derived from data. The researcher chose grounded theory because the purpose was to develop a theory grounded on the experiences of the participants.

This study looked at the process of students entering college and transitioning both academically and socially through an analysis of their perceptions and experiences. As a result, the data collected and analyzed helped generate a theory of college transition for students who experience academic probation during their first semester while also being mandated to take an academic strategies class. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are high-risk first-year students’ perceptions about their initial academic probation?

2. In what ways does academic probation impact first-year students’ subsequent motivation and learning?

3. Following academic probation, what strategies do students use to persist for college completion?
4. What are high-risk first-year students’ perceptions of their experiences after completing the mandated Academic Success course?

5. What roles do family relationships have on high-risk first-year students’ motivation to persist towards degree attainment?

This chapter provides the rationale for using qualitative methods, research design selected to conduct this study, and information on the participants. This chapter also provides information about data collection and analysis procedures. Validity and reliability will also be discussed.

**Rationale for Qualitative Research Methods**

For this study, qualitative research techniques were used to understand how students construct, interpret and make meaning of their experiences in context (Creswell, 2007; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Merriam, 2009; Mertens, 2010). The intent of this research was to explain first-year students’ perceptions about being placed on academic probation and mandated to take an academic strategies course during their second semester. Creswell (2003) stated that a research study merits a qualitative approach when “a concept or phenomenon needs to be understood because little research has been done on it” (p. 22). There are few studies exploring high-risk first-year students’ experiences once they have been placed on academic probation. Qualitative methods provided the best method for understanding the experiences of the students and how they understood their transition process (Merriam, 2009).

To better understand students’ perceptions and learning through the first year of college after initial academic difficulty, this study investigated students’ perceptions of their preliminary transition, their perceptions of the mandated course on their motivation and learning, as well as the strategies they implemented after experiencing academic probation and completing the Academic Success course.
Research Context

In Spring 2014, 103 first-time in college students enrolled at Florida State University; these students previously applied for either Summer or Fall 2013 admission (personal communication with Matthew Bucior, February 16, 2015). The Spring 2014 SAT mid range test score for enrolled students was 1590-1670 and the SAT average was 1639. The Spring 2014 ACT mid range was 23 - 25 and ACT average was 24. For Summer 2014, Florida State University admitted 4,090 first-time in college students and 2,176 first-time in college students enrolled (personal communication with Matthew Bucior, September, 14, 2014).

The Summer 2014 SAT mid range test score for enrolled students was 1670 – 1830 and the SAT average was 1744. The Summer 2014 ACT mid range was 24 – 27 and ACT average was 26. Among the 14 students who volunteered to participate in this study, six (five males and one female) students enrolled in Spring 2014. Eight (four males and four females) of the 14 students enrolled in Summer 2014. The standardized test scores of the majority of students in this sample either were below the average or average (see Table 1).

Every student who participated in the study (n=14) had been mandated to take the Academic Success (SLS) course either in the Spring 2014 or Summer 2014 (n=105) because they had earned less than a 2.0 GPA during their first semester at Florida State University (FSU). Of the 38 students mandated to take the SLS course in the Spring, six (16%, five males, one female) volunteered to participate in the study. Of the 67 students who were mandated to take the SLS course in the Summer term, eight students (12%, four males, four females) volunteered to participate in the study.

At Florida State University (FSU), the Academic Success course, SLS 1122, is an undergraduate course offered by the Office of Undergraduate Studies. Implemented seven years
ago, the course is mandated for first-year students who earned under a 2.0 grade point average (GPA) during their first semester at FSU (i.e., either Spring 2014 or Summer 2014). The course is one credit, graded, and meets weekly for one hour and fifteen minutes, for 12-weeks.

There were six sections offered in Fall 2014. There were three full-time instructors and each instructor taught two sections. The Associate Dean with oversight responsibility for the Academic Success course supported this research and provided access to students from all six sections. Until the dissertation, qualitative research had never been conducted with this at-risk student population at this institution. All of the sections used the same curriculum and required the same assignments.

Research Design

**Sampling.** The participants for this study consisted of students required to complete the Academic Success course because they earned below a 2.0 GPA in their first semester. The students were in the entering freshmen classes beginning Spring or Summer 2014. In Fall 2014, six sections of the academic strategies course were taught and approximately 20-24 students were enrolled in each section (personal communication with Sara Hamon, July, 15, 2014). To obtain in-depth descriptions of first year students’ perceptions, the students completed two separate semi-structured interviews.

**Participants.** There were 105 students mandated to enroll in the Academic Success course and invited to participate in this study. The criteria for selection of interview participants included students mandated to take the Academic Success course, enrolled full-time (taking 12+ credit hours in that semester), and over 18 years of age. Of 105 mandated students recruited for this qualitative study, the total sample was comprised of 14 students (nine males and five females). The 14 students who volunteered were of varying gender, racial, and socio-economic
backgrounds. In addition, the college experiences (i.e., major, residency, activities) of the students differed considerably. Ten undergraduate majors were represented amongst the 14 participants including: Advertising, Biological Science, Business, Computational Biology, Exploratory, Public Relations, International Affairs, Jazz, Political Science, and Voice Performance. All 14 students had completed and passed the Academic Success course at the point of completing the second interview during their second semester of college.

**Procedures**

Before participant recruitment began, initial permission to conduct research was obtained in writing from the Institutional Research Board (IRB) (Mertens, 2010). Once IRB approved the study (Appendix A), the Associate Dean, who oversees the Academic Success program, distributed the recruitment letter (Appendix B) via e-mail, at the beginning of the second week of classes, to all 105 mandated students currently enrolled in all six sections of the SLS 1122 course. The recruitment letter invited them to participate in this research study. Students indicated their willingness to participate by replying to the primary researcher’s e-mail address. The three instructors who taught each section also assisted with recruiting participants by describing the study as the opportunity for students to share their reflections and learning. The instructors also permitted the researcher to recruit students during the second and third week of classes when course observations were conducted. Some students volunteered to participate in the study after class ended by providing the researcher with their name and e-mail addresses. All 14 students who volunteered to participate received a follow-up e-mail (Appendix C) to schedule two separate forty-minute face-to-face interviews in the near future.

At the beginning of the initial interview for each student, a protocol was used to briefly describe the study, including the procedures, risks, and benefits to each student. As each
interview occurred (during the second to fifth weeks of the Fall 2014 semester), each participant was given a consent form (Appendix D) at the beginning of the interview session; students were requested to sign the informed consent before the interviews began (Creswell, 2007). Participants were assured their identities remained confidential within the research findings. Pseudonyms were created to maintain students’ anonymity and confidentiality. The participants were also reminded that they did not have to answer specific questions or may end the interview at any time (Mertens, 2010; Yin 2009). All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

**Academic achievement.** In the consent form, students were asked for their permission to obtain their first and second semester GPAs, standardized test scores, and grade in the Academic Success course from the University Registrar. The first and second semester GPAs of all students participating in the study are reported using academic records provided by the Registrar as well.

**Participant compensation and benefit.** Each student received a $15 gift card, as an incentive, for participating in the study (Patton, 2002). Among the final sample of students who completed second interviews, students were placed in a random drawing and two students received $50 gift cards. A benefit for the students to volunteer in the research study was the opportunity to share their reflections about their transitions to college.

**Data Collection**

Data collection within a grounded study has a high degree of interaction with the phenomenon. In depth qualitative interviews with 14 students was the primary form of data collection in this study. The specific interview procedures for this study are described below.

**Interview Questions**

**First Interview.** The researcher conducted interviews as the primary method of collecting data. Interviews are the most frequently employed method of data collection in
grounded theory (Creswell, 1998), and interviews serve as a common and effective way of understanding individuals (Fontana & Frey, 2000). The purpose of the first interview was to establish rapport with the participants (Creswell, 2007; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

The first round of interviews were conducted in early September during the fifth and sixth week of the students’ second semester while they were enrolled in the Academic Success course. The interview questions enabled the researcher to obtain information to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2007). Interview questions were provided to each student during the first and second semi-structured interviews (Appendix E); this approach enabled the researcher to collect data about the students’ initial interest in the institution and their perceptions of transitioning to college while being placed on academic probation. Additional questions were asked depending on the information provided by the participants during their answers. The average interview length was 40 minutes. The on-campus locations of the interviews were chosen by each participant, based on their comfort level and convenience.

Each interview was documented through digital audio recordings. Immediately following the first round of interviews, the audio tapes were transcribed. After transcription, the first round of interviews were coded. Glaser and Strauss (1967) posited analysis begins after completing the first interview and continues throughout the research process to identify relevant concepts, validate them, and explore them more fully. Transcriptions from three students who volunteered to participate in the study were also sent to two peer debriefers to verify coding. The peer debriefers independently analyzed the transcriptions and provided feedback and findings to the researcher (Patton, 2002). The two debriefers were doctoral candidates and knowledgeable about qualitative research.
Second Interview. The second interview (see Appendix E) was purposefully conducted after the students completed the 12-week Academic Success course yet before the second semester had ended. Therefore, the second round of individual interviews occurred in mid-November. The second-round of interviews allowed the researcher to ask the students to share personal information, perceptions, and experiences during their first two semesters at the university (i.e., their first semester in which they obtained less than a 2.0 GPA and their second semester), as well as strategies and/or behaviors they adopted since being placed on academic probation.

The researcher also reviewed and reflected on content shared by students in their first interview. Themes and questions that emerged from the first round of interviews were also discussed with each student. The average interview length was a half hour. The on-campus locations of the interviews was chosen by each participant, based on his/her comfort level and convenience.

Each interview was documented through digital audio recordings. Immediately following the second round of interviews, the audio tapes were transcribed. After transcription, the second round of interviews were coded. Transcriptions from three students who volunteered to participate in the study were also sent to two peer debriefers to verify coding. The peer debriefers provided feedback from their interpretations of the written transcriptions after the first and second round of interviews. The researcher exchanged e-mails with the peer debriefers to discuss the codes that emerged from the data. There were no discrepancies among the primary researcher and debriefers. The final member check process occurred through an exchange of electronic mail in February and March 2015. Each participant received their individual participant profile, an in-depth summary of the findings, and initial grounded theory of college transition.
Data Analysis

Data analysis was an ongoing process that enabled the researcher to explore themes as they emerged and to pursue unexpected leads. Data review and reflection was an ongoing, cyclical process (Merriam, 2009; Mertens, 2010; Stake, 1995). Interview data was transcribed by a transcriptionist service as interviews were completed. Transcriptions were verified through listening to audio tapes again; they were labeled by pseudonym and date only.

Data analysis consisted of open, axial and selective coding procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding allowed for the identification of new concepts to emerge. Initial open coding, the process of identifying any word or concept from the data and noted as relevant to answering research questions, allowed the primary researcher to identify significant words or phrases of each data source, create sub-categories, and record impressions that aligned with literature (Merriam, 2009). Then axial coding was the next step in the process where codes were grouped into patterns, which became categories or themes (Merriam, 2009). The third phase of coding, selective coding, provided an abstract explanation for the process being studied in the research. Using these three set procedures enabled the researcher to develop a grounded theory from the data collected (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Coding Procedures

In the process of data analysis, coding the data was a critical step in reducing the data. Codes indicated data, which varied from several words to multiple sentences, that was meaningful to the study. Each interview transcript was read in close detail multiple times for emerging themes.

During the multiple readings of the interviews, coding was expansive and information was coded using exact words from participants or concepts from literature. Codes were
developed as the data was analyzed. The research questions guided data analysis and were helpful in focusing the coding process and distinguishing which segments of data were included (Saldana, 2013).

When coding the data, the researcher looked at both interview transcripts for each of the 14 students. First the researcher read the first round interview transcripts. Next the researcher read through and coded meaningful statements from the second round interview transcripts. After reading all of the transcripts and coding the meaningful statements, the researcher reviewed the codes previously created and began to cluster similar themes together to create a hierarchy of codes. Then, the researcher reviewed the coding structure to see what codes could be combined, renamed, deleted, or restructured. A final coding hierarchy was created as the researcher analyzed the data and wrote the findings.

The researcher continued the process of analyzing data by finding themes in the data. Categorizing the themes meant using a major theme as the heading and supporting it with subthemes. In addition, a grounded theory was constructed from participants’ descriptions that emerged from the data collected in interviews. “While analyzing the full stream of data, categories and properties of the phenomenon emerge” (Turner & Husman, 2008, p. 149). The credibility of using a grounded theory approach occurs to the extent that the data reflects participants’ and researchers’ experiences with phenomena, while “the explanation the theory provides is only one of many possible ‘plausible’ interpretations from data” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 346). Throughout the process of analysis, categories and subcategories are linked and become the model of the emerged concepts (Turner & Husman, 2008). Grounded theory data analysis gives voice to the participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).
Grounded Theory Results

The grounded theory for this research study came from the data, concepts that emerged from the coding procedures. “The theory is actually considered grounded when it is validated against the data and mapped out narratively and when states of transition and intervening conditions are incorporated as well” (Brown, Stevens, Troiano, & Schneider, 2002, p. 178).

Validity

In empirical research, reliability, internal validity, and external validity measures and procedures are important to note. Five strategies were utilized to ensure validity of the data. First, the second round of interviews scheduled with each student achieved data saturation as recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Second, additional sources of data (i.e., class observations and document analysis) were collected to provide increased context of the student (Creswell, 2003).

Third, for the purpose of establishing validity of the coding scheme (Creswell, 2007), two doctoral candidates in the Educational Psychology and Learning Systems department majoring in Learning & Cognition, who also have past experiences conducting qualitative research, were asked to assist in validating emergent themes.

Fourth, member checks were conducted with the participants to ensure that analysis of the data resonated with participants. Conducting the member checks improved accuracy, credibility, and validity of the study (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In Spring 2015, after the participant profiles and results were written, the researcher e-mailed each student and asked him/her to review the information. Each participant was asked to reply with any revisions to their previous statements or the results, if they felt misinterpreted or mischaracterized.
Finally, external validity refers to the generalizability of the research study. Conducting a qualitative study emphasizes “thick description” of a relatively small sample within the context of a specific setting. The data analyzed may not be generalizable to any other populations (Bailey, 1992).

**Researcher Subjectivity**

Any researcher must be able to acknowledge his/her bias (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The researcher acknowledges her subjective point of view while working on this research. The primary researcher was paid by the university where the study was conducted, and the researcher has also been a graduate student at the target institution for seven years.

**Summary**

This research study explored first-year students’ perceptions and experiences after they were placed on academic probation during their first semester of college and mandated to complete an academic strategies course during their second semester. Utilizing the theoretical lens of a major retention theorist (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Maldonado, Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005), the research study conducted describes students’ perception and learning after being placed on academic probation and mandated to take an academic strategies course at a large, public university in the Southeast. This chapter described the methodology and research design that was used in this study. Data collection procedures including proper documentation and protocols required by the human subjects review board were summarized. Data analysis consisted of open and axial coding to generate codes, themes and, ultimately, findings.

The next chapter discusses the findings from this study. Several themes emerged as the data was analyzed among all 14 students. Each theme is discussed in depth and is presented within the context of answering the research questions that guided this study.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Overview

This study explored the transitional experience for first-year college students who were placed on academic probation after their first semester of college. These students were required to complete an academic strategies course to remain enrolled as a student. To answer the research questions designed for the study, two interviews were conducted with 14 students, using a constant comparison method of simultaneous data collection and analysis. Data analysis resulted in emergent concepts and categories based on students’ explanations of their experiences and interpretations regarding their transition.

To present the findings from the analysis of students’ interviews, the research questions for the study are addressed by providing descriptions of students’ perceptions and experiences based on interview data. Second, a grounded theory model is presented that illustrates students’ development as a continuum in which they must interpret their “failure” experiences as part of their transition into college.

Participant Profiles

The following profiles present information about each participant in order to provide the reader each student’s information. The 14 students in this study shared unique and diverse perspectives about their transitions of entering college. Table 1 presents an overview of the demographic descriptors of the 14 students. All of the students were provided with pseudonyms and each profile was presented to each participant to ensure the accuracy of the descriptions.
Table 1: *Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Matriculation</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>ACT</th>
<th>SAT</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>SLS Grade</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>First Semester</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Second Semester</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Spring</td>
<td>Computational Biology</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1550</td>
<td>1.357</td>
<td>.712</td>
<td>B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carson</td>
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<td>Hispanic/Latino; Caucasian</td>
<td>Spring</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1750</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>3.225</td>
<td>A</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Summer</td>
<td>Exploratory</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1650</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.442</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Spring</td>
<td>Jazz</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1350</td>
<td>1.273</td>
<td>1.583</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
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<td>Spring</td>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1700</td>
<td>1.875</td>
<td>2.375</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Summer</td>
<td>Pre-Biological Science</td>
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<td>1770</td>
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<td>1.6</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Summer</td>
<td>Public Relations</td>
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<td>1.625</td>
<td>3.036</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Summer</td>
<td>Exploratory</td>
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<td>1910</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>1.808</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keith</td>
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<td>Political Science</td>
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<td>1300</td>
<td>1.929</td>
<td>2.283</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
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<td>2.077</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Summer</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1480</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>3.712</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
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<td>Am. Indian, Hispanic/Latino;</td>
<td>Summer</td>
<td>Voice Performance</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2.525</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Black; Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>Summer</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1500</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1.875</td>
<td>1.673</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With respect to ethnicity, one of the five female students self-identified as African-American and Hispanic, another female self-identified as American Indian, Hispanic and Caucasian. The other three females self-identified as Caucasian. Among the men, one self-identified as Hispanic and
Caucasian, another as Hispanic, while the other males self-identified as Caucasian. The demographic information that students disclosed during their first and second interviews are included in the profiles below.

**Anne Marie**

Anne Marie is a freshman majoring in Computational Biology who lives on campus. She does not have a job. Her career aspirations are to conduct research on the human genome or coral. She joined a student organization in the fall, and, at the time of the interviews, she was actively pursuing an opportunity to serve in a leadership position and be more involved with this organization. She was required to take the Academic Success course because she failed college algebra.

**Carson**

Carson attended community college for one semester before enrolling at Florida State University as an Economics major. He chose not to work during his first two semesters at college. Following graduation, his career aspiration is to join the military. He lives off campus, but he joined a fraternity and ROTC. He was mandated to take the Academic Success course because he earned three Cs and a D.

**Chris**

Chris is a freshman within an ‘Exploratory’ major. He was uncertain about his career aspirations but plans to obtain an internship while in college to develop his interests in the business field. He lives on campus and he is not involved in any student organization nor does he have a job. He was mandated to take the Academic Success course because he earned a D in a computer class, a business pre-requisite, during a six-week summer term.
Jack

Jack is a junior transfer-student majoring in Jazz Studies on saxophone. He earned his Associate in Arts degree before enrolling at Florida State University. He identifies himself as a first-generation college student. He lives off campus and he is not currently involved in a student organization. Following graduation, his career aspiration is to join a military band. He has a job off campus and works 30-35 hours per week. He was mandated to take the Academic Success course because he failed survey of music literature.

Jason

Jason is a freshman majoring in Advertising. He lives off campus and he does not have a job. He attended a community college for a semester before entering Florida State University and is undecided about the employment he would like to pursue. Since his first semester at Florida State University, he has been a member of a fraternity. He was mandated to take the Academic Success course because he earned a D in fundamental statistics, a prerequisite for his major.

Jennifer

Jennifer is a freshman majoring in Biological Science who lives on campus. She does not have a job. Her career aspiration is to become a neonatal or pediatric surgeon. Upon entering FSU, she became a member of a sorority and joined Health Occupation Students of America. She was required to take the Academic Success course because she failed pre-calculus, a prerequisite for her major.

Jessica

Jessica is a freshman majoring in Public Relations. She lives on campus, and she has a job off-campus. She is uncertain about her career aspirations but she likes learning about Public Relations and Journalism. During her second semester at FSU, she participated in Intramural
Tennis, but she is not involved in any student organization. She was mandated to take the Academic Success course because she earned a D in psychological biology.

**Justin**

Justin is a freshman currently majoring in International Relations. He lives off campus and he has a part-time job off campus where he works 20 hours per week. He aspires to have a career in a scientific field, most likely as an aerospace engineer. Due to his academic performance, his goal is to increase his GPA to switch his major to Engineering. He attended a few meetings with the chess club, and, at the time of the interviews, he was planning to continue playing chess with his peers. He was mandated to take the Academic Success course because he failed statistics and an international relations pre-requisite, classes required for his major.

**Keith**

Keith was admitted to Florida State University (FSU) through the Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement Summer Bridge Program. He is a freshman majoring in Information Communication Technology. He lives off campus in scholarship housing and he has a job, working 10 hours a week on campus. He has joined the film club and attended a few campus ministry meetings. Keith is still interested in becoming involved in extra-curricular activities. His career interests include becoming an attorney or lobbyist. He was required to take the Academic Success course because he earned two C- grades in a history and an international relations course.

**Matthew**

Matthew was admitted to FSU for Summer 2013, but, unfortunately, experienced health concerns during his last semester of his senior year in high school, which delayed his admission to FSU. Due to his health concerns, he attended community college for one semester before
enrolling at FSU. Matthew is a freshman with an ‘Exploratory’ major. His career aspirations are in the health profession as a doctor or dentist. He lives off campus and he is not involved in any student organization. He spends his time outside of class doing Crossfit training, working out at a gym, or playing video games with friends. He was required to take the Academic Success Course because he failed biology and his biology lab courses.

Ryan

Ryan earned his Associate in Arts degree in a dual-enrollment program, associated with a community college, before enrolling at FSU. He is a freshman majoring in Business. He lives off campus and he is not involved in any student organization. Following graduation, his career aspiration is to own his own business. He was mandated to take the Academic Success course because he earned a D- in business calculus during the summer term.

Sarah

Sarah is a freshman majoring in Vocal Performance who lives off campus. She identifies herself as a first-generation college student. She does not have a job and she has not become involved on campus in any student organization. Following graduation, she aspires to become an opera singer and after performing for a couple of years, she plans to obtain her doctorate to teach college students about vocal performance. She was mandated to take the Academic Success course because she earned an F in english.

Tabitha

Tabitha is a freshman majoring in Business Management who lives off campus. She identifies as a first-generation college student. She has a campus job and works 10 hours a week. Since starting at FSU, she intentionally chose not to become involved on campus in any student organization; although, at the end of her second semester, she said she is “ready to get involved.”
She has applied for two jobs with University Housing in hopes of moving onto campus next year. Her career aspirations are to work for an international non-profit organization that benefits children and allows her to travel. She was mandated to take the Academic Success course because she failed a world religions (online) course.

**Waylon**

Waylon is a freshman majoring in Entrepreneurship. He lives on campus and he joined a fraternity during his second semester of college as well as the wakeboarding team. At the time of the interviews, he shared his aspiration is to become involved in leadership roles with other student organizations after improving his GPA. He was mandated to take the Academic Success course because he earned a C- in a computer class, a business pre-requisite, and a C in college algebra, during a six-week summer term.

**Findings from Analysis**

The specific research questions that guided this study were: (a) What are high-risk first-year students’ perceptions about their initial academic probation? (b) In what ways does academic probation impact first-year students’ subsequent motivation and learning? (c) Following academic probation, what strategies do students use to persist for college completion? (d) What are high-risk first-year students’ perceptions of their experiences after completing the mandated Academic Success course? and (e) What roles do family relationships have on high-risk first-year students’ motivation to persist towards degree attainment? The findings from the student-interviews are presented below under each question.
What Are High-Risk First-Year Students’ Perceptions About Their Initial Academic Probation?

After the end of the students’ first semester, either spring 2014 or summer 2014, students received a letter from the Office of Undergraduate Studies notifying them that they had been placed on academic probation due to their poor academic performance (i.e., earning a 2.0 GPA or less). This letter also notified the students that they were mandated to take the Academic Success course if they wanted to continue their studies at Florida State University. Most students were unhappy when learning they were placed on academic probation and mentioned feeling “disappointed.” For example, when Ryan initially learned he had failed a course during his first semester, he was said he was “upset or disappointed.” Another student, Sarah, explained, “[I thought] I’m so disappointed in myself.” The other students echoed her sentiments.

All students understood the reason they had been placed on academic probation. For example, when asked, “What led you to take the Academic Success Course?” one student shared, “This summer I took Pre-calculus and I completely failed it.” Thus, students understood they were taking the academic strategies course because of their poor performance. When asked why he was taking the Academic Strategies course, another student said, “I was mandated to take the course because I had received an unsatisfactory grade in business calculus over the summer.”

Students did not blame anyone for their poor performance; they all seemed to understand that being required to take the course was because of their actions. With respect to why he failed, Waylon recognized, “Lack of studying. Lack of a good schedule—sleeping in until 2:00 everyday isn’t good. Lack of going to class, lack of honestly and self-control, because I went out way too much.” Although they were unhappy about their poor academic performance, they were agreeable about the requirement to take the Academic Strategies course. Indeed, students
mentioned that they could use the help as Jessica, shared, “I was kind of happy I was in [the class], I definitely need it [because] I did poorly this summer, … I was not opposed to [completing the Academic Success course].” Students seemed to want to take advantage of the course and seemed willing to use the information they learned.

**Difference between High School and College**

During the first interview, which occurred during the first five weeks into their second semester, students were asked to describe their academic transition of starting college. At least 93% of students commented on their realization of the vast difference between going to high school and going to college. Several of them mentioned that they were surprised by the difficulty of college courses and/or surprised about the amount of work required in college compared to their high school experiences. Anne Marie, explained, “In high school I just easily skated by without really having to do anything, and so I thought I could do that in college. Then I [realized], ‘no I actually have to do work.’” Similarly, Keith shared, “It was hard in the beginning, but I mean, you kind of have to go in not expecting the grades to be handed to you, because it’s not really like high school. Well, not like my high school, …, you actually have to work to get your grades.” For other students, they admitted they were more disciplined in high school than during their first college semester. Sarah acknowledged “In high school—my senior year—I was doing good. [I was] getting As and I [told myself] ‘I’ll keep up these good study habits’ and I just didn’t.”

One problem the students encountered was the lack of structure in college. As Jennifer explained, “It’s a different schedule. High school is six hours non-stop learning. [In college], ‘this is class and you need to study in between classes,’ and … you have to make time for things.” For some, the lack of structure was compounded by the lack of external monitoring.
When asked why he was placed on academic probation, Waylon shared, “it is just because lack of planning—... Mom is not there to help me out, so I’ve got to start planning on my own”

Similarly, Matthew, described his difficulty of why he did poorly during his first semester:

Just keeping up with my classes—which has to do [with] first of all going to class. That was a problem for me in the spring. Just not having your parent there [at college] getting you to go to school and having someone there to get mad at you if you don’t go to class. You know [in college], you just have your roommates—they don’t care [if you don’t go to class].

Students’ failures promoted the lesson that they needed to put forth effort in college and reminded them that college was important. Matthew explained, “…well, college is first of all, [something you] don’t play around with. I mean they’ll dismiss you if you aren’t doing well. I’ve learned that I can’t get behind like I did [in my first semester]…” Although students had poor achievement in their first semester, they did not express feeling defeated. Examples of this is that students chose to return, they described a willingness to learn in the Academic Success class, and they described a willingness to improve their academic performance.

**Willingness to Learn & Perform**

After students were notified that they were placed on academic probation and required to take the Academic Success course, they could have dropped out or changed schools. Instead, they chose to enroll in a second semester at the same institution. Students’ comments suggested that they were willing to learn and use new learning strategies and they were willing to change their behaviors during their second semester. For example, Chris described his reaction to being placed on academic probation by saying, “…getting the D, was actually, I don’t know, kind of good in a way… I know exactly what I have to do to succeed from this point on.”

The 14 students did not describe feeling incapable of managing the academic rigor in college. Instead, they acknowledged responsibility for their poor academic performance during
their first semester. They were able to articulate how they chose to participate in the course and were willing to learn new strategies to improve their grades. Tabitha shared, “So, just because I got that grade, doesn’t mean that I should just quit and give up!” She further explained,

It’s like a reality check. Everything is not going to come [easily]. Just because you know [the course content] doesn’t mean you’re going to get the grade that shows that you know it. And also even if you don’t know it, you can still have a good grade. You just have to really work at things and put time in it and basically knowing something doesn’t equal the grade you’ll get. It’s the time that you put towards it, so whether that’s managing time or doing things ahead of time.

As with the majority of her peers, Tabitha acknowledged she needed to continue trying to work towards managing her time to improve her academic performance.

**In What Ways Does Academic Probation Impact First-Year Students’ Subsequent Motivation and Learning?**

The students in this dissertation study performed poorly (i.e., earning below a 2.0 GPA) after their first semester of college. After receiving notice from the University that they were placed on academic probation, the students described changes in their motivation.

**Motivation**

The students in this study did not enter college as being underprepared or at-risk of not graduating. Among the 14 students who volunteered to participate in this study, over 90% of these students earned Advanced Placement credits and completed college-level courses before graduating from high school, or received college credit while enrolled at a community college. When entering Florida State University (FSU), students seemed to feel capable of completing college coursework, but their expectations were not met. For example, Jennifer described how she was challenged by the rigor of a summer math course she took online, explaining, I thought I
could come in summer and knock out a math course and get going, but it was hard. Six weeks for a math course is a very short, very short time.”

Contrary to the majority of students, only three students shared that their motivation was negatively impacted after being placed on academic probation. One student, Jack, described the negative feelings he had after learning he was placed on academic probation, stating, “I’ve been very depressed. I don’t like failing … It bothers me every day because I have to see it every time I login—I have to see my GPA.” When enrolling at FSU, students had not anticipated that things could go so very wrong.

Once students were notified they were placed on academic probation, over 70% of the students in this study commented that their motivation actually increased after being placed on academic probation. Students reported feeling compelled to do something different after experiencing “a reality check.” Jessica shared, “[Being placed on academic probation] … boosted my motivation to do well in school. I [thought] I had motivation this summer, but I had a reality check when I got that D… Now, I’m really motivated to do well.” Although motivated, all students acknowledged they had not managed their time during their first semester at college, which caused their academic performance to suffer. After having been notified that they were placed on academic probation, students expressed an increased level of motivation to avoid repeating a poor performance in their second semester. Furthermore, 10 of 14 students mentioned they wanted to prove to themselves and to the University that they were capable of academic success. For example, Anne Marie shared,

I think I actually got more motivated because of the fact that when FSU contacted me and told me that I was on academic probation I said, ‘I’ll show them. I’ll get off of [academic probation] and I’ll become a great student again. I’ll get better at [managing my time].’
Thus most students gained more motivation with an increased sense of urgency—a call to action—to improve their academic performance in order to reach their goals, including attaining their degree. For example, Ryan described his renewed motivation to improve his academic performance:

The challenge has definitely, if anything, motivated me. I’m highly motivated to achieve exactly what I need to do here. I need to reach all my goals, get my degree, pass all my classes … [being placed on academic probation] is the fire behind me being so motivated to succeed now.

The academic probation prompted students, like Ryan who reevaluated his motivation to complete his degree, to evaluate the changes necessary to accomplish their goals. For instance, as with the majority of his peers, Ryan described the need for allocating more time towards improving his grades in order to achieve academic success. He made a deliberate effort to manage his time to increase his studying, describing,

I’ll study in the middle of the day between classes. Like [the Academic Success course instructor] said, ‘there’s always time to study. You can study on your way to class walking’ … [Now], I study much more and realize how much time I really do have in between classes at various points of time during the day.

Thus, poor time management was a common theme across all students. In fact, every student in the study admitted they had not spent adequate time on their academic coursework prior to being placed on academic probation. During their second semester, while on probation, students described focusing their attention and efforts on spending more time studying in order to improve their academic performance. For example, Carson shared,

Oh, now all I am focused on is school. I haven’t even been going out. I haven’t been doing anything. I’ve been studying a lot. I was at Strozier last night for four hours. I have two tests this week. [I’ve] just been focusing on class.
In response to his experience, Carson had changed his study habits and increased the amount of time he spent in the library devoted to his academic studies. He added that when placed on academic probation, “I realized that I’m here for school and I can’t be messing up. FSU made that pretty clear.” Students recognized that an increase in motivation and a change in priorities were required to achieve the academic success they wanted.

The analysis makes clear that after being placed on academic probation, most students felt determined to change their behaviors and work towards improving their grades during their second semester. Keith shared,

[Being placed on academic probation] made me feel like, ‘okay I worked all the way to get here, but now I’m not working to finish through.’ … So now I’m kind of more on top of everything. I’m making sure I’m ahead of the class instead of getting behind and not knowing what’s going on. I’m more determined to get a higher GPA.

After being placed on academic probation, students appraised their academic competence. Students acknowledged their lack of focus contributed to their poor performance during their first semester as a college student, and they consciously chose to persist towards degree attainment by putting forth greater effort and more time management towards their academic performance.

Identity

Students returned to the same institution for their second semester. They made a conscious decision to change their effort towards improving their academic performance. They believed they could change their behavior, devote more attention towards improving their academic performance, and not repeat failing. One student described how he could change his
behavior by attending class and consciously making an effort to perform to the best of his abilities when sharing,

In terms of motivation, [being placed on academic probation] definitely made me more motivated to go to class and actually do well in classes … I’d set expectations for my own—my own self-knowing, my own capabilities—and not living up to both of those things definitely provides motivation in a sense that I don’t want to do that again.

Similarly, another student shared not wanting to repeat her poor academic performance again because she felt she could change her behavior and excel academically, “[being placed on academic probation] has motivated me not to want to fail again… I really want to do better because it is on me.” She, like the majority of her peers, identified having academic competence. The students were academically prepared, but lacked focus. Students also took responsibility for their actions and were resolute about improving their academic performance after their first semester.

**Attributions.** Students’ perceived that the internal cause of their poor academic performance was due to their lack of effort and focus towards the rigor of college coursework. However, not all students expressed a change in motivation. Unique among this group of interviewees, Jason described feeling no impact on his motivation after being placed on probation. He said, “I was just like, ‘ah shit, whatever.’ I was maybe a little anxious and worrying but mostly I was like, ‘whatever.’” His initial reaction to being placed on academic probation was in stark contrast to those of his peers. However, he rationalized that “It was kind of expected” because he knew he was not keeping up with the work and, as a result, he knew he underperformed during his first semester at FSU. Yet significantly, Jason also identified a feeling, common among his peers, when sharing, “I think it’ll just be me that makes a difference.” He, like the other students, identified feeling personally responsible for his actions
and acknowledged that only he could make the concerted efforts necessary to change his behaviors and improve his grades. While some students expressed either no change in motivation or a decrease in motivation right after receiving the information about being on probation, most students developed greater motivation in their second semester to improve their academic performance. All 14 students took responsibility for their academic failures and recognized the need to change behaviors to reach their academic goals.

**Following Academic Probation, What Strategies Do Students Use to Persist for College Completion?**

All 14 students who volunteered to participate in this research study discussed specific academic strategies that they learned in the Academic Success course that they employed in other classes during the second semester. The following sections describe the specific topics they mentioned as being important in helping them to change their studying-related behaviors.

**Application of Goal-Setting**

Students’ appraisal of their self-efficacy occurred after they were placed on academic probation. Students felt capable of improving their academic performance and wanted to make changes to their behaviors to persist in college. They created academic-related goals when starting their second semester. The Academic Success course curriculum also included a module about goal-setting that students learned within the first five weeks of their second semester. Specifically, the course had a learning objective for students to be able to articulate short- and long-term goals (H. Hunt, personal communication, September 1, 2014).

In the Academic Success course, students learned about the importance of goals and how to conduct goal-setting in ways that can help them succeed. The students described that they learned about how to set goals and also described adjusting their educational goals. Students
described how they learned that their academic goals needed to be specific, measurable, and reasonable.

**Achievable goals.** Students also learned to set short-term goals that could help them achieve a specific grade on a test, and that would also increase their semester GPA compared to their first semester. For example, Chris explained he specifically learned, “Set [goals], you don’t want to set them too high. Basically set something that’s going to be achievable.” He demonstrated applying what he learned in the Academic Success course about goals saying, “Well we had to set goals at the beginning of the class…you have to be specific, if you want an A, say ‘a 92’ because it’s achievable. So, I did that with all of my classes.” Another male student, Carson, illustrated how he applied what he learned about goal setting from his Academic Success course instructor by saying, “Originally my goal…was to get off of academic probation and [my Academic Success course instructor] got me on the mindset of my goal to get a 3.5.”

Students learned they could set specific and measurable goals that were reasonable to achieve within their second semester. Goal setting was a strategy that helped students move toward increasing their GPA higher than the required 2.0.

**Sequence of goals.** Students also acknowledged that they had not set goals before. The Academic Success course was particularly helpful in not only helping students set goals, but also helped students divide goals into steps by determining short-term goals that would lead to long-term future goals. One student acknowledged he had never set goals before college. During the Academic Success course, he shared that he learned to create goals,

> I really never made goals for myself and it’s a lot easier when you do have them. Just short term goals and long-term goals—how the short-term goals can add up to the long-term goal.
He further clarified, “like deciding to stick with advertising and trying to get into a school, so I have to do more school now over the summer to get my GPA up so I can get in next year.” He was able to create a short-term goal of attending summer school to increase his GPA (short-term goal) so that he could become eligible to apply, and to be accepted, into the Advertising major (long-term goal). Another student Sarah, described her short- and long-term goal setting when saying, “[My] short-term [goal] would be probably to get…above C average. I want to get As and Bs…and then long-term I’d like to get my bachelor’s degree.”

Students also learned to set realistic goals. By setting realistic goals, students could work on specific and measurable tasks that led to accomplishing more goals. One student shared,

I have to say, definitely, before the class I was a little bit more unrealistic in my goal setting… [The Academic Success course] taught me to set more realistic goals and set steps, if you will, or check points, to reach that goal. So I do feel like [my goals] are more attainable. I have one major goal, but I have set minor goals along the whole way. [Setting minor goals] makes me feel that reaching the ultimate goal is a lot more attainable.

When the students were able to achieve their short-term goals, they described feeling motivated to remain at the University for another semester. By using goal-setting as a strategy, students expressed that they believed they could persist towards degree attainment.

Managing Time

Time management is another learning strategy that students described learning in the Academic Success course. The Academic Success course intentionally discussed time management as a learning objective to aid students in their transition during their second semester. Specifically, a learning objective in the Academic Success course was for students to be able to practice the principles of time management considering their new academic
environment (H. Hunt, personal communication, September 1, 2014). As described below, the most helpful strategies students described were the academic calendar and five-day study plan.

**Academic calendar.** When completing the Academic Success course, there was a specific learning strategy that students indicated helped them learn how to manage their time. A majority of the students \( (n=11) \) in this study described learning—and articulated changing their behavior—by using an academic calendar. Specifically, the most discussed strategy students used was the schedule that they created that compiled all of their assignments throughout the semester into one calendar. For example, Jessica shared the main strategy that helped her manage her time during the second semester was creating the academic calendar, she said, “I’m going to use that for the rest of college just because it really helped me.” She further described a specific scheduling strategy she used and how the strategy helped her,

[I used a] print out of a calendar for this semester, and you fill it in, you color code it. You have a different color for each class and you write in each day what is due… pacing yourself, ‘I should be doing this today’ or ‘I should have this done’ or ‘this is due today. I have a test here.’ When you are not sure [what’s due] you don’t have to go all the way online and look on the syllabus. You have the calendar and you can see, ‘oh today I have this due, I need to do this.’ It’s really helpful.

Another student, Anne Marie shared, “we had this calendar thing at the beginning of the semester that I absolutely loved. She made us look at every single syllabus and write all of our assignments together and I still use that. It’s so helpful.” Similarly, Jennifer affirmed that if she did not have her academic calendar on her wall, “I wouldn’t know what’s going on.” The students identified this strategy as the one that they were most likely to use while persisting towards graduation. For example, Ryan explained,

There’s a really good chance I will probably do that every single semester for the rest of my time here at FSU, because it made
things so much easier for me to plan on, and I can just flip open the assignment calendar, see what I’ve got for this week, ‘ok, I have a test, a couple of quizzes, and a paper due,’ or something like that. And that way I just know everything that I need to do, because obviously at college you don’t get that many assignments; but it really helped me to the fullest extent.

**Five-day study plan.** Another learning strategy students described using to manage their time was the five-day study plan. A majority of students mentioned that the five-day study plan assignment either taught them or reminded them of how *not* to procrastinate. This assignment helped students learn how to organize their time to spread out the work in reasonable portions.

Chris described this strategy as,

> Chunking, not trying to use or put too much time on the whole chapter, divide into how many days I have and just spend a little bit of time on each. [The five-day study plan] helps with [not] procrastinating and guides me if I have an overload of information one night.

Another student, Keith described that using the five-day study plan, with the calendar was essential,

> It was mid-terms, so we made a five-day study plan to study for mid-terms and I used that to block out,—okay, how much I was going to study then, and then what I was going to study, and then the next day the second part, and then review the other part. I thought it was really useful…

Due to his active participation in the Academic Success course, Ryan began using the five-day study plan as a strategy and it provided a boost to his confidence:

> I have currently been participating and using that plan to study for this exam coming up on Wednesday, so hopefully it works. I definitely feel a lot more confident, strong in the material that I work on, based on, you know... Obviously I am going to get different problems, different factors and variables, but I feel confident. It’s definitely helped me.
For some of the students, the development of the study plan was a radically different approach to what they usually did. The students changed their academic behaviors by allocating time over several days as opposed to procrastinating and cramming their work into the day before a quiz or test. Ryan explained,

I was really a cram-style study person—like my second quiz this semester, I didn’t study at all until the Wednesday of my test. [The test was] 6:45 PM Wednesday night, and I studied from 1 to 6:30, failed it—The next week I studied multiple days—92.”

The five-day study plan is a self-regulation strategy that students learned and applied in their daily practice. Thus, using the five-day study plan, students improved their academic performance. Students formed new habits to implement this strategy among other time management strategies.

**Formed new habits.** Students identified unstructured times in their schedule and utilized the time to implement studying-related behaviors. Chris explained, “I have class from 8-8:50, which is math and instead of going back to sleep I use the time from 9 until 11:30 or 9-12, depending on what classes I have, that’s a good time to study.” He proactively found ways to form new habits by allocating time to study; he shared,

When I get home from school today, I’m done with class at 1:45, so from two until four, I’m going to study because my roommate is in class… I put my headphones on and nothing else matters really. So I do that and every night I will study too before I go to bed.

Students changed their behaviors by utilizing more of their unstructured time to perform studying-related behaviors or complete assignments. Jason shared,

It’s just when I notice that I’ve been sitting on the couch for 45 minutes watching TV or just on my phone too much, I kind of make myself snap out of it and try to do something productive. That’s the biggest thing.
Students were cognoscente of their unstructured time and took personal initiative in allocating time towards studying-related behaviors. Another student, explained that he initiated diligent effort towards regulating his time when to study during the week,

> You can study on your way to class walking, … [I’m] realizing how much time I really do have in between classes and also throughout various points in time during the day.

Students articulated that this new approach to completing academic assignments helped them improve their GPAs by providing them more time to work on assignments throughout several days as opposed to cramming the night before deadlines.

**End-of-Semester Changed Behaviors**

Students learned strategies in the Academic Success course. They also applied the learned-strategies and observed improvements in their academic performance. Their changed behaviors enabled students to set goals, manage their time, monitor their academic progress, and find goal-relevant information to gauge whether they were on track with their academic goals during their second semester.

**Self-regulation.** After the students completed the 12-week Academic Success course, they discussed their perceived learning and change in behaviors. The students articulated learning academic strategies that increased their self-regulation while also positively increasing their self-efficacy. For example, when asked, “What changes have you made this semester?,” Ryan described monitoring his learning by designating self-study sessions to test his comprehension of new information. He shared,

> Now I do a lot more study sessions on my own… In terms of like world religions or social psychology, I’ll do separate sessions, just with myself, self-studying, with my notes and stuff… I found that instead of just listening to the professor and copying down what he says, I will just listen in class and then go home and will take the separate time to literally write down from the PowerPoint what I
need and put it in my own words, to make it have more sense to me. I have found that I retain information better when I write it down, because I process it in a different way.

Thus, students articulated using specific appropriate actions, thoughts, and behaviors (Zimmerman, 2000). Overall, students described changing their behaviors to schedule more time preparing and completing class assignments outside of class. Justin also self-initiated practice sessions in problem-solving when sharing:

So Monday I have … Physics and I start going over the review problems [on this day]. Tuesday is a lecture, again more review, and I’ll start really working on the problems with myself then. On Wednesday, there’s another section class where I can clarify the problems I couldn’t figure out by myself, and then finish those [problems] that night. [I then] do a little more studying and then Thursday morning’s the test.

He proactively sought information and took steps to master coursework by creating sample problems and solving those problems. He also tested himself to identify whether or not he was on target to meet his goal in improving his academic performance. Another male student, took greater responsibility in organizing his schedule to optimize his learning, he said:

I have set a calendar for myself, like kind of a circadian rhythm. Over the summer I didn’t really go to bed at a decent time, and now I set it to where, ‘okay, I have to sleep now.’ And then I wake up, make sure I have everything in order for classes, and then I go to class. And then, like my sections between classes, I go to the CARE lab and that’s when I work on all the stuff I need for the next class, or study in case of a pop quiz or something, and I kind of, I try to stay ahead of the game.

Students used self-regulated learning strategies to achieve desired academic outcomes throughout the week. Thus, their use of self-regulated learning strategies resulted in their improved academic performance and achievement in coursework. Among the sample (n=14), 11 students increased their semester-GPA during their second semester.
**Self-efficacy.** During their second interview, the students demonstrated self-efficacy as they prepared for the end of their second semester. Students described how their change in behaviors not only resulted in improving their grades, it increased their confidence as the second semester proceeded. Jason shared,

> I can do it. I can do it. I’m close to an A in one of my classes and I have an A already in one so I just need to keep them up the last three weeks or however much longer we have left.

Students felt confident that their changed behaviors would result in achieving good grades during their last three weeks of the semester. Ryan, shared,

> Well, as of right now, I guess I can say I am a little bit more confident that so far the transition has been okay. There was a really rough, bumpy start with my summer session. But so far, for fall I’m doing pretty well. I’m substantially doing well in all my quizzes, tests, and papers.

As he reflected on how he had implemented strategies to help with his time management, he demonstrated his self-efficacy, “I feel a lot more confident in understanding and I’m explaining problems to fellow students.” During the second semester, students changed their academic behaviors, experienced an increase in their academic performance, and their academic successes raised their efficacy. Notably, while learning and implementing new strategies during their second semester, all 14 students described positive interactions with their Academic Success course instructor.

**Positive instructor influence.** Part of the Academic Success course requirements included two formal meetings scheduled, in advance, with the instructor. The students viewed the instructors as a future resource. For example, Anne Marie shared, “[My Academic Success course instructor] is a really good teacher. I’ll definitely stop by and ask her for things, like advice.” All 14 students acknowledged that interactions with their instructors were positive and
the instructors could provide additional support to the students in the future. Waylon, shared, “I like how I met my teacher. I’m honestly, more happy that I met [my Academic Success course instructor]. Now I can use him as a reference for a lot of things and he’s very well liked by a lot of important people, in the administration and stuff so... I’m more happy that I met him and know him.”

All 14 students reported feeling a connection and/or affinity towards their Academic Success course instructor. The students stated their instructor provided meaningful support and a positive influence to their experience in the course. For example, Jason described how positive his relationship was with his instructor, “I really liked [my Academic Success course instructor] so I wanted to do well for her.” Another male student, Chris shared, “I felt like we had a good personal relationship.” He further added,

If I need help or anything like that, I know [my Academic Success instructor] would be there. And he has free time, it seems like, for office hours, I could talk with him if I really need to see him face-to-face.

What are High-Risk First-Year Students’ Perceptions of Their Experiences After Completing the Mandated Academic Success Course?

Notably, all 14 students agreed the Academic Success course taught them strategies that improved their abilities to manage their time while also increased their motivation to persist. After the 12-week Academic Success course ended, students reported very positive attitudes. For example, Anne Marie stated, “[The course] made me want to be a better student.” Students became aware of how they could be active agents in learning. They learned how to set goals, integrated knowledge and skills learned from the Academic Success course, created new habits by changing their behaviors in response to making connections with knowledge and skills
learned in the course to persist towards their goals. Another student shared, “If anything I’m
more focused.” Students intentionally created time and effort towards academic achievement.
Tabitha illustrated her ability to learn from her academic failure and continued to put forth effort
to persist towards a degree by sharing,

I don’t feel like it’s more of a pass or fail. I can see the middle
ground now. And I know if I do happen to fail, which I don’t like
that word, but not do so well, then there’s ways to get around it and
that doesn’t mean the end of the world.

The students learned and applied new academic behaviors and these new behaviors
increased their motivation and effort to persist towards a degree. Jennifer stated, “I learned about
time management, organizing the calendar and everything, how to study and then I have my
professor who I can go to and talk about my courses whenever.” Students learned strategies and
implemented studying-related behaviors to increase their academic performance. Students also
gained appreciation for the course when they achieved academic success. Jessica shared, “I think
that I’ve transitioned pretty well. I feel I’ve been studying more and working a lot harder than
summer— because I got bad grades in the summer. It’s more motivation. I think I did well.”

After the 12-week course, all 14 students were either enrolled or had every intention of
registering for their third semester for Spring 2015 classes. Also, when asked, “Do you plan to
still graduate from FSU?,” the majority responded assuredly in their persistence to degree
attainment at FSU. Like her peers, Sarah said, “I could not see me anywhere else and [FSU] is
the right choice.” Another student offered, “At the end of the day, I do know that I’ve got to get
done what I know has to get done, so it’s like up to me, win or lose it’s my fault no matter what.”
Students seemed prepared to complete their college degree.
What Roles Do Family Relationships Have on High-Risk First-Year Students’ Motivation to Persist Towards Degree Attainment?

During both first and second interviews, students were asked about the type of support they received. All the students identified support that came from their immediate family members, mainly a mother and father. The students also spoke very positively about their family relationships and maintained frequent communication with family. As described below, the people who students identified as being supportive provided the students with emotional and/or financial support to persist towards degree attainment.

Frequent Communication

Family support emerged as a salient theme in the participants’ pursuit of earning a college degree. Of the 14 students, all identified the important impact family had on their interests to pursue a college degree. All 14 described regular communication with immediate or extended family members by phone or text. For example, Anne Marie shared,

I still talk to my mom every day, or every other day, but I’ve been starting to talk to my dad more. It’s not like I never wanted to talk to him, I just never did because Mom’s usually doing everything for me.

Another student, Chris also shared,

They call me all the time and ask how I am doing with my grades and stuff, and even if I am not doing well it’s good to hear that they care because they’re on top of me, still. And if I do well, you know, they’re obviously really happy for me.

He added, “I text them every day, but on the phone every two or three days.”

Positive Support

Fortunately, all 14 students described positive relationships that they maintained with immediate and/or extended family even into their second semester at FSU. Unlike Tinto’s (1975)
framework, and similar to the pilot study findings, the students’ relationships with their family demonstrated how the students chose to not separate from their past communities while adjusting to their new college environment. For example, Jessica shared, “I mean, like I can always call them, if I ever, have any problems or if I need advice or anything like that. So they help me that way.”

Also, Sarah said, “they support me completely, financially. They support me, I’m an only child so they’re always there for me. They really emotionally support me, like we talk every day on the phone even though it’s annoying sometimes.” She further expressed how much of an influence her Mother is to her persisting in college. She said,

   My mom is really trying to encourage me to be more organized because she doesn’t want to see me fail. She’s like, ‘You should make a schedule.’ And she’ll cut me little newspaper article clippings and stuff, like when I go home—it’s organize and tips on succeeding...

**Emergence of a Grounded Theory of High-Risk First-Year Students Transition**

A Pathway Towards Persistence Model (PTPM) was constructed with concepts that emerged from analyzing the data from 14 students who volunteered to participate in this research study. In grounded theory, “the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12). Thus, I used grounded theory processes to develop a model based on the experiences of 14 students placed on academic probation and mandated to take an academic strategies course. Represented in Figure 1, the PTPM describes high-risk first-year students’ perceptions while transitioning to college, after being placed on academic probation and being mandated to take an academic strategies course. The following sections illustrate the students’ descriptions of their transition into college during their first and second semesters. This theory, depicted below, illustrates high-risk first-year students’
Transitioning to college

Students in this study (n=14) entered their first year of college sharing several pre-college background characteristics (e.g., socio-demographic traits, college preparation, family support) in common that shape their college experiences. Pre-college characteristics may serve as indicators of college persistence and may influence students’ entry into college.

The students were comprised of a demographically diverse group. Among the 14 students, their socio-demographic traits (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, age) varied. When considering other pre-entry characteristics, all 14 students had comparable or slightly lower standardized test scores as their peers. In addition, over 90% of the students in this study had completed dual-enrollment, Advanced Placement (AP) courses or had otherwise earned college credit prior to enrolling in college. Their backgrounds reflect a commitment to taking the necessary steps to be successfully admitted to college by accumulating the course credits in high school or in a community college required for degree attainment in a Research I university. Their college preparation also provides further evidence that the students were not underprepared when they initially underperformed.

Persistence towards degree attainment after experiencing poor academic performance, being placed on academic probation, and mandated to complete an academic strategies course. This grounded theory model provides support for why the Academic Success course was critical to students’ persistence. The sections below describe the model in more detail.

Finally, all 14 students identified their family members as support. Students described their relationships with their family members as positive and strong, evidenced by their family members providing them emotional and/or financial support. One student shared, “I can always call them, … Probably, a couple of times a week, I call them.” Students talked with their family
Figure 1: A Pathway Towards Persistence Model (PTPM)
members frequently (e.g., at least two to three times per week). These findings suggest that the mere existence of one or more close family relationships has a positive impact on students’ response to adversity and their decision-making to persist towards degree attainment.

Recognizing and understanding common background traits at the outset is important because pre-entry characteristics, e.g., academic aptitude and academic achievement, influence the passage of students through the separation stage (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000). After entering college with similar pre-entry personal characteristics, students in this study experienced academic failure after their first academic semester. Whether matriculating in the spring or summer term, all students in the sample academically performed poorly (e.g., earning a 2.0 GPA or less) in their first semester. The level of performances varied somewhat among the students. For instance, not every student failed a course during his or her first semester. Some students performed poorly in liberal studies requirements while others performed poorly with pre-requisite major courses. Yet all students earned a cumulative grade point average of 2.0 or less during the first semester.

Interestingly, none of the 14 students attributed their poor performance to having insufficient preparation in high school; however, all 14 students in this study seemed to attribute their poor academic performance primarily to the same thing: their own academic failure and their failure to allocate more of their unstructured time towards their college coursework. The students felt their poor academic performance was internal, changeable and controllable. They did not feel like their failure was enduring or stable. The students acknowledged their lack of academic focus could be changed.
**Distractions**

While navigating their first semester, some students chose to become involved in co-curricular activities (e.g., joining student organizations) while others took part-time jobs. Students reported not attending class regularly and not managing their unstructured time, which led to their underperformance in their academics. One student expressed his inability to manage his time, sharing, “It’s not really that I was just too lazy to do my work. My problem, for me, was I would just miss things I didn’t even know were there. I would open up my computer and I would have a quiz due in three minutes.” Another student described not using any schedule, which resulted in not managing his time, sharing, “I mean I had a lot of free time like I could have been studying.” This lack of academic focus (e.g., distraction) prevented these students from properly managing and prioritizing their unstructured time in their new college environment.

Students misjudged the amount of time and effort required to succeed in college. Students acknowledged that their collegiate academic experience was very different from their high school experience. One student explained his challenge with time management in college, sharing,

> Time management, it’s not easy. You have to actually set stuff aside to do certain things. You have to plan accordingly… If I would have taken [college] more seriously in the beginning, if I would have thought, okay this is not high school, you now have to get this work done.

Some students mentioned their academic behaviors in high school were routine and required limited effort. Students felt high school was a fixed schedule where students did not need or use time management strategies, such as using a calendar or allocating time to study. Other students felt their college coursework was more “rigorous,” including several students who had
completed at least one semester at a community college. Even when students recognized college required more time and attention, students admitted to not placing enough time towards their academics.

The PTPM illustrates that while students may enter college with the necessary preparation to succeed, first-year students often experience a distraction (e.g., lack of time management) during their first semester that derails their academic performance. As this study revealed, distraction (e.g., being unable to manage his/her free time and unable to manage their academic responsibilities) can be a factor that might cause an otherwise prepared and capable student to earn a 2.0 GPA or less during his/her first semester in college.

**Wake-up Call**

By virtue of their poor performance during their first semester, these students were then placed on academic probation and required to complete an academic strategies course during their second semester. One student expressed his negative reaction to being placed on academic probation, sharing,

> I got a letter in the mail, and I was, I was beside myself basically, and I talked with my parents about it for a couple of days, and that was pretty rough, but um, I know exactly what I have to do now, [being placed on probation] helped me, for sure I think.

The majority of students also felt an increase in motivation to not repeat their poor academic performance and to prove to themselves and others that they can persist towards degree attainment. Many students characterized the news of their academic probation as a “wake-up call.” One student described her increase in motivation by sharing, “I’ll show them. I’ll get off of it and I’ll become a great student again.” At this time, they were forced to reflect upon their commitment to college and to consider whether or not to remain in school, along with the ramifications that such a decision entails. Another student indicated that the wake-up call
prompted her to conclude she was not devoting enough time to studying and that her lack of attention to her college coursework was to blame for her poor performance. She shared,

It’s like a reality check… You just have to really work at things and put time in it and… whether that’s managing time or doing things ahead of time.

Before the academic probation, students described how they relied on previous behaviors formed before college as they navigated their first semester. One student, who actually reacted with ambivalence to the news of his academic probation, said, “It was kind of expected.” He acknowledged that he was not attending class regularly nor performing well throughout the semester. He described his inability to manage his unstructured time, sharing,

There would be a lot of days where I had absolutely no idea where time went. Pretty much it was me… ending up doing nothing. And I would look at the clock and it would be 6:00 PM and I would say, ‘okay I have this much time to get stuff done’ and then the time ends up being 1 AM and I said, ‘wow, how did I just waste all that time?’

Although the student took responsibility for not managing his time during his first semester, he did return for his second semester and used time management strategies he learned in the Academic Success course, sharing,

I feel like I’ve tried to manage my time better and I’ve tried to stay focused on giving time to my classes other than just during class time. So outside of class, I’ve been more… attentive to my academics outside of class.

To one degree or another, the experience of academic probation had a strong initial effect on the students, and prompted them to openly reflect on their mistakes and ultimately undertake a new approach to their academic studies. Other high-risk, first-year students who are placed on academic probation may not interpret the notification as a wake-up call. The students may choose to still enroll in their second semester and may or may not place effort towards learning
and utilizing the strategies discussed in the Academic Success course. Students may also transfer to a different institution or withdraw from the University. However, students, who participated in this study, interpreted their academic probation notification as a notification and chose to be proactive in their learning by persisting in their second semester at the same institution and engaging in learning strategies discussed in the mandated academic strategies course.

**Willingness to Learn and Change Behaviors**

Following the initial ‘wake-up call’ reaction to academic probation, students’ motivation varied. Many students discovered an increase in their motivation to persist, while others felt negative or neutral. Over 70% of students described an increase in motivation to not repeat their poor performance while in their second semester. One student shared, “[Being placed on academic probation] made me highly motivated to not let that happen again. I’m the type of person that if I get knocked down, I am going to get back up and then hit the ground running.”

Another student described feeling more motivated after being placed on academic probation when he shared, “So now I’m more on top of everything. I’m making sure I’m ahead… instead of getting behind and not knowing what’s going on. I’m more determined to get a higher GPA.”

Conversely, three students shared that their motivation was negatively impacted after their ‘wake-up call.’ One student explained his reaction, saying, “College is, first of all, don’t play around with that, yeah… They’ll dismiss you if you aren’t doing well. I’ve learned that I can’t get behind like I did…”

Regardless of their motivation, their decision to enroll at the same institution for their second semester in order to improve their academic performance, and complete the mandated academic strategies course provides evidence that they were persisting towards degree attainment. In this study, the time between students’ first and second semester
was critical. Students may have decided not to persist after learning about being placed on academic probation. They may have chosen to not return to the same institution or to withdraw.

Remarkably, however, all 14 students in this study returned in their second semester and established academic goals to improve their academic performance. The academic goals centered on increasing their second semester GPA from less than a 2.0 to a 3.0 and above. Another goal that students established was improving their overall cumulative GPA to be admitted into a specific major. During their second semester, all 14 students actively participated in the mandated academic strategies course by attending the class, learning time management strategies, and utilizing these learned strategies in other coursework. Students described how they learned to set realistic goals and modify their goals to perform better academically. One student described modifying his academic goals when sharing,

[The Academic Success course] taught me to set more realistic goals and set steps or check points to reach that goal. I do feel like [my goal] is more attainable, so I have one major goal, but I have set minor goals along the whole way, so I can get there. So it just makes me feel that reaching the ultimate goal is a lot more attainable.

The students also articulated how learning time management strategies (e.g., using the academic calendar or five-day study plan) changed their behavior, increased their confidence and allowed them to improve their GPAs by allotting more time to work on assignments over several days or weeks as opposed to deferring all effort, or “cramming,” to the night before due dates, quizzes, and tests.

Their modified behaviors in using new time management strategies ultimately increased the students’ self-efficacy and self-regulation. In describing how the second semester was going with the new focus on time management strategies, one student confidently shared,
I’ve started [completing] assignments earlier and I’ve started studying, not just the day before a test but a week before…If I have a test next week, I just tell myself that I will do well on it. Then I just start studying the week before …

Encouragingly the students’ use of academic strategies enhanced their self-efficacy.

Another salient finding that emerged in the analysis is that all 14 students also reported positive interactions with their mandated academic strategies course instructors, contributing to positive relationships that students planned to maintain while persisting in college. Students felt their instructors provided meaningful support and a positive influence to their experiences in the mandated course. Beyond the importance of the skills taught, the course experience itself was a factor for positive change and promoting persistence to degree attainment.

Finally, students, who are mandated to take the academic strategies course, may complete the course and not learn or utilize the strategies. Students may complete the course and choose to either persist or withdraw. Students who were placed on academic probation who do not meet the academic requirement of earning a 2.0 semester-GPA during their second semester may (or may not) be dismissed. However, upon conclusion of the 12-week course, the students, who participated in this study, self-regulated their unstructured time and studying-related behaviors, felt capable in applying their learned behaviors towards other courses, and described improving their academic performance during the second semester. One student shared, “I got a 3.0 GPA, so I am happy with that.” Students in this study described changes in behavior and improvement in their academic performance that resulted in their commitment to persist to their third semester at the same institution. All students expressed positive feelings towards the University and affirmed their original decision to transition to the University.
Summary

Students often experience transitions when entering college. The 14 students who participated in this study had been placed on academic probation after they earned under a 2.0 GPA during their first semester at Florida State University. As part of that probation, the students were required to complete an academic strategies course during their second semester. The students participating in that course were motivated to learn time management strategies, and their confidence to improve their efforts and academic achievement increased after completing this course. The students reported learning strategies, such as time management, and used those new strategies to persist towards a college degree. The students utilized those academic strategies in other courses and they intended to sustain these strategies as they pursued their academic degrees to completion.

Much like with the pilot study, the interviewed students acknowledged that support came from their Academic Success course instructors and families. Through students’ experiences and stories, the students described learning about time management and changing their academic behaviors since starting college. Findings from this study provide evidence to postsecondary administrators and faculty concerning what leads to academic probation following students’ first semesters, how students respond to academic probation, what learning strategies are most helpful to first-year students’ in changing their study-related behaviors, how they improve their academic performance, and ultimately their path toward persisting to degree attainment.

Chapter 5 includes the findings from the study and provides connections to extant literature. The chapter also includes discussion of limitations, implications, and recommendations for student affairs and academic affairs professionals.
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION

This dissertation study explored first-year students’ perceptions and experiences from being placed on academic probation and, consequently mandated to take the Academic Success course. Because Florida State University provides an Academic Success course with the goal of teaching academic strategies to high-risk freshmen who received below a 2.0 GPA in their first semester, it provides an interesting setting in which to explore freshmen students’ transition into college when they experienced a major set-back. This study fills a gap in existing research about the initial transitional processes that first-year students may experience—that is, going from academic failure through possible potential persistence—with the additional focus on how they interpreted being placed on academic probation, mandated to take a learning strategies course, and whether or not they learned and changed behavior from the course. Using grounded theory processes, a model emerged from the data portraying experiences and learning that occurred among 14 first-year students who were placed on academic probation as they transitioned into college life.

The previous chapter discussed results from first-year students’ participations of their mandatory academic strategies course during their second semester of college. The findings from the research study support the reasoning behind mandating an academic strategies course; i.e., the course supported students’ academic success by providing them with information about time management, self-regulation, and study strategies enabling them to persist towards degree attainment at the University. The students reported they learned the benefit of using time management strategies (e.g., using an academic calendar that consolidated deadlines and allocating studying-related behaviors over several days) and established positive relationships
with course instructors. The process of entering college, earning under a 2.0 GPA or less, being placed on academic probation, and being mandated to take an academic strategies course is a transition that had not been previously explored at Research 1 public institutions.

This chapter will discuss emergent themes from the data within the context of extant literature. Although Tinto’s (1975, 1993) model of student departure was the framework guiding this research, findings demonstrated that, contrary to Tinto’s proposition that students should separate from families in order to transition successfully to college, students in this sample did not separate from their norms, e.g. communicating frequently with their family, yet they were transitioning. In this chapter, the emergent theory detailed in the previous chapter, will be further examined. This chapter also discusses students’ motivation towards academic persistence and learning of time management strategies to improve their academic performance. Following this section, students’ increase in self-efficacy, self-regulation and self-determination due to their changed behaviors in studying-related practices will also be discussed. The conclusion of this chapter suggests limitations of the current research, implications for future research, and recommendations for administrators and faculty based on the findings from this study.

**Overview of the Findings**

Undergraduates experience numerous challenges when they start college and transition to a new educational environment in their pursuit of higher education (Clark, 2005; Hull & Seeley, 2010; Keup, 2008). Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) called transitions “life events entailing change” (p. 18). As part of their transition, first-year students in this research study experienced challenges—as evidenced by their poor academic standing (i.e., earned a 2.0 GPA or less)—during their initial move from high school to college. While in transition, students “have not yet adopted norms and behaviors from their new environment” (Milem & Berger,
1997, p. 388). Consistent with the literature, students in this study had difficulty adjusting to their new environment and they were placed on academic probation.

Vincent Tinto’s (1993; 1975) theory of student departure (1993, 1975) posited that complex processes occur when college students begin to engage with their postsecondary institution. According to Tinto, students must pass through three major stages in order to persist to graduation. The first stage centers on the students’ abilities to transition into the academic environment while disassociating from past norms and communities (e.g., high school). This transitional stage includes student separation from previous associations (e.g., family, friends) and adjustment to the social and intellectual demands of academia (Tinto, 1993).

During this first stage, Tinto suggests that students must adapt to their new college environment by rejecting the norms of their past. However, contrary to Tinto’s theory, the students who volunteered for this dissertation study did not reject their norms of their past. Indeed, students’ past norms were important for supporting their transition from failure to potential persistence. The findings indicated they had not separated themselves completely socially, or rejected the values from past associations (Tinto, 1988). They indicated they felt their immediate family members provided positive support both emotionally and financially, and the students maintained frequent communication (e.g., communicating two to three times per week) with their immediate family members during both their first and second semesters of college.

One finding that emerged was that students reported being surprised by the difficulty of college courses and/or the amount of work required in college compared to their high school. After being placed on academic probation due to their poor academic performance, students identified that a problem for them was that college provided more free time and, instead of allocating studying-related behaviors throughout the week, the students procrastinated and did
not use academic behaviors. Consistent with previous research, the results from the 14 students affirmed that students who do not manage unstructured time tend to be less academically successful (Reis, Hebert, Diaz, Maxfield, & Ratley, 1995). Indeed, several students discussed how they did not structure their free time in college, nor did they put forth studying-related behaviors to meet the academic demands of college. For example, one student commented how she did not use her previous study habits when she transitioned to college.

In addition to students’ initial challenges, the second stage of Tinto’s theory—the transition phase—postulates that students may continue to experience complex stressors caused by moving away from home and starting college. Tinto (1988) asserted that transition is a “period of passage between the old and the new, between associations of the past and hoped for associations with communities of the present” (p. 444). Indeed, research has shown students are more prone to drop out of school during this stage (Barefoot, 2007; Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999; Milem & Berger, 1997; Tinto, 1988). During this transitional stage, Tinto (1988) reported that students “come to learn the knowledge and skills required for the performance of their specific role in the new group (p. 441).” Transitional issues, both positive and negative, occur in first-year students, such as, homesickness, independence, peer relationships, and co-curricular involvement (Bolle, Wessel, & Mulvihill, 2007; Clark, 2005).

When applying Tinto’s theory to the findings of this research, participants affirmed they encountered initial difficulties, as demonstrated by their being placed on probation. As presented in Chapter four, the emergent grounded theory Pathway Towards Persistence Model (PTPM) described how the 14 high-risk first-year students encountered initial difficulties during their transition in their first two semesters. Specifically, a salient experience students described was having a difficult time managing their unstructured time as they entered their first semester.
When students were not able to manage their unstructured time, they academically underperformed during their first semester. Due to their lack of academic focus during their first semester, their poor academic performance resulted in being placed on academic probation and required them to take an academic strategies course during their second semester. As illustrated above and in detail in Chapter four, all 14 students decided to persist into their second semester and completed the mandated academic strategies course.

The findings from this dissertation study, including the grounded theory, support Clark’s (2005) findings, Clark conducted research with eight community college students during their second semester. These students had taken a mandatory 12-week Freshman Seminar course during their first semester. Clark asserted “Undesirable outcomes during the first year, such as earning poor or failing grades, forced some students to devise very distinct strategies for improving their academic performance during the second semester” (p. 303). Similarly, students in this dissertation study reported learning time management strategies, e.g., studying coursework over several days and creating a calendar with all of their assignments, during their second semester, which helped them improve their academic performance. Managing the demands of studying and earning good grades were salient themes for the 14 students in this study as well as in Clark’s study. However, unlike Clark’s (2005) findings, students in this sample did not see being placed on academic probation as a deficiency in their ability to complete college. Still, they did realize they needed to do something differently. Thus, although they did not perceive that they were incapable of obtaining a college degree, they were deficient in skills that would support their intellectual capabilities.

As students perceive their experiences within their college environment, their goal of graduation and subsequent commitment to the institution may be modified (Strom & Savage,
Tinto has stressed that if students’ have positive experiences, they may become more committed to degree attainment. Alternatively, if students perceive their experiences within their college environment as negative, commitments toward their degree attainment may become weakened and withdrawal may occur. Many students in this study perceived and responded to encounters in similar ways—acknowledging they had positive social transitions but negative academic transitions; however, the findings were not uniform across all students, as some of the students took different paths in dealing with the academic setback in their first semester. For example, one student described a negative emotion that he felt after he was placed on academic probation due to his academic failure, Jack shared,

I've been very depressed. I don’t like failing. It’s not something where it’s just, ‘okay, well I guess I’ll just try again.’ It’s something where it’s like ‘I’ve just wasted my entire time for this’….It bothers me every day… every time I login I have to see my GPA. And my parents don’t even know that I’m on academic probation.

Following an undesirable poor academic outcome in their first semester, all 14 students illustrated a willingness to learn new strategies by enrolling for a second semester and a willingness to complete the mandated course. These students made conscious decisions to direct their energies to solve the problems they faced. As depicted in the grounded theory, all 14 students identified, described, and articulated changing their behaviors by using at least one strategy, e.g., eliminated procrastination, that helped them succeed and persist towards degree attainment.

This dissertation study integrated the experiences of 14 high-risk, first-year students and formed a theory of their process regarding their transition to college. The theory that emerged as a result of their experiences and perceptions established that students may enter college and experience academic difficulty. The students’ reaction and motivation in responding to the
difficulty may enable them to persist to a second semester. This model depicts how students can be taught new academic strategies and, moreover, change their academic behaviors to improve their academic performance during their second semester. The emerging theory establishes that students’ commitment to complete the mandated learning strategies course during their second semester provided opportunities for students to learn new studying-related behaviors that ultimately improved their academic performance and increased their connection to persist towards their third semester and towards degree attainment. Conversely, the theory also depicts how students transitioning to college may identify learning new academic strategies, change studying-related behaviors, yet not increase their second semester cumulative GPA. Subsequently, by not improving their cumulative academic performance in their second semester, students may ultimately need to appeal a dismissal or withdraw from the university.

After a student passes through initial separation and transition, he/she is faced with the task of becoming integrated, the third and final stage (Tinto, 1988). At the end of their second semester, all 14 students were enrolled for their third semester. Over 90% of the students in this sample acknowledged they maintained a goal to graduate at the same institution, yet the majority of students indicated they had not yet become involved on campus with student organizations or other extra-curricular activities, particularly because they were focused on improving their GPA. The final stage of Tinto’s theory posited that transitioning into college life ends when students fully integrate into the campus setting—academically and socially. As for Tinto’s last stage, this dissertation study did not look at students’ full incorporation into their academic and social lives in college. While all 14 students overwhelmingly described experiencing very positive social transitions when entering college, future research could explore the students’ incorporation into full membership in academic and social communities.
The following sections describe the salient themes that emerged from the findings discussed in the previous chapter including goal directedness, learned strategies, motivation, self-efficacy, self-regulation, self-determination, and support.

**Goal Directedness**

Locke and Latham (1994) asserted that goal commitment—“the degree to which an individual is attracted to the goal, considers it important, is determined to attain it, and sticks with it in the face of obstacles” (p. 16)—provides the intensity needed for concerted focus. After students were placed on academic probation and mandated to complete the academic strategies course, all 14 students demonstrated they were open to learning, willing to confront academic challenges, displayed goal-related behaviors, and were rebounding from academic failures. Goal-setting is a learning strategy that can assist students in confronting academic challenges, maintaining motivation, and persisting towards academic success (Locke & Latham, 2002). Research shows that when a person has a specific, measurable, and achievable goal he/she is more likely to overcome difficulty, maintain motivation, and strive towards persistence (Locke & Latham, 2006). In the academic strategies course, students learned to make goals that are specific, measurable, and achievable. When asked what they learned about goals, one student, Carson demonstrated this specific knowledge, “you have to be specific, if you want an A, say ‘a 92 because it’s achievable.’ So I did that with all of my classes.”

Goal theory (Locke & Latham, 2002) posits that goal commitment is particularly needed because long-term goal striving inevitably encounters challenges. However, when goal commitment is high, an individual will find ways to counter obstacles. Consistent with goal-striving theories, after being placed on academic probation and mandated to take an academic
strategies course students articulated ways that they met their academic challenges by changing their learning-related and motivation-related behaviors. For example, Keith shared,

> We made a five-day study plan to study for mid-terms and I used that [plan] to block out, okay, ‘how much I was going to study then and then, what I was going to study, and then the next day the second part, and then review the other part.’ I thought it was really useful…

While completing the mandated course, students learned at least one academic strategy that enabled them to improve their time management while also positively impacting their motivation, self-efficacy and self-regulation.

Tinto (1988) proposed that students who remain sufficiently committed to their goal of obtaining higher education will do almost anything to persist. In their first interviews, students illustrated their goals to improve their academic performance and earn a college degree. For example, one student shared, “[My] short-term [goal] would be probably to get…above C average. I want to get As and Bs—and then long-term I’d like to get my bachelor’s degree.” Students willingly completed the Academic Success course to learn strategies that they hoped would help them increase their GPA and ultimately persist towards their long-term goal of degree attainment.

**Learned Strategies**

Learning-strategies enable students to acquire information and perform well academically (McKeachie, Pintrich, & Lin, 1985; Pintrich, 2002). When students develop academic strategies, they can become active agents in both their academic integration (Tinto, 1993) and persistence (Glenn & Ryan, 2004). To further investigate the connections between student agency, academic integration, and persistence, Glenn and Ryan (2004) conducted a quantitative study to compare the impact on retention of a strategy-based seminar versus a socialization-focused seminar.
among freshmen in good academic standing (e.g., above a 2.0), who voluntarily enrolled in either seminar. Although Glenn and Ryan’s (2004) study did not specifically focus on students who earned below a 2.0 GPA, the results confirmed that the strategy-based seminar was more effective in improving one-year retention for “low GPA freshmen” (p. 9). The findings from their study were that “freshmen who enrolled in the strategy-based seminar were significantly more likely to re-enroll…than were freshmen who enrolled in the socialization-focused seminar or in no seminar” (p. 8). Their retention-effective findings support the idea that a learning strategy-based seminar could develop students’ learning skills and their “academic efficacy to an extent that enhances academic integration and institutional commitment” (p. 9). After Glenn and Ryan’s research was concluded, the strategy-based seminar became required for the freshmen, identified as at-risk (Glenn & Ryan, 2004) at that university.

Similar to the course in Glenn and Ryan’s study, the Academic Success course was a credit-based course in which students focused on strategies to academic achievement such as time management and test preparation. Students in this dissertation study reported learning time management strategies, such as using an academic calendar that listed all of their assignments and test deadlines and allocated their work throughout the week—as opposed to not being aware of impending assignments or procrastinating the night before. Additionally, the students’ reported behavioral changes (e.g., allocating studying-related behaviors during the week) further supports McKeachie et al.’s (1985) research demonstrating that learning strategy programs teach students the importance of planning studying-related behaviors, regulating their attention, and monitoring their comprehension of readings and lectures. An example of how a student employed his learning strategies was when Chris shared,
I have class from 8-8:50, which is math, and instead of going back to sleep I use the time from 9 until 11:30 or 9-12 depending on what classes I have, that’s a good time to study.

The student’s description of using time management is significant because this skill helped him transition academically to college life. He claimed that this course helped him learn how to study course content over a four to five day period. Chris further articulated changing his academic behavior by implementing this learning strategy,

Chunking—not trying to use or put too much time on the whole chapter, divide into how many days I have and just spend a little bit of time on each. That helps with procrastinating and guides me if I have an overload of information one night.

Chris’s ability to manage his coursework by planning and chunking assignments, as described above, enabled him to feel more confident to be a successful student. The study habits and time management strategies illustrated by students depict self-directed behavior, an important aspect of successful college completion (Garrison, 1997; Pintrich, 2002; Zimmerman, 2000). Students’ ability to learn and use their learned-behaviors to academically perform well are instrumental activities that contribute to academic achievement. The findings demonstrate that as students develop skills and strategies their academic efficacy and motivation increases.

**Motivation & Learned Academic Strategies**

Students articulated that the Academic Success class taught them information that they believe will assist them in earning a college degree. They learned specific skills, such as planning studying-related behaviors and completing assignments over several days as opposed to procrastinating until the night before. As a result, their motivation to persist towards degree attainment increased.
Motivation

Alarcon and Edwards (2012) conducted a qualitative study with freshmen enrolled in a credit-based introductory psychology course. Their results indicated that student ability (as demonstrated through standardized test scores) and motivation (e.g., conscientiousness) were significant predictors of retention. Similarly, a majority of students in this dissertation study agreed the course improved their abilities to manage their time, review academic information each day, and comprehend relevant information. For example, Justin illustrated motivated behavior when he explained his approach to learning physics,

So Monday I have … Physics and I start going over the review problems [on this day]. Tuesday is a lecture, again more review, and I’ll start really working on the problems with myself then. On Wednesday, there’s another section class where I can clarify the problems I couldn’t figure out by myself, and then finish those [problems] that night. [I then] do a little more studying and then Thursday morning’s the test.

Justin’s motivation was essential in his transfer of learning about learning strategies to actually using learning strategies to meet his academic demands. His increased ability to implement a skill enabled him to increase his competence and effort to persist towards other goals. Among all 14 students, each stated he/she learned content in the Academic Success course that increased their academic abilities in ways that motivated them to persist towards degree attainment.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is an individual’s belief in his/her capability and what can be done “under different sets of conditions with whatever skills one possesses” (Bandura, 1997, p. 37). Bandura asserted, “people analyze the situations that confront them, consider alternate courses of action, judge their ability to carry them out successfully, and estimate the results the actions are likely to produce” (p. 5). My results showed that after being mandated to take the Academic Success
course, students learned time management strategies and changed their academic behaviors to improve their academic performance during their second semester. After the 12-week course, students articulated how they changed their academic behaviors and subsequently felt more confident in their ability to improve their GPA. Through their actions of using time management strategies, students were able to see an improvement in managing their time and their academic behaviors, which increased the self-efficacy to use the strategies, which then increased their outcome expectancies.

The connection between self-efficacy and student success has been demonstrated by numerous studies (e.g., Bandura, 1993; Bean & Eaton, 2001-2002; Hsieh, Sullivan, & Guerra, 2007; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Reyes, 2007; Schunk, 1991). Findings from this research study demonstrated that students’ self-efficacy in using studying-related behaviors and consequently seeing academic improvement because of their changes in their study-related increased their self-efficacy for academic attainment. Thus, students’ believed they could use time management strategies and if they used the strategies, they expected to be successful in obtaining higher grades. The course provided participants an opportunity to acquire skills and experiences in developing a sense of what it means to be a successful college student. Jason demonstrated his confidence in using strategies that were helping him improve his academic performance. He shared,

I can do it. I can do it. I’m close to an A in one of my classes and I have an A already in one so I just need to keep them up the last three weeks or however much longer we have left.

My findings from this dissertation also supported findings from Reyes’ study (2007); he described how five students learned to be successful students and improved their self-efficacy and learned to be successful by participating in a first-year support and retention scholarship.
program. While Reyes’s study placed emphasis on students of Mexican descent who did not meet the standard criteria for college admission, the findings from the students who participated in the Academic Success course study aligned with Reyes’s findings. Students in the Academic Success course actively participated in class and engaged in practices that allowed them “to learn and construct a successful student identity” (Reyes, 2007, p. 651). Likewise Reyes (2007) discussed how the five students’ participation in the retention scholarship program taught them how to become successful college students, some more successfully than others. According to Reyes (2007), his study’s participants “learned valuable skills in what not to do, which provided a point of reference for future endeavors” (p. 653). An example from this dissertation study that is consistent with Reyes (2007) research is that students learned to not only study at night. Students changed their studying-related behaviors to use unstructured time during the day to complete assignments and study for tests. For example, Waylon shared,

I've been studying in the day a lot more instead of at night. I used to just take my Adderall and go to Strozier at 11:00pm, which I don’t really like. I've been studying a lot more in the day, which is probably the main thing I have learned.

Most importantly, students in this study increased their self-efficacy to obtain better grades in the future (i.e., outcome expectancies). The students expressed positive expectations about actions or steps they can take to ensure desirable outcomes, and their self-efficacy beliefs controlled their performance. Turner and Husman’s (2008) research described how self-efficacy expectations are self-reactions students can have that can lead to goal attainment following failure. The students’ in this dissertation study were motivated by goals to improve their academic performance during their second semester, and their motivation was essential in transferring learned time management strategies from the Academic Success course to other
academic demands. As their use of new skills increased, so did their self-efficacy for using the skills and for using those skills for successful outcomes.

**Self-regulation**

In order to pursue academic goals, learners must self-regulate their learning by engaging in appropriate actions, thoughts, and behaviors (Zimmerman, 2000) that allow them to self-monitor and adjust their behaviors. According to Bembenutty (2011), “self-regulation affects motivation, emotions, selection of strategies, and effort regulation and leads to increases in self-efficacy and improved academic achievement” (p. 4). Students’ abilities to identify and change specific behaviors (e.g., application of academic study and volitional strategies) can aid in their academic achievement. For instance, cognitive self-regulation occurs when students actively engage in learning by analyzing the demands of school assignments, using resources to meet those demands, and monitoring their progress (Covington, 2000; Pintrich, 1999; Zimmerman, 2000). Students who participated in the dissertation study provided examples of their learned self-regulated behaviors after completing the Academic Success course. For example, Chris shared,

> When I get home from school today, I’m done with class at 1:45, so from two until four, I’m going to study because my roommate is in class then which is perfect because it will be me and my room. I put my headphones on and nothing else matters really. So I do that and every night I will study too before I go to bed.

Zimmerman (2000) identified three cyclical phases of self-regulation. During the first phase, forethought and planning phase, the students learn tasks and set goals to complete the tasks. The second phase, performance monitoring, students employed strategies and monitored effectiveness and/or motivation. The final stage, reflection on performance phase, is when the students evaluate their completion of tasks. The students in this dissertation study exhibited
behaviors associated with the performance phase. Students identified and initiated specific strategies to manage their current workload, including time management skills and organization strategies. The majority of students demonstrated they used their effort to learn time management strategies that improved their grades during their second semester.

Students in this dissertation study illustrated their interest for learning time management and studying related behaviors. Their confidence increased when students used the learned time management and studying related behaviors. Students also observed an increase in their academic performance after applying the learned time management and studying related behaviors. The next section discusses how students chose to learn strategies and utilize the strategies to improve their academic performance in their second semester.

**Self-determination Theory**

Self-determination theory (SDT) differentiates motivation from being autonomous and controlled (Deci & Ryan, 2012). A construct of SDT is intrinsic motivation and this type of motivation exists when three psychological needs are met: competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Originally, this theory was not a focus for this research study. However, the findings indicated that the students were intrinsically motivated as evidenced by learning and using time management strategies. For example, Ryan exuded self-determination when sharing:

The most that I will take from the [Academic Success] class is the study habits, because the study habits completely changed the way that I’m gonna go about getting my grades; the way that I work for my grades and then receive the grade that shows the way that I worked for it, because I changed. I have completely changed the way I study. I can tell you that I didn’t study. I didn’t do these types of things in high school, at all.
The students demonstrated intrinsic motivation for improving their academic performance by using time management strategies, changing their behaviors to apply the strategies, and doing what they need to do to persist towards degree attainment.

Moreover, the students experienced a significant academic challenge of performing poorly during their first semester while in college and being placed on academic probation. While enrolled in an academic strategies intervention course, the students articulated becoming proficient in time management techniques (e.g., scheduled studying-related behavior over five days) that aided in their ability to study throughout the week, instead of procrastinating the night before an assignment was due.

In addition, relatedness affected the students’ motivation in a positive way because the students reported feeling a connection and/or affinity towards their instructors. The students felt supported by their instructors and felt the class provided them information that improved their ability towards academic achievement.

The findings also illustrated that the students had the autonomy, interest to learn on their own, to engage in the mandatory course, and learn time management strategies. For example, Ryan shared,

Now I do a lot more study sessions on my own… In terms of like world religions or social psychology, I’ll do separate sessions, just with myself, self-studying, with my notes and stuff… I found that instead of just listening to the professor and copying down what he says, I will just listen in class and then go home and will take the separate time to literally write down from the PowerPoint what I need and put it in my own words, to make it have more sense to me. I [have] found that I retain information better when I write it down, because I process it in a different way.

The students’ interest to learn on their own impelled them not only to choose to learn the content but to use the content to change their academic behaviors. The time management strategies they
learned aided in their ability to manage their coursework and persist towards a third semester, furthering their degree attainment.

Another salient theme discussed in the findings was support. Students identified both family and academic support. The next section will discuss students’ positive interaction with both their family members and their respective academic strategies course instructors.

**Support**

Although students in the study were placed on academic probation and were identified by the University as being high-risk of dismissal from the University, the course seemed to become part of their transitioning to campus life—academically, socially, and intellectually. All 14 students in this study chose to actively participate in the mandatory class while transitioning to higher education. While participating in the academic strategies class, the students developed positive relationships with their academic strategies course instructors.

Unlike Tinto’s model, the 14 students, who volunteered for this study, did not feel home was a stressor. In fact all 14 students frequently communicated with immediate family members and identified their immediate family members as a strong support (both emotionally and financially). Furthermore, participants affirmed that they did not separate or reject their family or their norms during this transition, as postulated in Tinto’s (1975) theory. In fact, students’ relationships with family and instructors reportedly had positive influences on their goals of college degree attainment.

**Familial support.** One of the prominent findings of this research highlighted students’ perceptions of support that facilitated their persistence to obtain college degrees. Notably, participants provided clear examples of family members, who they thought provided support. Consistent with previous research, the results from the 14 students affirmed that external
influences and support systems are important factors that facilitate students’ transition and persistence in college (Cavazos, Johnson, Fielding, Cavazos, Castro, & Vela, 2010; Guiffrida, 2005; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011). In particular, as also previously determined in the pilot study findings, all 14 participants described emotional and financial support they received from their families.

Guiffrida’s (2005) research centered on African American students, an underrepresented student population on many campuses, and how family members influence this particular population, both positively and negatively. Based on findings from his sample of African American students (i.e., high achieving, low achieving, and leavers) at a predominantly White institution (PWI), Guiffrida’s findings indicated that the perceived role of family among African American students played an influential role in their academic achievement and persistence. As a result, Guiffrida concluded that family plays an influential role on student persistence so much so that he suggested Tinto’s (1993) theory should be modified to recognize the “significance of relationships within families to students’ transition to college” (p. 57).

All 14 students articulated their positive relationships with their families. Specifically, each participant articulated having a positive and influential relationship with at least one member of his/her immediate or extended family. The students maintained frequent communication with their families as well as received emotional and financial support from different family members that aids in their ability to transition to campus, particularly after experiencing academic adversity.

In addition to the emotional support provided by families, another relevant finding of the study was that students mentioned that they received financial support from their families. However, different from Guiffrida’s findings, the 14 students did not feel pressure to support
their families from afar nor did they receive pressure to return to their families and/or visit their families frequently. Although students in the Academic Success course felt disappointed or upset for performing poorly, they did not report the guilt exhibited by participants in Guiffrida’s study. Among the 14 students in this dissertation study, two students (one Black female and one Caucasian male) specifically described a sense of obligation to succeed in relation to their family’s lack of financial ability to provide for their education. Overall, these findings support Guiffrida’s proposed expansion of Tinto’s first stage of separation, one where students do not need to separate from their previous communities and norms to successfully transition to a college environment.

**Instructor support.** Foundational research provides evidence linking students’ perceptions of their instructors to their decision to re-enroll or depart from their institutions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, 1980; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977). Ullah and Wilson (2007) found students’ relationships with faculty members as a determinant for academic success. The course curriculum in the mandatory Academic Success course was intentionally designed to include two scheduled individual meetings between the instructor and each student within the 12-week period. All 14 students identified that the instructors of the course had a positive impact on them. Specifically students in this study noted that interactions with their mandated course instructors had a positive impact. For example, Carson shared, “I mean the guy’s kind of motivating and just taught me some good things…”

In addition, students in the Academic Success course established positive relationships with their instructors that they seemed hopeful would continue. For example, Matthew, shared:

> The relationship with my instructor was very good. I like [my Academic Success course instructor] a lot. [My Academic Success course instructor] is very nice. I could see [my Academic Success course instructor] as someone who would write me a letter of
recommendation in the future. I feel like I have that kind of a relationship with [my Academic Success course instructor].

His description of the interactions with the Academic Success course instructor illuminates the constructive relationship that can develop with a course instructor(s), particularly under the auspices of having to complete a mandated course. The instructors in the Academic Success course became part of a support network and resource for students.

Sakiz (2012) conducted a study to determine the significance of providing affectively supportive learning environments with 277 college students enrolled in an elementary education department of a major teaching and research university in Turkey. Freshmen, sophomore, junior and senior participants completed a survey two weeks before the end of their Spring 2010 semester to be sure the students had spent enough time with their instructors. Findings showed that perceived instructor support was significantly positively related to academic enjoyment in college classrooms. Considering the findings, this study highlights the important role instructors have on developing affectively supportive learning environments for college students.

“Specifically, using caring communication, respecting and valuing students’ ideas, showing concern for and interest in students, listening, smiling, providing fair treatment, holding high expectations, using encouragement, and humour and being kind can help building peaceful and affective classroom environments promoting positive emotions, engagement and learning in college (Sakiz, 2012, p. 73-74). Findings from this dissertation study support Sakiz’s (2012) research in that students’ perceived teacher behaviors can relate positively to students’ motivation and engagement to learn and persist in college.

While positive relationships with instructors are helpful, not having positive relationships with instructors can be deleterious. As Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000) explained: “the college classroom constitutes one possible source of influence on social integration, subsequent
institutional commitment, and college departure” (p. 570). Thus a positive relationship between student and college instructor can have a significant, positive impact on students’ success. For example, Jason shared, “… I really liked [my Academic Success course instructor] so I wanted to do well for [my Academic Success course instructor].” For the participants, their engagement in the Academic Success course led to positive relationships with their instructor, ones that they were hopeful would continue to be a resource for them in the future. The relationship between Jason and his instructor was more than a supportive relationship. The student felt a meaningful connection with his instructor. He was motivated to do well for his instructor so he chose to learn new strategies, change his academic behaviors, and improve his grades.

When students have positive interactions with faculty or staff, students’ sense of self-efficacy can be enhanced and lead to engagement in further interactions and investment in greater psychological energy, which can increase social integration (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2011). Students’ relationships—with instructors, family members, peers, or mentors—correlate strongly with the institution, college satisfaction, and intent to graduate from the institution (Schreiner, 2010). Student-faculty interaction appears to be an important contributor to student success, yet the research has not focused on high-risk students (Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2011). The results from this dissertation demonstrated the overwhelmingly positive interactions students had with their instructors from the mandated Academic Success course. The findings supported other research that has shown that a positive teaching-learning environment can influence students’ ability of being a successful student (Reyes, 2007; Tinto, 2012).
Limitations

There were several limitations in the study that are worthy of attention, as they have implications for the interpretation of current findings as well as future research. Because this was the first qualitative study conducted of students participating in the Academic Success course, the researcher faced a distinct challenge in recruiting students. This study was specifically designed to explore high-risk first-year students’ perceptions, experiences, and behaviors within the cycle of an academic semester because academic semesters (and academic years) represent naturally occurring start-points and end-points of students’ learning processes (Turner & Husman, 2008). Although the researcher’s efforts were supported by the program director as well as the instructors, the short time-frame, the 12-week course, posed a challenge when trying to recruit and attract participants. However, participation rates, considering the 12-week period of the course, improved from the pilot study because an incentive—a $15 gift card—was given to every student for completing the first interview and two $50 gift card incentives were given to two students, through a raffle among the total sample, who completed their second interviews within the same semester.

In addition, the program director permitted sampling among all six sections taught by all three instructors. Fortunately the sample size provided descriptive and relevant findings among five of the six sections, and students being taught among all three instructors participated in the course. Any future study should intentionally recruit students from the sixth section of the class to maximize participant recruitment among the largest possible sample and to try to offset instructor bias. The total mandated student enrollment for this program during the Fall semester was 105 (personal communication with Sara Hamon, August, 7, 2014). Any future research
should continue including students enrolled in all sections in order to effectively reach and represent the population of interest.

Also, data were collected from a sample of students at one large, public southeastern university in the United States, Florida State University. Since the study was conducted with a single-institution sample, results may not be generalizable or transferable of the findings to other institutions and the greater student population mandated to take the Academic Success course. This is an inherent limitation of most qualitative research designs. In addition, the descriptions were provided by 14 students mandated to enroll in an academic strategies intervention course and were primarily Caucasian. The generalizability of this study to other ethnicities may be limited by the demographics implicit to this restricted setting, whereas a multi-site study would provide more demographic representation and diversity of students’ thoughts and experiences. Given the number of participants and their attendance at the same university, the research was unable to compare the experiences of the participants to other students at other institutional types. However, single institutional studies are more prevalent when exploring Tinto’s (1997) theory to explain the longitudinal process of student departure at a college or university (Braxton & Lien, 2000). It may be unwise for future research to compare FSU’s program to programs at other universities, as the dissimilarities may confound the study.

Another limitation to this study concerns sample selection. Participants were not randomly selected for this study. The 14 students, mandated to take the academic strategies course, self-selected to participate in the study. Although the number of students in this sample was appropriate for this type of qualitative investigation, perhaps the students who volunteered for the study were more confident in their abilities to persist or simply participated due to the incentives provided. These students who self-selected to participate may not be similar to the
total population of students in the sections of all mandated students. Inherent differences may exist between students who elected to enroll in the academic strategies intervention course and those who were mandated. Furthermore, the perceptions and experiences of first-year students, identified as high-risk by the University, are not explored outside of this course.

Finally, students’ learning and behaviors were investigated within a finite period of time (12 weeks) in the academic school year. The study’s duration—which was limited to the first half of the students’ first year in college—may not provide a complete view of their transition into college. Because the course was offered for 12 weeks, the limited time duration also placed constraints regarding the schedule and performance of interviewed participants. The limited time to conduct this research was intentional, because research demonstrates that most student-attrition occurs within their freshman year (Alarcon & Edwards, 2012; Veenstra, 2009).

Implications for Future Research

The current study has several implications for future research. First, the findings of led to additional questions that could be addressed by future research studies, such as the following: What have students’ transitions to college been like now that they completed two full semesters? Did the five students who did not earn a 2.0 cumulative GPA, during their second semester, persist after their first year? Did participation in the course help students feel academically and socially integrated? What roles do family relationships continue to have on students after their first-year? These questions will help create a more accurate picture of the students and their beliefs and interpretations concerning their transition.

Based on the results of this study, a follow-up study should include a longitudinal study of mandated students to further assess retention. The Academic Success course has been offered for over five years and students who completed the course over the past five years could provide
critical information about their learning and studying-related behaviors. Vermetten, Vermunt, and Lodewijks (1999) concluded that students use more high-level learning strategies by the end of the third semester in college. Therefore, by including a greater timespan of student progress and change, subsequent studies may determine long-term behaviors students develop for academic achievement. A longitudinal study may provide additional information about specific skills retained and demonstrated through their performance in other coursework, and may also validate the grounded theory about high-risk students presented in this study.

Future research should include interviews with instructors to provide their perceptions of their instruction, as well as their observations of the students’ transitions. Exploring instructors’ perceptions would be beneficial because each instructor will have different strengths and weaknesses as they relate to instruction techniques and methods that impact student learning. Because this study did not examine the roles that Academic Success course instructors play in their instruction and dissemination of content related to learning strategies, future research should attempt to determine what effect the instructors may have on student learning, while seeking to identify attributes that distinguish an effective or ineffective instructor.

Finally, until this study, qualitative data had not been collected nor analyzed with students who were both placed on academic probation and mandated to take an academic strategies course, at this Research 1 public institution. A longitudinal, follow-up study may provide more depth and breadth of findings. Additional research studies would determine whether or not the 14 students have remained at the institution to complete their sophomore and junior years, whether students reached integration, and what factors led to students’ persistence (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Also, collecting data regarding how students continue to use their learning strategies in their sophomore through senior years could provide beneficial information.
Recommendations for Administrators and Faculty

Results of this current study indicated students learned strategies, such as completing assignments over several days as opposed to procrastinating until the night before, and planning when to use studying-related behaviors during their unstructured time, to persist towards degree attainment. Students described specific class activities, such as planning an academic calendar and utilizing a five-day study plan that helped them learn how to manage their time more efficiently. Students articulated changing their behavior by using the five-day plan for other coursework in their second semester. Students delegated course material to be studied during a five-day schedule and this learning strategy assisted in students’ ability to persist throughout the semester. Next, a majority of students discussed creating an academic calendar where all of their courses assignments, quizzes and tests were combined on one calendar. By combining all of their academic requirements into one calendar, the students felt more capable in managing their time to complete all the necessary work by spreading out the workload over several days in advance of the deadlines. Not only did the students articulate strategies they learned while completing the mandated academic strategies course, the students reported their intent to utilize these strategies in their third semester and while persisting toward degree attainment. The Academic Success course provided many time management and studying related skills to students, and this course should be provided for all first-year students as a requirement during their second semester in college.

In addition, the 1:1 instructor meetings scheduled twice during the course provided students the ability to establish positive working relationships and open communication with their instructors, providing positive, influential support to the student. Students in this dissertation study reported overwhelmingly positive relationships formed with their Academic
Success course instructors. This finding further supports research about the significance of positive faculty-student interaction on students’ satisfaction with college (Astin, 1999) and the direct benefit for student retention (Tinto, 1987). The opportunity for students to meet personally with their academic strategies course instructor aided in the students ability to perceive instructors as a resource and problem-solve both personal and academic challenges with their instructor during the semester. Intentional and personalized contact between students and faculty should remain a learning outcome in academic strategies course curriculum.

Conversely, students in the mandated course should receive additional academic advising while in the 12-week mandated course. At least five students reported having difficulty with a class and they each dropped a class during their second semester. For example, Anne Marie, a computational biology major, dropped biology 2 and a biology 2 lab because she learned she did not need these courses. Carson, an economics major, dropped a course in his second semester that was not required for his major. Another male student, Waylon, reported registering for a course that he did not need for his business major. Ensuring students are currently enrolled their second semester for courses that are required for their major will help ensure they are completing pertinent degree requirements and making certain students are registered for appropriate courses aids in their academic success.

Another recommendation, based on students’ responses, is this class should be required for all incoming students by their second semester, including transfer students. Jack, one of two male students who earned his AA degree before beginning at Florida State University shared, “It should be a required course for every undergraduate. Transfer students it doesn’t matter, if you are coming to Florida State whether you know what you want to do or not take a section of the Academic Success course.” Students enter college and may (or may not) lack academic focus.
Whether students are first-time in college or recently transferred to an institution, every student should be required to take an academic strategies course to learn learning strategies that will enable them to be more efficient with their unstructured time and aid them with their academic success. Students, whether performing at high or low academic abilities, could learn additional study skills or strategies that may enhance their academic performance. The course could also include career counseling and additional campus resources could be shared with the students to assist students in knowing more support services that are currently available.

Remarkably, at least half of the 14 students had earned Bright Futures scholarships (i.e., a scholarship program to reward any Florida high school graduate, based on their test scores, GPA, and commitment to community service, for up to five years in postsecondary education for a maximum of 120 credit hours). However, after these seven students completed their first semester, their academic probation placed them in jeopardy of losing this scholarship. There is a threat to students’ ability to persist when financial support, albeit scholarship funds or any monetary support, is withdrawn. Therefore, a future longitudinal study should follow-up to see which students, among the total sample, had their scholarships, and or any monetary support, reinstated or withdrawn and what the students’ likelihood was to persist towards their degree. Students may lose Bright Futures funding—jeopardizing their ability to persist, and this funding may be students’ main source of financial support. Administrators and financial aid staff can monitor students placed on academic probation after their first semester who are in jeopardy of losing this scholarship, and educate them on how either to restore this funding support or provide direct financial advising about other financial support. Carnevale and Rose (2003) purported students with low-socioeconomic status are less likely to graduate (76%) than students from the highest quartile (90%).
Conclusion

Students may (or may not) adjust academically and socially when transitioning to college. As 14 students in this study show, first-year students can experience academic difficulty and failure while transitioning to the college environment. For four-year colleges, whether public or private, approximately 38% are likely to leave their first year (Tinto, 2012). Students’ experiences within their first year can have a significant impact on whether or not students ultimately persist to degree attainment. Students may (or may not) transition to college connecting socially with peers, interacting positively with instructors, and performing well academically. However, early academic failure often undermines future success in college. Thus, this dissertation study and the corresponding grounded theory that emerged on high-risk, first-year students provide evidence that academic support can be critical to students in their first year at college.

The findings in this dissertation study provide a better understanding of high-risk, first-year students’ transition to college and highlight courses of action that University administrators and faculty can implement to help retain students. Through understanding the experiences of high-risk, first-year students, and particularly how the students chose to persist through academic adversity, administrators of student affairs and academic affairs can provide opportunities to implement academic strategies curriculum and practices that better prepare students during their transition in college.

The students in this dissertation study were not underprepared when entering college. However, students who volunteered in this study credited the time management strategies they learned and concomitantly incorporated into their academic behaviors contributed to their improved achievement during their second semester. Specifically, by implementing the time
management strategies, students reported feeling more capable in managing their coursework and improved their academic performance compared to their first semester. Students demonstrated a commitment to learning using time management and studying-related behaviors taught in the mandated academic strategies course. After being placed on academic probation after their poor academic performance, students re-committed to their educational aspiration to graduate with a college degree, placed effort into learning new strategies, and utilized strategies that aided in their goals to increase their academic performance during their second semester. Students also articulated their intent to utilize these same specific time management and studying related practices in their third semester.

While students’ talked about the strategies they learned that helped them to persist, they also reported establishing overwhelmingly positive relationships with their academic strategies course instructors. Tinto (2012) affirmed, “Nowhere is such support more important than in the classrooms of the institution” (p. 256). These findings have clear implications for student affairs and academic affairs practitioners in assisting in the retention of students by providing personalized faculty-student interaction and investing academic support—teaching instruction of time management skills and studying-related behaviors—particularly for students identified as high-risk of dropping out of college. This dissertation study affirms the faculty-student interaction can have a positive impact and influence on student learning and motivation. Indeed, students may not have learned the strategies nor maintained motivation if they had not developed the positive relationships with their instructors. Future research could investigate the significance of positive interactions for students mandated to take an academic strategies course.

According to Tinto (1993, 1988, 1975), departure from higher education depends on students’ level of commitment both to the goal of degree attainment and to the institution
Accordingly, most colleges and universities have created extensive support programs emphasizing learning strategies in order to retain students beyond their first year. The results from this study provide evidence that those students identified as high-risk of dropping out of college (put on academic probation) and mandated to enroll in an academic learning strategies course engaged in academic practices that enabled them to work toward their ultimate educational goal—earning a college degree. The results indicated that first-year students, after being placed on academic probation, learned time management skills and changed their academic studying-related behaviors to improve their academic performance while in college.

Overall, this study confirms that institutional practices affect student retention and provides further guidance on best practices for helping students persist. Students’ learning in the classroom impacts students’ persistence. Most importantly, students need to develop academic strategies that can help them maintain motivation to effectively manage the academic and social transition in college and to persist to graduation. Through exploring the findings of this study, administrators and faculty may better understand the experiences students may encounter when entering college. Students in this study demonstrated that professionals who work in student affairs and academic affairs fulfill a critical role toward ensuring student success when they provide specific time management strategies to enhance first-year students’ academic performance in college and ultimately have a meaningful influence in their ability to persist to graduation.
APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL

Office of the Vice President for Research
Human Subjects Committee
Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2742
(850) 644-8673 · FAX (850) 644-4392

APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

Date: 07/14/2013
To: [Redacted]
Address: 1340
Dept.: EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY AND LEARNING SYSTEMS
From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair
Re: Use of Human Subjects in Research
   Undergraduate Academic Success Strategies and Persistence in College

The application 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 Expedited per 45 CFR § 46.110(7) and has been approved by an expedited 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 you submitted a proposed consent form with your application, the approved stamped consent form is attached to this approval notice. Only the stamped version of the consent form may be used in recruiting research subjects.

If the project has not been completed by 09/12/2013 you must request a renewal of approval for continuation of the project. As a courtesy, a renewal notice will be sent to you prior to your expiration date; however, it is your responsibility as the Principal Investigator to timely request renewal of your approval from the Committee.

You are advised that any change in protocol for this project must be reviewed and approved by the Committee prior to implementation of the proposed change in the protocol. A protocol change/amendment form is required to be submitted for approval by the Committee. In addition, federal regulations require that the Principal Investigator promptly report, in writing any unanticipated problems or adverse events involving 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 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 Human Research Protection. The Assurance Number is IRB00000446.

Cc: [Redacted], Advisor
HSC No. 2012.8751
APPROVAL MEMORANDUM (for change in research protocol)

Date: 10/31/2012
To: Courtney Barry
Address: 1340
Dept: EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY AND LEARNING SYSTEMS
From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair
Re: Use of Human subjects in Research
Project entitled: Undergraduate Academic Success Strategies and Persistence in College

The application that you submitted to this office in regard to the requested change/amendment to your research protocol for the above-referenced project has been reviewed and approved.

Please be reminded that if the project has not been completed by 09/12/2013, you must request renewed approval for continuation of the project.

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 as often as needed to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DIBIS regulations.

This institution has an Assurance on file with the Office for Human Research Protection. The Assurance Number is IRB00000446.

Cc: Joannina Turner <jnturner@fsu.edu>, Advisor
HSC NO. 2012-9293
RE-APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

Date: 06/07/2014
To:Courtesy Barry <[REDACTED]>
Address: 1340

Dept.: EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY AND LEARNING SYSTEMS
From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair

Re: Re-approval of Use of Human subjects in Research:
Undergraduate Academic Success Strategies and Persistence in College

Your request to continue the research project listed above involving human subjects has been approved by the Human Subjects Committee. If your project has not been completed by 09/05/2014, you are must request renewed approval by the Committee.

If you submitted a proposed consent form with your renewal request, the approved stamped consent form is attached to this re-approval notice. Only the stamped version of the consent form may be used in recruiting of research subjects. You are reminded that any change in protocol for this project must be reviewed and approved by the Committee prior to implementation of the proposed change in the protocol. A protocol change/amendment form is required to be submitted for approval by the Committee. In addition, federal regulations require that the Principal Investigator promptly report in writing, any unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risks to research subjects or others.

By copy of this memorandum, the Chairman of your department and/or your major professor are reminded of their responsibility for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in their department. They are advised to review the protocols as often as necessary to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

Cc:
HSC No. 2013.11050
RE-APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

Date: 04/26/2015

To: Courtney Barry

Address: 1340

Dept.: EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY AND LEARNING SYSTEMS

From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair

Re: Re-approval of Use of Human subjects in Research:
Undergraduate Academic Success Strategies and Persistence in College

Your request to continue the research project listed above involving human subjects has been approved by the Human Subjects Committee. If your project has not been completed by 06/25/2015, you are must request renewed approval by the Committee.

If you submitted a proposed consent form with your renewal request, the approved stamped consent form is attached to this re-approval notice. Only the stamped version of the consent form may be used in recruiting of research subjects. You are reminded that any change in protocol for this project must be reviewed and approved by the Committee prior to implementation of the proposed change in the protocol. A protocol change/amendment form is required to be submitted for approval by the Committee. In addition, federal regulations require that the Principal Investigator promptly report in writing, any unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risks to research subjects or others.

By copy of this memorandum, the Chairman of your department and/or your major professor are reminded of their responsibility for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in their department. They are advised to review the protocols as often as necessary to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

Cc:
HSC No. 2014.13134
Office of the Vice President For Research  
Human Subjects Committee  
P O Box 3062742  
Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2742  
(850) 644-8673 • FAX (850) 644-4392

APPROVAL MEMORANDUM (for change in research protocol)

Date: 09/04/2014

To: [Redacted]

Address: 1340

Dept: EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY AND LEARNING SYSTEMS

From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair

Re: Use of Human subjects in Research

Project entitled: Undergraduate Academic Success Strategies and Persistence in College

The application that you submitted to this office in regard to the requested change/amendment to your research protocol for the above-referenced project has been reviewed and approved.

Please be reminded that if the project has not been completed by 06/25/2015, you must request renewed approval for continuation of the project.

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 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 Human Research Protection. The Assurance Number is IRB00000446.

Cc: [Redacted], Advisor  
HSC NO. 2014.13585
Office of the Vice President For Research  
Human Subjects Committee  
P O Box 3062742  
Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2742  
(850) 644-8673 · FAX (850) 644-4392

APPROVAL MEMORANDUM (for change in research protocol)

Date: 09/12/2014

To: Courtney Barry

Address: 1340

Dept: EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY AND LEARNING SYSTEMS

From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair

Re: Use of Human subjects in Research  
Project entitled: Undergraduate Academic Success Strategies and Persistence in College

The application that you submitted to this office in regard to the requested change/amendment to your research protocol for the above-referenced project has been reviewed and approved.

Please be reminded that if the project has not been completed by 06/25/2015, you must request renewed approval for continuation of the project.

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 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 Human Research Protection. The Assurance Number is IRB00000446.

Cc: Jeannine Turner <jeturner@fsu.edu>, Advisor  
HSC NO. 2014.13585
APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT E-MAIL

Dear [Student Name]:

I am requesting your participation in academic research about students enrolled in the SLS 1122 course. You were selected to receive this invitation because you are a freshman student who is mandated to take this course. If you choose to participate, please e-mail me directly at @fsu.edu. I will contact you so that I may interview you two times (in the beginning of the course and at the end). I hope you will participate in this study so that we can learn more about your perceptions of, and experiences with, your transition to Florida State University.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary, and you may choose to not answer any question during the interviews that you feel uncomfortable answering. If you choose to participate, you will receive a $15 gift card for completing the first interview. The duration of your participation involves completing two interviews with me that take approximately 40 minutes in the University Center or your preferred location on campus. This research may or may not help you personally; however your honest input is extremely valuable and will be appreciated.

I appreciate your consideration and time in advance. Inquiries regarding your rights as a subject, or any other aspect of the research as it relates to your participation, can be directed to me at @fsu.edu or 000.000.0000. You may also contact the Chair of my doctoral committee, Dr. Jeannine E. Turner, by e-mail, jeturner@fsu.edu, or by phone, 850.645.2405.

If you have any questions about this study, and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the FSU IRB office by e-mail, humancosubject@magnet.fsu.edu, or by phone, 850.644.8633.

If you are willing to schedule an interview with me this week, please let me know via email or phone.

Sincerely,

Courtney Barry
Doctoral Candidate
Learning & Cognition
@fsu.edu
000.000.0000

Dr. Jeannine E. Turner
Associate Professor
Learning & Cognition
jeturner@fsu.edu
850.645.2405
APPENDIX C

SCHEDULING INITIAL INTERVIEW

[DATE]

Dear [Student Name],

Thank you very much for your willingness to complete two interviews with me. When considering your class schedule, may we meet following your SLS course? If not, I am happy to reserve a study room in Strozier if you prefer that location on a day and time most convenient for you this week.

I greatly appreciate your time in advance.

Sincerely,

Courtney Barry
Doctoral Candidate, Learning & Cognition
@fsu.edu
000.000.0000
APPENDIX D

CONSENT FORM

[DATE]

Dear Research Participant,

I am collecting data for an academic research project that explores undergraduates’ transition to Florida State University, their perceptions of their enrollment in the Academic Success course (SLS 1122) and their pursuit of a college degree. As a participant in this research study, I hope to learn more about your perceptions of transitioning to Florida State University and the meaning you make of your experiences in completing the mandatory course.

I received your name and e-mail address from the director of the Academic Success course. Your participation in this research study is voluntary, and you may choose to not answer any question during the interview that you feel uncomfortable answering or you may choose to not participate at this time. If you choose not to participate in the research, there will be no penalty from your course instructor or Florida State University. You can withdraw from the research at any time. The duration of your participation involves completing two separate interviews that will take approximately 40 minutes for each interview. This research may or may not help you personally, however your honest input is extremely valuable and will be appreciated.

Please be assured that, to the extent permitted by law, personal information obtained for this project will remain confidential, and will not be shared with anyone. I will be the only person who has access to your information and information obtained from you will be stored on a password-protected computer at my private residence. Participants will not be videotaped during their interviews but a digital-recording device will be used to ensure accurate depiction of the your information. The recordings saved on the digital-recording device will also be stored on a password-protected computer at my private residence.

Your participation in this interview is extremely valuable and much appreciated. Inquiries regarding your rights as a subject, or any other aspect of the research as it relates to your participation, can be directed to me, the Chair of my doctoral committee, or the Institutional Review Board. If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact:

Courtney Barry
Doctoral Candidate
Learning & Cognition

Dr. Jeannine Turner
Associate Professor
Learning & Cognition
jeturner@fsu.edu
(850) 645-2405

Institutional Review Board
2010 Levy Avenue, Ste. 276
Tallahassee, FL 32306-2742
(850) 644-7900
humansubjects@fsu.edu

HSC # 2014.13585
I have read the above information. I have been asked if I have questions and have received answers to any questions I had. I give Courtney Barry, the primary researcher, my permission to obtain my first and second semester GPAs when enrolled at FSU, as well as my standardized test score(s) and final grade in the Academic Strategies course. I consent to participate in the study and have been given a copy of this informed consent.

________________________    ______________
Participant Signature            Date

________________________    ______________
Researcher Signature              Date

HSC # 2014.13585
APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Upon meeting the participant, the researcher will introduce herself, briefly describe the purpose of the study, and then review the consent form with the participant. The researcher will remind the participant that he/she can decline to answer any question and may withdraw from the research study at any time. If the participant is willing to continue with the study, the researcher will obtain a signed copy of the consent form and provide the participant with a copy of the consent form for his/her records.

The researcher will explain the use of the digital recording device to the participant and remind the participant that he/she will receive a copy of the transcription. The researcher will remind the participant that he/she will be able to provide any revisions to both interviews in a timely manner to ensure accuracy. The researcher will also remind the participant that confidentiality will be upheld after the interview and a pseudo name will be used to represent the participant.

Phase 1: Interview Questions for Students:

The first interview questions are intended to create a positive relationship and explore participants’ perceptions and experiences since starting at Florida State University.

(1) Are you 18 years of age or older?

(2) Why did you choose to enroll in college?
   a. When starting your first semester at FSU, how many credits did you have?
   b. How many people in your family have a college degree?
   c. What influence did your family have on your interest to enroll at FSU?

(3) What type of support do you receive from your parents or family members, if any?
(4) What is your major?
   a. Why did you choose this major?
   b. What do you hope to do with your degree upon graduating from college?

(5) What are your current living arrangements?

(6) What are you involved in outside of classes?

(7) Do you have any goals?

(8) How would you describe your social transition since starting college?

(9) How would you describe your academic transition since starting college?

(10) What led you to take the SLS course?

(11) How has failing a college course affected your motivation?

(12) Using the emotions listed (Appendix F), what did you feel when you first received a D or F during your first semester at FSU? (Heiy & Cheavens, 2014)

(13) Which of these strategies (either negative or positive) (Appendix F) did you do in 24-hours of receiving the D or F grade(s)? (Heiy & Cheavens, 2014)

(14) Using the emotions listed (Appendix F), what did you feel when you learned you were mandated to take the Academic Success Course? (Heiy & Cheavens, 2014)

(15) Which of these strategies listed (Appendix F) did you do in 24-hours of learning you were mandated to take the course? (Heiy & Cheavens, 2014)

(16) What has been your greatest challenge since starting at FSU?
   a. How have you handled this challenge?
   b. What have you learned from the challenge?
   c. How has this challenge led you to where you are now?
d. How could the challenge have been prevented?

e. What changes have you made, if any, since experiencing this challenge?

(17) What motivates you to do your best work academically? *

(18) Is there anything else you’d like to tell me about your first experiences at FSU?

**Phase 2: Interview Questions**

The interview questions selected for the second phase of the interviews specifically explore participants’ perceptions and experiences during their second semester in college.

(19) Since we met, have your goals changed?

(20) How would you describe your social transition since we last met?

(21) How would you describe your academic transition since we last met?

(22) What academic areas are you doing well in right now?

(23) What academic concerns do you have at this time?

(24) How have your approaches to your courses and learning changed because of taking the SLS course?

(25) Have your goals changed after being required to take the SLS course? How so?

(26) What have you learned from the SLS course that you would like to use in the future?

(27) Are you confident you will graduate from FSU?

(28) Are you currently enrolled for the spring semester?

(29) Is there anything else you’d like to tell me about your first experiences at FSU?
*Designate questions the primary researcher revised that were previously cited in:

REFERENCES


Hamon, S. (2012, August 2). Email interview.


Hunt, H. (2014, September 1). Email interview.


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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Courtney Barry graduated from Florida State University with her bachelor’s degree in Communications. Immediately following her undergraduate college career, she continued her educational pursuit by obtaining a Master’s in Higher Education at Florida State University. After completing her Master’s degree, she served 13 years as a college administrator working in Residence Life, Student Activities, and Greek Life. She was inspired to continue her education from her experiences teaching undergraduate students and entered the Learning and Cognition doctoral program at Florida State University. She also has taught both undergraduate and graduate courses, simultaneously while serving as a practitioner and as a doctoral student.

Since Spring 2014, she has served as an instructor teaching undergraduates about learning and motivational theories for classroom instruction at Florida State University. Following successful completion of this degree, Courtney plans to serve as a college administrator and continue her research on first-year retention and transition and will take care of her old, decrepit major professor when the time comes.