

RETENTION SUCCESS PRACTICES IN SELECTED COMMUNITY COLLEGES  
DURING THE INCEPTION OF THE TENNESSEE PROMISE SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Education Department

Carson-Newman University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

By

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July 2020

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## **Dissertation Approval**

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RETENTION SUCCESS PRACTICES IN SELECTED COMMUNITY COLLEGES  
DURING THE INCEPTION OF THE TENNESSEE PROMISE SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

This dissertation has been approved and accepted by the faculty of the Education Department, Carson-Newman University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Education.

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## Abstract

Since 2014, the Tennessee Promise Scholarship program has provided free tuition to any Tennessee high school graduate who attended a two-year community college or a college of applied technology. While community college enrollment increased after the inception of the Tennessee Promise Scholarship program, retention rates decreased. This qualitative study provided research gathered from Tennessee community colleges to identify the most effective strategies used for freshmen retention. The data were collected from the colleges having the highest retention rates and those with the lowest rates for first-time freshmen for 2015-2018. The research included qualitative and quantitative data from seven community colleges as well as the secondary school counselors' perceptions of characteristics that are most likely to impact students' likelihood of college persistence. Through artifacts, interviews, surveys, and a focus group, two identified themes showed evidence of positive impacts on college retention for first-time freshman students—mandatory, ongoing advising or coaching with follow-up and mechanisms for needed interventions; and a required college success course or seminar. The implications of this study should be considered by community colleges striving to increase freshman retention rates.

*Keywords:* college retention, college freshmen supports, Tennessee Promise, college persistence

## **Dedication**

This study is dedicated to my fab four: Greyson, Cooper, Cole, and Quinn. You have been understanding of the times when I have worked instead of played, and cheered me on when I was discouraged. Your belief in me means the world. Know that I will always believe in you and I will always have your backs. May you all continuously work to improve the world through your personal growth, lifelong learning, and faith journeys. I love you and I thank you for making me challenge myself to always get better.

*In the same way, let your light shine before others,  
so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

Matthew 5:16

## Acknowledgments

First, I thank my parents for raising me to always hold myself to a high standard and to believe in the power of education. I thank my older brothers, for inspiring me to improve myself and challenge my thinking. I also thank my grandmother, who left this earth in 1999, but who was a model of pure faith and who stays with me always in my drive to make the world a better place.

I thank my committee, Dr. Davidson, Dr. Murphree and Dr. Taylor. I thank you all for staying with me, pushing me, sharing your expertise and providing encouragement when I needed it (Especially when my brain hurt! Right, Dr. D?).

I thank my peer reviewers. They have served as professional colleagues, critical friends, cheerleaders, prayer partners, and pizza deliverers. I could not have persisted without your love and support.

I thank my loyal study companion, Papi the Chihuahua. He is useless and completely unimpressed with my work, but always consistent with his company.

Last, and certainly not least, I must thank my family. My husband and four children have been patient and supportive throughout this long journey. When I let them know I was approved for defense, my oldest son's response: "Congrats! You'll defend it like Mutombo did the paint."

I love you all and am so grateful for my home team.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

Was a college degree essential? In the United States, how useful was a post-secondary diploma for an individual looking for a job? A 2016 Georgetown University study examined the job market prior to and since the post-Great Recession, reported employment changes from 2008 through 2016 for individuals with high school diplomas or less, Associate's degree or some college, and Bachelor's degree or higher. The Georgetown researchers discovered that individuals with at least some college had more job opportunities readily available since the recession, while individuals with a high school diploma or less have minimal opportunities. Further, the latter group saw no growth among well-paying jobs with benefits (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016).

### Background

In the state of Tennessee, this issue became a priority with Governor Bill Haslam's *Drive to 55* initiative. The Governor's goal was for fifty-five percent of Tennesseans to be equipped with a college degree or certificate by the year 2025 (Drive, 2016). Governor Haslam worked to improve college enrollment rates was by offering the *Tennessee Promise*, which provides scholarships for all Tennessee high school graduates to attend a community college or technical school. There were no income guidelines or grade requirements for eligibility. Any student who graduated from high school in Tennessee was eligible for the scholarship by meeting minimal requirements that included completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), completion of eight community service hours, and meeting with an assigned mentor.

The Tennessee Promise Scholarship program was designed as a "last-dollar" scholarship and covers only tuition. If students were eligible for any other scholarships or grants, the Tennessee Promise Scholarship would pay any remaining tuition due after all other awards were

applied. Students could not receive Tennessee Promise monies to help pay for books, room and board, or any other related expenses (Tennessee, 2016).

The researcher hypothesized that community college enrollment rates had increased since the inception of the Tennessee Promise, while retention rates had not increased at the same or similar rates. More students were applying and enrolling in community college, but the retention rates were not increasing proportionally. The researcher believed that more students were going to college, but they were not all truly prepared to persevere. Attending college required paying tuition, but many other resources were needed. Laskey and Hetzel (2011) studied factors related to retention of at-risk college students and determined that certain personality traits and academic tutoring had positive impacts on students in a midsized private Midwest university. Alana Semuels (2015) investigated this topic for *The Atlantic* and identified financing living expenses; balancing work, schooling, and families; and the rigor of college academics as challenges for college students. While eliminating payment of tuition as a barrier to attending was helpful, it did not reduce all barriers, particularly for at-risk students. For this study, at-risk college students were considered to be those who were eligible for the Pell Grant in college.

### **Research Questions**

This study analyzed community college enrollment and retention and identified three community colleges with evidence of relatively high retention rates, three community colleges with relatively low retention rates, and one community college that had the third-highest retention rate and the fourth-highest poverty rate. These colleges were analyzed to identify practices in place for freshman success supports. Personnel at the colleges who knew about programs for freshmen were interviewed to attain thorough knowledge of the schools' freshman

requirements and opportunities. The researcher's purpose was to analyze enrollment and retention rates for community college and to identify trends that indicated successes and challenges. Once successful programs were determined based on retention rates, the researcher sought to identify practices that contributed to community college retention. To that end, the researcher addressed the following questions:

1. How were college success practices used in selected Tennessee community colleges for first-time freshman students?
2. What college success practices showed evidence of a positive impact on retention rates for first-time freshman students in selected Tennessee community colleges?

The researcher had a background as a school counselor and served as a K-12 public school district supervisor. She worked directly with secondary school counselors and college advisors to improve post-secondary preparation and enrollment for a high poverty rural school district in East Tennessee.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this research stemmed from Vroom's Expectancy Theory of Motivation. Vroom's Expectancy Theory separated effort (which arises from motivation), performance, and outcomes. He stated that effort, performance, and value were linked to a person's motivation. He used the variables Expectancy, Instrumentality, and Valence. Vroom's Expectancy Theory informed the research questions because his three variables address multiple factors that influence post-secondary success.

**Expectancy theory.** The Expectancy theory was the belief that increased effort would lead to increased performance (i.e. if I work harder, then this will be better). Expectancy was

affected by one's access to resources, having adequate skills, and having the necessary support (Vroom, 1983).

**Instrumentality theory.** The Instrumentality theory was the belief that if one performs well, then a valued outcome would be received (i.e. if I did a good job, there was something in it for me). This was affected by things such as a clear understanding between performance and outcomes, trust in people who make decisions on outcomes, and transparency of the process (Vroom, 1983).

**Valence.** Valence was the importance an individual placed on the expected outcomes. For the valence to have been positive, the person must have preferred attaining outcome to not attaining them (Vroom, 1983).

For a student to have persisted through college to graduation, he or she must have placed enough value on the outcome to be worth the struggles and sacrifices required. Vroom's Expectancy Model showed methodology that applies to needed motivation and value for college students.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

**College readiness.** A College Ready student is an academically prepared student, ready for postsecondary education or training without the need for remedial coursework (Wilson, 2016).

**Economically disadvantaged Students.** Children who are directly identified as receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits (or food stamps), those whose families participate in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, students who experience homelessness and are on the local school district liaison's list of homeless students,

Head Start participants, migrant youth, runaways, foster children, and others who may be certified by state or local officials are considered economically disadvantaged (Wilson, 2016).

**Pell Grant.** Pell Grants are awarded to undergraduate students with exceptional financial need who do not have a bachelor's degree or higher. Pell Grants do not have to be repaid (Federal, 2018).

**Post-secondary success rates.** Student retention in post-secondary institutions determine success rates (Retention, 2017).

**Retention rates.** The percent of students who enroll in their admitting institution or other public institution the fall after the year they were first-time, full-time freshmen determine retention rates (2015-2016 Tennessee, 2015).

**Tennessee Promise.** Tennessee Promise is a scholarship and mentoring program that provides Tennessee high school graduates with a last-dollar scholarship to any of the state's 13 community colleges, 27 colleges of applied technology, or other eligible institutions offering a two-year degree (Tennessee, 2017).

## **Summary**

The Tennessee Promise Scholarship program was a significant step in the state of Tennessee in promoting post-secondary participation for all high school graduates. The cost of tuition was an obvious barrier to community college attendance for economically disadvantaged students. The researcher analyzed data to assess college-going rates for four years of the Tennessee Promise Scholarship program. The researcher strived to identify best practices that promoted retention rates for students enrolled in community colleges. Ultimately this research would identify practices that could contribute to post-secondary success rates for first-year freshmen in the state of Tennessee, particularly for economically disadvantaged students.

## CHAPTER TWO: Review of the Literature

To be persistent in the pursuit of a college education takes grit, self-discipline, a certain level of intellect, opportunity, and perhaps some occasional luck. The importance of a college education in the United States increased dramatically beginning in the late twentieth century. Gone are the days that a high school diploma could allow an individual to compete for most high-paying jobs. Columbia University's Andrew Delbanco (2012) quoted Richard Ripley, former secretary of education under President Bill Clinton, who stated, "We are currently preparing students for jobs that don't exist, using technologies that haven't been invented, in order to solve problems that we don't even know are problems, yet" (p. 11). Delbanco further explained that there was an abundance of evidence that people with a college degree earn more money throughout their lives than people without a post-high school degree and that, for economic reasons, the United States needed its citizens to earn higher education degrees and be able to compete for those high-tech jobs (2012).

"A typical college graduate can expect to make greater than half a million dollars more than a noncollege graduate over a lifetime" (Cipriano & Riccardi, 2017, p. 20). Cipriano and Riccardi considered several questions in their 2017 study of college faculty members in a quest to identify reasons that students chose to attend college. They concluded that one could have a much better life by going to college. They reported, "The unemployment rate for twenty-five to thirty-four-year-olds who graduated from college was 2.4 percent. For those within the same age cohort with only a high school degree, the unemployment rate was 7.4 percent" (p. 21). They further credited the non-monetary value of attending college included life lessons, relationships, and perseverance.

Arthur Dean (2012) addressed millennials in post-secondary education settings in the book, *A Generation on a Tightrope: A Portrait of Today's College Student*. Levine's book was reviewed by the University of Texas at Austin's associate director of campus diversity Ryan A. Miller (2014). His review highlighted the topic of millennials (students born in the late 1980s and 1990s) growing up in a digital environment while being raised by parents who did not. Further, these young adults went to college and were instructed by individuals who did not grow up in a digital environment. The authors indicated that the invention of the World Wide Web was a more influential event in the lives of millennials, even more so than the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States.

Labor economist Stephen Rose (2013) took on the challenge of determining the validity of college naysayers—those who claimed that attending a post-secondary institution was not worthwhile due to “low graduation rates, high debt levels, lost time working, inadequate learning gains, and poor job prospects” (p. 1). Rose attacked each claim, writing that at least a two-year degree or occupational certificate was necessary and worthwhile to earn a middle-income wage. A four-year degree or beyond was even better. He showed that educational debt was inappropriately compared to other debts such as credit cards, that graduation rates are better than most schools are recognized for, and that employers value skills acquired in college. Rose concluded, “The two most important things we can do to move national social and economic prosperity forward is to produce high school graduates with stronger academic skills and to identify and support students who are starting to fall behind” (2013, P. 12).

### **College Retention**

Jorg Vianden (2016) with the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse, stated that “To affect college retention, academic advisors should act as agents of student relationship management by

strengthening the connection between students and their institutions” (p.1). Vianden’s research was specifically targeting college advisor behaviors, while his objective was to promote retentions. His findings showed that academic advisors have opportunities to bind students “strongly to the institution by creating an ongoing, durable relationship with someone who cares deeply about student success” (P. 27). In a similar study, Ivan Allen and Samuel Lester (2012) with Middle Georgia Technical College, studied the impact of a college survival skills course and a success coach on retention and academic performance. Their work found that a technical college showed that attrition in learning support math courses contributed significantly to overall college retention and that academic success in these courses had some influence. The school implemented a “College Survival Skills” course and hired a person to serve students as a “Success Coach.”

Why do students leave college? There were numerous reasons for college students to leave school, including financial or family obligations, academic frustrations, uncertainties about career choices, or other stressors. An Indiana University Bloomington study by Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea (2007) reported that students quit going to college for multiple reasons, including a change of major, lack of money, family demands, and poor psycho-social fit, among others. The report studied models that examined student success and broadly defined five sets of variables:

- (1) student background characteristics including demographics and pre-college academic and other experiences,
- (2) structural characteristics of institutions such as mission, size and selectivity,
- (3) interactions with faculty and staff members and peers,
- (4) student perceptions of the learning environment, and

(5) the quality of effort students devoted to educationally purposeful activities (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2007, pp. 4-6).

Kuh, et al., (2007) reported that there were many more variables that impact success rates. Characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, first-generation status, and family income all interact with the above-mentioned variables. Historically, underserved students' college experiences can differ greatly from those who are not from underserved demographics. Given the wide range in variables, for this study it was important to note that the reasons students leave college are consistent and specific items may relate to retention for at-risk students (Kuh, et al., 2007).

Gary Burkholder, et al. (2013), considered the issues of developing a culture of student persistence in post-secondary institutions.

There continues to be increasing focus on college student retention and persistence. This focus is coming from the United States federal government, accrediting organizations, and from students, parents, and the public. Given the spiraling costs of education and the fact that retention rates have not improved over time, various stakeholders are concerned about the value of a higher education credential. (p. 16)

Burkholder and colleagues concluded that, while students entered college with many factors that predisposed them to success and engagement, institutions who made cultures of persistence a commitment improved retention rates. Many factors were outside of the students' and colleges' controls, including gender, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Other factors could have been controlled by students, such as the intention to graduate and a commitment to success. Regardless of all these factors, according to Burkholder, et al. (2013), a college with a clear commitment to strategically supporting student persistence will see positive impacts.

Another higher education study by DeNicco, Harrington, and Fogg (2015), considered factors contributing to student retention. More than 1,800 community college students were studied for five years, beginning in their freshmen year in a public state college system. The DeNicco study's unique data set considered demographics, high school characteristics, placement tests, freshmen year performance, and remedial courses. The study showed that the most significant predictors of retention past the freshmen year were the number of credits earned and freshmen year GPA. While remedial courses were not determined as a direct predictor, taking remedial courses reduces the number of possible credits students could earn, so they were considered as a contributing factor. Beyond that, according to the researchers, attention should be shifted to college preparation during high school years.

A longitudinal study at a Pennsylvania public university (Rheinheimer, et al., 2010) showed that tutoring significantly improved students' academic performance and retention. With a sample size of 129, the researchers considered the impact of tutoring on at-risk students who were participants in a state-funded program designed to provide support services. Variables included measures of academic performance, retention, use and frequency of tutoring, years in college, gender, and total credits earned. The state-funded program that the students were participating in, Act 101, provided support services for economically and educationally disadvantaged students. Support services included a summer bridge program, counseling, and tutoring.

In a study designed to help understand factors influencing college success to assist practitioners in planning, East Carolina University professor Dr. Meghan Miller (2018) studied residential living, attendance programs, demographic attributes, average class sizes, and student academic preparation. Miller wrote, "Retention and graduation rates have become key metrics

for assessing progress and student success for colleges and universities, often using first-time freshmen as a subject of study” (p. 309). She further explained that “Some factors can be influenced by institutional programming or incentives, but other factors are external or based on student-specific attributes” (p. 309).

Dr. Miller’s research determined the following factors to be institutional: student/faculty ratios, student-life programs and services, and specific academic programs such as college-prep, honors courses, or first-year experience classes. In addition, Miller’s research deemed the following attributes to be individual: behaviors, motivation, academic preparation, demographics, and family characteristics (such as siblings’ and parents’ degree attainment). Data included nearly 13,000 incoming freshmen over seven years at one mid-sized public university in the southeast United States (2018).

“The first hurdle in academic achievement is remaining in school” (Millea, et al., 2018, p. 3). Retention after the freshmen year was the initial measure for student success. Miller’s study considered multiple factors as contributors to freshmen success rates. The study posited that students who were in-state residents and students who lived in residence halls were more likely to be retained. When considering academic ability, high school grade point averages and ACT scores were included. Miller explained,

Although both are measures of academic attributes, they measure different characteristics. GPA is a measure of academic performance, the degree to which the individual can apply knowledge and perform tasks assessed for grades. ACT is a measure of college readiness. Both measures were expected to positively impact retention rates. (p. 314)

When considering the financial burden of attending college, Miller's (2018) study acknowledged that students who received academic scholarships were more likely to persist while students who obtained student loans or had financial hardship were less likely to persist. Receiving grants and athletic scholarships were also considered. Miller wrote,

The practical implications of this work suggest that universities should invest in smaller class sizes and focus on students' financial constraints to improve student success. Surprisingly, two factors typically considered important for freshmen retention and eventual graduation, absenteeism and on-campus residence, were not found to be significant in our models. (p. 320)

Miller recommended that future work be done applying a similar methodology to other colleges and include additional factors such as access to online schooling.

A study conducted by researchers David Saunders-Scott, Matthew Bersagel Braley, and Naomi Stennes-Spidahl (2017) of Vitterbo University considered traditional and psychological factors associated with academic success to investigate the best predictors of college retention. Two traditional factors were compared to two non-traditional factors. The traditional factors were high school grade point average and ACT scores. The non-traditional factors were the students' perceived stress and grit.

Saunders-Scott, et al., (2017) conducted their research at a small, midwestern university. Their interest was in determining predictors of college retention and the relationships between academic success and perseverance. Their review of literature established a potential correlation among grit, stress, and academic success. They selected Duckworth and Quinn's Short Grit Scale to measure grit based on its reliability and validity. Further, they utilized research findings regarding neuroticism. Neuroticism was strongly associated with anxiety and depression, which

also correlated with stress. Their review of the literature indicated that grit was negatively associated with stress. They chose to assess perceived stress because it could be conveniently and reliably assessed in a college sample. They intended to determine if opportunities could be identified to improve grit by reducing perceived stress through stress management and coping strategies training.

The researchers further utilized research conducted by Duckworth et al. (2007), because they believed it was important to learn ways to modify and even improve grit since grit was a strong predictor of college retention.

There was sound evidence that grit predicts the completion of challenging tasks that are characterized by a delayed reward. Completion of college was one such task. However, traditionally, other measures of academic success such as high school grade point average (GPA) and American College Testing (ACT) scores or Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores were required for admission by most colleges (Saunders-Scott et al., 2018).

The researchers utilized these four factors to predict college retention. Their study included 165 undergraduate students with a cross-sectional design as well as a longitudinal design. The *Perceived Stress Scale* was used to measure perceived stress, and the Short Grit Scale was utilized to measure grit. Students' GPAs and ACT scores were used to indicate academic performance. Students who were still enrolled or who had graduated were considered as having made successful academic progress. Conversely, those not enrolled or graduated were deemed academically unsuccessful (Saunders-Scott et al., 2017).

Saunders-Scott, et. al. (2018), developed the following hypotheses:

- (1) There will be an inverse relationship between stress and grit, so that students experiencing high levels of stress will have a lower grit score;

- (2) There will be a positive correlation between grit and GPA;
  - (3) There will be a positive correlation between ACT scores and cumulative college GPA;
  - (4) There will be a positive correlation between grit and ACT scores, unlike the results found in a previous study by Duckworth et al. (2007) that found a negative correlation between grit and SAT scores;
  - (5) Compared to ACT score and high school GPA, grit will best predict cumulative college GPA and
  - (6) High school GPA and grit will be better predictors of retention than an ACT score.
- (p. 460)

This research was particularly applicable to current research regarding college retention for Tennessee's community colleges since the inception of the Tennessee Promise Scholarship program. Components of the Tennessee Promise Scholarship program include free tuition, community service requirements, and an assigned mentor. Perhaps the program could benefit from grit or perceived stress assessments and correlating interventions.

Results of the Saunders-Scott et al. study were mixed with regard to their hypotheses. They identified a correlation between grit and perceived stress (hypothesis one). There was a significant association between ACT scores and cumulative college GPA (hypothesis three). However, hypotheses two, four, five, and six were not supported. There were no significant correlations between grit and cumulative college GPA or ACT scores. Grit did not successfully predict college GPA when compared to ACT and high school GPA. High school GPA and ACT scores were not predictors of college retention. They reported, "Quite serendipitously, however,

we discovered that one variable (perceived stress) was a significant predictor of retention” (p. 462-463).

It was also noteworthy to review Saunders-Scott et al.’s (2017) look at their data for only first-year students. Grit became a better predictor of retention for first-year students than perceived stress for this sample group. As was the case for the entire study, high school GPAs and ACT scores did not predict retention for first-year students.

### **Financial Stress**

One high school graduate was interviewed by a reporter for *The Atlantic* and explained that she was going to attend community college with free tuition thanks to the Tennessee Promise, but she still had to work 30 to 40 hours per week in a fast-food restaurant to help support her family and herself. “Sleep,” she said, “Is not a commodity I have a lot of right now” (Semuels, 2015, p. 3). Was this student at high risk of dropping out? Absolutely.

How could schools increase the needed characteristics in under-resourced students and raise students like the interviewee’s chances of graduating? Educators needed explicit professional development to learn how to provide the right kind of support for students who are at risk for dropping out of post-secondary institutions. Semuels (2015), described a walk through one of the campuses of Tennessee’s community colleges and commented,

You won’t see many students studying in the library or lingering on the quad. Many of them come to school for classes, and then go off to jobs where they work 30 or 40 hours a week to pay for rent, books, and other living expenses. The balancing act can be a challenge for students, free tuition notwithstanding. (p. 2)

It was often difficult for middle- or upper-class teachers to empathize and connect with students living in poverty. Dr. Ruby Payne (2003) explained the importance of developing

relationships, “When individuals who made it out of poverty are interviewed, virtually all cite an individual who made a significant difference for them. Not only must the relationship be present, but tasks need to be referenced in terms of relationships” (p. 4). Educators must learn how to make the important connections with students in high school to promote the characteristics needed beyond graduation for successful transitions to post-secondary schools when those traits are not enforced at home.

A 2019 analysis of college enrollees in the United States showed an increase in students from poverty. This figure was more noteworthy at less selective colleges ( Fry and Cilluffo, 2019). Sara Goldrick-Rab and Clare Cady (2018), with Temple University and Wisconsin HOPE Lab, studied Amarillo College in Texas, where a system was put in place to assist students who were dealing with financial crises. The college made a very intentional commitment to assist students who faced dropping out of school due to poverty-related problems. Goldrick-Rab and Cady studied the program, called the *No Excuses Poverty Initiative*, as the first in-depth and evidence-based case study of its kind.

The university’s innovative approach to finding practical solutions to the problems associated with the at-risk population of students living in poverty started with intense staff training, the creation of a resource center where students can apply for emergency financial assistance for living expenses, food and supplies, and recruitment of local businesses to help support the programs. Goldrick-Rab and Cady reported,

Critically, the efforts of Amarillo College go well beyond the increasingly commonplace steps taken at community college around the country, such as the creation of a food pantry or stand-alone emergency grant, by supplementing those actions with case management, academic support, curriculum development, and college-wide hiring and

evaluation practices. In other words, the No Excuses Poverty Initiative represents a comprehensive ‘culture of caring’ that is woven into the fabric of the entire campus.

(p. 1)

The Amarillo study was the first of many of its kind, facing an issue that was both prominent and difficult to address. The Amarillo College president was commended by the researchers for his commitment to learn more and relentlessly strategize ways to help students overcome challenges. This study indicated that the systematic changes applied to the school’s culture might serve as a model for other schools to improve retention rates and, ideally, help college students succeed. The researchers emphasized three lessons: successful programs require culture change; college communities need data-driven education about poverty; and leaders are everywhere (Goldrick-Rab and Cady, 2018).

A look at financial stress for college students indicated that it could negatively affect college students’ academic performance, retention, and health and well-being. Study findings also showed that this mainly applied to freshmen. Financial counseling, particularly with those who sought help, proved helpful in a large Midwestern university (Britt et al., 2015).

Economically disadvantaged students were at a particular risk for financial stress. High school students were identified as economically disadvantaged if they qualify for free or reduced lunch programs through the National School Lunch Program by any method. Qualifications included income (130%-185% of the poverty level), participation in other government-sponsored food or income programs, homelessness, migrant status, living in Foster Care, or unaccompanied youth (Wilson, 2016).

A Portland State University team of researchers (Eichelberger, et al., 2019) looked at financial prowess regarding college retention and graduation. Their specific interest was in

determining if a college-level personal finance course improved students' likelihood of staying in college and, ultimately, graduating.

The challenges for college students who lack financial literacy are twofold. First, students need to be able to afford the cost of and acquire the money for tuition and fees. Second, in order to successfully graduate, students must learn how to responsibly spend their available resources while they are in college. (p. 480)

They reported that college students who lacked financial training are not prepared to make borrowing or money management decisions.

A study by Heckman (2015) indicated that 71% of college students experienced financial stress with a negative impact on student wellness. The results of Eichelberg et al.'s study (2019) indicated a correlation between the completion of a personal finance course and the overall retention and graduation rates of undergraduate college students. "This study adds to the research on how to increase retention and completion rates. The demonstrated correlation shows the positive impact of educational intervention through the use of a credit-bearing personal finance class" (Eichelberg et al., 2019, p. 6). These results, though the researchers report some limitations, could be beneficial to colleges working toward improving retention and graduation rates.

### **Financial Aid**

Unlike the public education system in the United States, a post-secondary school was not free. Scholarships were available for some enrollees but paying for college has presented challenges for many. Matthew Fuller (2014) wrote, "Colleges, universities, and the communities they serve have always been concerned about students' abilities to pay and the systems of aid to support students' learning" (p. 42). Fuller reported that approximately fifty-five percent of

college and vocational students received some form of financial aid in 2010. When considering only college and university students, that number increased to seventy-four percent.

The American system of higher education initially followed the prior pattern of “sponsorship, charity, and patronage established by European universities” (Fuller, 2014, p. 45). Wealthy colonists played significant roles in funding higher education in the colonies. In 1643, Lady Anne Radcliff Mowlson provided funds for an endowed scholarship at Harvard with the stipulation that the interest on her donation be used to assist poor students’ education. Lady Mowlson started a trend and similar philanthropic scholarships spread around Cambridge at William and Mary, Yale, Princeton, and the University of Pennsylvania (Fuller, 2014).

These efforts were lessened somewhat during the Revolutionary War, but the general pattern for scholarships had been established. From the time of the Revolution through the early 1800s, the country underwent many cultural, economic, and industrial changes. Higher education needed to adapt to the changing society. While higher education expanded westward with the country’s growth, funding options for students who could not afford to pay for college remained primarily through philanthropic support. Harvard was the first school to develop a system of financial aid that ultimately shaped the system adopted by the federal government (Fuller, 2014).

In 1838, Harvard created a lending system that loaned funds to students who could not afford to attend with zero interest. This program inspired similar ones throughout the Ivy League and state colleges in the mid- to late-1800s. Around the turn of the twentieth century, higher education began to see many changes. More and more students enrolled in college and academic disciplines developed. The Industrial Revolution resulted in high needs for skilled scientists in agriculture, military, psychology, chemistry, engineering, medicine, law, and education. Criteria

and standards for admissions and degrees were established, and accreditation programs developed. Experiences in military testing led psychologists to form a foundation for scholarship and admission exams in higher education (Fuller, 2014).

The federal government identified the needs to develop long-term financial plans for military men and their widows. In 1944, President Roosevelt established the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the G.I. Bill. This key act transformed higher education and enrollment more than doubled in the first decade after its inception. The G.I. Bill shaped the structure of the current financial aid system (Fuller, 2014).

President Lyndon Johnson's presidency resulted in the Higher Education Act of 1965. This Act was a monumental movement in higher education in the United States. Fuller (2014) explained:

The Act cemented the federal government's involvement in higher education and permanently established a philosophy of higher education as an issue of national interest. The Higher Education Act also established nine titles outlining the administrative structure for a variety of programs in higher education, while also requiring institutions accepting Title IV funds through students to adhere to recognized accreditation standards and report data on institutional quality and operations. ... the 1965 act established a guaranteed loan program that carried with it the full promise of the U.S. government to repay private lenders if a student defaulted on their loan. (pp. 53-54)

In 1972, the re-authorization of the Higher Education Act established additional support for students with the most significant financial needs. Additionally, the Guaranteed Student Loan Program, later known as the Stafford Loan, was established. With a Stafford Loan, the government paid interest payments for students while they were enrolled in college. Last, the re-

authorization also initiated the State Student Incentive Grant Program which provided matching funds to state need-based aid programs. All fifty states actively participated in this program. Many additional re-authorizations have occurred since 1972. The Pell Grant helped solidify the federal government's commitment to access for higher education for all individuals (Fuller, 2014).

The Federal Student Aid Office of the United States Department of Education (2018) provided information about the Federal Pell Grant program. "Federal Pell Grants usually are awarded only to undergraduate students who display exceptional financial need and have not earned a bachelor's, graduate, or professional degree" (p. 1). Exceptions may be made for students enrolled in a postbaccalaureate teacher certification program and students who are incarcerated in a federal or state penal institution, or who are subject to an involuntary civil commitment upon completion of a period of incarceration for a sex offense. A Federal Pell Grant does not have to be repaid under most circumstances.

The amounts awarded through the Pell Grant program vary from year to year. The maximum amount for the 2018-19 school year was \$6,095. The award amounts, however, depend on expected family contribution, cost of attendance, full-time or part-time student status, and plans to attend school for a full academic year or less (Federal Student, 2018). The cost of attendance includes tuition, fees, and room and board (American, 2018). Students apply for a Federal Pell Grant by completing the FAFSA every year they are enrolled in school.

The Federal Student Aid office of the United States Department of Education (2018) provided the online application for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form. The application was applicable for grants, loans, and work-study funds for college or career school. The Federal Student Aid Office was:

the largest provider of student financial aid in the nation. At the office of Federal Student Aid, our more than 1,300 employees help make college education possible for every dedicated mind by providing more than \$120 billion in federal grants, loans, and work-study funds each year to more than 13 million students paying for college or career school. . . . Federal Student Aid is responsible for managing the student financial assistance programs authorized under Title IV of the *Higher Education Act of 1965*.

(p. 1)

The Federal Student Aid Office was responsible for processing applications, distributing funds, and managing repayments.

The student assistance website, Scholarships.com, reported that a student whose annual family income was \$50,000 or less qualified for a Pell Grant; however, most Pell grants would be awarded to students with a total annual family income under \$20,000 (Scholarships, 2018). The researcher used “Pell-eligible” as a determining factor for community college students who are economically disadvantaged.

## **Grit**

Grit, by one of the definitions published by Merriam-Webster (2019), was “4: firmness of mind or spirit: unyielding courage in the face of hardship or danger.” It has been used in research and discussions regarding education for decades, according to Ethan Ris (2015), but became especially popular when teacher, author, and researcher Angela Duckworth introduced her work on the subject in 2007.

Angela Duckworth, University of Pennsylvania, first published her research on grit along with Christopher Peterson of the University of Michigan and Michael Matthews and Dennis Kelly with West Point United States Military Academy in 2007. The authors researched the

noncognitive trait they called *grit*. Their applicable definition of grit was “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” (p. 1). Their research concluded that grit “demonstrated incremental predictive validity of success measures over and beyond IQ and conscientiousness. Collectively, these findings suggested that the achievement of difficult goals entails not only talent but also sustained and focused application of talent over time” (p.1).

Duckworth et al. (2007) opened their article with a 1907 William James quote:

Compared with what we ought to be, we are only half awake. Our fires are damped, our drafts are checked. We are making use of only a small part of our possible mental resource. . . . Men the world over possess amounts of resources, which only exceptional individuals push to their extremes of use. (p. 1)

This quote was especially relevant to Duckworth and her colleagues’ work regarding grit as well as the researcher’s work concerning the impact of the Tennessee Promise Scholarship programs on college enrollment and retention. According to the grit experts, individuals used only a small portion of their capacity for achievement and success. How does an instructor, advisor, or mentor teach an individual to maximize his or her capacity?

Duckworth’s research delved into the century-old concept introduced by William James. Harvard University psychology professor from 1872-1907, James was a philosopher and psychologist and was instrumental in establishing Harvard’s psychology department. According to Harvard University’s Department of Psychology (Harvard, 2019), James’ research on physiology and its connection to psychology was profound, ground-breaking, and influential. His theoretical perspective on psychology eventually came to be known as functionalism. Additionally, when he moved away from experimental psychology to more philosophical works, he became known as one of the founders of the school of American Pragmatism. James authored

multiple publications that were widely read and continue to influence the fields of psychology, physiology, and education.

Ris (2015) wrote that grit initially was generally used to reference students who were economically disadvantaged. He explained that champions of the concept claimed that gritty children could “claw their way out of poverty” (p. 2). Skeptics, according to Ris, called it a buzzword or a reference to social Darwinism. Children from low-income families, minority groups, or inferior schooling inherited character traits that resulted in an inability to break the cycle of economic disadvantage, according to some who did not buy-in to the grit factor for students to alter their lot in life. He continued that Duckworth’s critics argued that the grit factor was a way to divert blame away from teachers, under-resourced schools, and other situational factors. Situation factors that had, to increasing levels, let students off the hook as victims of circumstances rather than underachievers.

Julia Novakowski (2017) studied the work of William James. Her work considered the application of James’ *The Energies of Men* to the field of philosophy of education. In the essay, Novakowski proposed that “the field of Philosophy of Education is in search of its own second wind and can find guidance in the work and life of William James” (P. 97). While Novakowski applied James’ research to the specific field of the philosophy of education, the researcher applies it to attaining a “second wind” in other applications, including persevering through college. Novakowski first asked the question, “Does the field of philosophy of education need a second wind?” She then asked, “What are the challenges faced within the changing landscape?” (P. 97). She delved into the question, “What is a second wind as explained in *The Energies of Wind*” (P. 100)? Finally, she applied *The Energies of Men* in finding a second wind for philosophers of education.

Novakowski's work with a century-old psychologist's work was relevant in the specific field of philosophy of education but had additional relevance to the mindset of any student attempting to persevere through their chosen field of study. In the third part of her article, Novakowski introduced the application of James' *The Energies of Men*:

When "fatigue" sets in, philosophers of education can find inspiration from James in finding their second wind. James uses the term "regenerate" when discussing how some pupils find their first wind through interest and then attempt to tap into energy reserves and find their second wind. One method may be to focus on unlocking our hidden energies through a process of questions, perceiving ideas as live or dead, reflecting and choosing from these ideas, and then continuing the process all over again. Truth be told, there does not exist a robust argument that I can make about finding the second wind. Instead, I provide examples and processes (similar to how James provides examples).  
(p. 104)

Novakowski provided multiple examples to illustrate how individuals could tap into energy reserves. She explained that James credited the first wind to be interest-driven. She wrote, "when one is motivated to do something, then their energies are narrowed into the interest-driven action" (p. 104). The second wind, however, was more complicated. James used examples of people who overcame significant challenges in life. Challenges such as addiction, cancer, and depression were such examples. However, he also offered a scenario of a scholar afraid to "engage in discourse" (p. 104). Novakowski quoted James: "An intellect tied down by literality and decorum makes on one the same sort of impression that an able-bodied man would who should habituate himself to do his work with only one of his fingers, locking up the rest of his organisms and leaving it unused" (p. 105).

Considering William James' own life and professional decision-making, one could speculate that he, indeed, found his second wind. He changed his research methodologies and practices throughout his career. Some of his most impactful contributions were at the end of his tenure at Harvard and shortly before his death in 1910. Emile Boutroux published a book about the life of William James in 1912. From the translated version of the second edition of that publication, Boutroux wrote: "He taught that philosophy has its root in life, not in the collective or impersonal life of humanity, in his view the abstraction of the schools, but in the concrete life of the individual, the only life which really exists" (P. vi). While she elaborated greatly on James' life and person, she summarized,

The philosophy of James is essentially free. It goes boldly forward with experience as its only guide. The result of his investigation is very remarkable. He starts from science as if it were in itself all knowledge, and the very development of science finally leads in his opinion to a type of speculation which at first appeared to be excluded by its own method. . . . The essential idea of James's metaphysics is the identification of reality with the broadest, completest, most profound and most direct experience; that is to say, with the most intimate of life consciousness. . . . The metaphysical problem is that of relations, not of phenomenon to phenomenon, or concept to concept, but of being to being. (p. 119-120)

The researcher utilizes the implications of William James' work to consider human relations as a critical piece of the motivation for students to persevere through college, particularly at-risk students. Does one simply need to have the right relationships—or even the lucky relationships—with positive and supportive people to be successful in a stressful post-

secondary education? Referencing back to the theoretical framework of Vroom's Expectancy Theory, the researcher will consider the impact of "being-to-being" relationships.

### **Tennessee Promise**

According to its website, the Tennessee Promise was:

...both a scholarship and mentoring program focused on increasing the number of students that attend college in our state. It provides students a last-dollar scholarship, meaning the scholarship will cover the cost of tuition and mandatory fees not covered by the Pell grant, the HOPE scholarship, or the Tennessee Student Assistance Award. [if students do not receive any other scholarships or grants, the Tennessee Promise will cover the entire cost of tuition.]

Students may use the scholarship at any of the state's 13 community colleges, 27 colleges of applied technology, or other eligible institution offering an associate degree program.

(Tennessee, 2017)

The State website explained that a key component of the program was that each participant was assigned to a mentor who would assist him or her as she navigated the college admissions process. There were some mandatory meetings, eight required hours of community services, and a minimum GPA of 2.0 at their post-secondary institution (2017).

Celeste Carruthers, who was an assistant professor in the department of economics and the Center for Business and Economic Research at the University of Tennessee, described the Tennessee Promise program in an article for the New York Times (2016). Carruthers reported that Tennessee's work offered some early lessons for those who wished to promote a similar program at the national level. She praised the Promise for transforming the way students viewed college and their place in it. It effectively encouraged students to apply for college and complete their FAFSA at a time in the school year that was not too late to miss deadlines and eliminated

uncertainties. Carruthers (2016) also stated that the rest of the story needs more time to be told. She stated that the Tennessee Promise was:

changing the conversation about going to college, but the harder work begins when new college plans become a reality. Tennessee Promise students enter a system where just 28 percent of first-year students graduate within 6 years of enrolling. Many require remedial courses to catch up to college-level work. (p. 2)

Fran Cubberly (2015) addressed President Barack Obama's proposed initiative to provide free college to everyone across the nation. She reported that it would have a "profoundly positive impact" on the American society. Still recovering from the 2008 recession, Cubberly noted that the student loan debts were more than a trillion dollars, and many students were finding themselves questioning the value of their higher educations. With a need to earn money after high school, many students were choosing to work and attend school part-time or not at all. Cubberly proposed that free tuition for community college could alleviate some financial stressors.

As the concept of free college tuition became a more popular topic among politicians at both state and national levels, varying innovative concepts littered education journals and forums. A 2016 forum with the University of Wisconsin-Madison Professor of Educational Policy Studies and Sociology Sarah Goldrick-Rab and Director of the Center on Higher Education Reform at the American Enterprise Institute Andrew Kelly addressed the question: "Should community college be free?" (Goldrick-Rab & Kelly). Goldrick-Rab stated:

The reality of attending college was far too expensive for many Americans. The 2012 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, found that after taking all grants and scholarships into account,

attending one year of community college runs dependent students from low-income families more than \$8,000 in tuition, fees, and living costs. In other words, while it is true that more students are qualifying for and receiving a federal Pell grant, the price *after* the discount from the Pell is climbing higher and higher. This is largely driven by living costs, which must be covered if students are to focus their time and energy on school rather than work. Federal loan limits are too low to fully cover these costs, but they are the true costs of degree completion. Tuition and fees are the price of access—living costs are the price of success. (pp. 55-56)

Goldrick-Rab further stated that the value and price of higher education were both still debatable. However, she was firm that when large numbers of citizens were not able to afford college, the system was broken (2016).

Is college affordable? In the University of Texas at Dallas *Issues in Science and Technology* (2010) research college affordability and financial aid, Bridget Terry Long proposed that aid programs could be simplified and should favor grants over loans. Long also asserted that aid should be need-based rather than merit-based. Long touted some of the benefits of higher education as an increased tax base, greater civic engagement, economic and social success, higher lifetime earnings, and more excellent health decisions. However, she reported that one of the primary barriers to college was financial, especially for economically disadvantaged students.

The Federal Aid for Postsecondary Students Congressional Budget Office reported that the government financed approximately \$100 billion in student loans, approximately \$30 billion in grants, and \$30 billion in tax preferences in 2017 (Congressional, 2018). Reasons behind the massive spending on higher education, as reported by the Congressional Budget Office, included benefits to students as well as to society. The students' main benefit was higher earning

potential, while the society's benefits include increased tax receipts and reduced dependence on government assistance. However, according to the 2018 report produced by Congress, there was no real consensus on the overall benefits of the existing programs (Congressional, 2018).

The Congressional Budget Office (Federal, 2018) offered the following specific motivations as to why the federal government offered student aid:

- Students may lack access to financing. Private loans for higher education can be expensive or unavailable, even when the associated degree would be expected to substantially increase the student's income. That circumstance especially applies to students and families with a limited credit history or collateral.
- Benefits are uncertain. Higher education is a risky investment. Students may depart college without completing a degree, leaving them with expenses to repay and little financial benefit from their schooling. In addition, whether or not they complete a degree, students cannot predict their future earnings with certainty. Those risks may deter some people from pursuing higher education.
- Some benefits do not accrue to the student. One person's education may benefit others through higher taxes paid and lower rates of dependency, examples of what economists call positive externalities. But students may not incorporate those externalities in their decisions, so they may obtain less education than would be beneficial for society.

(Federal, 2018)

Congress (Federal, 2018) was considering changes to the existing programs such as adjust how much financing was available, changing the uncertainties students face, or change subsidies.

The reported changes to amounts available for financing were undetermined. Raising or lowering available amounts for loans could limit students' options or increase the risk that

students could not pay back what they borrow. Decreasing loan limits could prevent some students from continuing or completing their degrees, however increasing limits could allow students to borrow more than they could afford to pay back. Another proposal was to attach loan eligibility to school successes, such as graduation rates. One other proposition was to increase Pell Grant limits for high performing students from low-income families (Federal, 2018).

The Congressional Budget Office (Federal, 2018) provided a list of factors that impact whether or not a student completes a degree. Those factors included high school academic performance, family history of college attendance, income, and age. Students who performed well academically in high school were more likely to finish college. Students who were first-generation college students were less likely to graduate. Students from low-income families were less likely to graduate. Last, older students were less likely to graduate. The most-reported risk factor for college enrollment, retention, and graduation was poverty. According to Long (2010),

“After decades of financial aid policy, there are still significant gaps in college access by income, even after accounting for differences in academic preparation and achievement. Low-income high school graduates in the top academic quartile attended college at only the same rate as high-income high school graduates in the bottom quartile of achievement. (pp. 1-2)

## **Summary**

Because the Tennessee Promise program was only in its fifth year, there was minimal research regarding its success rates and best practices. The researcher hypothesized that college retention rates would not increase as much as enrollment rates due to inadequate access to needed resources beyond tuition. The cost of tuition was one of the multiple barriers to success

that college attendees have. At-risk students, in particular, were faced with financial, personal, and academic challenges. The researcher worked to identify successful practices that could be utilized by community colleges to support students and increase their likelihood of earning a diploma.

Tennessee Higher Education Commission (2017) produced a Fact Book each year to address the topics of access, efficiency, productivity, and quality in public education. It does so by including the following categories:

(1) Student preparation, such as admission rates, freshman class profiles, and learning support placement and success rates, by subject area;

(2) Student participation, such as college-going rates, overall enrollment, and enrollment by critical student subpopulations;

(3) Student progression, such as end-of-term enrollment counts, freshman-to-sophomore retention rates, the number of students passing credit hour benchmarks under the higher education funding formula and lottery scholarship renewal rates;

(4) Student success and completion, such as student transfer activity and subsequent academic performance, graduation rates, time to degree, credentials awarded, and credentials awarded per one hundred (100) full-time equivalent enrolled students;

(5) Workforce participation, such as labor market supply and demand, employer satisfaction survey results, job placement rates, and licensure passage rates;

(6) Academic trends, such as student engagement survey results, changes to the academic program inventory, low-producing academic programs, the number and percentage of accredited programs, and the percentage of lower division instructional courses taught by full-time faculty, part-time faculty, and graduate assistants;

(7) Financing trends, such as state appropriation levels and net tuition revenues, state and total subsidies per student, and degree costs; and

(8) Affordability trends, such as in-state and out-of-state tuition rates, net costs of attendance, and need-based and merit-based student financial aid.

These data provided the researcher with needed information to analyze college enrollment and retention trends for Tennessee's community colleges for the years 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018 (2016-2017 Tennessee, 2017).

The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) 2016-17 Fact Book reported on the progress of Governor Bill Haslam's *Drive to 55* initiative.

In fall 2015, the inaugural cohort of 16,291 Tennessee Promise students enrolled in community and technical colleges across the state. As a result, first-time freshmen enrollment in Tennessee public institutions increased by 10 percent, due to a 24.7 percent increase in community college enrollment and a 20 percent increase in TCAT enrollment. Approximately 80 percent of these students persisted into their second semester, and 63 percent persisted Year 1 to Year 2 (Fall 2015 to Fall 2016). In fall 2016, 16,790 students enrolled in community and technical colleges as members of the second cohort of Tennessee Promise students. Like cohort 1, approximately 80 percent of these students reenrolled for the Spring 2017 term. The third application cycle for the Tennessee Promise program concluded on November 1, 2016. During this application period, 60,780 students applied for the Tennessee Promise program, representing over 90 percent of public high school seniors and 80 percent of all high school seniors in the state. (p. 4)

## **CHAPTER THREE: Methodology**

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to analyze the 13 Tennessee community college enrollment and retention rates for the first four years of the Tennessee Promise Scholarship program and to identify effective practices that positively impacted retention rates. The researcher used public data available through the Tennessee Promise Scholarship program and the Tennessee Higher Education Commission to analyze enrollment and retention rates. Community colleges with the highest retention rates and those with the lowest retention rates were researched to identify successful practices and opportunities for improvement. The researcher utilized interviews, surveys, and a focus group to determine practices and programs that are in place to support student retention and to identify needed supports for students.

Enrollments and freshman-to-sophomore retention rates were analyzed for each of the 13 community colleges. The schools with the three highest retention rates and the schools with the three lowest retention rates were selected for more in-depth research to identify any practices that were in place to support freshman students and discover challenges that have been noted by the school personnel since the inception of the Tennessee Promise Scholarship program. The schools with the three highest retention rates, the three lowest retention rates, and one additional school were selected for in-person or telephone interviews.

Community college practices were identified through interview findings. School admissions personnel, registrars, counselors, or advisors were interviewed to establish support practices. Results were transcribed and designated with preliminary codes to determine categories for the organization of the results. Secondary school counselors then completed surveys and participated in a focus group to further enhance the study. All findings were

reported with the objective of identifying successful practices and prioritized needs for college freshmen.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How were college success practices used in selected Tennessee community colleges for first-time freshman students?
2. What college success practices showed evidence of a positive impact on retention rates for first-time freshman students in selected Tennessee community colleges?

### **Description of the Specific Research Approach**

**Research design.** The research approach for this study was defined by Creswell (2018) as the narrowing of broader assumptions to more specific conclusions. Qualitative research allowed the researcher to design a study and communicate the findings through words instead of numbers (Creswell, 2018). The researcher chose qualitative research to gain an understanding of how community colleges have responded to increased enrollment, particularly for at-risk students. Store (2012) explained the concept of the researcher as an instrument in qualitative analysis. The researcher served as the “primary instrument” in conducting qualitative research. Qualitative research “complicates and thereby unfreezes the idea of evidence, foregrounds the politics in definitions of evidence, and precludes *a priori* prejudices against certain types of evidence” (Store, 2012, p. 1). The researcher, as an instrument, was not merely modifying quantitative research, but used his or her expertise, interview skills, and ideology to best interpret evidence and results.

This qualitative study used archived data analysis, interviews, artifacts, surveys, and a focus group. The researcher utilized data provided by the Tennessee Higher Education

Commission and the Tennessee Promise Scholarship program to ascertain community college enrollment statistics for the first-year freshman classes and freshman-to-sophomore retention rates for 2015 through 2018.

**Data collection.** The data were analyzed for the community college enrollment and retention rates for all 13 schools over four years. Schools that had the three highest and three lowest retention rates were selected to interview and collect information from retention and support strategies. One other community college was selected because it had the third highest retention rate for all four years of the study and the fourth highest poverty rate. These data were available for public review through the Tennessee Higher Education Commission. Reports utilized were obtained from the Tennessee Higher Education Commission published by the State of Tennessee government (2014-2015 Tennessee, 2015; 2015-2016 Tennessee, 2016; 2016-2017 Tennessee, 2017; 2017-2018 Tennessee, 2018).

Reports analyzed included the following from the Tennessee Higher Education Fact Books (2015 through 2018):

- Public Headcount by Student Level (First-Time Freshmen)
- Freshman-to-Sophomore Retention Rates for Public Institutions

Data were analyzed and organized in charts to observe the enrollment rates for each community college and the retention rates for each community college. Retention rates were analyzed to identify the overall most successful and least successful schools regarding retention rates from freshman to sophomore years. The following methods were used to establish retention rates: Public Headcount by Students Level (First-Time Freshman) data were compiled for each year from 2015 to 2018 into a spreadsheet. Freshman-to-Sophomore Retention Rates

for Public Institutions data were compiled for each year from Fall 2014 to Fall 2018 into a spreadsheet.

The percent of students retained for the 13 community colleges was analyzed for each year of the study. Three schools were identified who had the highest retention rates and three schools were identified who had the lowest retention rates. These included the three with at least two years of the highest retention rates and the three with at least two years of the lowest retention rates. Those six schools were again charted to analyze trends.

The researcher received authorization from Carson-Newman University's Institutional Review Board to conduct this research. The community college administration granted permission for interviews, artifact collections, surveys, and a focus group. The Director of Schools in the selected Tennessee school district granted permission for the surveys and focus groups to be conducted with secondary school counselors (See Appendix A). The researcher then ensured that all participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and permission was given by each participant before the administration of interviews, surveys, and the collection of artifacts. The participants were assigned pseudonyms to guarantee anonymity. Interviewees signed an informed consent form (See Appendix B) before participating.

A six-question interview (See Appendix C) was conducted with admissions counselors, registrars, or student advisors at the identified community colleges to ascertain required and recommended services for freshmen. The researcher sought to identify practices that were in place to influence student motivation and capacity for college success.

As data were collected from interviews, results were transcribed. Next, results were assigned with codes to determine categories for the organization of the results. The codes were both *a priori* and emergent. Results were categorized and reported.

Once the interviews were completed, feedback regarding postsecondary success among high school seniors was solicited through surveys and a focus group of secondary school counselors from one rural Tennessee school district. The survey (See Appendix D) administered to the school counselors consisted of questions designed to gain information about graduating seniors' identified and perceived challenges. Survey results were analyzed, and then the same school counselors convened for a focus group.

Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick, and Mukherjee (2017) described the use of focus groups as “a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of social issues. This method aims to obtain data from a purposely selected group of individuals rather than from a statistically representative sample of a broader population” (p. 20). The researcher used a series of questions driven by the survey results with the focus group to pinpoint student support methods considered most crucial to postsecondary success. The researcher recorded detailed notes of the focus group responses and reported them accurately.

**Coding process.** “Coding is an almost universal process in qualitative research; it is a fundamental aspect of the analytical process and the ways in which researchers break down their data to make something new” (Elliot, 2018, p. 2850). Coding was a way to condense data to relate them to the research questions (Elliot, 2018). To initiate the coding process, the researcher first transcribed the interviews. Once the interviews were transcribed, the researcher browsed the transcriptions, looking for common words or phrases, and made notes about initial noticings. Next, the researcher read the transcriptions thoroughly, making additional notes of common words, phrases, opinions, and unexpected responses.

The relevant pieces of the findings were labeled (coded). Relevant pieces included words, phrases, activities, and processes that were repeated or deemed noteworthy by the

researcher. Once labeled, the created codes were organized as the researcher determined what was most appropriate and logical. The researcher then created categories to ultimately organize the data. The researcher labeled the categories and determined which were most relevant to the study and how they connected. The categories and connections were utilized to develop findings from this part of the study and to drive the next steps of the study. The results from the coding and categorizing were analyzed and reported without bias.

### **Description of Study Participants and Setting**

The participants for the research conducted in this study include admissions counselors, registrars, or advisors at Tennessee community colleges that were selected after analyzing freshman-to-sophomore retention rates. These admissions personnel were interviewed either in-person or via phone. Community college admissions personnel or advisors were selected because they had a first-hand working knowledge of freshmen supports and requirements that existed in their respective colleges.

The researcher selected secondary school counselors as participants to survey and then for a focus group because they were working with graduating high school seniors to make post-secondary decisions. Secondary school counselors had first-hand, real-world experiences with students from all demographics as they worked through the process of deciding post-secondary plans, applying to colleges or technical schools, choosing to enlist in the military, or choosing to enter the workforce. The perspectives of secondary school counselors were especially relevant to the researcher's study.

The setting for the study was across the state of Tennessee at various community colleges and in one East Tennessee rural public school district. The school district served approximately 5,500 students and housed three traditional secondary schools, each with grades nine through 12.

Survey and interview participants were selected through criterion sampling. Community college participants were chosen based on their positions in community college admissions offices and based on their knowledge of student programs. Secondary school counselor participants were selected based on their positions.

### **Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions**

Limitations are issues beyond a researcher's control that could possibly affect the results or validity of a study (Creswell, 2012). A limitation of this study was that the data were self-reported. Rosenman, Tennekoon, & Hill stated that response biases in various behavioral studies were to be blamed on self-reported information (2011). Participants in the interviews, surveys, and focus group may have had skewed views of the subject due to personal experiences. This study was relevant since the Tennessee Promise program was in its early stages. Data regarding success rates and recommended practices for improving success rates could contribute to the long-term effectiveness of the program as well as increasing the number of college graduates in Tennessee.

According to Simon (2011), delimitations are the boundaries a researcher places around a study, and the research participants included in the study. Delimitations include participant exclusion and research questions. Surveys and interviews were limited to school personnel with direct knowledge of programs offered to students that support retention and success. The research was limited to high schools and community colleges in Tennessee and did not include other states with similar scholarship programs or applied technical schools in Tennessee (TCAT), which are part of the Tennessee Promise Scholarship program.

An assumption of this research was that interview and survey participants would respond truthfully. It was also assumed that research participants' responses would be representative of

other individuals in their respective fields. Further, it was assumed that readers of this research would accept the work and reported data as plausible or true.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical concerns when conducting qualitative research included anonymity, truthfulness, and confidentiality (Ngozwana, 2018). Gallagher (2009) described ethics in research as “principles of right and wrong conduct” (p. 11). Ethics were defined as “a set of moral principles and rules of conduct,” by Morrow and Richards (1996, p. 90). The researcher conducted each portion of this research without coercion or persuasion. All results were reported accurately and without bias.

For peer debriefing, the researcher worked with two colleagues in the college and career readiness field with unbiased views to review the research process. Data triangulation occurred to connect statistical findings to the survey and interview results. The researcher shared results and conclusions with the survey and interview participants to confirm findings and maintain transparency (member checks).

### **Summary**

The researcher identified the need for this qualitative study based on observed perceptions of risk factors for college success for students who have pursued post-secondary education in community college since the inception of the Tennessee Promise Scholarship program. Retention rates were used as a method to establish successes and challenges for community colleges. Qualitative data were used to establish practices with the potential to benefit the overall success of the scholarship program and its recipients.

## CHAPTER FOUR: Presentation of Findings

The purpose of this study was to analyze the Tennessee community college enrollment and retention rates for the first four years of the Tennessee Promise Scholarship program and work to identify effective practices in place for college success. The researcher worked to identify trends in Tennessee community college enrollments for first-time freshmen from the fall of 2015 through the fall of 2018. The researcher then recorded the retention rates for each of those four years for students returning to college for their second year. With that data, the researcher identified schools with the highest and lowest retention rates and worked to ascertain freshmen support practices for each of those schools through interviews. The researcher also surveyed secondary school counselors and conducted a focus group to obtain additional information on the perceptions of the most impactful factors and needed supports for first-time college freshmen.

### **Data Sources and Participants**

The Tennessee Higher Education Commission publishes a report each year, the *Tennessee Higher Education Fact Book*.

Pursuant to Tennessee Code Annotated § 49-7-210, The Tennessee Higher Education Commission shall produce each year a Fact Book to address the topics of access, efficiency, productivity and quality in public higher education. The Fact Book does so by including . . . performance categories and illustrative indicators. (Tennessee, 2018, para. 1)

Utilizing the data available in the Tennessee Higher Education Fact Books for each of the four years of the study, the researcher identified the three community colleges that had the highest retention rates over the four-year period studied, and the three community colleges that had the

lowest retention rates over the four-year period studied. Additionally, the researcher selected one additional community college that had high poverty as well as a high retention rate. The researcher identified practices in place at each of the seven identified colleges by conducting interviews and reviewing artifacts. The researcher sought to pinpoint effective practices by examining common requirements at the schools with higher retention rates in hopes of producing recommended activities for first-time college freshmen.

Published data utilized included reports on first-time, full-time freshmen enrollments, freshmen to sophomore retention rates, and Pell Grant eligibility. These data were analyzed by the researcher to identify the colleges that had the least and most successes with retention. The researcher developed a method for identifying the community colleges with the least and most successful retention rates. The three schools that had the highest retention rates for at least two of the four years studied were classified by the researcher to be the most successful, and the three schools that had the lowest retention rates for at least two of the four years studies were classified by the researcher as the least successful.

Next, the percentage of students eligible for Pell Grants for the last year of the study (2018) were considered to establish poverty rates. One school was noted to have the third-highest retention rate for each year of the study and to have the fourth-highest poverty rate of the 13 schools. This school was added to the list of schools in the study, using interviews to determine what practices were in place to support freshmen.

The interview data were collected using the same six questions for each school representative (see Appendix C). Interviewees were invited to answer the questions through phone calls or video conferences because schools were closed during the interview period due to the COVID-19 public health crisis. School employees were working from home, and social

distancing mandates required interviews to be conducted remotely. The interview responses were transcribed and coded to identify common practices and trends. All schools and interviewees remained anonymous by assigning random numbers to the junior colleges and eliminating interviewee identifying information.

To further enhance the study, the researcher surveyed secondary school counselors to determine their perceptions on the most impactful characteristics and factors that contribute to high school graduates' likelihood of college success using a Google Form (see Appendix D). Those same school counselors were later convened for a virtual focus group using Zoom video conferencing. The results of the survey are reported in this chapter, as well as a synopsis of the focus group discussion. The identity of the counselors was protected for all reporting purposes.

### **Research Questions**

1. How were college success practices used in selected Tennessee community colleges for first-time freshman students?
2. What college success practices showed evidence of a positive impact on retention rates for first-time freshman students in selected Tennessee community colleges?

### **Results of the Data Analysis**

The researcher's first step in data analysis indicated trends and some variety in the percentages of students retained at each school. Of the 13 Tennessee community colleges, no school had the highest or lowest retention rates for all four years of the study. The researcher identified the schools with two highest and two lowest retention rates for each year. For further study, the researcher selected the schools that had the highest or lowest rates for at least two of the four years of the study. These criteria identified the three schools with the highest rates and

three schools with the lowest rates. Table 4.1 provides the retention rates for all 13 community colleges, with the highest and lowest rates for each year indicated.

**Table 4.1**

*Community College Retention Rates*

College Assigned Number	Percent Retained			
	Fall 2015	Fall 2016	Fall 2017	Fall 2018
C1	<b>66.2%+</b>	<b>62.8%+</b>	<b>62.9%+</b>	56.5%
C2	<b>65.0%+</b>	56.9%	60.7%	<b>57.8%+</b>
C3	54.5%	<b>50.8%-</b>	55.9%	53.9%
C4	<b>52.5%-</b>	52.0%	54.5%	<b>52.1%-</b>
C5	58.0%	56.1%	<b>53.5%-</b>	52.4%
C6	61.3%	<b>60.6%+</b>	59.6%	<b>59.3%+</b>
C7	59.5%	54.0%	54.2%	54.4%
C8	55.9%	55.4%	55.6%	55.4%
C9	58.3%	56.1%	59.5%	55.1%
C10	<b>61.8%*</b>	<b>59.8%*</b>	<b>61.0%*</b>	<b>57.1%*</b>
C11	57.6%	58.9%	<b>63.5%+</b>	56.8%
C12	54.5%	53.8%	<b>52.4%-</b>	<b>49.2%-</b>
C13	<b>52.5%-</b>	<b>49.9%-</b>	56.3%	52.5%

Key:

Green numbers (+) indicate the highest two rates each year

Red numbers (-) indicate the lowest two rates each year

Blue numbers (\*) indicate the third-highest number each year

Through a review of the literature, the researcher learned that poverty was a high predictor of college success, so the percentages of students who were eligible for a Pell Grant were analyzed. One school had the third-highest retention rate for each year of the study and the fourth-highest poverty rate. This school was added to the list of colleges to further the research. Table 4.2 shows the Pell-eligible percentages for each of the seven schools selected.

**Table 4.2**

*Selected Community College Pell Eligibility*

High Retention Participant	Pell Eligible Percentage
C1	40.1%
C2	40.2%
C6	43.7%
Low Retention Participant	Pell Eligible Percentage
C4	42.7%
C12	53.9%
C13	61.3%
Additional Participant w/High Retention & High Poverty*	Pell Eligible Percentage
C10	47.0%

*\*Third-highest retention rate for all four years of the study and the fourth-highest poverty rate*

**Analysis of College Interviews**

The interviews provided answers to the questions developed to identify practices that the selected community colleges had in place to support freshmen for college success. The

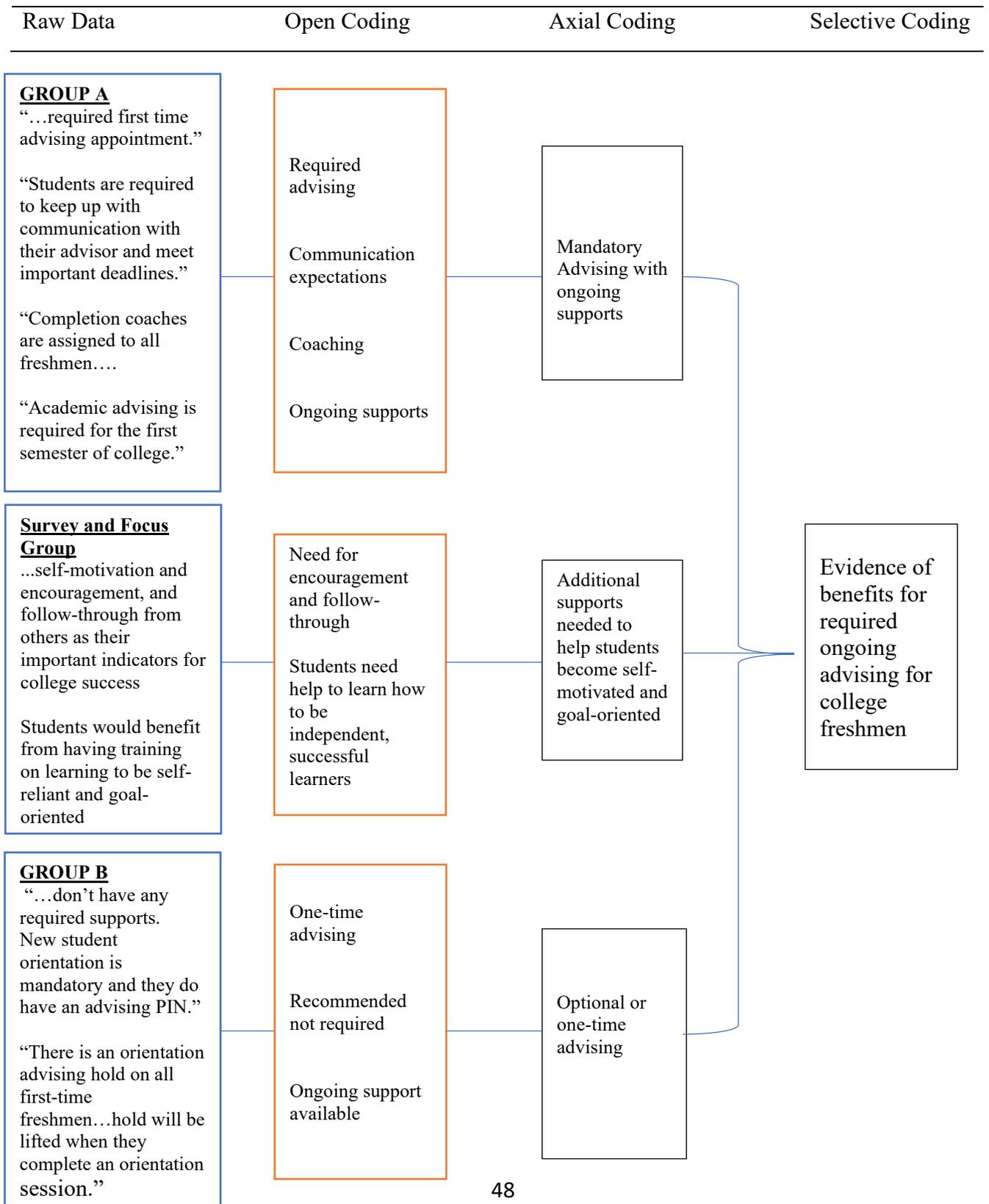
interviews were conducted with college personnel that had knowledge of student supports. The interviews were transcribed after completion. Transcriptions were then coded to identify common themes, practices, and trends. Artifacts were referenced when needed if interview responses referred to programs or resources available on the school websites. The results of the interviews were reported for each individual question in two groups. Group A included the identified successful college programs with higher retention rates. Group B included the identified schools with lower retention rates. The seventh school that was selected to interview based on its high poverty and high retention rate was reported individually.

### **Interview Findings**

After completing the initial data analysis and surveys, the interview responses were transcribed. Transcriptions were assigned with codes to determine categories for the organization of the results. The codes were both *a priori* and emergent. *A priori* codes were advising and mentoring, college success courses, penalties for not completing freshman requirements, and data tracking. An emergent code was orientation and specific requirements based on student characteristics. Further, the category of advising and mentoring was divided to have one-time requirements and ongoing requirements. The results were categorized by advising, college success course, and the penalty for completing freshmen requirements. These categories and codes are reported in Figures 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3.

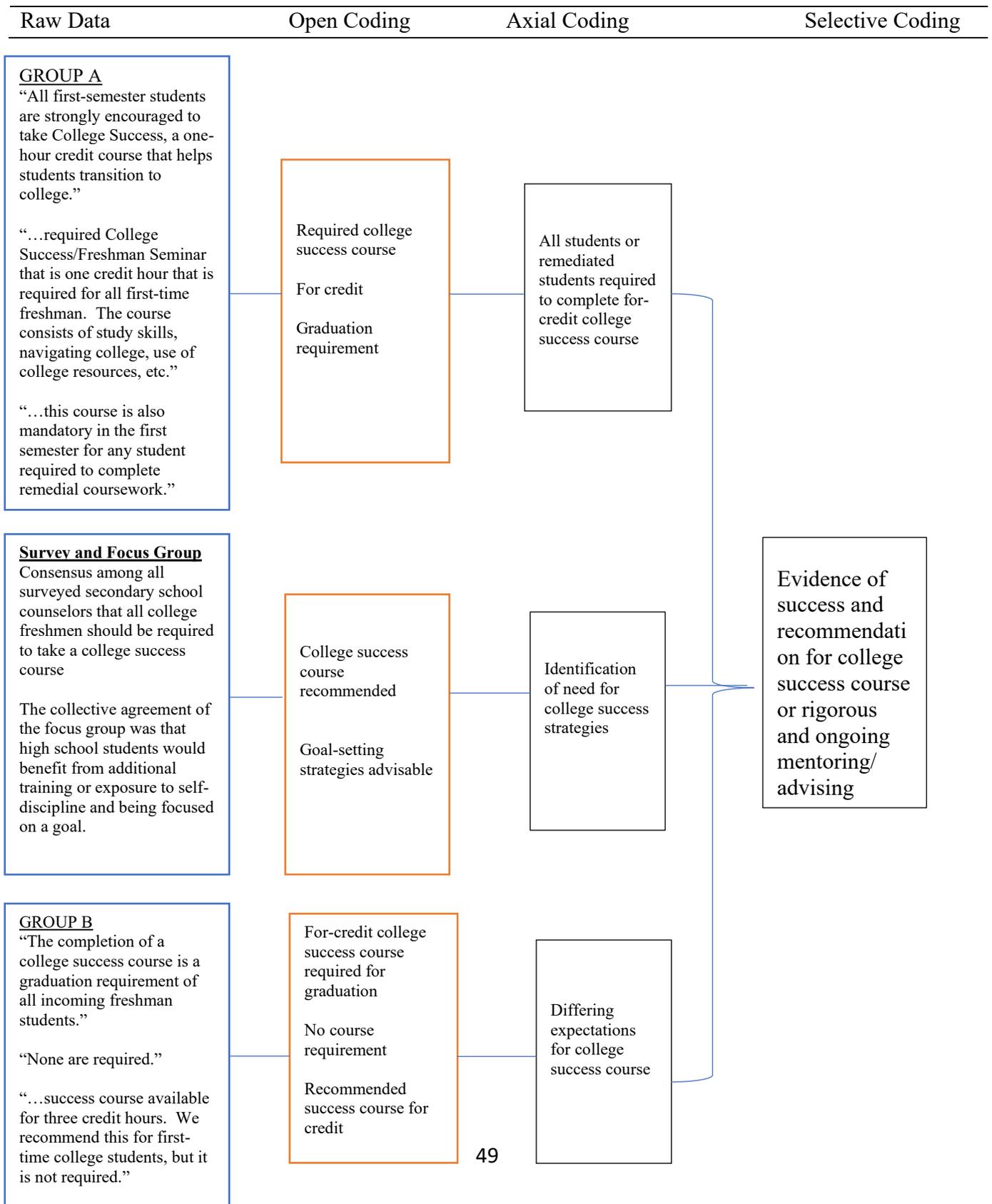
**Figure 4.1**

*Data Sorted in Levels of Coding for the Category of Advising*



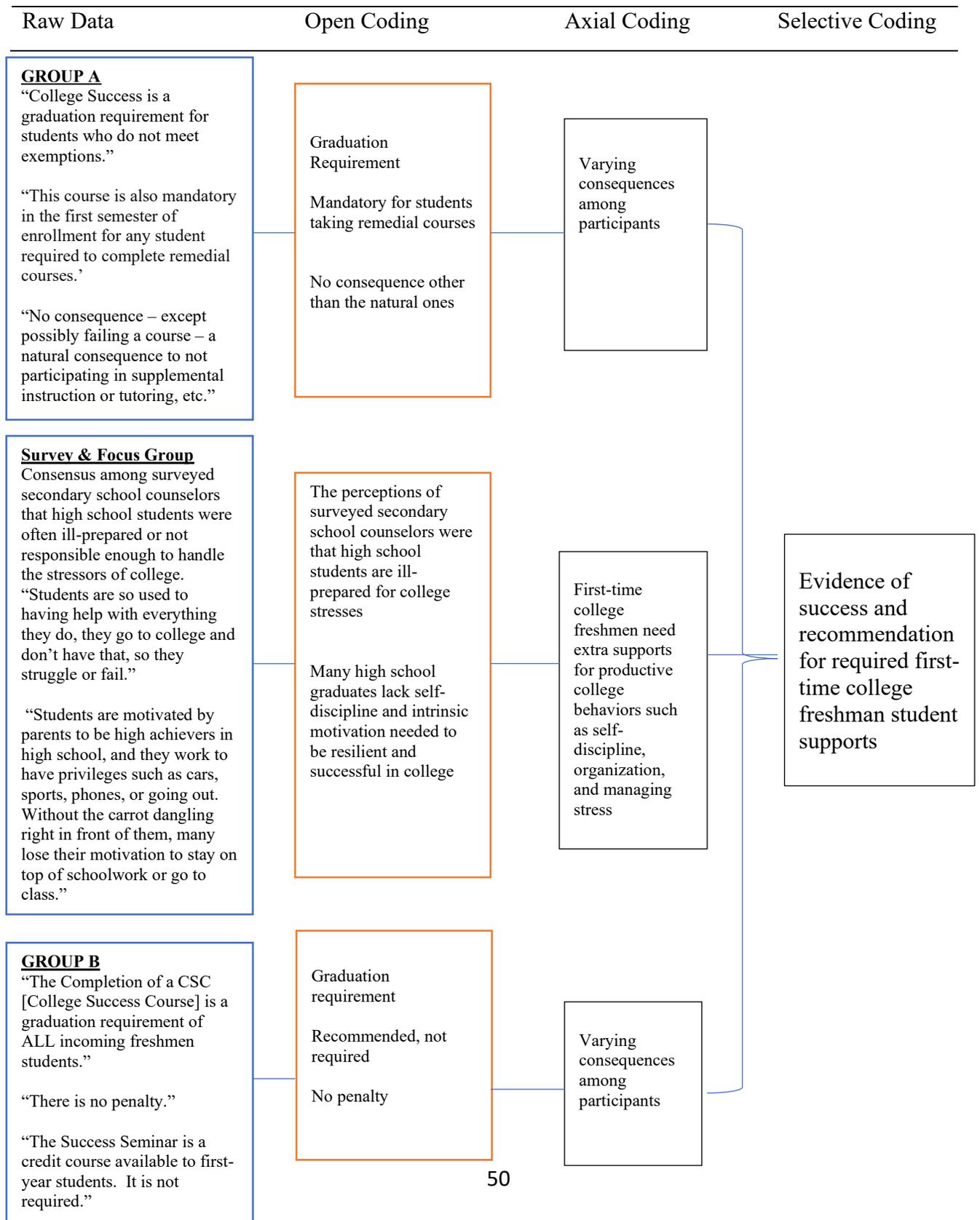
**Figure 4.2**

*Data Sorted in Levels of Coding for the Category of College Success Course*



**Figure 4.3**

*Data Sorted in Levels of Coding for the Penalty for Failure to Complete Freshman Requirements*



The survey conducted with secondary school counselors provided insight into understanding perceived indicators to predict college success from individuals who are working directly in real-time with students considering their post-secondary options. When the counselors were asked what they considered the most significant challenge facing students as they go to college as first-time freshmen, their results were varied, but had a distinct trend. All but one respondent referred to students being ill-prepared or not responsible enough to handle the stressors of college. When the school counselors were asked if all college freshmen should be required to complete a college success course, two-thirds strongly agreed, and one third agreed. Additional survey results are reported in Table 4.3.

**Table 4.3**

*Secondary School Counselor Survey Results*

Survey question: Select up to three indicators that have the greatest impact on students’ potential for success in college.

Indicator	Number selected	Percent selected
High school attendance	4	66.7%
Parent/Guardian level of education	2	33.3%
Economic status	2	33.3%
ACT or SAT Score	1	16.7%
Internal motivation*	1	16.7%
Encouragement and follow-through*	1	16.7%
Self-motivation*	1	16.7%
High School GPA	0	0.0%

*\*Write-in responses*

Two-thirds of the respondents selected advanced coursework completed in high school as well as high school attendance as indicators that had the greatest impact on students' potential for college success. Two respondents selected parent or guardian level of education as impactful, and two selected economic status as impactful. No respondents selected high school grade point average (GPA) and one selected ACT or SAT scores. Three respondents wrote in additional options, with internal motivation, self-motivation and encouragement, and follow-through from others as their important indicators for college success.

### **Analysis of Focus Group**

Conducting a focus group was beneficial in getting more detailed information about the secondary school counselors' perceptions of what characteristics are most likely to predict a student's likelihood of college success. While the researcher's review of the literature indicated that the most significant risk factor for not completing college was poverty, the secondary school counselors believed that the students' intrinsic motivation was most impactful. Completing advanced coursework in high school, maintaining good attendance, and having a good work ethic were most important.

The group unanimously noted that students seemed too reliant on adults in their lives to help them with even small struggles. Teachers, parents, or family members were referenced as "hand-holders." One counselor stated, "Students are so used to having help with everything they do, they go to college and don't have that, so they struggle or fail." Another claimed that "Students are motivated by parents to be high achievers in high school, and they work to have privileges such as cars, sports, phones, or going out. Without the carrot dangling right in front of them, many lose their motivation to stay on top of schoolwork or go to class." Almost everyone

in the group agreed with that line of thinking. Several even referenced their own experiences as young college students.

The collective agreement of the focus group was that high school students would benefit from additional training or exposure to self-discipline and being focused on a goal. An unexpected benefit of the group was that they discussed the best way to provide this type of training and decided that the message might be most impactful coming from recent high school graduates. They brainstormed ideas to invite individuals who had been successful in college, individuals who were currently thriving in the workforce, individuals who had not persevered through college, and any others with a powerful message. The counselors considered that high school students would be most receptive to young adults with whom they might be able to relate. They also considered that both stories of successes and stories of struggles would be impactful.

The first interview question was, “What support systems are in place to promote freshmen student success?” Participants had a variety of responses. Some were elaborate, and some were basic. All the participants had multiple supports in place to promote freshmen student success. Participant C6 had one of the most detailed responses, stating: “We have a required College Success/Freshman Seminar that is one credit hour that is required for all first-time freshman. . . . We also provide tutoring for free for all students—face-to-face and virtual.” Participant C6 provided an extensive explanation of other student supports available for free to all students, such as career services, access, and diversity. Participant C1 reported a broad range of opportunities for freshmen such as “Welcome Week Activities, college life survival skills workshops, and completion coaches.” The last of the Group A participants, C2, also had a list of opportunities for freshman students to find support, reporting, “There are multiple learning support systems in place at [C2]. First-time freshmen and transfer students attend a new student

orientation and have a first-time student advising appointment.” Participant C2 named counseling, tutoring, learning center, and disability resources as examples of student supports.

Group B participants also described a multitude of freshmen supports. Participant C4 described a college success course, math and science learning center, and a writing learning center. Participant C13 offered an academic success seminar, saying, “This course provides an orientation to the college environment.” Participant C12 referenced the Student Success Center, where students can be connected with resources and opportunities to maximize success.

Participant C10, which was the seventh participant selected for the interview, indicated that there were multiple systems in place to support freshmen.

One of the most important is our network of success coaches. Each new freshman is assigned a success coach who serves as an academic advisor and also answers any other questions, from financial aid to available campus resources and services for new students. Participant C10 also stated that most freshmen were required to take the College Learning Strategies course. Further, the college offered a student academic services division that “houses other resources that support students,” including a Learning Center, library, and Center for Teaching Arts and Technology. Finally, the college has an alert system for all students that provided instructors a direct line to student success coaches when a student had any concerning issues such as behavioral or mental health issues, not completing assignments, or grades dropping so success coaches could intervene early.

### **College Success Courses**

When asked what support systems, if any, are required of all freshmen, most participants referenced a college success course or seminar. Group A participants had a course for credit that was designed to support students as they transitioned from high school to college. The

courses were either one or three credit hours and were mandatory for all, or specific, groups of first-time freshmen and transfer students. Participant C2 explained,

All first-semester students are strongly encouraged to take College Success, a one-hour credit course that helps students transition to college. This is a requirement for graduation unless students have completed a similar course at another college or have completed more than 12 transfer credit hours.

The participant referenced the course catalog for additional details about the course. Participant C1 described a similar course designed to “empower students to reach their educational and career goals.” Participant C6 also explained its version of a college success course, stating,

We have a required College Success/Freshman Seminar that is one credit hour that is required for all first-time freshmen. The course consists of study skills, navigating college, use of college resources, etc. It helps students focus on their academic plan and career options as well.

When asked about required college success courses for freshmen, the Group B participants had similar offerings. Participant C4 was the only member of Group B that required a college success course, indicated that it was a graduation requirement of all incoming freshmen students. Participant C13 described a three-hour academic success seminar that was offered to all degree-seeking students who had fewer than 25 credit hours. The course at C13 was not, however, required. The last of Group B, participant C12, indicated that there were no required freshmen supports other than new student orientation.

Participant C10 described a required [for most freshmen unless exempt] College Learning Success (COLS). “This course helps students develop study strategies that will help

them succeed in college and make career plans to direct their studies.” Students who completed the course earned three credit hours toward graduation.

### **Analysis of Penalties for Failure to Complete Freshmen Required Supports**

Interview questions four and five asked the participants what consequences students received for not completing required and recommended supports systems, respectively. The results from Group A differed for each participant. Participant C6 explained that students who do not take the required college success course could not graduate. The participant also explained that students who do not complete recommended supports simply suffer the natural consequences, “No consequence—except possibly failing a course—a natural consequence to not participating in supplemental instruction or tutoring, etc.” Participant C6 also acknowledged that they do not have issues getting students to comply with expectations, stating, “We don’t really have a problem with them not complying. Their advisors tell them it was a requirement and they take the courses.” Participant C1 indicated that students who do not complete the mandatory first-year experience course would have to retake it. Participant C2 explained that students who do not complete the college success course and who do not meet an exemption requirement do not graduate. Participant C2 also stated that there was no penalty for students who do not take advantage of recommended supports, such as tutoring.

Group B participants had similar, varying responses to the questions about penalties for not complying with required and recommended freshmen supports. Participant C13 stated no penalties for not complying with any freshmen supports. Participant C12 also stated that there were no penalties for not completing or participated in student supports. However, Participant C4 emphasized,

Students who do not take and pass the [college success course] within the first full-time semester of entry will NOT be required to remediate the course, nor will this prevent those students from graduating. It is simply a requirement that students complete the course.

Other supports at C12 were recommended and not required.

Participant C10 reported the most extensive consequences for freshman students who did not complete required and recommended supports.

If a student doesn't meet with his or her success coach, the student has a hold placed on registration until that requirement is fulfilled. If the student tests into a learning support class but does not complete it, he/she is unable to get credit for the course with which it is associated.

Further, students who did not complete recommended supports, such as students who do not follow up with required success coach meetings, could suffer a negative impact on their grades from the associated class.

## **Summary**

While there were some similarities among all participants, the coding process showed some practices that were more common with Group A participants. All six participants had varieties of support available for students. The research indicated, however, that the schools in Group A, which were those with higher retention rates, required more advising and were more likely to require completion of a college success course. Also, School C10 had multiple practices that were similar to those in Group A.

The survey of secondary school counselors and the subsequent focus group provided insight into the perspectives of current individuals who are guiding students through the process

of planning for post-secondary schools and careers. Their survey results indicated that completing more rigorous courses in high school and attending school were the most significant predictors of post-secondary school success. None opined that high school GPA was a useful predictor, and only one selected ACT or SAT score as a useful predictor. The focus group with the school counselors further reiterated that their perspectives, in general, were that student behaviors in high school were the likeliest predictor of post-secondary school success. The group consensus was that students who attended school regularly, selected a more rigorous course schedule, and relied less on adults such as teachers or parents to assist them with challenges were the most likely to succeed in college.

Chapter Four shared the findings from seven interviews with selected community college representatives, a survey with secondary school counselors, and a synopsis of a focus group conducted with the secondary school counselors. Chapter Five will provide the researcher's conclusions, implications, and recommendations for further research.

## CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusions, Implications, and Considerations

The goal of the researcher in this study was to determine how the Tennessee Promise Scholarship program has impacted community college enrollment and retention rates for four years and to identify promising practices used by the schools with the highest retention rates. Stewart, Lim, and Kim (2015) report,

A major issue facing higher education institutions serving underprepared and underrepresented populations is addressing transition issues. . . If students do not resolve transition issues in the first year, especially during the first semester, the likelihood of persisting at the same institution is diminished. (p. 12)

The researcher learned through a review of literature that economic status was the most significant predictor of college retention. Students living in poverty are at the highest risk for not persevering through college to degree completion. Providing services specifically designed to address the needs of students who were Pell Grant eligible (low SES) would be a method for enhancing students' opportunities for success.

To collect information about services available to freshman students, the researcher identified community colleges and conducted interviews. Advising and admissions staff at the community colleges participated in interviews. The researcher intended to learn about required and recommended services in place at each school for freshman students; however, there was also an observation about a clear commitment to a culture of relationship-building at some schools. The researcher reflected that a commitment to intentional and ongoing relationship-building among school staff and students was an indicator of successful retention.

To provide additional information, a survey and focus group with current secondary school counselors provided insight into their perceptions of the most impactful factors that would

predict a student's likelihood of college success. The survey and focus group results, along with the interview results, were evaluated through data triangulation and reported in coding tables. The researcher identified common practices in selected community colleges to discern effective programs and contribute to the literature and recommendations available on this topic.

The Tennessee Promise Scholarship program was developed to promote post-secondary degree and certificate completions for Tennessee residents as part of a larger initiative with a goal of fifty-five percent of Tennessee adults having at least a two-year college degree or certificate by the year 2025 (Drive, 2016). The researcher was interested in identifying trends in both community college enrollment and retention for four years of the Tennessee Promise initiative to determine if more students were enrolling in college and if more students were persisting in college. Further, the researcher worked to identify factors that may have contributed to a higher likelihood of college retention for first-time freshman students continuing to the second year of college.

The theoretical framework considered for this study was Vroom's Expectancy Theory of Motivation. Vroom's theory informed the study via his model of expectancy, value, and instrumentality. Expectancy was the belief that increased effort will lead to greater performance. Instrumentality was the belief that performing well will result in a valued outcome. Valence was the importance placed on an expected outcome. Ultimately, students must decide that the reward of graduation or completion was worth the necessary sacrifices and efforts (Vroom, 1983).

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How were college success practices used in selected Tennessee community colleges for first-time freshman students?

2. What college success practices showed evidence of a positive impact on retention rates for first-time freshman students in selected Tennessee community colleges?

A qualitative study was conducted through the utilization of interviews, surveys, and a focus group. The researcher interviewed representatives from seven Tennessee community colleges. The colleges were selected based on success rates for first-time freshman students returning to college for their second year. Interview participants were asked six questions regarding resources, recommendations, and requirements in place for first-time freshman students.

A survey was sent to six secondary school counselors to identify perceptions of the greatest factors contributing to the likelihood of college success among secondary school graduates. The school counselors were then convened virtually for a focus group to gain additional insight into their perceptions and beliefs regarding secondary school students' preparedness for post-secondary school.

Data from the community college participant interviews, school counselor surveys, and focus group discussions were analyzed by the researcher and categorized into three categories. Open, axial, and selective codes were identified to respond to the research questions. The researcher identified evidence of beneficial programs.

### **Study Findings**

**Evidence of benefits for required ongoing advising for college freshmen.** When the researcher initially developed interview questions, consideration was given to student advising; however, through interview transcript analysis, an emergent category difference developed. The two categories identified were one-time advising versus ongoing advising. The results were summarized by axial codes.

***Mandatory advising with ongoing supports.*** Group A interview participants all reported mandatory advising, ongoing communication with school staff, and other required communication. At one school, a completion coach was assigned to every student. Students were required to communicate with completion coaches throughout the semester. Instructors utilized completion coaches to ensure that students were current with course expectations. Another participant explained that students were required to engage in ongoing communication with advisors throughout the semester. Advisors assisted students in meeting critical deadlines and the provision of needed resources. Based on high retention rates and poverty rates, the seventh interview participant indicated that there was a network of success coaches in place who served as academic advisors and resource specialists for all students. The success coaches maintained updated information on students' participation, performance, and behavioral or mental health issues.

***Additional supports needed to help students become self-motivated and goal-oriented.*** Secondary school counselors indicated that students would benefit from encouragement and follow-through from others as first-time college freshmen. The counselors reported a perception that high school students are motivated by privileges from parents and teachers. They reported that many students desire cell phones, driving, and other material items and allowances. The survey and focus group participants expressed that they observed first-time college students struggling because they lacked the intrinsic motivation and self-discipline necessary to persevere through the challenges of college without an adult "dangling the carrot" in front of them to keep them motivated and driven.

***Optional or one-time advising.*** The Group B participants in the interviews shared a variety of practices regarding student advising. One participant reported that orientation was

required for new students, and they had opportunities for advising, but it was not mandatory. Another reported mandatory orientation, but no required one-on-one advising. The third participant in Group B reported available ongoing supports, but not *required* ongoing supports.

***Summary of evidence of benefits for required ongoing advising for college freshmen.***

When categorizing and coding all sources of collected information regarding the topic of advising, the researcher discovered evidence that ongoing advising for first-time college freshmen was beneficial to the likelihood of persistence among students. The community colleges with higher retention rates selected for the study required ongoing advising or coaching for all first-time freshmen. The community colleges with lower retention rates selected for the study required optional or one-time advising for students with additional advising or coaching opportunities available, but not required.

**Evidence of success and recommendation for college success course.** Through interviews, the researcher learned that six of the seven selected community colleges offered a course or seminar to provide students with instruction in college success strategies and resources. Some colleges required the course or seminar for all first-time freshman students, whereas some only recommended it. Regarding a college success course, the researcher reported the results of the interviews, surveys, and focus group.

***All students or remediated students required to complete for-credit college success course.*** All Group A participants described a college success course or seminar as offerings for freshmen students. For all three of the schools, it was a for-credit course for either one or three credit hours towards a degree. Two of the three schools indicated that the college success course or seminar was a graduation requirement. The third school included a college success course or seminar as a requirement for certain students and recommendation for others.

***Identification of need for college success strategies.*** The secondary school counselors who were survey respondents and focus group participants contributed to this study through their unanimous perceptions that first-time college freshmen should be required to complete a college success course. As a group, they believed that high school students would benefit from training or exposure to best practices for academic success and the appropriate response to the stressors associated with post-secondary education, self-discipline, and goal setting.

***Differing expectations for college success course.*** The Group B interview participants were less consistent with responses to the questions about required and recommended freshman supports. One participant indicated that the completion of a college success course was a graduation requirement for all incoming freshman students. The other two participants, however, had differing responses. One did not indicate that a college success course or seminar was recommended or required. The other described a three-credit-hour success course as an option, but not a requirement for first-time freshmen.

***Summary of evidence of college success course recommendation.*** The researcher noted that there was evidence showing the positive impact or potential impact of college success courses or seminars for first-time college freshmen. All four community colleges with higher retention rates required a course or seminar to at least some freshman students. The secondary school counselors indicated strong, unified beliefs in the need for new college students to learn strategies to transition to college and become self-sufficient. Lastly, the Group B participants with the lower retention rates reported a variety of expectations for completion of college success courses or seminars. Only one of the three participants in Group B indicated that a success course was a requirement.

**Analysis of completion requirements for freshmen supports.** The researcher collected information from interviewees, respondents to surveys, and a focus group on penalties for students who did not complete freshmen requirements. The intentions of interview questions related to penalties for lack of completion of required freshmen supports were an attempt to identify and connect the practices of mandatory supports for first-time freshmen to retention results.

***Consequences for not completing freshmen requirements and recommendations.***

Group A interview participants shared varying responses to the questions regarding penalties for completing freshman student requirements. One reported that completion of a success course was a graduation requirement for all students unless they met certain exemptions. Another reported that a success course was mandatory for students required to complete remedial coursework, which was based on college readiness status as determined by ACT, SAT, or AccuPlacer Test scores. The third Group A participant reported that there were no consequences for not completing freshmen support offerings other than the natural consequences of failing courses or getting behind with coursework.

***Identification of need for student support.*** There was a consensus among surveyed school counselors that high school students were often ill-prepared or irresponsible with school requirements and work. In the focus group, the counselors all agreed that students in high school were generally more motivated by external factors such as privileges and material items. They reported perceptions that all first-time college students would benefit from required training or coursework on transitioning to college, study skills, self-reliance, and self-discipline. The focus group began brainstorming ways to provide students with improved training opportunities while still in high school to better prepare them for post-secondary success.

*Summary of analysis of completion requirements for freshmen supports.* The confirmation of success for penalizing students who did not complete the freshmen required supports was not straightforward; however, there was enough consistency among selected community colleges to show evidence of effectiveness for *required* freshmen supports. The schools in the study with higher retention rates more often required completion of success courses for graduation. The secondary school counselors unanimously agreed that students would benefit from compulsory freshman student support requirements.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

The findings in this study were promising in that multiple practices were identified that are common among selected Tennessee community colleges with the highest retention rates. There was clear evidence that requiring first-time freshman students to complete a college success course or seminar was an effective practice. Also, the provision of mandatory and ongoing advising or mentoring was identified as an effective practice. While the review of literature pointed to poverty as possibly the most significant risk factor for failing to persist in college, one school selected for interview by the researcher in this study showed promising practices for high retention *with* high poverty rates. The researcher concluded from these observations that providing ongoing, personal contact with students serves as an effective method for improving retention rates. Designing efforts specifically for students who are Pell Grant eligible would further enhance the likelihood of students connecting to a school and persisting with their studies.

The schools that reported ongoing advising or coaching with regular check-ins were highlighted by the researcher. Coaches or advisors were working through the stressors of being in a new learning environment with students in real-time. Students served could be struggling

academically, in need of resources such as food or transportation, or be struggling with mental health issues. Coaches or advisors could intervene quickly and effectively before students fell behind or failed to complete courses. The researcher considers this beneficial to the learning environment and the general well-being of students.

An additional discovery the researcher made was the commitment that the schools with higher retention rates had to build relationships with students. Connection coaches and required ongoing advisement were the most noteworthy practices that the researcher considered. Developing personal relationships with students, monitoring their academic progress, checking on their mental and emotional well-being, and following up when a need was indicated were the most promising practices the researcher noticed. The researcher also noted that the interview participants from Group A were generally more enthusiastic about sharing practices and successes. That observation led to the researcher concluding that a commitment to a culture of relationship-building and the nurturing of students through the transition to post-secondary learning was valuable.

The conclusive implications of this study included at least two identified practices that could positively impact college retention rates for first-time freshman students. Providing engaging and ongoing advising or coaching for students was a consideration that any college should make when working to improve retention rates from freshmen to sophomore year. The second implication of this study was the fact that the requirement of first-time freshmen to complete a college success course or seminar was an effective practice. Schools that offered success courses should consider mandating them as freshman or graduation requirements. A success course or seminar needed to include college study skills, training on resilience, goal setting, and instructions for how to access available school and community resources. College

students who lived in poverty may need assistance with responding to stressors that go beyond academics. Topics on how to cope with the day-to-day struggles such as having a flat tire, running low on food with no grocery funds, or accessing technology would be beneficial to economically disadvantaged students.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Additional research on the topics of the impacts of the Tennessee Promise Scholarship program and college retention could further inform the topic of effective freshmen supports and best practices for promoting college retention. Including all Tennessee community colleges in the sample population would broaden the scope of information. Researching the impacts of the Tennessee Promise Scholarship program on Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCAT) would also provide insight into the effective practices and supports of post-secondary students. The researcher particularly recommends researching the impacts of freshmen or first-year students who are economically disadvantaged to determine how the most at-risk students are effectively supported through college or technical school.

### **Summary**

The researcher used multiple forms of data to conclude that certain practices in community colleges were connected to higher retention rates. The researcher identified programs related to freshmen retention that included ongoing communication with accountability for students, mandatory supports for first-time freshmen with penalties for lack of completion, and a commitment to developing relationships among students and college support staff and resources. While these practices take financial and human capital commitments, the return on the investments would contribute fiscally to colleges specifically, and to society, in general.

Up to sixty percent of the jobs once classified as blue-collar currently required some sort of a post-secondary degree (Carnivale et al., 2013). Earning a post-secondary degree or certificate substantially increased the lifetime earning potential for Americans (Education and Lifetime, 2015). Though innovative in nature, the concept of providing all high school graduates a free college education was overwhelming. The researcher's experience working with impoverished, at-risk students lead to a particular interest in the topic of free college for all, as it assisted with attempts to maneuver the complexities of determining effective supports for college students. The provision of free tuition was a giant step toward leveling the playing field for economically disadvantaged students; however, additional supports were necessary if *all* students were expected to persist through college. Examining colleges with effective student persistence practices among first-year freshmen provided opportunities to further the likelihood of success and graduation among prospective students.

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**Appendix A:**

Permission to Conduct Research

March 2, 2020

[REDACTED]  
Director of Schools  
[REDACTED]

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

Dear Dr. [REDACTED]

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study at the [REDACTED] County Schools. I am currently enrolled in the Doctor of Education program at Carson-Newman University in Jefferson City, TN, and am in the process of writing my dissertation. My study is entitled The Impact of the Tennessee Promise Scholarship Program on Community College Enrollment and Retention.

I hope that the school administration will allow me to survey the school counselors from the three [REDACTED] County high schools. I will be collected information from some Tennessee community colleges for the study and would also like to collect information from some secondary school counselors regarding their observations of student needs as they enter post-secondary studies.

If approval is granted, the school counselors will anonymously complete a brief survey and then participate in a focus group with each other. The survey process should take no longer than ten minutes and the focus group should take approximately 30 minutes. The survey results will be pooled for the dissertation project and individual results of this study will remain absolutely confidential and anonymous. Should this study be published, only pooled results will be documented. No costs will be incurred by either your schools or the individual participants.

Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. If you have questions or concerns, you may contact me by phone at 423-836-182, or by email at lgstrickland@cn.edu.

If you agree, kindly sign below and return the signed form to me.

Sincerely,  
  
Lee Anne Strickland

cc: Dr. Steve A. Davidson, Carson-Newman University  
Associate Professor and Dissertation Chair

Approved by:  
[REDACTED]

---

**Appendix B:**  
Informed Consent

## **Informed Consent**

**Title of Research:** Retention Success Practices in Selected Community Colleges During the Inception of the Tennessee Promise Scholarship program

**Principal Investigator:** Lee Anne Strickland  
Carson-Newman University  
Candidate for the Degree Doctor of Education

  
423-836-1852

lgstrickland@cn.edu

**Institutional Contact:** Dr. Steve A. Davidson  
Associate Professor of Education  
Carson-Newman University  
sdavidson@cn.edu  
865-471-3319

### **Introduction and Purpose of the Study**

The researcher is working to analyze Tennessee community college enrollment and retention rates for the years 2015 through 2018 to learn about the impact of the Tennessee Promise Scholarship program. The purpose of this study is to identify practices that contributed to improving community college retention rates by learning about supports in place for freshman students. This study involves research that includes:

- Data analysis of the 13 Tennessee Community College enrollment and retention rates
- Identification of the community colleges with the highest and lowest retention rates for first-time freshmen to sophomore year
- Interviews with admissions personnel such as advisors, counselors, admission clerks, and registrars at the identified community colleges
- Surveys conducted with secondary school counselors
- Focus group conducted with secondary school counselors
- Analysis of responses to interviews, surveys and the focus group to establish most common practices identified to support college freshmen success

### **Description of Research**

- Interview participants will be asked to answer six questions regarding programs or courses in place to provide support for freshman students at their respective colleges.
- The estimated time the interviews is 15 minutes per participant.

- Survey and focus group participants will be asked to complete a four-question online survey and then participate in a focus group discussion with each other.
- The estimated time for the secondary school counselors' participation is 30 minutes.

**Subject participation**

- Community college admissions personnel or advisors were selected because they had first-hand working knowledge of freshmen supports and requirements that existed in their respective colleges.
- Secondary school counselors were selected as participants to survey and then for a focus group because they work with graduating high school seniors to make post-secondary decisions. Secondary school counselors have first-hand, real-world experiences with students from all demographics as they work through the process of deciding post-secondary plans.
- Participation is voluntary.
- Refusal to participate will involve no penalty.
- Participants may discontinue participation at any time.
- All participants will remain anonymous. Community colleges will remain anonymous and referred to as College 1, College 2, etc. Admissions personnel will be referred to as Community College 1 Admission Staff, Community College Admission Staff 2, etc. Secondary school counselors will be referred to as School Counselor A, School Counselor B, etc.

**Potential Risks and Discomforts**

There are no known or foreseeable risks for participants in this study.

**Consent to Participate**

If you have questions, comments or concerns about regarding the conduct of this research, please contact the researcher or institutional contact listed at the top of this form.

By signing below, you agree that you have read and understand the information above and willingly give consent to participate in this research study.

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Participant Signature	Date
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---

Printed Name of Participant



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Researcher Signature	Date
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Lee Anne Strickland

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Printed Name of Researcher

**Appendix C:**

**Interview Questions for College Admission Office Personnel**

### **Interview Questions for College Admission Office Personnel**

1. What support systems are in place to promote freshmen student success?
2. What support systems, if any, are required of ALL freshmen?
3. Are specific subgroups of freshmen required to complete certain requirements for mentoring, tutoring, or other supports? For example, do students with certain ACT scores, GPAs, or other risk factors have additional requirements?
4. What are the consequences for freshmen students who do not comply with *required* support systems?
5. What are the consequences for freshmen students who do not comply with *recommended* support systems?
6. What types of data are collected to determine the effectiveness of freshmen support systems? (Optional: How are data collected?)

**Appendix D:**

Secondary School Counselor Survey  
On College Success Potential

# Secondary School Counselor Survey on College Success Potential

\* Required

1. 1. What do you consider the greatest challenge facing students as they go to college as first-time freshmen? \*

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2. 2. All college freshmen should be required to complete a college success course. \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- a. Strongly Agree  
 b. Agree  
 c. Neutral  
 d. Disagree  
 e. Strongly Disagree

3. 3. Select up to three responses that have the greatest impact on students' potential for success in college \*

*Check all that apply.*

- High school GPA  
 Advanced coursework completed in high school (AP, Dual Enrollment, Dual Credit)  
 ACT or SAT score  
 High school attendance  
 Parent/guardian level of education  
 Economic status

Other:  \_\_\_\_\_

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