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**ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL ADAPTATION THROUGH A COLLEGE SUCCESS  
COURSE: A CASE STUDY OF SECOND SEMESTER STUDENTS AT A  
SUBURBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN NORTHERN NEW JERSEY**

by

Jenny Pamela Marcenaro

A Dissertation

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Services and Leadership  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
at  
Rowan University  
March 29, 2018

Dissertation Chair: Monica Reid Kerrigan, Ed.D.

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## **Dedications**

I dedicate this dissertation to my amazing husband, editor, and friend, my love Angel Manuel Negron Jr., my sweet daughter Deandra Antoinette Negron, and my supportive and loving parents Jose Oscar Marcenaro and Jenny Gloria Marcenaro.

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## Abstract

Jenny Pamela Marcenaro

ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL ADAPTATION THROUGH A COLLEGE SUCCESS  
COURSE: A CASE STUDY OF SECOND SEMESTER STUDENTS AT A  
SUBURBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN NORTHERN NEW JERSEY  
2017-2018

Monica Reid Kerrigan, Ed.D.

Doctor of Education

The purpose of this qualitative critical single case study was to explore how second semester students who took a college student success course during their first term adapted to their second term. Specifically, by focusing on how this course contributed to their academic and social adaptation, and why this course may have facilitated such adaptation and persistence at their institution. Findings from this study indicated that this course contributed to these students' adaptation from first to second semester by teaching these students the importance of time management, changing their priorities, putting their academics first. In addition, these participants learned about college services available and used these during their second term; they became more self-confident and open to ask for assistance. Furthermore, because of the required communication in the course with faculty and with fellow students, the participants became more socially connected. Lastly, these participants learned various academic strategies in their college success course that they applied in other courses during their second term. Included is a discussion of this study's findings, implications, and recommendations in relation to CSS and other college success courses like it.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

The transition from high school to college is a time of academic and social adjustment for students. This transition is complex in part because of the diverse groups of students that arrive on campus with different educational backgrounds and levels of commitment to pursuing a college degree (Stovall, 2000). During the first year of college, faculty and staff expect students to navigate these institutions seamlessly, to understand proper faculty-student interactions, to know their campuses, and to be able to succeed academically. For them, these are set expectations of appropriate student behavior and standards (Cox, 2009).

However, although students are very motivated and aspire to pursue a post-secondary education, and they consider college part of their long-term plan (U.S. Department of Education, 2002; Wimberly & Noeth, 2005), they are not necessarily prepared to meet such expectations and standards. Many students come into college with very poor academic preparation, while also disengaged with the college process. They have unrealistic academic abilities; which puts them at a disadvantage for first-year student success (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Korn, 2007; Complete College America, 2011). These issues of college readiness reach across different student groups, even those that appear to be ready based on their high school records (Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011). Amongst students of color such as Latino and African Americans, who show a larger achievement gap when it comes to first year college success at two and



four-year institutions, this problem is exacerbated (Shaw, Valadez, & Rhoads, 1999; Greene & Winters, 2005; NCES, 2015).

Two-year institutions struggle the most to see their students make it past the first year (AACC, 2012; NCES, 2015), although they enroll 40 percent of all post-secondary students in the United States (Marcotte, Bailey, Borkoski, & Kienzl, 2005; NCES, 2015; AACC, 2016). Public two-year colleges have an open access admissions policy (Bailey & Morest, 2006) and enroll many academically underperforming students (Mechur-Karp, 2011). This population includes low-income and first-generation students, students of color, and various non-traditional students (Shaw et al., 1999; Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). Only seven to twelve percent complete an associate degree within a three-year mark (Complete College America, 2011). More than ever, policymakers and administrators are holding community colleges accountable for their practices and the success of their students, especially during the first year (Bailey & Morest, 2006; AACC, 2015).

Community colleges are aware of these challenges and understand that accountability for the success of their students is at the forefront of all decision making. For that, these institutions are consistently engaging in a variety of first-year high impact practices to increase student success (Tinto, 1993; Greenfield, Keup, & Gardner, 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). “Colleges and universities have invested a great amount of money in retention services (e.g., preparation courses, first-year seminars, academic success centers, advising interventions, tutoring programs, and counseling) in the hopes of retaining students through graduation” (Krumrei-Mancuso, Newton, Kim, & Wilcox, 2013, p. 248). Specifically, the first-year seminar or college success course is one of the

most popular tools used across colleges to aid in the transition and learning experience of new students (Greenfield et al., 2013). These courses provide students with techniques to help improve study habits, personal skills, and learn ways to acclimate to college and succeed (O’Gara, Mechur-Karp, & Hughes, 2008). Furthermore, first-year seminars/college success courses allow students to connect with one another, contributing to feeling a sense of belonging, which results in their persistence from first to second year of college (Friedman, 2017).

Nonetheless, although these courses are very popular there is research indicating college success courses support first-year retention, persistence, and student engagement (Tinto, 1993, Barefoot, 2000, Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, Bailey, Jaggard, & Jenkins, 2015, NSFYS, 2016), there are still unanswered questions that researchers need to address. There is limited qualitative research, a lack of understanding the student experience, and questions about the impact these courses have on grade point averages and retention. In addition, there is uncertainty about how these courses contribute to student persistence and success in college (Barefoot, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2007; Barton & Donahue, 2009; Kuh et al, 2010; Clark & Cundiff, 2011; Greenfield et al., 2013; George-Young, 2013). There are also internal issues in relation to the administration and management of college success courses at two and four-year institutions (Greenfield et al., 2013; Mechur-Karp & West Stacey, 2013).

Many of the concerns raised by the research community on college success courses align with Skylands County College (SCC), the site used for this case study. Currently, the institution’s college student success (CSS) course is in a process of thorough assessment and analysis, as there are questions regarding the content,

effectiveness, and potential future expansion of the course. SCC began offering CSS four years ago. They currently only require selected groups of students within all majors of the School of Liberal Arts who place into developmental English (ENG025 – Writing Skills) to take CSS. Most of the available data to date on CSS is quantitative. Currently, due to SCC's need to assess the course, further research is necessary to show how the course may support students in their transition to college and during their first year. In the long term, this could assist SCC in the decision-making process of a possible CSS expansion that could require more groups of first-year students to enroll in the class or to make changes to the course's current curricular structure. The following subsequent sections in chapter one cover the purpose, significance, assumptions, limitations, research questions, and definitions of this critical single case study.

### **Purpose**

This qualitative critical single case study (Yin, 2014) explored a group of second semester traditionally aged students (under 24 years of age) at SCC who took the institution's CSS course during their first term. The purpose of this study was to understand how these students adapted to the college environment in their second semester. Precisely, I determined how CSS contributed (or not) to these students' social and academic adaptation at SCC and why the course may have facilitated students' adaptation and persistence during their second term. I accomplished this by utilizing a variety of data and analysis techniques. Data collection included review of course documents, semi-structured interviews, and field notes (Creswell, 2014). Following the data collection phase, I based the process of data analysis on a general strategy that relied on theoretical propositions and rival explanations (Yin, 2014). This followed with a two-

cycle coding process (Saldaña, 2013) leading to an analytic strategy of pattern matching and explanation building, as designed by Yin (2014); thus, allowing me to explicate the phenomenon occurred and to answer my research questions.

Ultimately, the findings of this study provide the reader with a better understanding of how a college success course contributed to the social and academic adaptation of a group of students from first to second term. Additionally, through these study findings the reader should identify what important areas covered in these courses students find of most value in their collegiate experience, ways they are applying what they learned, and the reasons why this college success course facilitated their adaptation and persistence, all told by students' own words and perspectives. These results may also assist community colleges in general with some direction on CSS type course curriculum when making changes, when deciding potential student populations who may benefit from enrolling in these types of courses, as well as looking at offering other first-year experiences that can incorporate these findings that may support a diverse student body.

### **Significance**

Despite strong evidence from the research community that college success courses have a positive contribution towards students' first year transition and success, there are many unanswered questions. Researchers are still unsure about these courses' effectiveness and question the type of data that is currently available (Barefoot, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Zeidenberg et al., 2007; George-Young, 2013) My critical single case study is significant because it addresses three major research gaps found in the literature of college success courses. First, this qualitative case study contributed to

the need for more qualitative research available on college success courses that provides a better understanding of the student experience in a deeper way (George-Young, 2013). This has been a problem, as most studies available on college success courses are quantitative, which does not help determine how they lend themselves to student support in a meaningful way (O’Gara et al., 2008). Second, this study looked at how a college success course contributed towards student persistence, and third, why the material covered in this course facilitated student success (Schenll & Doetskott, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Porter & Swing, 2006; Zeidenberg et al., 2007; Kuh et al., 2010).

By investigating SCC’s CSS course and its relationship to students’ social and academic adaptation and persistence, I have contributed to the broader research community on such topic and help bridge the addressed research gaps. This is especially significant for community colleges that continue to face challenges in their pursuit of finding effective strategies to support their first-year students and increase their retention and persistence (AACC, 2012; NCES, 2015). This case study can serve as a guide for administrators, faculty, and policymakers that not only informs how traditionally aged community college students experience college during the first year, but also what to them is meaningful during this time to help them adapt from a social and academic lens. Moreover, this case study illustrated how a college success course fits within this first-year and why the content covered in the course is significant in a students’ academic journey. The findings of this case study can assist community colleges when developing and making decisions on first year activities that align with their students’ needs.

## **Assumptions**

To conduct a rigorous and trustworthy case study on the CSS course, I had to address my assumptions with the course. I have worked at SCC for seven years and I have 15 years' worth of higher education experience in the areas of college admissions, financial aid, Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program, and others. I have worked at both two and four-year institutions with mostly, traditionally aged students. Currently, I am the Dean of Learning Support and Opportunity Services at SCC and my responsibilities are to oversee the EOF program, which provides academic support services for first-generation/low income students. These services include a summer bridge program, first-year experience activities, counseling, advising, and other types of leadership opportunities, in addition to providing students with a financial aid grant. Furthermore, I oversee SCC's Tutoring Center, which provides learning support for all students in the areas of math, writing, and science, amongst a few other subjects.

The experience I bring to this study has given me years of interactions and first-hand contact with first-year students and certainly, I have my assumptions. These include challenges students experience during the transitional first year in relation to connecting with their college, managing their time, and understanding expectations from their professors and their institution. Especially, as the EOF Program Dean, I work with students required take CSS, while also interacting with non-EOF students, some who may have taken the course. However, my role as Dean is to oversee the program, monitor student performance, and their academic progress. My counseling staff works with students on a one-on-one basis, so for me any shared experiences with CSS are very new.

Additionally, to my work with students, I was involved in the early implementation of CSS along with a group of faculty, staff, and administrators. I was part of the early conversations when the course was getting set up. This included course goals and the selection process of the student groups required to enroll in CSS. Nonetheless, since the course's inception, there have been revisions done on course structure and content. In addition, some of the faculty who was part of its early involvement and pilot do not teach it anymore. Personally, I never taught CSS, so I do not have any direct classroom/student experience with the course. Currently, my involvement with CSS is strictly to request through Institutional Research, quantitative data on the course and pass it to the faculty and administration that works with this information for further review. Certainly, my preliminary assumptions are that CSS is a valuable course; however, I do not know or have any data available on how the course is valuable or why it is valuable, which this study helped answer.

To make sure my early involvement with CSS and my assumptions did not influence my data collection and interpretation, I implemented very strong parameters of rigor and trustworthiness. I covered all aspect of qualitative data rigor and used criteria to judge and test the quality of my research design as set by Yin (2014) that included techniques such as construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability. By engaging in such rigor techniques, I was able to present a well-vetted study and minimized any issues or questions of biases and assumptions.

## Limitations

Although this study addressed three major research gaps and it explored a college success course and student experiences with the course, it did have limitations that needed consideration. This critical single case study took place at one suburban community college in Northwestern New Jersey. Furthermore, the unit of analysis was traditionally aged (24 or under) first-year community college students, and the phenomenon explored was CSS, which is an extended orientation hybrid type of college success course taught in an 8-week and 16-week format.

Depending on a community college's geographical area, the outcomes of this study may not necessarily fit the needs of an urban institution or a more diverse age demographic, that attends that institution. Some community colleges may work heavily with non-traditional adult students over the age of 25, which may have a different first year college experience and needs than their traditionally aged counterparts. Furthermore, the way SCC structured the CSS course may or may not resemble other types of college success courses taught at different colleges, which may not be an effective comparison. There are a variety of college success course/first-year seminar themes, which includes extended orientation, academic, academic variable content, basic study skills/remedial focus, and pre-professional/discipline oriented (Swing, 2002; George Young & Keup, 2015).

In addition, the focus of this study was on students who persisted from their first semester, Fall 2016 to their second semester, Spring 2017. These students continued their enrollment at SCC and this study is specifically looking to determine the how and why



CSS may have contributed to their adaptation and persistence. I did not include in this study the reasons why a student who took CSS during their first term did not persist. The focus was on what helped students adapt and persist from first to second term in college through a college success course, not what did not work for them, and/or the reasons why they did not persist.

Lastly, if the reader is looking for data on student's first term experience outside of CSS and other factors that may have contributed to their adaptation, from this research, there is no way of knowing. My research and interview protocol questions centered on students' first term experience with CSS and the relationship the course had with this experience, as these participants adapted to college. Anything outside of that, I did not collect.

### **Conceptual Framework**

“A conceptual framework is grounded in your own experience, existing research, and often, an existing theoretical base” (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 121). For this critical single case study, the conceptual framework relied on my professional work experience, a thorough review of the literature, and two major student development theories that made up the study's theoretical framework. Professionally as a community college administrator, who has worked with a college success course, I am familiar with these types of college success courses and the reasons why students take them. This helped me better understand the phenomenon that took place when I was out in the field reviewing documents, conducting interviews, and reflecting on my field notes. In relation to existing research, I collected and reviewed many scholarly studies, books, and

publications on college success courses. Topics such as college readiness, community colleges, student demographics, first-year experience, first-year high impact practices, college success courses, and respective scholarly theories were included in this study (Tinto, 1993; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Barefoot, 2000; Schenll & Doetkott, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Porter & Swing, 2006; Zeidenberg et al., 2007; O’Gara et al., 2008; Kuh et al., 2010; Greenfield et al., 2013; George-Young, 2013; Friedman, 2017).

Lastly, the theoretical framework of this case study rests on two major student development theories that focused on the constructs of first-year student success and retention. Tinto’s (1979, 1987, 1993) Theory of Student Departure, which looks at the conditions that lead to college withdrawal based on academic and social constructs. If students do not adjust academically and socially to their college environment, their institutions will not retain them. The second and complimentary theory used in addition to Tinto was Chickering & Reisser’s (1969, 1993) Theory of Identity Development: Seven Vectors. This theory also looked at a student’s first year adjustment from a psychosocial lens that is more diverse and fitted for community college student populations. These seven vectors go through a student’s college development process that include new and complex ideas, other values, and meeting new people, while also struggling with their own ideas, values, and beliefs.

Tinto’s theory (1993) was the driver of my research questions and theoretical propositions in relation to college adjustment, social and academic adaptation, and ways CSS contributed to such. Tinto (1993) agreed that college success courses are a great way to assist students in the process of adaptation, which helps in their retention and

persistence. However, because Tinto's Theory did not address in-depth community college student populations, Chickering & Reisser's (1993) Seven Vector effectively addressed that gap on questions that focused more on the social and academic adjustment of the two-year student population and their respective rival explanations. Their theory expands much further than Tinto's, as it looked at other aspects that affect a student's college adaptation process, especially through the eyes of diverse student populations. Nonetheless, Chickering and Reisser (1993) like Tinto also believed that college success courses are an important tool to help bridge new students into the college setting, along with other practices that must take place during the first year.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study. One overarching question, *how do traditionally aged students at SCC who have taken CSS during their first semester of college adapt to their second term?* Additionally, there were three sub-research questions asked that helped answer my overarching research question:

1. How, if at all, does CSS contribute to students' social adaptation at SCC?
2. How, if at all, does CSS contribute to students' academic adaptation at SCC?
3. If evidence exists for the contribution of CSS to students' adaptation, why does CSS facilitate students' adaptation and persistence at SCC?

I aligned each research question with its respective theoretical proposition and rival explanation based on this study's theoretical framework as set by Tinto (1993) and Chickering and Reisser (1993). Having theoretical propositions gave me the necessary

guidance when I selected and approached my data collection and analysis techniques. Conversely, through my rival explanations, I was able to look at other outcomes that may have emerged in my research (Yin, 2014), while still able to answer my research questions. The answers from these research questions provided the reader with a broader understanding of the experience, adaptation of first-year traditionally aged community college students, and the relationship a college success course had in this experience and adaptation process.

### **Study Definitions**

- Academic adaptation – Student’s capacity to adapt to their courses, grades, and invest the most study time while in college (Clark & Cundiff, 2011).
- Anti-deficit achievement framework – Framework researchers can use to understand student success in college by inverting questions that focus on disadvantage, underrepresentation, insufficient preparation, academic underperformance, and disengagement (Harper, 2010; Harper, 2012).
- Case study – Strategy of research inquiry that facilitates exploration of a real-case phenomenon within its context using varied data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2014).
- College readiness – A high school graduate who has the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in credit-bearing courses at the college level without any form of remediation (Achieve, 2016).
- College success course/first year seminar/college survival course – Varied themed courses that assist first-year students in making the transition from high school into college. These courses cover everything from college expectations, study

strategies, learning techniques, goal setting, faculty-student communication, how to access college services, and other selected topics (Greenfield et al., 2013).

- College student success (CSS) course – Extended orientation course currently administered at Skylands County College, the location for this study. The course covers topics such as time management, college expectations, faculty communication, teamwork, money management, available college resources, how to set up goals, and other topics related to first year college transition and success.
- Community college/two-year institution – A postsecondary institution that offers programs of at least 2 but less than 4 years’ duration. Includes occupational and vocational schools with programs of at least 1800 hours and academic institutions with programs of less than 4 years. Does not include bachelor's degree-granting institutions where a student can complete a baccalaureate degree program in 3 years (NCES, 2016).
- First-generation student - First-generation students are those whose parents’ highest level of education is a high school diploma or less (Nunez & Carroll, 1998, p.7).
- First-year experience – Flexible construct that reflects institutional characteristics and history, campus culture, resources, and the needs of students who enter and progress (or do not) through college (Greenfield et al., 2013).
- First-year high impact practices – Educational practices that engages students in their college experience and that includes active, collaborative, and supportive learning environments that are predictors of college completion (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014).

- First-time first year student - A student attending any institution for the first time at the undergraduate level. Includes students enrolled in the fall term who attended college for the first time in the prior summer term. Also includes students who entered with advanced standing (college credits earned before graduation from high school) (Broyles, 1995, p.49).
- Freshman – First-year undergraduate student (Broyles, 1995, p. 51).
- Non-traditionally aged-student – These are students who are 25 or older and who fit one of seven characteristics: delayed enrollment into postsecondary education; attends college part-time; works full time; is financially independent; has dependents other than a spouse; is a single parent; or does not have a high school diploma (NCES, 2016).
- Persistence – Percentage of students who continue their postsecondary education at any institution for their second year (National Student Clearinghouse, 2015, p.5). Researchers also measure persistence from term to term (Noel-Levitz, 2008). For purpose of this study, I explored persistence during the first year from first to second term.
- Second-generation students – Students whose parents or guardians earned at least one baccalaureate degree (Pike & Kuh, 2005).
- Skylands Community College (SCC) – Pseudo name used to describe the community college site used to run this study located in Northwestern New Jersey.

- Social adaptation - Student's capacity to build on campus relationships with faculty and other students and get involved with their institution's social structure (Clark & Cundiff, 2011).
- Theory of Identity Development: Seven Vectors – Theory that symbolizes the direction and magnitude of college student development. Each vector signifies a student's individualized journey and a period of self-discovery and refinement towards self and with other individuals and groups (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).
- Theory of Student Departure – Theory that argues that for college students to succeed, integrate, and persist, they must adapt socially and academically to their respective post-secondary institutions or departure is imminent (Tinto, 1993).
- Traditionally aged student – These are students who are 24 or younger, who earn a high school diploma, who enroll full time immediately after finishing high school, who depend on parents for financial support, and who either do not work during the school year or work part time (Choy, 2002, p. 1). For this study, the participants comprised of traditionally aged (under 24 years old) students; however, some of these students also fit the first-generation and second-generation student profiles – see definitions.

## Summary

The transition from high school to college is not an easy one. Although students have all intentions to continue their education into post-secondary institutions (NCES, 2015), their levels of preparation are very low (Wimbery & Noeth, 2005). Students are coming into college with varied educational and demographical profiles that creates challenges of first-year student success (Stovall, 2000). This, at the community college

level is even more problematic, as students continue to be very underprepared for the rigors of college work (AACC, 2012). However, educators and policy makers are aware of such challenges and are holding community colleges more accountable for the success of their students, especially during the first year (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; AACC, 2015). Many two and four-year colleges are offering a variety of high-impact practices to reassure first-year student success (Greenfield et al., 2013). The most popular one is the college success course, the phenomenon I addressed in this study. Currently, college success courses are very common and used to help bridge the gap between high school and college. Researchers indicate a strong support for these courses, based on some of the positive results they show in relation to persistence, improved GPAs, and retention. However, there are still many unanswered questions about how these courses help students and why they contribute to their success and persistence in college (Schenll & Doetkott, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Porter & Swing, 2006; Zeidenberg et al., 2007; O’Gara et al., 2008; Kuh et al., 2010).

This qualitative critical single case study contributed in answering some of the gaps researchers have found on college success courses. I accomplished this by directly investigating students who completed a college success course at a community college during their first semester and who returned for a second term. I evaluated their first semester experience in relation to CSS and ways the course contributed to their academic and social adaptation. Additionally, I explored why the course may have helped in their adaptation and persistence from first to second term. I grounded my research on the voice of the student, through their experience and observations with CSS. I accomplished this by structuring this study in a way that provided the richest and most detailed information,



so that I could produce the most accurate findings with a case study framework set by Yin (2014). I reviewed documents, conducted interviews, and compiled a series of field notes that produced a diverse set of data. Additionally, I analyzed the data through coding, pattern matching, and explanation building, so that I gained the best set of results.

To make sure I was following proper data collection and analysis techniques, I engaged in a series of practices that addressed questions of research rigor and design as set by Yin (2014) that included construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability. Lastly, this study was set on a conceptual framework founded on my professional work experience, a thorough and detailed review of the literature and research that discusses community colleges, first-year challenges, student experience, first-year activities, and college success courses. Lastly, and most importantly, two major student development theories, Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure and Chickering and Reisser's (1993) Theory of Identity Development: Seven Vectors grounded this study. Both theories described what happens during a student's first year of college and how that may affect their success, retention, and persistence with a special focus on traditionally aged community college students. Chapter 2 illustrated such theories in detail, along with the literature on college success courses that are the foundation of this study and connect my subsequent chapters three, four, and five.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

The following critical single-case study explored the college adaptation of traditionally aged second semester students who completed SCC's college success course during their first term. Specifically, this study assessed the social and academic adaptation of these students within the college environment in relation to them taking CSS. Furthermore, I assessed why the course may have facilitated to their adaptation and persistence at their institution. The goal of this study was to research the course from an anti-deficit framework (Harper, 2010) that focused on the positive aspects of CSS that may have contributed to these student's adaptation and persistence, as they remained enrolled at SCC. Topics explored in this literature review included an overview of higher education, student populations, two-year colleges, college success courses/first-year seminars, and the student development theories that supported this study.

This chapter begins by addressing the research on higher education in the United States, focusing on college readiness, retention, and persistence. Furthermore, a review of the research on community colleges, specifically, on first-year student success and persistence was an area of attention for this study. The subsequent sections of this review focused on different types of first-year high impact practices that addressed issues of attrition with an emphasis on college success courses, the most prevalent high-impact practice across two and four-year institutions (Greenfield et al., 2013). I explored college success courses in this review of the literature through their history, structure, outcomes, and course variations. Chapter 2 closes with the theoretical framework that was the core

of this study, Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (Tinto, 1993). Tinto's theory focuses on first-year students, college success courses, and other practices that contribute to their social and academic adaptation to the college environment. To complement Tinto's work, I applied another student development theory, Chickering and Reisser's (1993) Theory of Identity Development: Seven Vectors. This theory substantiates Tinto's model in relation to non-traditional community college students and the challenges they face during the transitional first-year both internally in their college environment and externally within their families and cultural norms. The last part of this chapter closes with an overview of the anti-deficit emphasis (Harper, 2010) that I used to approach my research and findings.

### **College Readiness and Higher Education**

The topic of college readiness, student success, and retention is a major area of research and interest amongst scholars, educators, and administrators (Tinto, 1993; Astin, 1984; Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Mannan, 2007; Kuh et al., 2010). Most students consider college a part of their long-term plans after high school. Going as far as the eighth grade, close to 80 percent of students indicate college is part of their long-term goals; even half consider pursuing a graduate degree (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999; Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 2002; Wimberly & Noeth, 2005). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2015) indicated a steady growth in college participation rates from students immediately coming out of high school. Between 2000 and 2010, undergraduate enrollment increased by 37 percent with expectations to continue growing.

Although most students leaving high school have college aspirations, their levels of preparation are very low (Wimberly & Noeth, 2005; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). A longitudinal study from 1991 – 2002 on high school graduation rates and college readiness conducted by Greene and Winters (2005) indicated that approximately 34 percent of students leave high school with minimum skills and qualifications necessary to continue into post-secondary education. These shortcomings from high school result in more students taking remedial courses when arriving to college (Spellings, 2006). These figures are even lower for Latino and African American students in comparison to their white counterparts (Greene & Winters, 2005; Spellings, 2006; NCES, 2015).

The idea of college readiness is an issue amongst varied student groups, even those considered more academically prepared. “Getting into college and then dropping out is a problem at postsecondary education institutions, even among students who enter with high school records that would appear to predict college success” (Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011, p. 479). Students today are more diverse than before (Kuh et al., 2006). They begin college with different levels of commitment towards pursuing a degree and deal with many pressures (Stovall, 2000). These pressures include issues of race, inequality, financial stress, and struggles with making social connections while in college (Stovall, 2000; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012).

College readiness is more problematic amongst the community college student population, as stated by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2012). Nationally, first-year student retention at four-year institutions is 80 percent, with a 20 percent dropout rate, while at two-year institutions retention rates are 60 percent

with a 40 percent dropout rate (NCES, 2015). In comparison to four-year institutions, community colleges consistently struggle to see their students succeed and make it past their first-year. The higher education community knows there is a major college achievement gap and a need to address persistence rates, mainly during the first-year (Porter & Swing, 2006).

“Scholars seek explanations, whereas college and university administrators desire to manage their student enrollments by reducing rates of departure” (Braxton et al., 2000, p. 569). Efforts to reduce student departure and to push towards degree completion are common across the two-year sector. The 21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges is a joint effort that began in 2014 amongst six national community college organizations including the AACC that agreed and set goals to collaborate and assist two-year institutions with student retention and degree completion (AACC, 2015).

### **Community Colleges**

Policy makers and administrators praise community colleges for their open admissions and for catering to the working class, as prior academic success is not a requirement to attend (Bailey & Morest, 2006; Zeidenberg et al., 2007). These institutions provide a relatively low cost higher education option that serves a wide student population (Bailey & Morest, 2006; Goldrick-Rab 2010; AACC, 2015). Low income, working class, and minorities have enjoyed increased access to postsecondary education, largely through the doors of community colleges (Shaw et al., 1999). These institutions have a variety of missions that range from transfer services to continuing education programs for working adults (Bailey & Morest, 2006; Cohen et al., 2014).

Clotfelter, Ladd, Mushkin, and Vigdor (2013) described the complexity of community colleges best:

Compared to 4-year colleges and universities, community colleges serve a more diverse population and provide a wider variety of educational programs that include continuing education and technical training for adults, diplomas, associates degrees, and transfer credits for recent graduates. (p.805)

Although community colleges are a very important part of the American higher education system, these institutions struggle with limited funds, time, and energy to sustain such missions (Dougherty & Townsend, 2006). In addition, policy makers and administrators continue to hold community colleges more accountable for their practices, outcomes, and student success; there is a shift from getting students in college to what happens to them once they are there (Bailey & Morest, 2006). The reason for this accountability shift is because student success rates are unacceptably low, employment education is not adequate to job market needs, and because there is a disconnect that exists when students transition from high school to community colleges and into baccalaureate institutions (AACCC, 2012).

Policy makers and researchers agree that community college success must be a top educational priority (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; AACCC, 2015). Specifically, during the first year of college, as it shapes student persistence (Tinto, 1993; Stovall, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Today, approximately 40 percent of undergraduate students in the United States attend two-year institutions (NCES, 2015; AACCC, 2016). This is close to almost half of all students in the country, and as the literature indicates,

their success rates are extremely low. This is a student population that is diverse and complex, like the institutions that serve them.

### **Community College Student Demographic**

As of February 2016, there are 12.3 million students enrolled in community colleges for credit bearing and non-credit bearing courses (AACC, 2016). However, more than 50 percent of two-year students enter these institutions with some form of remediation, due to their underprepared status (Complete College America, 2014). After the first-year, community colleges only retain 60 percent of their students (NCES, 2015). Moreover, these students are most at-risk because they are not likely to get involved in the social and academic infrastructure of their colleges and are not aware on how to negotiate their college's social and academic context (Shaw et al., 1999; Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

The characteristics of community college students demonstrate that in many cases these students have more than one dependent, are low-income, they work while in college, are English as a second language, and first-generation (Shaw et al., 1999; Cohen et al., 2014). These students attend college with a variety of outside personal and familial issues due to their non-traditional status, which affects their success and retention (Metz, 2004; Complete College America, 2011). First-generation students make up the largest student population across community colleges (Bailey & Morest, 2006; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Cohen et al., 2014; AACC, 2016). Other non-traditional students like veterans, adults, and students with disabilities make-up the rest (AACC, 2016). Particularly, first-

generation students are four times more likely to leave college after their first-year and have some of the highest dropout rates in the two-year sector (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

**First-Generation students.** The literature defines first-generation students as those whose parents did not attend college (Chen, 2005). For first-generation students, there is a major obstacle when transitioning into the post-secondary environment during the first-year. These students have no guidance, due to their parent's lack of knowledge of the college process. They navigate on their own through an unfamiliar system, unlike more traditional second-generation students, whose parents attended college and have a base knowledge of the process and expectations (Coffman, 2011). First-generation students that transition into two-year institutions show higher anxiety about their educational path, they have lower expectations of college, doubt their ability to perform and succeed, and fear failure (Cox, 2009). In addition, they struggle with time management, setting priorities, goals, and lack self-efficacy (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005). These students also have other responsibilities outside of college, which minimizes their commitment towards their academics. Non-traditional students due to work and family obligations spend less time on campus in comparison to traditional students (Choy, 2002; Complete College America 2011).

**Other underserved student populations.** Although first-generation students are the largest single group that attends community colleges (AACC, 2016), it is important to address other underserved student populations who struggle with educational attainment and first-year student success. These diverse smaller groups although less in individual percentages, make up together 40 percent of the community college student population and includes single parents, non-US citizens, veterans, and students with disabilities



(AACC, 2016). These students fit the profile of non-traditional, due to their diverse nature and needs (Complete College America, 2011) and fall under the adult student category, which continues to draw the highest gains in numbers and percentages of two-year enrollments (Schuh et al., 2011). “College students over the age of 25 years are a commonplace on most community college campuses” (Harper & Quaye, 2015, p.307). Yet, institutions frequently overlook adult students when it comes to their academic and social integration within the college environment (Chaves, 2006).

In addition, adult learners have unique problems with identity development, having a sense of mattering and validation, gender differentiation, and own cultural background, as it relates to their collegiate experience (Chaves, 2006). This is a challenge for community colleges, as they try to engage these students while also catering to traditionally aged students throughout the critical first-year. The major issue is that there is a lack of resources for adult students as it relates to community college retention (Chaves, 2006). College success barriers for these students include family responsibilities, scheduling issues, and feelings of intimidation upon returning to college (Johnson & Nussbaum, 2012). Nonetheless, two-year institutions are working to support their diverse student population through a variety of first-year experience activities (Barefoot, 2000; Greenfield et al., 2013) that help students navigate the collegiate landscape. It is important to acknowledge that for this study, I did not address the non-traditional adult student population. This study only focused on the experiences of traditionally aged first-year students.

## **The First-Year Experience**

As the literature indicates, the complexity of the community college structure and student population are large contributors for the lack of first-year success. There are numerous reasons as to why community college students do not persist past their first year. However, two-year institutions agree that it is necessary to find ways to help students overcome these barriers and to contribute towards better completion rates by implementing a variety of student support services (O’Gara et al., 2008). Researchers and scholars have scrutinized for decades the idea of the first-year experience in relation to what activities within these “experiences” correlate with student success (Barefoot, 2000). “A first-year experience is a flexible construct that must reflect institutional characteristics and history, campus culture, resource parameters, and, most importantly, the needs of the students who enter and progress (or do not progress) through the college or university” (Greenfield et al., 2013, n.p.). Barefoot (2000) postulated a series of higher education activities that are research-based and part of successful first-year experiences. These activities encourage increased student-to-student interaction, increased faculty-to-student interaction, and more student involvement in out of classroom activities throughout campus.

These recommended activities as described by Barefoot (2000) connect to an already set of best practices that provide a framework for colleges of effective undergraduate teaching and learning that leads to student success (Greenfield et al., 2013). Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education guidelines are the foundation of these higher education

activities, and were among the first ones to operationalize such constructs on first-year experiences and engagement pedagogy:

These Principles are a foundation that encourage contact between students and faculty, development of reciprocity and collaboration between students.

Furthermore, these Principles promote active learning inside and outside the classroom, a timely evaluation and feedback process between faculty and students, emphasis time on task, communication to students of high expectations, and for faculty to respect diverse talents and learning styles. (p.2)

Ultimately, Barefoot's recommendations (2000) and Chickering and Gamson's (1987) Principles lead to student engagement, first-year success, and help establish a clear roadmap for every student (Greenfield et al., 2013).

Collectively, Chickering and Gamson (1987) and Barefoot (2000) encouraged active learning, better communication between student and faculty and more in and outside of classroom engagement that equips the student with effective coping mechanisms that increase their chances of success during the first year. In recent years, this is a focus for community colleges, as they address issues of student retention and persistence. The Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE, 2014) conducts yearly national surveys, collects, and analyzes longitudinal data on individual two-year institutions as it relates to student engagement and institutional practices that help students succeed. The surveys looked at students from a variety of community colleges that engaged in different first year activities versus students that did not. Results from their research indicated that many of the activities students described in their survey

responses resembled those described by Chickering and Gamson (1987) and Barefoot (2000). The CCCSE (2014) survey results indicated that student participation in activities that connect them to their faculty, that teach them about campus resources, and that provide an all-around support system throughout college, leads to better outcomes and engagement. The CCCSE (2014) identified these set of activities as high-impact practices that institutions should provide throughout a student's time in college. A good number of these high-impact practices should take place during a student's first-year experience (CCCSE, 2014).

### **First-Year High Impact Practices**

The CCCSE (2014) defined high-impact practices as educational practices that engage students in their overall college experience. Moreover, high-impact practices provide active, collaborative, and supportive learning environments that are predictors of college completion. The variety of high-impact practices or transition programs, as some institutions refer to them that a body of research indicate high levels of first-year success include summer bridge programs, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, tutoring, collaborative assignments and projects, diversity, and global learning. Other high-impact practices comprise of new student orientations, advising strategies, probation initiatives, and college success courses or first-year seminars (Tinto, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Kuh et al., 2010; Greenfield, et al., 2013; CCCSE, 2014).

These high-impact practices can vary based on the institution type, size, student population, and available resources. Nonetheless, they all play an important role in a student's first-year experience and their potential of college success (Greenfield et al.,

2013). Tinto (1999) encouraged institutions of higher education to use a varied set of high-impact practices that indicate the most impact towards student success and retention. “Institutions that provide academic, social, and personal support encourage persistence. Support that is readily available and connected to other parts of student collegiate experience leads to retention” (Tinto, 1999, p. 5). For community college students, these high-impact practices expose them to the behavioral expectations of their institutions, so that they can meet such expectations (Mechur-Karp, Raufman, Efthimiou, & Ritze, 2015). Conversely, researchers do caution that for high-impact practices to work, institutions must create a collaborative environment amongst faculty and administration, which helps increase new student learning and success (Cornell & Mosley, 2006). Furthermore, students should feel they are part of an institution that is an inclusive and affirming environment, and that clearly communicates expectations of performance (Kuh et al., 2010).

One of the most popular high-impact practices used to bridge students through their transition into post-secondary education is the college success course or first-year seminar (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Greenfield et al., 2013). These courses provide an opportunity for institutions to create more collaboration with faculty and staff and a set platform to communicate college expectations to students (Greenfield et al., 2013). College success courses are the mostly used type of intervention and support mechanism for students (Tsui & Gao, 2007). Additionally, they are an approach that institutions take to increase academic performance and retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tsui & Gao, 2007). Colleges anticipate that by providing students with first-year experiences that include college success courses, they are encouraging their students to become active

participants in their communities, to develop friendships, and to have a better understanding of institutional values (King & Baxter-Magolda as cited in Schuh, et al., 2011). These interactions help students develop a sense of belonging (Friedman, 2017).

Moreover, colleges administer first-year seminars with the goal to aid students in acquiring better learning strategies they can apply towards their studies, resulting in better grades. Learning strategies during a student's first-year are an essential contributor towards improved grade point average, retention, and graduation rates (Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011). "First-year seminars have become the venue where students can develop academic skills and access campus programs in meaningful ways" (Andersen, 2006, p. 21). Ultimately, these first-year seminars and other programming attempt to demonstrate to new students how to do college (Kuh et al., 2010).

### **College Success Courses/First-Year Seminars**

**History.** In the 1880's Boston University introduced the first ever seminar course designed to orient first-year students to the campus (Gordon, 1989). These courses continued to evolve and by the 1930's, approximately one-third of colleges in the country offered a first-year seminar (Gordon, 1989). Yet, by the 1960's this changed dramatically as higher education institutions shifted their approach to working with students as they no longer felt they had to assume a parental type role in their educational experience, resulting in the discontinuation of first-year seminars (Tobolowsky, Mamrick, & Cox, 2003).

However, by 1970 there was a strong movement to get these courses back into colleges. Educators identified a need, as students were not getting sufficient support from

their personal networks. In addition, there were open access institutions that were dealing with underprepared student populations, and for students, process and policies within post-secondary institutions became more complicated and harder to navigate (Dwyer, 1989). The newer iteration of college success courses or first-year seminars, led by John N. Gardner and others would eventually reintroduce these courses back into American colleges and universities (Mamrick as cited in Tobolowsky et al., 2003). Gardner introduced the course in 1972, as “University 101” at the University of South Carolina (Tinto, 1993; Barefoot, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Barefoot (2000) described this movement, which gained strength in the early 1980’s:

Higher education in the United States has witnessed what Lee Upcraft and John Gardner term a grass-roots movement to improve the first college year. At the root of this twenty-year movement are many factors that span a continuum from institutional survival and self-interest to “doing the right thing” for the students themselves. (p. 12)

As the literature indicates, students are underprepared and in need of assistance and support navigating their academic and social environment, precisely, during the first-year of college (Tinto, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Kuh et al., 2010). College success courses became a way to support and assist students in adapting to their college environment socially and academically. Currently, there are more than thirty years’ worth of research backing up college success courses. Betsy Barefoot would be the first person to review and research college success courses, as a graduate assistant at the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (NSFYS) back in 1988 (Tobolowsky et al., 2003; Greenfield et al., 2013). Barefoot would launch the

first comprehensive national survey that year, which the NSFYS still administers, publishes, and uses today for the assessment and research of first-year seminars at two and four-year institutions (NSFYS, 2016). Today, close to 89.7 percent of two and four-year colleges in the United States indicate they have first-year seminars or college success courses (Greenfield et al., 2013; George-Young & Keup, 2015).

**Course structure.** The structure and focus of college success courses vary greatly amongst institutions of higher education (Mechur-Karp & West-Stacey, 2013). These courses differ in how they run, topics covered, structure, duration, and delivery methods. In some institutions, college success courses are a requirement or an elective. Some colleges offer these classes to all students, while others may only be for specific targeted groups (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). These groups may include students enrolled in developmental courses, athletes, at-risk, or students in probation (Greenfield et al., 2013). Two and four-year colleges refer to these courses interchangeably as first-year seminars, freshman seminars, college survival, and college success courses, which either faculty or staff teach (Tinto, 1999; Greenfield et al., 2013). Mechur-Karp & West-Stacey (2013) on their report Student Success Courses for Sustained Impact explicated:

Some are one-credit courses, and some are worth three credits. Some success courses are combined with academic courses. Some focus primarily on college readiness skills, such as note taking, and others take a more holistic approach and include topics such as personal wellness. (p.1)

The themes found across college success courses range from extended orientation, academic, academic variable content, basic study skills/remedial focus, pre-



professional/discipline based, or hybrid (Swing, 2002; George-Young & Keup, 2015). Nonetheless, the most popular one is the extended orientation or college transition theme, which is more predominant at two-year colleges, while at four-year institutions these do vary (George-Young & Keup, 2015). Students rate college success courses with extended orientation themes as highly effective for improving learning outcomes such as improved study strategies, improved out of class engagement, creating knowledge of academic services, and knowledge of wellness issues (Swing, 2002). Other topics found in college success courses with extended orientation type themes include strategies to improve time management skills, personal skills, and other ways to be a successful student, while managing the college environment (O’Gara et al., 2008). For community college students, learning these types of skills and strategies through college success courses is critical in their success, as they have little familiarity or guidance in relation to college expectation and performance (Mechur-Karp, 2011). Students tend to view college success courses positively, as they feel these courses help them build a sense of confidence and belonging that was not there before (Bailey et al., 2015).

Although the literature indicates a diversity in the structure and themes across college success courses (Swing, 2002; George-Young & Keup, 2015), they do share commonalities. “The common goal of first-year seminars is to increase academic performance and persistence through academic and social integration” (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006, p. 26). Students develop academic and social integration by making connections and gaining an overall orientation of their campus environment (Padgett & Keup, 2011).

**Course pedagogy.** There is much to consider when discussing course pedagogy and meaningful impact as it relates college success courses. The approach when teaching college success courses needs to be student-centered and it must put the student as the priority as opposed to faculty or staff. Furthermore, college success course/first-year seminar pedagogy should be engaging and flexible where the instructor is able to adapt to the type of seminar they are teaching (Greenfield et al., 2013). Faculty or staff that teaches college success courses should use a variety of teaching methods, should give challenging assignments, use class time productively, encourage students to speak in class and collaborate, and engage in meaningful discussions and homework (Swing, 2002, p.2). Friedman (2017), Director of University 101 Programs at the University of South Carolina, whose course, University 101 pioneered the research in college success courses (Tinto, 1993; Barefoot, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) encourages professors to do icebreakers, active talking and listening exercises between students, and to run interactive games using current technology. In addition, professors could have students do short online videos and/or to write reflective pieces that display what they learned, how they have evolved, and applied skills learned from the course.

Ultimately, faculty and staff must teach college success courses in a way that is flexible, fluid, and allows students and professors to take on very active roles in the classroom. Through active learning, college success courses allow students to integrate socially, to identify people with similar interests and to feel accepted by others at their institution. This type of pedagogy shows the greatest gains in relation to student engagement and persistence (Friedman, 2017). The usefulness of an applied pedagogical approach allows students to learn the material covered through authentic opportunities of

practice and reflection; it helps students take control of their own learning (Mechur-Karp et al., 2015). From an institutional view, Tinto (1999) emphasized that a connection must take place between institutions that run college success courses and the faculty that teaches them, so that they can be most beneficial for students. “Freshman seminars should be integrated into the very fabric of the first-year. The seminar should not be left at the margins of institutional life, its ideas treated as add-ons to the real business of the college” (p. 9).

**Course outcomes.** The research community has been studying college success courses for more than thirty years. To date, the outcomes at both two and four-year institutions are very positive. A qualitative study conducted by O’Gara et al. (2008) on two northeast community colleges that ran college success courses resulted in very interesting findings. In this study, students found these courses helped to learn about campus resources, course selection, how to support their academic progress, and build relationships with their campus community, which they did not know before the course. Zeidenberg et al., (2007) described a very large multivariate quantitative study conducted by the Florida Department of Education and by the Community College Research Center of all the state’s 28 community colleges that have versions of college success courses or as they call them student life skills (SLS) courses. These courses varied in type and they were open to all students, although in some institutions it was a required class. The outcomes of this study across all 28 researched colleges indicated that enrollment in the SLS courses had a positive marginal effect on student’s chance of earning a credential, persisting, or transferring.

One quantitative study conducted at a university in the Midwest by Potts and Schultz (2008) looked at a customized college success course that was for students enrolled in their college of business. The course worked with student cohorts, specifically, at-risk students. These student's high school ranks were lower in comparison to others that were highly ranked. In addition to the college success course, the institution offered these at-risk students structured advisement that coincided with the course. The outcomes indicated that statistically this significantly improved their retention by 15 to 20 percentage points higher in comparison to those that were not at-risk. For this group, early intervention and additional support through advisement had the most significant long-term impact. Another type of study conducted at a community college, which also dealt with at-risk student populations, showed similar long-term effects. This was a mixed-methods study led by Mechur-Karp et al., (2015) of a community college in the New York City area that looked at a redesigned first-year seminar course that incorporated more academic content, skill building exercises, and applied teaching pedagogy. The results indicated that the course had a long-term effect for the students as it related to educational attainment. Students indicated that they were able to translate their learning into new situations within their academic environment, resulting in a better collegiate experience.

From an aspect of pure academic impact, these courses do show promise. A large four-year institution conducted a quantitative study between students that took a college success course versus those that did not to determine if there were higher GPAs and retention rates from those that took the course. Their findings indicated those that took their college success course, did have higher GPAs after their first-year than those that

did not. However, there were no differences in student retention (Barton & Donahue, 2009). A mixed-methods study at a four-year institution took a much different approach by changing aspects of their standard college success course and adding a “wellness component” that covered topics on personal health, well-being, relationships, and spirituality. The results indicated that students were able to reflect and learn how to transition to college better, to take responsibility for their academic journey, and know that they were in control of their learning (Choate & Smith, 2003). All these studies highlighted a variety of results across college success courses due to their structure and management; still, the literature overall supports these courses very strongly. As summarized by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005):

In short, the weight of evidence indicates that first-year seminar participation has statistically significant and substantial, positive effects on a student’s success transition to college and the likelihood of persistence into the second year as well as on academic performance while in college and on a considerable array of other college experiences known to be related directly and indirectly to bachelor’s degree completion. (p. 403)

### **College Success Course/First-Year Seminar Controversy**

While there is strong evidence supporting college success courses and their outcomes, researchers have identified a variety of issues with course structure and the data that is available. Some colleges that administer college success courses have problems of course administration, curriculum, course management, and student access (Tobolowsky et al., 2003; Greenfield et al., 2013; Mechur-Karp & West Stacey, 2013).

Above all, researchers are concerned about the lack of qualitative research that is available, because it leaves a major gap in understanding the student experience when taking college success courses (O’Gara et al., 2008 & George-Young, 2013). In addition, there are questions as to how college success courses contribute to student persistence and what about these courses help students succeed in college (Schnell & Doetkott, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Porter & Swing, 2006; Zeidenberg et al., 2007; Kuh et al., 2010). Other issues across the research of college success courses point to inconsistent quantitative data results, as in some institutions these courses contribute to student’s improved grade point average (GPA) and/or retention, while in other institutions it does not affect retention and/or GPA (Barton & Donahue, 2010; Clark & Cundiff, 2011).

**Issues with colleges.** Even though post-secondary institutions across the country teach college success courses, there are major inconsistencies in their administration and the types of students required to take these classes during the first year. Of all the institutions that have college success courses, fewer than half require it for all first-year students, although it is common for only subsets of students to take these courses (Greenfield et al., 2013). Furthermore, Padgett and Keup (2011) called attention to institutional challenges of course management and decision making related to the departments that should run college success courses, and issues of identifying and having someone in a leadership position take on the implementation and monitoring of these courses, for sake of long-term sustainability. This is a major problem because these courses do not receive the full attention they need. Padgett and Keup (2011) indicated that institutions report usually having someone within the administration or faculty manage these courses on a part-time level. This type of inconsistent course management

and limited staff commitment makes college success courses very difficult to assess (Barton & Donahue, 2009).

Another major problem is the decision as to how college success courses fit a student's academic curriculum and if institutions should award credit to students that take the course. Stovall (2000) addressed the fact that awarding graduating credit for college success courses validates the knowledge that students gain from the course and helps improve the course's reputation amongst the college community. However, results from the 2003 National Survey on First-Year Seminars illustrated consistent course issues. "In spite of their utility and documented successes, many seminars continue to face an ongoing struggle for credibility. This struggle is often played out in decisions about credit and contact hours" (Barefoot as cited in Tobolowsky et al., 2003, p. 9). These problems continue today as colleges scramble to staff these courses, to determine the number of credits available to award for these courses, and to make sure students have a standardized course curriculum experience (Mechur-Karp & West-Stacey, 2013). For community colleges, this is a major problem because "most success courses do not offer credits that are transferrable to four-year institutions" (Zachry-Rustchow, Culligan, & Welbeck, 2012, p. 48). Even more staggering is that institutions, at times, treat college success courses as add-ons, which explains issues of course survival and the revolving leadership that manages them (Barefoot, 2000; Greenfield et al., 2013).

**Issues with the research.** Although college success courses show a positive contribution towards student engagement, persistence, and retention (Schnell & Doetkott, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Porter & Swing, 2006; Zeidenberg et al., 2007; Kuh et al., 2010; Bailey et al., 2015), learning about their effectiveness is a daunting task

because there are so many course variations (Barefoot, 2000). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), who indicated a strong support for first-year seminars, have addressed the fact that from an aspect of college persistence or the underlying reason as to why these courses are successful remains unexamined and needs attention. The popularity towards college success courses has increased, as more institutions offer them; yet, research to date has not been as rigorous to determine if these courses do indeed help students succeed in college (Zeidenberg et al., 2007). Furthermore, studies available to date have found only short-term positive effects that may dissipate over time, still questioning persistence, graduation, or transfer rates (Bailey et al., 2015).

In addition to questions about the effectiveness of college success courses, the available research is conflicting. Certain studies indicate that college success courses increase student retention and GPAs, while other studies show these courses had no impact on GPAs and/or retention (Barton & Donahue, 2010; Clark & Cundiff, 2011). The literature presented illustrated this in the prior course outcomes section that described several studies of college success courses with different results. As Goodman and Pascarella (2006) postulated, although these courses are vital for student achievement, the research is still in its inaugural stages and additional research is necessary to determine desirable outcomes. There is a need to determine what works about these courses that help students persist in college, which researchers have not addressed (Zeidenberg et al., 2007; Kuh et al., 2010). The studies that are currently available on college success courses are mostly quantitative based and not enough qualitative that would help better understand the student experience in a deeper, more meaningful way (George-Young, 2013). Even the quantitative research that is currently available although it provides a



promising picture on persistence and degree attainment, it is still not enough. O’Gara et al., (2008) addressed such challenges:

More quantitative research is needed, however, to establish a causal relationship between student success courses and positive student outcomes. Yet, what is lacking as well is a qualitative exploration of these courses through the eyes of students themselves. Such research may begin to illustrate how particular course content lends itself to student support. (p. 3)

### **Course Issues and Research Gaps**

Ultimately, there is a need for future research to expand and examine the relationship between student success courses and social skills with faculty and peers, student’s self-confidence, student’s satisfaction with their education, and student graduation (Clark & Cundiff, 2011). This critical single case study situated itself within the research of college success courses by focusing on three of the research gaps. First, by addressing a need to have more qualitative research conducted to learn about the student experience when taking college success courses. Second, by looking at how these courses contribute towards student adaptation and persistence, and third, by determining why the material covered in this college success course facilitates student success (Schnell & Doetkott, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Porter & Swing, 2006; Zeidenberg et al., 2007; Kuh et al., 2010).

This study researched a college success course from a qualitative lens that explored the student point of view and their lived experiences (O’Gara et al., 2008; George-Young, 2013). The research comprised of a group of first-year students who took

the CSS course at SCC during their first semester and who completed their second semester. Precisely, the study centered on how students who took CSS adjusted to SCC during their second term. I accomplished this by determining how the course contributed to these students' social and academic adaptation. Furthermore, the research looked at why the course may have facilitated such adaptation and persistence, as these students completed their first year of college.

### **Theoretical Framework**

There are several theories based on the study and practice of undergraduate education that connect to the literature on college readiness, first-year students, high-impact practices, and college success courses (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Terenzini (1987) called attention to the importance of grounding and aligning the development of academic and non-academic practices within post-secondary institutions with proper theoretical models that study collegiate impact on students. The foundation of these theoretical models originates from student development, retention, and departure themes that include aspects of economic, organizational, psychological, and societal models (Tinto, 1993). In recent times, there has been a push to better comprehend such constructs due to students' poor success rates during the critical first year. Within the research community there has been an increased interest in models and theories of student departure to help explain the intricate interactions of factors that affect student persistence or dropout (Mannan, 2007).

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) grouped these student development theories in two broad families. First group are developmental theories or models that address the

nature, structure, and processes of individual human growth. These models are more personal and psychologically focused. The second set of theories are college impact models, which emphasize change associated with the characteristics of the institutions students attend and the experiences students have while enrolled. These models are diverse, and they explore the academic, social, and cultural constructs affecting students, which faculty and other students help create (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

For this study, I selected Vincent Tinto's (1993) Theory of College Student Departure. Tinto (1993) along with Astin (1984, 1996) are some of the most cited theorists in relation to the research associated with first-year seminars and student persistence in college (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Braxton et al., 2000; Schnell & Doetkott, 2003). Tinto's (1993) Student Departure Theory coincides with other college impact models of student change; however, unlike other theorist under this classification, Tinto seeks to explain more in-depth the college student withdrawal process (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Tinto views this withdrawal process from a social and academic perspective.

In addition, this study presented one more student development theory, Chickering and Reisser's Theory of Identity Development: Seven Vectors (1993) to complement areas of Tinto's theory that needed further research and clarification. These Seven Vectors are part of a group of psychosocial development theories that deal with the overall development a student goes through while in college. This theory involves differentiation and integration as students encounter complex ideas, values, and other people, while struggling with their own ideas, values, and beliefs (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Schuh et al., 2011). Through these Vectors, Chickering and Reisser (1993)

addressed diverse and underserved student populations such as women, African Americans, and Hispanics. These student groups are a majority the population at community colleges (Cohen et al., 2014) including the cases investigated in this study, which Tinto's theory did not define well (Metz, 2004). Although Tinto (1993), made major revisions to his Theory on the second edition of his publication *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, which included underserved student populations and two-year institutions, there was still a lack of a thorough understanding of the community college student. Furthermore, Tinto did not address the adaptation of community college students, as it is somewhat different from the traditional four-year student population (Metz, 2004).

### **Identified Research Gaps and Selected Theories**

There are three major research gaps identified in the literature of college success courses, as previously discussed that this study addressed and that the selected theories strongly support. First, there is limited college success course qualitative research available; leaving many questions unanswered about student's experience taking college success courses. There is a need to understand student perception and hear it in their own words, so that researchers can better assess the outcomes of college success courses (O'Gara et al., 2008; George-Young, 2013). Second, there are questions about how these courses contribute to student persistence in college. Third, there is not enough clarity in the understanding of why college success courses help students succeed (Schnell & Doetkott, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Porter & Swing, 2006; Zeidenberg et al., 2007; Kuh et al., 2010). Although different in their approach, both theories selected emphasized student success and persistence during the first year.

Tinto (1993) focused on this by exploring the reasons that lead to student departure during the first year, highlighting this time to be most critical for the student and their institution. The issues that arise during this time affect their social and academic adaptation. This, if not addressed early, ultimately leads to departure influencing student persistence. He described the need to implement several types of institutional actions both socially and academically that are effective in treating the early roots of student withdrawal, including first-year experience courses, the focus of this study. Institutions that foster the integration of students into their intellectual and social life contribute to their success (Tinto, 1993).

Conversely, Chickering and Reisser's (1993) Seven Vectors, complements Tinto's theory by better defining the process of college adjustment during the first year for the community college student population. Their theory delves into the psychosocial and personal side of the student that Tinto (1993) does not strongly define, but that is also critical to their persistence and success. Chickering and Reisser (1993) described first-year persistence and retention through a process of adaptation socially and academically that includes involvement, connecting with faculty and fellow students, making friends, seeking strong advising, and by being involved with their college. They illustrated this process through Seven Vectors, as the students distance themselves from their past lives, their values, and move onto a different environment.

Chickering and Reisser (1993) emphasized that this process of social and academic adaptation for community college students is more complicated due to their non-traditional status and is more critical in securing their success. Any type of orientation activity around two-year student's schedule must be flexible, as they commute

to campus daily. College success courses are a great way to introduce students to the constructs of social and academic adaptation; however, professors need to teach these courses in an individualized way that will help students practice academic and social skills, while also exploring majors and careers (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). First-year success lies in programs and services that are available for special student populations, like adults and students of color (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), the predominant student group at two-year institutions. “Just as employees need different styles of supervision based on their ability and motivation, so college students need different levels of structure and support” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 443). With these theories as my framework, I was able to have a better understanding when I conducted my research on the needs of first-year students and the challenges they may face, as they try to adapt socially and academically to their college environment and persist. These theories provided me with context in relation to the type of material college success courses should address in relation to first year transition and social and academic adaptation.

In relation to filling the gap on available qualitative research work on college success courses (O’Gara et al., 2008; George-Young, 2013), both Tinto (1993) and Chickering and Reisser (1993) encouraged this type of research and emphasized the importance of measuring student success and persistence by better understanding their college experience during the first year. They all support the notion that qualitative research, along with quantitative is necessary so that proper programming and activities can be set to fit the needs of students. Tinto (1993) described, “the first and most obvious requirement for an effective retention assessment system is that it be student-centered, that is that it taps the nature of student experience and the impact the institution has upon

that experience” (p.214). He specifically encouraged institutions to explore students by their ability, study skills, social background, goals, commitments, needs, concerns, and pre-entry expectations about the quality of institutional life. Interviews, observations, focus groups, and others enable institutions to uncover how students make sense of their experience (Tinto, 1993).

Chickering and Reisser (1993) looked at qualitative research as necessary to understand student growth, especially during the first year. “We can observe behavior and record words, both of which can reveal shifts from hunch to analysis, from simple to complex perceptions, from divisive bias to compassionate understanding. Theory can give us the lenses to see these changes and help them along” (p. 43). However, they challenged the notion of generality in research. Their Vectors give practitioners the option of providing their own understanding and interpretation of the student experience, while giving the student the opportunity of making meaning of their experience. These Vectors answer questions like, what was your old way of thinking? How do you think now? How have you changed? What experiences helped you change? (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Both Tinto (1993) and Chickering and Reisser (1993) not only supported, but also encouraged qualitative research approaches that explore student’s own words. For my study, both theorists effectively guided the structure of my interview protocol, the types of questions I asked, and as I reflected on students’ responses in relation to their social and academic experience from first to second term, while taking a college success course.

## **Tinto's Theory of Student Departure**

Tinto's (1993) longitudinal model seeks to describe the student attrition process (Terenzini, 1987). His Theory of Student Departure adapted from Durkheim's (1951) theory of suicide that builds from Spady's (1970) work, as it relates to the social factors involved in suicide to the phenomenon of student attrition (Tinto, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Mannan, 2007). In Tinto's words (1993):

In using the study of suicide as a guide for our thinking, we do not mean to imply that institution departure necessarily leads to suicide or that it represents a form of suicidal behavior. But there are enough intriguing analogies between the two situations that warrant our attention. The most obvious of these is that both forms of behavior can be understood, in most circumstances, to represent a form of voluntary withdrawal from local communities that is as much a reflection of the community as it is the individual who withdraws. (p. 99)

Tinto (1993) argued that for students to succeed, integrate, and persist in a college environment they must adapt socially and academically during their first year. Failure to acclimate socially and academically results in departure. Institutions measure academic success by a student's capacity to adapt to their courses, grades, and amount of study time. While their social success is determined by the development of on-campus relationships with faculty and other students (Clark & Cundiff, 2011). The types of social and academic activities that contribute to first-year retention and success, and that colleges should implement includes learning communities, first-year seminars/college success courses, early contact and community building programs, and academic



involvement and support services (Tinto, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, Kuh et al., 2010). Milem and Berger (1997) illustrated the process of student's social and academic adaptation within the context of Tinto's (1993) theory during the first year:

As students enter a campus environment, they begin to interact with that environment. In doing so, they encounter new values, attitudes, behaviors, ideas, and norms; and these interactive encounters allow students to explore new experiences and to adopt normative beliefs and patterns that may differ from the normative beliefs and patterns from home. (p.389)

Tinto's model posits that students enter higher education with varied attributes, family and community backgrounds, educational experiences, and expectations. Students bring these attributes into the college's social and academic environment, which in return can affect their social and academic integration (Mannan, 2007). Therefore, the first-year is the most decisive as it relates to student's social and academic adaptation, as it affects their academic progress and retention. First-year seminars can address aspects of student's social and academic involvement by engaging and supporting them upon entry (Schnell & Doetkott, 2003). According to Tinto (1993), first-year seminars or college success courses should be set up like orientation courses and adjusted to institutional structure. Academic topics for these courses should include study skills, study habits, academic preparation, and usage of college academic resources. Social topics in these courses may include social adjustment, social responsibility, sexual behavior, discrimination, date rape, and self-protection.

Nonetheless, Tinto (1993) did challenge institutions that consider only one single method of retention to look at other methods as well. Tinto explicated that institutions cannot retain all students; however, it is possible for students to succeed with existing institutional resources and activities offered that include both faculty and staff. The campus community must be willing to engage with their students. In the context of college success courses, Tinto (1993) encouraged these firmly; still, he cautioned that institutions must complement them with other high-impact practices such as learning communities, orientations, course co-requisites, advisement, and others:

Rather than invest in highly segmented courses and/or experiences, which tend to isolate students from each other and from faculty, foundation programs seek to provide a range of common, shared experiences wherein both students and faculty come to interact with a range of intellectual and social issues. (p. 174)

For this case study, Tinto's (1993) discussion on college success courses and other important activities that post-secondary institutions must offer first year students were very important for this study. Specifically, when I had to relate participant interview responses with the literature, as I began to make connections within my findings and developed my themes. This included participant's responses on their social and academic experiences with CSS, what was most meaningful from the course and any other pertinent information about their campus experience from first to second term that contributed to their academic and social adaptation, and persistence at their institution.

Conversely, although a strong body of research supports Tinto's theory, there are those that challenge it. There are issues of generalizing student success in college,

specifically, at community colleges where the population is so diverse and arrive to campus with so many outside factors affecting their success and retention. Tinto does not put enough focus on community colleges and does mostly on four-year institutions (Metz, 2004). Social and academic integration may be valuable concepts in the retention of students, but scholars must rethink how to conceptualize and research two-year college students (Deil-Amen, 2011). Post-secondary institutions should investigate concepts of social and academic adaptation from an aspect of race, class, gender, and culture (Deil-Amen, 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Many community college students come from marginalized backgrounds that prevent such adaptation to take place. The departure from college based on a student's background may have different contextual meanings (Metz, 2004). Even Tinto (1993) himself recognized that community college students have limitations in their opportunities to become integrated socially and academically, due to time constraints.

Furthermore, not only is it important to look at the student, but also at the institution in more detail. Other studies have indicated that Tinto's theory needs to expand by including organizational attributes that can contribute to a student's adaptation to college and their intent to re-enroll the following year. An institution's commitment towards their student can affect their persistence and academic outcomes (Berger & Braxton, 1998). Pascarella & Terenzini (2005) addressed this by explaining, "Tinto devotes less attention to specifying the nature or strength of the influences of an institution's structural and organizational characteristics" (p. 56).

Lastly, some emergent theory models encourage researchers to review social and academic adaptation from a more integrative socio-academic model (Deil-Amen, 2011;

Stuart, Rios-Aguilar, & Deil-Amen, 2014) and not separately, as addressed by Tinto (1993). This model evaluates the way students feel about their peers and college, frequency of interaction between students and professors, and student access to various sources of social capital (Deil-Amen, 2011). This model considers a student's cultural background as part of their college experience. Others agree that the concepts of social and academic adaptation connect to a student's ethnic background; however, this model should expand and consider how financial and merit-based aid and economic value affects adaptation and persistence (Tierney, 1992; Stuart et al., 2014; Gross, Hossler, Ziskin, & Berry, 2015).

The research suggests that the concepts of social and academic adaptation must consider the type of student, institutional structure, and other cultural, economic, and ethnic aspects that will influence student persistence. This case study considered the controversies surrounding Tinto's theory in lieu of the limited information he provides in his research related to community college students and their process of social and academic adaptation due to their non-traditional status. I accomplished this by incorporating a complimentary student development theory, Chickering and Reisser's (1993) Seven Vectors of Identity Development that focused on the social and academic adaptation of diverse student populations, such as community college students, the focus of this study.

### **Chickering and Reisser's Theory of Identity Development: Seven Vectors**

Although Tinto's Theory effectively looks at the components of why students depart from college and the conditions that must be in place for them to adapt socially

and academically (Tinto, 1993) there is not enough detail on what exactly happens psychologically within the individual student. Precisely, amongst the community college student population that is so diverse and adapt differently (Metz, 2004). Chickering and Reisser's (1993) Theory of Identity Development: Seven Vectors is a revised version of Chickering's (1969) original Theory of Identity Development. Chickering (1969) developed Seven Vectors that symbolized the direction and magnitude of college student development.

These vectors can occur at different rates and interact with others, as students move through college. In 1993, Chickering and Reisser released a revised version of this theory by using language that was gender free and that applied to students from diverse backgrounds. As described by Chickering & Reisser (1993), these vectors are "major highways for journeying towards individualization, the discovery and refinement of one's unique way of being and also toward communion with other individuals and groups, including the larger national and global society" (p. 35). For the diverse community college student, it is important to understand how they navigate their college's social and academic environments so that they can adjust during the first year. Chickering and Reisser's (1993) Vectors are very individual and they incorporate emotional, social, and intellectual aspects of development (Schuh et al., 2011).

The Seven Vectors of student development according to Chickering & Reisser (1993) includes first, developing competence. This vector focuses on tasks of developing intellectual, physical and manual, and interpersonal competence; it is about building confidence. Second vector, managing emotions. Students develop ability to recognize and accept emotions. This includes depression, anger, guilt, caring, and happiness. Third,

moving through autonomy toward interdependence. This vector allows students to develop increased emotional independence, self-direction, problem-solving ability, persistence, and mobility. Fourth, developing mature interpersonal relationships, which demonstrates the development of acceptance and appreciation of differences and the capacity to have healthy relationships. Fifth vector, establishing identity. At this level, there is comfort with body, appearance, sense of own cultural heritage, self-acceptance, self-esteem. All varies based on gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Sixth, developing purpose. Developing clear educational goals and making meaningful commitments to specific personal interests and activities. Seventh, developing integrity. In this final vector, students' progress from rigid, moralistic thinking to more a humanized and personalized value system that acknowledges and respects others (p.43-51).

Chickering and Reisser (1993) emphasized community colleges are commuter institutions that can understand much better their diverse students through these Seven Vectors, especially during the first year. They propose that first-year seminars for example, should include topics on self-esteem, life skills, or career explorations. Furthermore, support for adult and other non-traditional students should provide childcare options, peer advisers, and have other potential assistance programs to complement their experience, so that it can secure their success and engagement. The first Vector Developing Competence signifies greater movement as it relates to college success courses because it contributes to student's enhanced self-esteem and leads to the development of the other Vectors. Like Tinto (1993), Chickering and Reisser (1993) emphasized the importance that not one single activity is the answer to student

persistence and success, but a variety that are a combination of academic and social types. For Chickering and Reisser (1993), this was very predominant and important so that students have the biggest chance of first year success. These activities included student government, athletics, and organizations that sharpen interpersonal skills.

For this case study, including Chickering and Reisser's (1993) Theory along with Tinto (1993) provided me an extended context when analyzing participant responses and their experience with CSS at SCC, as I connected my findings with my emerging themes. I was able to determine if the course may or may not have been the only contributor in these students' social and academic adaptation from first to second term. I was able to consider other factors within their responses based on their community college student status. Things like high school background, demographical profile, individual challenges described in their college transition, college involvement, and college offerings helped me determine if there was a relationship between CSS and other factors that may have contributed to how these students adapted from first to second term.

### **Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework**

Along with the literature presented, it is necessary to explicate the approach I took in conducting this case study. This study had an anti-deficit achievement approach that explored the types of strategies and practices that help students adapt and persist in college through a college success course, instead of focusing on what makes them fail. Harper (2010) introduced the anti-deficit achievement framework to invert the research of black males in higher education and STEM fields by moving from questions of underperformance and disengagement to those that uncover the success of these students

in and out of college. This included family, K-12 systems, and post-secondary experiences (Harper, 2012). Harper (2010) called upon researchers to think about asking questions that move away from examining deficits and to be more deliberate about inquiring as to what makes students succeed. Prior to Harper's (2010) framework, other researchers have also discouraged the deficit perspective that focuses on students' negative characteristics, particularly for the underserved community college student population (Green, 2006; Cox, 2009). Anderson (2005) suggested that deficit-minded approaches that try to fix students and diagnose their needs, defects, and problems are not effective. This case study did not explore the how and why students have issues adapting and persisting between the first and second term, and ways a college success course can fix students.

Instead, this case study explored the first semester student experience through CSS, and how the course may (may not) have contributed to students' adaptation during their second term. Green (2006) encouraged researchers and practitioners to look at a students' positive qualities, potential, and what they contribute to their learning experience, as it can improve their success (Green, 2006). Community college students, although considered in the literature as underprepared when it comes to college adjustment and success show that with the right balance of academic and non-academic support, they can be successful in the long-term and improve their outcomes (Mechur-Karp, 2011). Gardiner (1994) described these students as having a strong commitment to education, perseverance, and determination that if given the chance, leads to their success (Gardiner, 1994). Duckworth et al., (2007) defined this as grit:



Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress. The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his or her advantage as stamina. (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087-1088)

The literature presented illustrates that community college students must endure many challenges in their path of college success, especially during the first year. However, their adaptation and persistence may lie within many factors both institutional and/or personal that may or may not have a relationship in their continuous success, like a college success course, the area of inquiry for this study.

### **Summary and Usability of Study**

First-year student success is a broad and complex topic, as the literature indicated that begins with issues of college readiness from high school, and that continues as students make their way into the college setting. Students lack academic preparation, and this is even more predominant in the community college setting, which has an open access policy (Bailey & Morest, 2006). Students at community colleges are dropping out at alarming rates and institutions are looking for a variety of ways to support them during the first year. Post-secondary institutions embed this support through a series of high-impact practices that includes summer bridge programs, advisement activities, learning communities, and the most popular of all, the college success course/first-year seminar (Greenfield et al., 2013).

College success courses provide students with the support they need to learn how to navigate the college environment, learn expectations from professors, learn how to study, and just to be a successful college student. There is a variety of ways that institutions run and offer these courses. There are orientation themes, subject-specific themes, and others, depending on the student population and college that is offering them (Swing, 2002; George-Young & Keup, 2015). Still, the goal is to assist students during the critical transitional first year. So far, the literature indicates there is promise with the research on college success courses as it contributes to college persistence and student retention (Tinto, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tsui & Gao, 2007; Kuh et al., 2010; George-Young & Keup, 2015; Friedman, 2017).

However, the research community recognizes that there are inconsistencies in the research of college success courses. This is because of the varied way colleges run and offer these courses, as they fluctuate in the way they are administered, managed, and researched (Barefoot, 2000). In some cases, college success courses affect student retention and GPAs in a positive way, while other results indicate they do not (Barton & Donahue, 2010; Clark & Cundiff, 2011). Additionally, there are questions on how these courses contribute to student persistence and why these courses help students succeed in college (Schnell & Dotekott, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Porter & Swing, 2006; Zeidenberg et al., 2007; Kuh et al., 2010).

Nonetheless, researchers agree there is a need to keep on studying and assessing these courses, due to their continuous positive indicators and to determine what works about them. Most importantly, there is an emphasis that further qualitative research is necessary, so that researchers can better assess the student experience when taking these

courses and to be able to measure outcomes (Zeidenberg et al., 2007; George-Young, 2013). Regardless of the differences amongst college success courses and the inconsistencies found in the research, this literature review demonstrated that many student development theories, which explain the psychological, social, and organizational aspects that contribute to student success, retention, and attrition during the first-year connects to college success courses (Tinto, 1993; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

My critical single case study filled the research gap on college success courses by contributing to the expanding area of qualitative research (George-Young, 2013). Furthermore, this study filled the gap in relation to how these courses help students persist and why these courses may help students succeed in college from first to second term (Schnell & Doetkott, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Porter & Swing, 2006; Zeidenberg et al., 2007; Kuh et al., 2010). This study accomplished this by understanding the student experience within a community college setting that enrolled in a college success course during their first semester. Specifically, I determined how this course contributed to their academic and social adaptation during their second term and why the course content facilitated students' persistence from first to second term.

Most importantly, this case study situated itself within a group of student development theories that explained in depth the constructs of first-year student retention, attrition, persistence, and success. Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure and Chickering and Reisser's (1993) Theory of Identity Development: Seven Vectors are part of the theoretical framework that tied this case study together. Both theories provided a better understanding of the constructs that contribute to student's social and academic

adaptation. Tinto (1993) addressed this from a more generalist view, by discussing the conditions that lead to student attrition, if not adapted socially and academically to their institution. Chickering and Reisser (1993) postulated a deeper focus on the psychosocial aspect of such adaptation, specifically, in relation to community college students, which Tinto's theory somewhat lacked.

Regardless of the difference in approach, each theorist indicated that college success courses are an avenue to help students adjust socially and academically, but they cautioned that these courses should not be the only type of student success and persistence activities, but part of a group of all-encompassing initiatives within an institution. By addressing these research gaps through this qualitative critical-single case study, I have made a solid and needed contribution to this evolving and growing area of inquiry from an anti-deficit approach (Harper, 2010). Through this perspective, I explored the how and why these courses may contribute to student adaptation and persistence from term to term, focusing on positive attributes of such experience for the student. In addition, I grounded this study on two major student development theories Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure and Chickering and Reisser's (1993) Theory of Identity Development: Seven Vectors, which encouraged the use of college success courses to help first-year students persist and adjust socially and academically. The following theories and the presented literature in this chapter guided chapter 3. The next chapter will illustrate how the literature situated itself within my research design, data collection and analysis process, and throughout my study's research questions, theoretical propositions, and rival explanations (Yin, 2014).

## Chapter 3

### Methods

#### Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative critical single case study was to investigate a cohort of second semester students at SCC who enrolled in the institution's CSS course during their first term. The research centered on how these students adapted to the college environment. Specifically, I explored these students' social and academic adaptation in relation to CSS and why the course may (may not) have facilitated such adaptation and persistence from first to second term. I accomplished this by using a strategy of inquiry based on Yin's (2003, 2006, 2014) case study methodological approach, which allows the researcher to understand the real world by using different types of data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2014). Specifically, I used a descriptive critical single case study type (Yin, 2014) that investigated a phenomenon and its real-life context in relation to my theory or theoretical propositions.

I used a variety of research methods to gather data that included interviews, review of documents, and field notes (Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Creswell, 2014). I analyzed this data through a two-cycle coding process, and an analytic technique of pattern matching and explanation building (Yin, 2014). To make sure the integrity and trustworthiness of this study remained at the forefront, I engaged in a variety of research rigor techniques set by Yin (2014), which included construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability. In addition, I addressed any ethical issues, my role as researcher, and limitations of my case study in relation to CSS at SCC.

## **Research Questions, Theoretical Propositions, and Rival Explanations**

For this case study, I used how and why questions that allowed more explanations to develop and operational links to rise from the research. A researcher can trace these operational links overtime instead of incidence or frequencies (Yin, 2014). Additionally, each research question had a respective theoretical proposition that represented key issues from the literature or practice and served as the theoretical base for my research design, while also presenting rival explanations that uncovered plausible alternatives (Yin, 2014). To understand the experience and adaptation of second semester students at SCC who enrolled in CSS during their first term, I posed one overarching research question with its respective proposition and rival explanation. Furthermore, I asked three sub-research questions with their own proposition and rival explanation that helped answer my overarching question:

### **How Do Traditionally Aged Students at SCC Who Have Taken CSS During their First Semester of College Adapt to their Second Term?**

**Overarching proposition.** Traditionally aged students who took CSS during their first semester adapt to their second term by applying study strategies learned in CSS, managing their time, understanding college expectations, and by using campus support services. Additionally, these students adapt by being comfortable in connecting with one another and with their professors. Through CSS, these students learned the academic components of college life, how to improve their study skills, be more academically prepared, and to have the social skills needed in a college environment, which contributes to their social and academic integration (Tinto, 1993) during their second term.

**Rival explanation.** Traditionally aged students who took CSS during their first semester adapt to their second term, not because of CSS, but because of SCC's capacity to be creative in an effort to address the needs of their students. Additionally, these students demonstrate grit characteristics of perseverance and interest (Duckworth et al., 2007) as they approach their college experience. They try to stay engaged with the institution, even when facing difficulties. These students adapt by connecting with faculty, staff, and one another through methods different from those addressed in CSS.

### **Sub-Sequent Research Questions**

#### **How, If at All, Does CSS Contribute to Students' Social Adaptation at SCC?**

**Theoretical proposition.** CSS contributes to students' social adaptation at SCC by teaching skills on how to communicate with faculty, how to work in teams, and how to become involved with the campus community. Furthermore, CSS also contributes to students' social adaptation by encouraging students to have frequent and meaningful social interactions with other members of the institution including faculty, staff, and other fellow students (Tinto, 1993).

**Rival explanation.** CSS does not contribute to students' social adaptation. Instead, this happens individually, based on students' demographic, aptitude, situation, and need. Students who are independent, open, respect others, and have a sense of self-acceptance adjust. This informal interaction process takes place with faculty and other students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

## **How, If at All, Does CSS Contribute to Students' Academic Adaptation at SCC?**

**Theoretical proposition.** CSS contributes to students' academic adaptation at SCC by teaching them effective study skills, study habits, supplementing academic preparation, and encouraging them to use college resources (Tinto, 1993).

**Rival explanation.** CSS does not contribute to students' academic adaptation. Instead, this happens individually, based on a student's demographic, aptitude, situation, and need. Students who are open to learning new things, want to develop intellectually, have problem solving ability, are persistent, and acknowledge and embrace differences with others, adjust. This is a type of formal interaction that takes place in class, by grades earned, co-curricular activity involvement, and regulations set by the institution (Chickering & Riesser, 1993).

## **If Evidence Exists for the Contribution of CSS to Students' Adaptation, Why Does CSS Facilitate Students' Adaptation and Persistence at SCC?**

**Theoretical proposition.** CSS facilitates students' adaptation and persistence because the course eases the social and academic transition and teaches students how to navigate college. Through CSS, students have more frequent and rewarding interactions, which makes them more likely to adapt and persist (Tinto, 1993).

**Rival explanation.** CSS is not the only component that facilitates students' adaptation and persistence at SCC. The course contributes to adaptation and persistence by teaching students about college expectations, life skills, and career explorations; however, CSS is part of a series of activities that allow adaptation and persistence. This adaptation and persistence happens by offering support services geared to traditional and



non-traditional students. Things like childcare, peer advisors and other institutional supports facilitate adaptation; in addition, to providing a combination of academic and social types such as student government, athletics, and other organizations or services that sharpen interpersonal skills (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Additionally, this adaptation and persistence is part of a student's personal desire to learn, persevere, and be purposely involved in their college experience; they are gritty individuals (Duckworth et al., 2007).

Through these questions, I effectively focused and explained the intensions of my study (Maxwell, 2013). Furthermore, the concurrent theoretical propositions and rival explanations provided a blueprint that guided my research design and the type of data I collected and ways I analyzed it (Yin, 2014). The answers I gained from each research question allowed me to understand a student's second term adaptation at SCC, and the contribution CSS had in such adaptation. Precisely, I determined how the content taught in CSS contributed to students' academic and social adaptation and why CSS facilitated such adaptation and persistence at their institution. Ultimately, through these students' lived experiences with CSS, I comprehended the essence of the phenomenon, their adaptation (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

### **Unit of Analysis**

The previously mentioned research questions guided this study. Still, case study research design requires an investigator to address and define the actual "case" studied (Yin, 2014). Miles and Huberman (1994) defined the case as "a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context. The case is, in effect, your unit of analysis" (as cited

in Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545). These cases can be an event or entity. They can be a person, small groups, community, programs, and others (Yin, 2014). For purpose of this case study and based on the research questions asked, I defined the “case” as SCC second semester students who completed CSS during their first term. The focus of these cases was the adaptation to college for these students in relation to CSS.

By identifying this unit of analysis, I created feasible limits to my study (Yin, 2014). This precluded me from making comparisons between students who took CSS and those who did not. Additionally, my study was bounded by excluding cases who may have taken CSS but were not in their first year because of probation or because they decided to take the course later in their academic experience. The focus of this case study was traditionally aged students who took CSS during their first semester and their lived experiences with the course. With a defined set of research questions, propositions, and unit of analysis, I proceeded to outline a research design that helped me describe a phenomenon within the real-life context that it occurred (Yin, 2014).

### **Research Design**

This was a qualitative case study design. Qualitative research seeks to explore and understand individuals and their experiences, as it relates to a phenomenon within the social world (Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Creswell, 2014). The research revolves around emerging questions and procedures, which leads to a series of themes that are the result of data gathered within the participant’s environment (Creswell, 2014). I investigated traditionally aged students who completed their second semester of college who took CSS during their first term. Specifically, the study focus was on the social and academic

adaptation of these students in relation to them taking CSS and ways the course may have contributed to their adaptation and persistence. Qualitative designs study the empirical world from the participant's viewpoint, which allows the researcher to assess their perceptions and make meaning of such (Schmidt, 1981).

By selecting a qualitative research design, I also addressed the three research gaps that were the focus of this study. As described by the literature in Chapter 2, we do not have enough qualitative research available on college success courses that help better understand the student experience in a more meaningful way during the first year (George-Young, 2013). Additionally, there are questions on how college success courses contribute to student persistence, and lastly, what about these courses help students succeed in college (Schnell & Doetkott, 2003; Porter & Swing, 2006; Zeidenberg et al., 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Kuh et al., 2010). A qualitative research design effectively allowed me to address these gaps by exploring students through their stories and experiences. This resulted in patterns and themes that generated from their responses in relation to their adaptation and persistence. As O'Gara et al. (2008) illustrated in the literature, there is a lack of qualitative exploration when it comes to college success courses that would help researchers see them through the eyes of students. Such research can help demonstrate how a college success course lends itself to student support.

### **Strategy of Inquiry**

The strategy of inquiry I applied was a case study with a guiding methodological approach established by Yin (2014). According to Yin (2014), a case study investigates a contemporary phenomenon in detail and within its real-world context. Case studies allow

an analysis of a case that can be an individual, program, event, activity, process, or organization within a certain period (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2014; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Yin, 2014). Most importantly, they allow the researcher to understand a real-world case by using multiple data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2014).

Based on the research questions I asked and the data type I gathered, a case study served as the best-chosen strategy of inquiry. This is due to its bounded period structure and the diverse data choices I was able to utilize throughout the data collection process. I only researched students who were first-time freshmen during the Fall 2016 and that enrolled in CSS during their first semester of college and completed their second term, Spring 2017. The time between when these students took the course and when I conducted the research was within a semester period, Summer 2017. This gave me the opportunity to explore and listen to these case's reflections within a set period that did not allow too much time to pass, keeping data contained and relatively contemporary to when the phenomenon occurred. Furthermore, I had the flexibility to work various data sources (Yin, 2014; Baxter & Jack, 2008) that assisted me in my interpretation of such phenomenon. These included course materials, interviews, and field notes (Creswell, 2014).

**Case study type.** This was a descriptive critical single case study. Yin (2014) illustrated descriptive case studies as those that investigate a phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred. Such phenomenon is CSS and how the course helped SCC's second semester students adapt to college that took the course during their first term. As far as the design, this research was set as a critical single-case study, which Yin (2014) described as one that is critical to your theory or theoretical propositions and that

a researcher can use to determine whether the propositions are correct or there is an alternate explanation. This case study was critical because it focused on second semester students at SCC (the case) who took CSS during their first term and completed their first year of college. These students were critical because they were the only ones that could explain how CSS (the phenomenon) contributed to their adaptation to college during their second term. As a critical case, these students were necessary to answer my research questions, determine my theoretical propositions and/or rival explanations; without them, there was no study.

Furthermore, the supporting literature on college success courses described the different ways these courses contribute to students' adaptation (Tinto, 1993, Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; O'Gara et al., 2008; George-Young & Keup, 2015), which put the student at the center, and, therefore, was the critical piece of such literature. When it came to determine alternative or rival explanations as to how college success courses may or may not have a relationship to students' adaptation, the literature, again, used the student as the critical element in such conclusions (Zeidenberg et al., 2007; Kuh et al., 2010; George-Young, 2013). As Yin (2014) described, through my critical case study, I was able to confirm my propositions or develop alternate answers.

**Worldview.** Worldviews are general orientations of the world, as seen through the eyes of the researcher (Creswell, 2014). Yin (2014) based his approach to case study research from a constructivist paradigm that claims truth is relative and dependent on an individual's perspective (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This worldview included social and historical constructs that develops a theory or pattern and that the researcher is

responsible for making sense or interpret the meaning others have about the world (Creswell, 2014). For this study, constructivism was the most suitable worldview, as the students (cases) described their experiences with CSS from their first semester in college and the relationship the course had on their adjustment to college, as they completed their second term. These cases described their perspectives on CSS and I, as the researcher, made sense and interpreted such perspectives within the context of the course.

### **Setting**

The site of this study was Skylands County College located in Northwestern New Jersey. SCC is a suburban community college comprised of 8,067 students with 1,172 being first-time full-time (FTFT) students (SCC Facts & Figures, 2016). The institution offers students the option of choosing from 53 majors and/or 25 certificate programs. Unlike other community colleges throughout New Jersey, SCC has the largest out of county student population that makes up close to 20 percent. The age range of SCC students and their demographic breakdown show they are mostly traditional age between 19-24 years of age and predominantly Caucasian at 58% percent. The colleges' second largest and steadily increasing student demographic group is Hispanic with 21.4 percent of the population. The additional demographic groups that make up the remainder 21 percent of students include Asians, African Americans, and others (SCC Facts & Figures, 2016). The ratio between full-time and part-time student headcount at SCC is very even, 53 percent of students are part-time, and 47 percent are full-time (SCC Fact Book, 2016).

Out of 1,172 FTFT students, only 11 percent took CSS during that term, 125 students (CSS Data, 2017). SCC does not make CSS a required course for all FTFT

students. The course is only mandatory for all FTFT students placed in developmental English and are majors under the School of Liberal Arts, which includes communications, early childhood education, fine arts, graphic design, liberal arts and sciences, music technology, musical theatre, photography technology, public administration, and teacher education. In addition, SCC requires FTFT students who are part of the EOF program and on academic probation to take the course at SCC (Skylands County College, 2016). Although a select group of students must take CSS, the course is open to any student should an academic advisor recommend it.

### **Participants**

This study focused on traditionally aged (under 24 years old) FTFT who took CSS during their first term, Fall 2016 and persisted into their second term, Spring 2017. This included students that were majors under the School of Liberal Arts and tested into developmental English (Writing Skills – ENG-025). In addition, second-semester EOF students and other FTFT whose advisors recommended taking CSS were part of this study. Although I defined these students as traditional, I only based it on their age (under 24 years old). Some of the participants also fit in other student categories due to the characteristics of the community college student population, such as first-generation students (Nunez & Carroll, 1998; Shaw et al., 1999; Cohen et al., 2014).

Once I completed the Institutional Review Board (IRB) with Rowan University and SCC, and both institutions approved to conduct this study effective June 20, 2017, I proceeded to reach out to my participant pool. With IRB approval in place, I requested and received from the Office of Institutional Research at SCC a spreadsheet with two tabs

listing all students who took CSS during the Fall 2016. The first tab provided the counts of the entire CSS cohort, which totaled 125 students. The second tab had the list of all FTFT who took CSS during the Fall 2016 and returned for the Spring 2017 term, which were 103 students. This list included student first names, last names, term, course name, and email addresses, so that I was able to reach out and invite them to participate in the study.

However, due to the confidential nature of this study, I only used the names and emails to reach out to students, but not to identify them. I created a pseudo name for each participant -See Table 3 that I used in all the data collection and analysis process. To invite students to participate in this study, I sent out two rounds of email invitations to the 103 students who took CSS during the Fall 2016 and returned Spring 2017. To incentivize responses, I offered students a \$10.00 Starbucks gift card to participate in the study. The first email communication went out on July 5, 2017, which produced 6 responses. I sent out a second email reminder on July 11, 2017, which would produce 5 more responses. In total, 11 students responded to my study invitation. However, I had to disqualify one student because she was over 24 years of age and already had one year of college completed, Fall 2016 was not her first semester. Ultimately, 10 students participated in the study, who were FTFT during the Fall 2016 and returned for the Spring 2017 term. Each participant at the end of their interviews received a \$10.00 Starbucks gift card, for their time.

The participants were all under 24 years of age and very diverse in their demographic backgrounds, gender, majors, and student types, which provided a broad group who gave a variety of perspectives with their experience taking CSS. The group



included male and female students, first-generation and second-generation students, and majors that ranged from business administration, international studies, art, nursing, engineering science, and exercise science. Furthermore, demographically the group was comprised of Caucasian, Latino, and African American students. The selection of this case was a purposeful sample, which selected participants based on certain criteria and for a reason or purpose (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). These are small samples of people (Miles et al., 2014). The specific criteria for this purposeful sample was FTFT students who took CSS during their first semester Fall 2016 and returned for a second term, Spring 2017. Yin (2014) posits that purposive sampling in case study research reflects the selection of a case that effectively illuminates my theoretical propositions.

My theoretical propositions identified CSS as an important component of their adaptation to the college environment, both socially and academically, which contributed to their successful college adaptation process. Nonetheless, Yin (2014) emphasized that in case study research the use of the word sample for a case can be misleading, leading some to believe the “case” may be a large population group. This is a widely used practice in quantitative research that draws from samples of people (Miles, et al., 2014). Therefore, based on the distinction that this was a qualitative single critical case study, which was critical to my theory and theoretical propositions (Yin, 2014), I used a critical case sample (Miles, et al., 2014). As Yin (2014) demonstrated,

The theory should have specified a clear set of circumstances within which its propositions are believed to be true. The single case then can be used to determine whether the propositions are correct or whether some alternative set of explanations might be more relevant. (p. 51)

**Critical case sampling.** This sampling strategy proves or exemplifies the main findings and can make the point quite dramatically (Patton, 2002; Miles, et al., 2014). Critical case sampling yields the most information and provides the greatest impact on the development of knowledge (Patton, 2002). I investigated second semester students who took a college success course during their first term. They were critical and necessary, so that I was able to gather the essence of their experience with CSS. They were the only ones who could provide information on how the course served them during their first semester of college and continued to serve them socially and academically during their second term. This also allowed me to develop logical generalizations, based on the rich data I gathered from a small group of critical cases.

### **Data Collection and Instrumentation**

Case study research allows data collection to be very methodologically eclectic, as described by Rossman and Rallis (2012). This lets the researcher use a variety of data collection techniques or as Yin (2014) calls these “sources of evidence” (p.105). Case study research can use multiple sources of evidence that includes documents, open-ended interviews, focus groups, archival records, observations, and others (Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Yin, 2014; Creswell, 2014; Miles, et al., 2014). In addition, corresponding with data collection, the researcher must also indicate the type of instruments used in this process. This includes how a researcher is writing notes, type of notes, if audio or video recording is taking place, and transcription methods (Miles, et al., 2014).

My goal was to understand how students experienced CSS at SCC. Therefore, I had to collect and analyze data in a variety of ways. First, I needed to learn about the

course itself and its structure, through the review of different documents such as course curriculum, textbook used, outcomes assessment, and course syllabus. This served as the foundation of my data, so when I interviewed my cases, I had a sense of what the course was about. Second, I had to hear about CSS through student's voices, so that I could interpret their experience and make sense of it. This is where interviews provided the richest and most detailed information (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Third, as I reviewed documents and gathered interview results, I simultaneously reflected and commented on my findings from the field (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). This reassured that I had a place where I could reflect on what I had reviewed from documents and heard through the interviews that provided further insight from the data.

In brief, qualitative researchers normally gather multiple forms of data that they review, make sense of it, and organize it so that they can make inferences based on common themes found across all data sources (Creswell, 2014). Using varied sources of information produced more convincing and accurate results (Yin, 2014) for my case study.

**Pilot study.** The types of data techniques I proposed in this section and the instrumentation I used resulted from a pilot study I conducted two years ago on CSS. Yin (2014) encouraged pilot case studies, as it assists the researcher in developing relevant questions, while even providing research design conceptual clarification. These pilot tests preferably occur before final IRB approval. This pilot study served as a "laboratory" role that allowed me to observe different phenomena from varied angles, while trying different approaches (Yin, 2014). SCC was the site of this pilot. The study comprised of four semi-structured student interviews. These students were part of the EOF program

and required to take CSS during their first semester, Fall 2014. The goal of the pilot was to inquire about their experience with CSS during their first year and how they implemented strategies learned from the course in their adaptation to the college environment, as second year student. The pilot questionnaire comprised of eight questions and each interview lasted about 20 minutes. In addition to interviews, other data collection methods included graphic elicitations and field notes.

The data gathered from this pilot study helped inform and adjust my case study in three different ways. First, by having a need to expand my participant pool. During the pilot test, I only interviewed traditional (under 24 years of age), first-generation EOF students required to take CSS. This was a limited group of participants because they were all part of the same program, EOF. To expand the breadth of this case study and truly gain a diverse set of perspectives on the CSS experience, it was necessary to include any traditionally aged student who took CSS during their first semester EOF and non-EOF. Second, my original data collection methods included interviews, graphic elicitations, and field notes. Although the interviews and graphic elicitations provided interesting insight, through my field notes and observations I realized that as I asked questions and interacted with participants, I still had very limited knowledge on CSS. Instead of including graphic elicitations, which did not provide as rich information as interviews did, I realized I had to substantiate my data collection methods with documents. This reassured that I had a strong foundational background on CSS, as I collected data in the field and interviewed students. Third, my interview protocol comprised of eight questions, which were very limited. For me to have a better understanding of the CSS student experience from first semester to second semester, I had to expand my questions,

provide prompts, and edit the language in a way that aligned with student's simpler vocabulary. Some questions during the pilot interviews needed clarification, so I adjusted these accordingly for this study.

**Documents.** For case study research, the purpose of documents is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources. Documents are very effective in understanding structure of an organization, names, and other information that can assist when going out in the field to gather data. These can be letters, emails, diaries, journals, reports, administrative documents, formal studies, or evaluations (Yin, 2014; Creswell, 2014). Consequently, prior to conducting student interviews, I had to understand the structure of CSS and content the course covered. The goal was to have a strong foundational background on CSS, so when I interviewed students, which was the main and most meaningful part of my data collection methods, I was prepared and knew the course well. I began by reviewing the SCC course catalog, SCC website, CSS syllabus, and CSS outcomes assessments. In addition, I accessed the course's Blackboard content, so I had a better understanding of its hybrid structure. Some of the documents I accessed were public like CSS information on the SCC website and course catalog.

However, to access course documents that were not public like outcomes assessments, course syllabus, and CSS Blackboard course shell, I had to contact via email with the Languages and ESL Department Chair, who is currently managing the CSS course to ask for access to this information with IRB approval, which he granted and provided. During my email conversation with the Languages and ESL Chair, I explained my intentions and gained permission to internal course documents (Rossman & Rallis, 2012), while I also offered to address any questions or concerns prior to me entering the

field, which the Department Chair did not have. It was very important that I approached this process in a transparent manner, as these individuals serve as critical friends (Rossman & Rallis, 2012) that assisted me when I reviewed the data collected from the course. Their experience and feedback helped strengthen my study.

With all this preliminary document data, I took notes, and looked for pertinent information in relation to my research questions, theoretical propositions, and rival explanations. Primarily, this was my data foundation for CSS prior to interviewing participants. I learned about the structure and history of CSS, course management, and outcomes of the course from an administrative end. Additionally, I gained some general ideas about the structure of CSS. This foundation of knowledge was the onset of the data collection process that was of assistance when I was out in the field interviewing students about the course. Yin (2014) postulates that a researcher must do preliminary data triangulation to seek promising patterns and concepts.

**Interviews.** The purpose of interviewing is to elicit the participant's worldview and for it to be a conversation with a purpose (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Interviewing is the hallmark of qualitative research and viewed as essential for understanding how participants view their worlds. These provide a deeper understanding that develops through a dialog process that creates a co-construct meaning between participant and interviewer (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Rubin and Rubin (2012) described there are four categories of qualitative interviewing. These are focus groups, internet interviews, casual conversations and in-passing clarifications, and semi-structured and unstructured interviews. For this study, I used a semi-structured interview approach that allowed me to learn from students about their experience with CSS during their first semester of college

and how they adapted to their second term. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to learn about a specific topic through a series of preset questions with the flexibility to ask follow-up questions, if necessary (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Prior to beginning the interview process, I required participant to sign a consent form that allowed me to record him or her, so that I gathered all the necessary details of their experience. Participants had the option to opt out from the interview at any time, if they chose to or if they did not want to sign the consent form. Once the participants signed the form, I proceeded to review an introductory statement of the study, its content and further instructions. With those steps completed, I conducted the interviews, based on a set interview protocol (Creswell, 2014).

*Case study interview protocol.* Yin (2014) considered an interview protocol to be a case study “instrument.” Yin (2014) described protocol questions as queries that help and remind researchers of the information that they need to collect and why; this is to keep researchers on track. Based on my methodological case study approach, I structured my interview protocol to meet Yin’s (2014) five levels of questions, with a focus on levels one and two. Level one began with a series of four questions that allowed me to know each case and to gather introductory background information. These were specific questions for each interviewee. Level two contained specific questions based on this case study that addressed each one of my research questions in detail. I then concluded the interviews with follow-up questions, when it was necessary in case I needed clarification or to expand on anything the participants said (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Level three was not applicable to my single case study, as the researcher needs to include this when only conducting a multiple-case study design. Yin (2014), emphasized, level one and two should be what the researcher needs to concentrate in a single case study design. Level four and five questions are broader in nature and go beyond the scope of the study. Again, for purpose of my single case study design and research questions, I did not ask anything that went beyond learning from students about CSS; therefore, only focusing on levels one and two questions. Refer to Table 1 – page 82, which illustrated the alignment of my research questions with interview questions and respective theoretical framework used, interview consent form, and interview protocol.



Table 1

*Interview Protocol Alignment with Critical Case Study Research Design Structure and Theoretical Framework*

| Yin's (2014)<br>Levels of<br>Questions | Interview Question<br>= IQ | Overarching Research<br>Question = ORQ<br><br>Research Question =<br>RR | Theoretical<br>Framework<br><br>Tinto (1993) = T<br><br>Chickering & Reisser<br>(1993) = CR |
|--|----------------------------|---|---|
| Level 1                                | IQ 1 – IQ 5                | ORQ, RQ1, RQ2,<br>RQ3   | T, CR   |
| Level 2                                | IQ 6                       | ORQ, RQ1, RQ2,<br>RQ3   | T, CR   |
| Level 2                                | IQ 7                       | ORQ, RQ3  | T, CR   |
| Level 2                                | IQ 8                       | ORQ, RQ1, RQ2,<br>RQ3   | T, CR   |
| Level 2                                | IQ 9                       | ORQ, RQ1, RQ2,<br>RQ3   | T, CR   |
| Level 2                                | IQ10                       | RQ1, RQ2, RQ3   | T   |
| Level 2                                | IQ 11                      | RQ1, RQ2, RQ3   | T   |
| Level 2                                | IQ 12                      | RQ1, RQ2, RQ3   | T   |
| Level 2                                | IQ 13                      | ORQ, RQ1  | T, CR   |
| Level 2                                | IQ14                       | ORQ, RQ2  | T, CR   |
| Level 2                                | IQ 15                      | ORQ, RQ3  | T   |
| Level 2                                | IQ 16                      | ORQ, RQ1, RQ2,<br>RQ3   | T   |
| Level 2                                | IQ 17                      | ORQ, RQ3  | T, CR   |
| Level 2                                | IQ 18                      | ORQ, RQ3  | CR  |
| Level 2                                | IQ 19                      | ORQ, RQ1, RQ2,<br>RQ3   | T, CR   |
| Level 2                                | IQ 20                      | ORQ, RQ1, RQ2,<br>RQ3   | T, CR   |

**Field notes.** These were my observations and comments from the field (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Yin (2014) postulated that in case study research it is critical to use some type of database to organize and document data that the researcher collects in the investigation process. This helps the researcher order and separate their information, so that they can make better sense of it. For case studies, field notes are the most common component of a database (Yin, 2014). For my critical single case study, at first, I wrote my field notes in a note pad as I researched documents and conducted interviews. At first researchers, usually take raw field notes by hand in the study setting (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Within a day, I transferred these notes into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet that contained the following fields: interviewee pseudo name, date, major, field note summary, common words identified, and reflections. In addition, I used the documents that I had researched for this case study prior to conducting my interviews as a supplement to my interview data. The goal of my field notes was to capture what transpired during the interview, documenting feelings, observations, and anything that I did not captured while interviewing participants.

Ultimately, I used a varied set of data collection methods that allowed me to understand the essence of the student experience with CSS by recording feelings, observations, and anything that went beyond all the information I gathered from CSS documents and participant interviews. Field notes become usable when researchers transcribe these into a computer and by adding commentary. I accomplished this within a day, so that all memories were fresh, and I could explain more details (Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis in qualitative research works in two levels. First, it is a more general data analysis process, and second, the analysis is deeper and aligned with one specific type of qualitative research design (Creswell, 2014). For case studies, this involves a detailed description of the environment and individuals, which then the researcher follows it by identifying themes or issues (Stake, 2006). For this critical single case study that used a methodological approach set by Yin (2014), I began at the first level with categorizing and combining data that produced promising patterns or concepts (Yin, 2014). I used this time to organize and prepare my data for analysis (Creswell, 2014). In this process, I transcribed my interviews, optically scanned material, and finalized my field notes and reflections. I then looked for certain preliminary themes or made some early interpretations. As Yin (2014) stated, a helpful starting point in case study data analysis is to “play” with your data.

## **General Strategy for Analysis**

With my data organized, I moved towards a general strategy to my research that relied on theoretical propositions (Yin, 2014). Theoretical propositions identify key issues within the literature and the theories that support the overarching nature and design of a study. A researcher aligns these propositions with every research question set in a study (Yin, 2014). Between my propositions and early data interpretations, I began to see if there were early indicators of alignment between the data I gathered from CSS documents and first-semester student interviews conducted, and the literature and theory on college success courses. As my theoretical propositions indicated, college success

courses help students adapt to the college environment during the first year with the first semester being the most critical in this transition process. Students connect with one another and with their professors, learn better study strategies, and seek support services available within their institutions. This is a process of social and academic integration (Tinto, 1993; Swing, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011; Padget & Keup, 2011; Greenfield et al., 2013). Relying on my theoretical propositions created a foundation that guided the analytic techniques that I used to analyze my data, which included pattern matching and explanation building (Yin, 2014). However, before I could apply such analytic techniques, I had to first analyze my data through a two-cycle coding process that uncovered themes and patterns (Saldaña, 2013).

**Coding.** Coding provides a symbolic meaning to information gathered during a study (Miles, et al., 2014). The coding process involves taking text data that the investigator gathers in the field, puts into categories, and then labels with a term (Creswell, 2014). Based on my interview transcripts and field notes, I made sense and understood CSS and its relationship to students' academic and social adaptation through repetitive words or phrases, which resulted in patterns and meaning (Mills, 2003).

***First-cycle of coding.*** To start, I used descriptive coding to identify basic topics and descriptions through a simple word or short phrase (Saldaña, 2013). This assisted me in finding any set of common words or scenarios that students identified in their experience, while taking CSS. It provided me with early direction and categories, based on potential trends or differences that emerged from students' assessment of the course. Simultaneously, I used In Vivo, because this coding method allows the researcher to understand student experiences in their own words; it honors the participant's voice

(Saldaña, 2013). In Vivo complemented the descriptive codes by giving each one some meaning, based on the student's perspective. I achieved this during a first-cycle of coding that produced data chunks (Saldaña, 2013). Descriptive coding summarized the data with one word, while In Vivo identified short words and phrases in relation to the phenomenon (Miles, et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2013). This effectively helped me identify and highlight different aspects of CSS and the way it worked for students socially and academically.

***Second-cycle of coding.*** The second cycle of coding was a pattern code, which generated categories, themes, patterns, or determined relationships. This type of coding method searches for rules, causes, and explanations (Miles, et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2013). Pattern coding assisted my first cycle by narrowing down the most meaningful codes that led to preliminary themes and patterns based on my research questions. These themes described how students who took CSS adapted to college, how the course connected to such adaptation from a social and academic lens, and why the course was significant to their adaptation and persistence from first to second term.

**Qualitative codebook.** To analyze and keep codes that emerged from my research on CSS, I compiled a qualitative codebook. Codebooks provide a master list of codes, labels, definitions, and gives clarity as to when to use a code or when not to use it. Codebooks are evolving documents that develop and change over time as a study analysis takes place (Creswell, 2014). For this case study, I created a codebook in a Microsoft Office Word document that was set in a table format with headings that included code number, code type, chosen code, definition, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and quote from interview transcript that related to the code. Keeping a running list of codes allowed me

to move from first to second cycle of coding in a way that was accurate and orderly, as I analyzed interview transcripts and documents on CSS. Once I completed the coding process, I moved to my next step in the data analysis process, my analytic techniques.

### **Analytic Techniques**

**Pattern matching.** This technique allowed me to compare my coding findings and early themes with my theoretical propositions and rival explanations to determine similarities or differences (Yin, 2014). Trochim (1989) posited that pattern matching logic was based on case study findings. This included my coding themes, my early predictions made before collecting data (or with other alternative predictions), my theoretical propositions, or rival explanations (as cited in Yin, 2014). In descriptive case studies, pattern matching is relevant, if the researcher defined predictive patterns prior to data collection (Yin, 2014), which I included in this study. With a comparison set, I proceeded to generate concise themes from my findings. As described by Rossman and Rallis (2012), “a theme is a declarative phrase or sentence describing a pattern, a process, a connection, or an insight” (p. 277). With my emerged themes set, I completed my final data analysis phase, explanation building (Yin, 2014).

**Explanation building.** With my identified patterns and themes, I built an explanation about the case (Yin, 2014). To explain a phenomenon means the researcher should specify a presumed set of causal links about it and how/why, this phenomenon happened (Yin, 2014). I was able to explain the alignment of my theoretical propositions in comparison to my analyzed data. Additionally, explanation building provided me the opportunity, if necessary, to revise my propositions and to compare any other details of

my case study against such revisions (Yin, 2014). Lastly, through this process, I evaluated my data results, and if there was a revised explanation based on my findings, I could consider it for future case study research on college success courses (Yin, 2014).

### **Data Management**

In the process of data organization and analysis, it was necessary to identify how I was going to secure and place all the data collected. Data comes from several sources, cases, or sites and it must be easily accessible, backed up, secured, and easy to analyze (Miles, et al., 2014). Because I reviewed documents, interviewed cases, and wrote field notes, I needed to have a centralized location that I could access all this information in a summary base. First, I created one main folder in Microsoft's One Drive personal/password protected cloud system labeled Research Data. Within this folder, I had identified three separate sub-folders labeled, CSS documents, interview transcripts, and field notes. Each sub-folder contained respective information for each data collection method and was the place where I stored all raw documents from the field.

With the data available from these folders, I created one master Excel password-protected spreadsheet file with a series of tabs. Tab 1 had all the condensed data gathered and it included the participant's pseudo name, date, major, field note summary, common words identified, and my reflections. Tab two comprised of my master codebook. One single master document for a one-person qualitative study that is your one working file is highly recommended (Miles, et al., 2014). In addition to all the raw and analyzed data I placed into the cloud system, I also backed up this information in a password protected laptop computer that had face recognition technology to log in, as a double security

feature, which I housed in a secure location. The goal was to have the data backed up in several places to reassure its security and access, while still maintaining confidentiality.

### **Case Study Rigor**

In qualitative research, the investigator can uncover the truth of a phenomenon from the discovery of human experiences as to how the participants lived and perceived them (Krefting, 1991; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Conversely, for the researcher, it is their responsibility to reveal and present these experiences, as adequately as possible by testing their findings against where they drew the data from or with persons that are familiar with the phenomenon (Krefting, 1991). Through this critical single case study on CSS, I collected course documents, interviewed student cases, and reflected on such data gathered through my field notes. This moved through a process of data analysis that included coding, pattern matching, and explanation building, which allowed me to make inferences, answer my study's research questions, and address my theoretical propositions and/or rival explanations.

Throughout this process of data collection and analysis, I engaged in various qualitative rigor techniques. A researcher that incorporates multiple types of validity strategies will help enhance the accuracy of their findings and convince the reader of that accuracy (Creswell, 2014). According to Yin (2014), there are four types of criteria a researcher must apply to reassure a case study's quality and design. This includes construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability, all addressed in the subsequent sections.



**Construct validity.** Construct validity is the correct operational measure for concepts presented in a study that includes tactics such as using multiple sources of evidence, establishing of a chain of events, and having key informants review the proposed case study (Yin, 2014). In this critical single case study, I used multiple sources of evidence. This included course documents as my foundation to learn about CSS and its course structure, interview transcripts to understand the student experience with CSS, and my field notes, which were my reflections and observations from my documents reviewed and interviews conducted. The goal was to triangulate my data by looking at different data sources at multiple points in time to help build solid evidence of the phenomenon I was investigating (Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Creswell, 2014). Additionally, triangulating my data helped me establish a chain of events; links between the data I collected and the relationship of such data with my research questions and/or rival explanations.

Lastly, I used key informants (participants) who helped review my case study data collected to make sure the interpretations and inferences I made were accurate or in case I had to make any corrections or possible additions, I was able to do so. Once I transcribed all participant interviews, I emailed a copy of the transcript to each participant individually asking them to review their responses and provide me with any corrections, comments, or feedback. If they had no further comments and all interview responses were correct, no response was necessary. By the end of the study, no participant responded back with any corrections or further feedback on their responses.

**Internal validity.** Internal validity for a descriptive single case study focuses on the researcher making inferences that an event resulted from an earlier occurrence, based

on the multiple sources of evidence used like documents, interview transcripts, and field notes. The main concern is that such inferences made are correct and that every area proposed leads to answers of research questions through the confirmation of theoretical propositions or rival explanations (Yin, 2014). I addressed this through a process of data analysis that included two cycles of coding. Cycle one, descriptive and In Vivo coding and cycle two, pattern coding (Saldaña, 2013). I followed my coding process with a strategy of pattern matching and explanation building (Yin, 2014). The coding process set my early themes and patterns, which then led to pattern matching and explanation building of my case study. In the end, my data analysis process was multi-layered with a broad and robust coding approach at the macro phase, which allowed at the micro level to identify patterns and themes from my findings; therefore, generating explanations from my results that reaffirmed my theoretical propositions and/or led to my rival explanations.

**External validity.** External validity reassures a researcher can generalize a single case study to other areas outside of a study, based on relevant theories or principles (Yin, 2014; Yin, 2013). I accomplished this through a two-step process of analytic generalization. This is the suitable logic used for the generalization of case study findings, which is distinct from statistical generalizations (Mitchell, 1983; Bromley, 1986; Donmoyer, 1990; Burawoy, 1991; Gomm et al., 2000; & Small, 2009, as cited in Yin, 2013). First, a researcher must make a conceptual claim that shows a connection to a particular theory or theoretical construct. Second, a researcher must apply theory so that it connects to situations in which similar events may occur (Yin, 2010). Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure was the theoretical framework that grounded my critical

case study, which looked at the various factors that contribute to student's departure of college during the first year. This theory specifically focused on student's social and academic adaptation as key contributors their transition into the college environment during the first year or departure is imminent. This adaptation posited that students engage in various activities and practices that their colleges offer, and that contribute to their integration like college success courses, the phenomenon explored in this case study.

In addition to Tinto (1993), I used Chickering & Reisser's (1993) Theory of Identity Development: Seven Vectors that addressed students' college adaptation from a psychosocial lens with a more in-depth look at diverse student populations, including community college students, who adapt to the college environment in a different way. This theory substantiated Tinto's more generalized model by expanding to the population I addressed in this study, traditionally aged community college students. Tinto (1993) and Chickering and Reisser (1993) are commonly referenced student development theorist found throughout various studies that address first year student success, adaptation, retention, and engagement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Ultimately, with my findings I made connections that supported my theoretical propositions and/or rival explanations. I did this by going back to review the literature on college success courses at community colleges. I determined how my study results, along with its theoretical framework related to other similar studies, as per the literature that explored the traditional age first-year student experience in relation to college success courses offered at community colleges. I strengthened this further by confirming my theoretical propositions or rival explanations, which gave me the flexibility to look at my

findings in different ways that may fit the research of college success courses. As Yin (2010, 2013, 2014) suggested, to address external validity, findings must show the way results of a case study either challenge or support theory presented. If a theory supports a study, a researcher can generalize based on other similar situations; however, if the findings of such study challenges these generalizations, then that is where rival explanations can strengthen such analytic generalizations. I reflected this in my Chapter 5, as I discussed my study findings in the context of each research question and its respective theoretical proposition and rival explanation.

**Reliability.** Reliability addresses the consistency and repeatability of a case study. The goal is that if another researcher conducts a similar study, the investigator arrives to the same conclusion. This includes tactics such as a case study protocol and a case study database (Yin, 2014). This was a critical single case study, which as Yin (2014) illustrated does not need to have a case study protocol set up in addition to the study itself. Nonetheless, this case study had a well-designed interview protocol that was an instrument and a query, which helped guide the nature of my study, the questions I asked, and the reasons why (Yin, 2014). I aligned my protocol questions with my research questions to help confirm my theoretical propositions or possibly rival explanations. Furthermore, to reassure this case study's reliability, I conducted a pilot study to verify before I went out into the field that my study was working properly. In addition, I had a case study database available that organized all my raw and coded data, interview transcripts, and field notes in various sub folders within a cloud system that I safely secured in a remote location. Ultimately, any external party would be able to follow my study, use my protocol, review my data, analyze it, if need to replicate and be able to

arrive to the same conclusions. Table 2 below illustrates the breakdown of various rigor techniques I used during my data analysis and collection process.

Table 2

*Rigor and Validity Strategies*

| Rigor Strategy     | Rigor Technique Used         | Research Phase                    |
|--------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Construct Validity | Multiple sources of evidence | Data collection and Data analysis |
|                    | Chain of events              | Data collection and Data analysis |
|                    | Triangulation                | Data collection and Data Analysis |
|                    | Key informants               | Data analysis                     |
| Internal Validity  | Coding                       | Data analysis                     |
|                    | Pattern matching             | Data analysis                     |
|                    | Explanation building         | Data analysis                     |
|                    | Rival explanations           | Data analysis                     |
| External Validity  | Use of theory                | Data collection and Data analysis |
|                    | Analytic generalization      | Data analysis                     |
| Reliability        | Interview protocol           | Data collection                   |
|                    | Case study database          | Data collection and Data analysis |

**Ethical Consideration**

Although my study implemented a variety of rigor strategies to reassure its validity both at the data collection and analysis phase, there were certain ethical considerations that had to acknowledge. Because of my early involvement in the CSS

course and knowledge of the college structure and faculty, to some, this could bias my interpretations. However, since the course's inception, there were components of the course that changed such as covered topics and type of textbook used, which made the data gathered new to me. In addition, some of the early faculty that participated in the pilot of CSS no longer teach it or are associated with the course, so there were changes within the group of administrators and faculty involved.

Finally, some of the students who take CSS are in the EOF Program, which I oversee. To some, there may be a question of my working relationship with certain participants. Still, my role as Dean is to oversee the program, student performance, and monitor their academic progress. My counseling staff works with the students one-on-one. Furthermore, as a program, we do not assess CSS, so for me their shared experiences with the course were completely new. Lastly, it is important to note that even with prior knowledge I had on CSS, I never taught the course, and so I did not have any faculty experience or connections with students at this level. Although I believe in the course, I do not know how the course is valuable and why it is valuable to students. This study was about student's lived experiences with CSS during their first semester and the contributions the course had in this experience, which I did not know prior to completing this study.

### **Researcher's Role**

As previously described, I have a direct connection to the site of this study and the subject matter, CSS. As Dean of Learning Support and Opportunity Services, my work centers around providing college students with a variety of support services like the EOF

Program and Tutoring to help them achieve their educational goals. Certainly, as a higher education professional in the two-year sector, especially working with EOF students, I am aware of the challenges community college students face during the first year of college. I understand why first year students should take CSS and the importance of the course. I, personally, believe in the course and the role it plays in providing new students with guidance and knowledge of college expectations during their first semester that will be valuable throughout their first year of college and beyond. I also know that as researcher, I had to put my ideas and beliefs aside to understand the student experience with the course. To do this, I implemented many parameters of rigor and trustworthiness as illustrated by Yin (2014), which kept me in check always throughout the completion of this study.

The research I conducted included traditionally aged students who took CSS during their first semester and returned for a second term. This was a diverse group of participants with different views on the course and experiences. For me, this study was a learning experience that challenged my own view, beliefs, assumptions, and biases on CSS. However, to make sure these did not influence my research, I implemented the right strategies to maintain the highest levels of ethics of care, justice, and analysis as I conducted my research (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2004). I accomplished this by taking all the necessary steps to follow proper human subject research etiquette and permission through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at both Rowan University and Skylands County College. Through IRB, I engaged in a process of vetting every step of my research, literature, methods, and chosen participants, so that I was able to enter the field

and study such cases in an ethical and rigorous manner that did not cause any harm (Creswell, 2014).

### **Limitations**

This critical single case study took place in one suburban community college in Northwestern New Jersey. The unit of analysis was traditionally aged first-year students (24 years or less), and the phenomenon explored was CSS, an extended orientation hybrid type of college success course taught in an 8-week and 16-week format.

Depending on a community college's geographic area, the outcomes of this study may not necessarily fit the needs and population of an urban institution. Some community colleges work more heavily with non-traditional students (25 years or older), which may have a different first-semester college experience than their traditionally aged counterparts. This means that the content covered in CSS may not fit their academic and social adaptation to the college environment, as this may be more for a traditionally aged student. From a point of comparison, this study will not serve that purpose.

Furthermore, SCC structured the CSS course as an extended orientation type of college success course, which may or may not resemble other types of college success courses taught at different institutions. Post-secondary institutions offer these courses in a variety of themes that includes extended orientation, academic, academic-variable content, basic study skills/remedial focus, and pre-professional/discipline oriented (Swing, 2002; George Young & Keup, 2015). For other community colleges that may run college success courses in a different structural base, my study may not be as useful. Additionally, I conducted this study at a two-year institution, which is different from a



four-year one from the administration, course curriculum, student needs and population, so a comparison may not be accurate.

Lastly, the reader should also note that this study only focused on traditionally aged students who successfully completed CSS and returned for their second term. This case study did not focus on students who took CSS during their first term and did not return for a second term. I framed this study from an anti-deficit perspective (Harper, 2010) that explored the successes of students who took CSS and how they adapted to the college environment socially and academically, and why the course may have facilitated such adaptation and persistence from first to second term. This included aspects of the course that helped students and ways students implemented strategies learned from CSS. This is not about how these students failed to adapt to the college environment, not persisting past their second term.

## **Summary**

The purpose of this critical single case study was to explore how second semester traditionally aged students who completed CSS at SCC during their first semester adapted to college. Specifically, to determine how the CSS course may have contributed to their social and academic adaptation, and why the course may have facilitated such adaptation and persistence from first to second term. Currently, the research on college success courses is quite vast, as Chapter 2 illustrated. However, the literature indicated there are some research gaps within the outcomes of college success courses that this study specifically addressed. This included a need to expand the qualitative research of these courses by learning about the student experience, a need to determine how college

success courses contribute towards student persistence, and why these courses facilitate student success (Schnell & Doetkott, 2003; Porter & Swing, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Zeidenberg et al., 2007; Kuh et al., 2010; George-Young, 2013).

This chapter described the methodological approach I used to conduct this case study. Case study research design allowed me the opportunity to embed myself in the phenomenon and explore the experience of the participant through a variety of data collection and analysis methods (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2014). I grounded my methodology on Yin's (2014) approach to case study research, which not only focused on answering research questions, but also on propositions either confirmed and/or provided rival explanations to my findings. I collected data by reviewing documents, conducting interviews, and drafting field notes. The data analysis phase began with a general analytic strategy that looked at my research questions and respective propositions and compared them to my findings. I then analyzed my data by conducting a two-cycle coding process (Saldaña, 2013), which then followed with a process of pattern matching, and explanation building (Yin, 2014).

To address questions about the rigor of my research and biases, I applied a variety of rigor techniques that included construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability, as emphasized by Yin (2014). In addition, I addressed my role as the researcher along with the limitations of this study. Chapter 4 addresses the results of my collected and analyzed data through my study findings and themes emerged, which describe in detail the student experience with CSS and the relationship the course had on this experience from first to second semester.

## Chapter 4

### Findings

The purpose of this descriptive critical single case study (Yin, 2014) was to determine how traditionally aged students (24 years old or younger) who completed a College Student Success (CSS) course during their first term adapted to college during their second term. Specifically, I examined how the course may have contributed towards students' academic and social adaptation and why the course may (may not) have facilitated such adaptation and persistence at their two-year institution. The focus of this study was the student experience with CSS through their own voices. To do this, I used a descriptive critical case study research design that allowed me to understand a phenomenon and its real-life context in relation to my theory or theoretical propositions (Yin, 2014). This included gathering course documents, conducting interviews, and recording field notes (Creswell, 2014; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Course documents helped me better understand the structure of CSS, its objectives and it served as my foundation prior to conducting interviews. The interviews provided rich data on each participant's course experience, while my field notes complemented my interviews, as they allowed me to note and reflect on their responses. After transcribing my interviews, I proceeded to analyze the data through a two-cycle coding process, followed by an analytic technique of pattern matching and explanation building (Yin, 2014).

To accomplish the goals of this case study and to understand the student experience with CSS, I proposed one overarching research question: *how do traditionally aged students at SCC who have taken CSS during their first semester of college adapt to*

*their second term?* Along with three sub-research questions that helped answer my overarching research question:

1. How, if at all, does CSS contribute to students' social adaptation at SCC?
2. How, if at all, does CSS contribute to students' academic adaptation at SCC?
3. If evidence exists for the contribution of CSS to students' adaptation, why does CSS facilitate students' adaptation and persistence at SCC?

Ultimately, the goal of chapter four is to present my study findings through my analyzed interviews and field notes. The first section describes each participant individually and concludes with general observations about the participants. The second section describes my findings by identifying five overarching themes that emerged from my data. Lastly, I conclude this chapter with a summary of my findings.

### **Participants**

There were 125 students who enrolled in CSS during the Fall 2016 and only 103 completed the course and returned Spring 2017. Out of the students who completed the course, ten participated in this study. By the time interviews concluded, all the participants had completed their first year of college. The group was very diverse in gender, ethnicity, and major of study. Half were female, and the other half were male. The ethnic breakdown included Caucasian, African American, and Hispanic. Their areas of study ranged from business administration, nursing, engineering, and others. Most participants described CSS as a required class, while for others it was a recommended course. Students required to take CSS included those who tested into Developmental

English – Writing Skills (ENG-025) and are majors within the School of Liberal Arts. In addition, SCC required students enrolled in the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program to take CSS. However, although some groups must take CSS, the course is open to any students, should an advisor recommend it. See table below for participant demographic breakdown, sorted by CSS requirement:

Table 3

*CSS Interview Participant Demographic Characteristics (n = 10)*

| Name   | Gender | Major                   | Student Type      | CSS Requirement |
|--------|--------|-------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| Sherry | Female | Art                     | Second Generation | Recommended     |
| Dina   | Female | Nursing                 | First Generation  | Recommended     |
| Oscar  | Male   | Engineering Science     | Second Generation | Recommended     |
| Angel  | Male   | Engineering Science     | First Generation  | Required        |
| Gloria | Female | Nursing                 | First Generation  | Required        |
| Margie | Female | Business Administration | First Generation  | Required        |
| Carmen | Female | International Studies   | First Generation  | Required        |
| George | Male   | Business Administration | First Generation  | Required        |
| Sam    | Male   | Business Administration | First Generation  | Required        |
| Manny  | Male   | Exercise Science        | Second Generation | Required        |

**Sherry.** Sherry is a female art major who is a second-generation student. She was a high achiever in high school, took honor courses, and did very well academically; however, she had very low self-esteem and felt somewhat socially awkward. Coming into college was not a surprise for her, as she understood there were high expectations, more challenges academically, and there was a lot more work. Sherry hoped college would be a place where she could have a fresh start and make new friends and social connections. “When I first came, I was really shy; I had a really low self-esteem.” She described CSS as important in helping her make connections with others. As far as other topics covered in CSS, Sherry felt she knew about being a good student; however, she did not know different academic strategies that would help her become more organized and efficient. Socially, CSS assisted her the most, as the course forced her to connect with other students and to engage. In the process, she described herself as more confident and social.

**Dina.** Dina is a female first-generation nursing major. In high school, she did well with minimal effort. “High school was kind of easy for me. I could have gotten better grades, but I did not try. I was a slacker in school, but mostly pretty successful.” For her, college was going to be harder, require more work, and extra time to study. As far as social engagement, her expectations were very low. Dina believes there is minimal social interaction in community colleges. You just go to class and go home. In some ways, she seemed to have an aversion towards community colleges, but was here and just ready to take her classes and earn her degree. Dina felt that CSS was not a useful course. In addition, she explained that her advisor made her take the course because of the developmental English course requirement. Nonetheless, she did acknowledge there was some value to it. Dina learned about campus departments, which she did not know

existed or how they operate; she still uses those departments today. Furthermore, she shared the course forced her to learn how to speak in public and work in groups. By the end of CSS, she felt more confident about communicating with groups and presenting.

**Oscar.** Oscar is a male second-generation Engineering Science major, who although had parents that went to college, he was very disconnected from the process. This participant shared that he was not very successful in high school or as he described, “I just went to do my work and fall to sleep.” He made it through high school with just the bare minimum effort and really did not have any expectations of college. He knew college would be somewhat difficult and that you had to push yourself more to complete the work. His approach towards college was a watch and see what happens. As far as CSS, Oscar described himself as very open to the course and learning more about it. As he began covering the material, he quickly realized he was lacking an understanding of what is the right and wrong way to do college. Furthermore, he was unaware of how important it is to make connections with others throughout campus. He did not know what time management meant or how he should apply it towards his classes. For Oscar, CSS was somewhat of an epiphany, as he realized he needed to make changes in his approach towards his academics if he wanted to succeed. He felt CSS motivated him to be a better student, but also to connect with others and to become more involved with campus organizations and clubs.

**Angel.** Angel is a male first-generation engineering science major. This participant had a very positive experience in high school and considered himself a successful student. He felt that his school did a good job preparing him for the academic rigors of college. He shared that he is very social and knew he had to engage with others,

so he could make it through college. “I knew one way or another you had to make connections with other people cause obviously is a whole new world out here in college, so you had to push yourself into meeting people and that’s what I did.” For Angel, CSS was a very productive course, as it taught him how to access resources on campus that he did not know existed and to ask for help. He credited CSS for showing him there is a tutoring center and a library that he can access anytime to get extra help in his classes. In addition, CSS taught him how to balance his time and prioritize. This is something he put into practice during his second semester, as he juggled work, college, and his social life.

**Gloria.** Gloria is a female first-generation nursing major. She is a very focused and driven student, who excelled in high school. She was not into socializing, but just to be the best student she could. “I was not part of many groups or anything, but I did feel like I did go the extra mile for extra help when I needed anything, I would ask them. I went to my guidance counselor.” Gloria was very anxious and fearful of college. She expected it to be very hard and that she would have to survive on her own without any help. She thought that connecting with people was not an option because she would not have time to do her work. In the end, she shared her expectations were a lot worse than what she experienced. Through CSS, Gloria felt she was not alone and that she had support throughout campus, which she did not know existed at first. In addition, she applied many testing strategies, time management techniques, and overall organization taught in the course that she continued using during her second term. She felt CSS gave her confidence and provided her with the necessary tools to continue being successful in college. Socially, she did feel the course limited her, as her class was not as interactive as she would have liked it to be.



**Margie.** Margie is a female business administration major who described herself as a first-generation college student who had some ideas about what college may be like. She knew that high school was much lighter when it came to academics and expectations of teachers, while college was different, you had to make connections with people, and studying would be more demanding. Nonetheless, college was a lot more than she expected. She was very honest that she did not prioritize college at first and that she went about it the wrong way, because she would fit everything before doing her schoolwork. For her, CSS was very eye opening, as the course gave her information on campus resources, where to get help, and through a course exercise on time management she realized how little time she was putting into her studies. During CSS, she described a self-reflective evolution of who she was first term and who she became her second term. Still today, Margie states that she continues to practice some of the exercises CSS covered. For Margie, CSS was a required course and one that forced her to self-reflect and consider her practices. As she stated, “the name is kinda cliché, but it literally like helps you succeed in college; it was a really good course to take.”

**Carmen.** Carmen is a female International Studies first-generation student, who came from high school prepared for the rigors of college. She described she had a slow start, but eventually did very well during the latter part of her secondary years. Carmen was part of a college preparatory program during her last two years of high school, which gave her a good foundation of what to expect from college. In addition, she is currently part of the EOF program at SCC, which she described as one that provides her with extended and continuous academic support in college. As a new student, Carmen knew courses would be more challenging, longer, and that she had to work more independently.

For her, CSS was not necessarily a new learning experience, but a refresher course on what is the right and wrong way of approaching college. One of the most important aspects of CSS for Carmen was that the course gave her more confidence when communicating with professors. For her, CSS was all about teaching her “interpersonal communication. More of, you have to communicate with everyone around you, especially your teachers.”

**George.** George is a male first-generation business major who started college with very poor study habits from high school. At first, he did not take college as serious as he should. He brought with him a high school mentality, but quickly realized things were much different. “It was a lot more work and I had to take it more serious than high school.” Through the CSS course, George began a personal evolution and an exercise of self-reflection on what he was doing wrong. By his second term, he had grown, understood college expectations, ways to maximize his studying, and how to make connections that would benefit him both socially and academically as a college student. George did indicate this continues to be a work in progress, as he changes and adjusts, as needed.

**Sam.** Sam is a male first-generation business major, who did not do very well in high school academically. “I didn’t like study to my full potential. I could have done better.” He believed college would be easier when it came to making friends and connecting with people, but as far as academics, he knew it would be very hard. The transition was not going to be easy, as he had not put much effort throughout high school. Nonetheless, Sam explained that he was part of a college preparatory program for Hispanic youth in his local community, which gave him a basic understanding of what to

expect of college. However, what he learned in this program was broad. CSS explicated the intricacies and expectations of college in more detail. Sam credited CSS with teaching him various study, testing, and time management strategies. For this participant, CSS seemed to provide him with the right academic tools to improve during his second term, while on the social end the course was more limited, it only assisting him with ways on how to communicate with professors.

**Manny.** Manny is a second-generation male Exercise Science major. He was a borderline poor high school student, who was very much into the social structure of school and played sports, mainly soccer. Academics were not a priority for him. However, when it came to college, he had a basic understanding of the expectations, as one of his parents went to college and he knew others that did. “Well, I knew people from college already, so they told me it was way hard. So, I guess in a way high school I didn’t take seriously, but now that I know how college is, I have to take it seriously.” CSS taught Manny about available campus resources, which he did not know were there. On the social end, CSS did not necessarily assist him in making connections with other students, as Manny was very social already. Nonetheless, the course taught him how to speak in public more comfortably; as he shared, he applied those skills during his second term in his classes when doing presentations and outside of college in his part-time work.

### **Summary**

The study participants were a very diverse group of students, as these profiles reflected based on their majors, genders, high school aptitude, and expectations of college. Most participants were first-generation students, whose parents did not attend

college, while a few others were second-generation, who at least had one parent graduate from college. Academically, most participants were either very or somewhat successful in high school, while a few others were not. Overall, the group had a mixed understanding of the social and academic dynamics of college and the expectations of such regardless of high school success. Because of this, their needs as first semester students adapting to college varied greatly. Some participants were even involved in college preparatory programs during their high school years, which contributed to their knowledge of the college process and felt some of the CSS content may have been a repeat of what they already knew.

However, these participants indicated in their responses through various examples, as the themes below described that they still learned from the CSS course and applied this knowledge into their academic experience during their second term. Overall, the findings of this study indicated CSS played a role in the adaptation of these students from first to second term. After analyzing all their shared experiences with CSS, a set of five common themes emerged that illustrated how the course may have contributed to their college adaptation, socially and academically and why the course may have facilitated such adaptation and persistence at their institution.

## **Themes**

Based on the participant's interview responses and reviewed CSS course documents, the below five themes emerged from my data.

**Theme 1: Time management changed priorities.** The importance of time management in CSS, and what students learned about time management changed

students' priorities. CSS covers the topic of time management by teaching students about managing their time, how and why it is important to remain organized in college, and efficient ways students can balance school, work, and life in a productive way. As part of an assignment, professors request students to complete a time management weekly and semester grid, which illustrates their schedule from morning to evening. This includes class time, study time, breaks, work, and any other activities (College Student Success, 2016). Six out of ten participants shared that going through this exercise was a real discovery as to where their priorities were when it came to college. In addition, they realized that they had to shift their time management approach in a way that was efficient and helped them stay on task. For Margie, doing this exercise was eye opening, as it uncovered how she viewed college within her life priorities:

“I felt like first semester in college you go into it as it is fine and I know what I am doing it is just like high school and get to pick your classes and if I don't go to class its fine.... I used to build my time around myself and then fitting college in between. Since CSS was required, I'm glad I took it anyway because there were actual results after taking it and it was just like college student success. It kinda actually helps you. Like second semester when I made my schedule, I filled it in with my classes and my homework first and making time for studying and making my life around school. It kinda made me realize that school is what's important now in my life and I was doing everything else and putting school in between the cracks, so I really made a schedule and made time to go the tutoring center and get help more.”

By the second term, Margie put her college work above other things and made an intentional effort to focus on her academics.

Like Margie, Gloria shared insight on how completing this time management activity helped her focus more academically:

“Writing things down definitely helps. There was this one thing we did, plan for the semester and she gave us like the paper and would say the weeks and you would have to fill the most important things that were coming up and that really opened up my eyes....WOW..., when I see it on paper, this week I need to concentrate on this, I can spend a little time on that, I think it helped me finish the semester strong.”

Gloria learned to prioritize her work, which contributed to a better semester. For both participants, learning about time management changed their views on how they can maximize their time in a way that makes college a priority. For Margie, it was a macro self-reflection on where college was on her priority list, resulting in a realization that she had to change, as college was more important, and she had to create a schedule that reflected that. For Gloria, the focus was more micro; she shifted her assignment approach to decide what she should address first, versus what could wait for later; she learned to organize her work.

For other participants, the concept of time management translated to an improved studying approach that was more organized and intentional; they moved away from doing things last minute, prioritizing their work. Sam, George, and Oscar were not very strong academically in high school and started college with a very low set of expectations and

habits. However, during CSS they learned time management tips that helped them make simple adjustments in their studying that produced results. George had very poor time management and study habits before CSS; nonetheless, by his second semester, he had evolved. “I’m just being more responsible. I didn’t have those habits in high school and they have affected me as a student. They made me not get as good grades as I wanted to. Now that I am improving those habits, I am becoming a better student.” During his second term, George applied these learned time management habits from CSS into his classes in an intentional way. “Just studying with time and little by little each day, instead of studying the day before a test or something like that.” Ultimately, with what George learned in CSS, he evolved as a student by changing his studying approach.

Like George, Sam did not have strong study habits and time management skills in high school, “I didn’t like study to my full potential. Like, I didn’t try to my full potential. I could have done better.” Although Sam was not a strong student in high school, he did have a basic understanding of college, as he was part of a college preparatory program that covered basic information about college expectations and how to be a successful student. However, he explained the content covered was broad and not as thorough as CSS. “I know somewhat about being a good student, organizing, and time management because my counselor through this program covered it, but like it didn’t go as much depth.” After taking CSS and by his second semester he knew more about “being more organized, being a good student, and time management.” For Sam, CSS made a difference in how to plan his life. He applied the time management strategies learned in the class:

“It was really all about time management. The first semester I was pretty bad with it too, but after the whole course, I decided to use like some of the tips from the course and got time for my schoolwork and work. I wrote everything down in my agenda and calendar, so I can plan out throughout the day what I am going to do for school.”

CSS helped Sam manage his time more effectively, allowing him to prioritize his day. Another participant, Oscar, would share the same sentiment.

Oscar is a student who did very poorly in high school and who brought the same habits into college; however, taking CSS would change his approach and give him time to self-reflect; therefore, resulting in a transformation. When college began, Oscar approached it like high school. “I actually thought of it as being in high school part 2. The way I used to be in high school, just as one usual thing.... where you do your work and try to get out.” Instead, through CSS, Oscar’s outlook of college changed:

“I learned a lot about time management and how to use it to my own advantage. I was taking different classes at the time, so I did have to make time between that, my clubs and my job and moving around between doing my work in my classes and clubs. I always had to make a schedule and I actually brought it up to my teachers, to my other club members, and classmates; I would check if it was ok.”

Because of CSS, Oscar shifted this approach towards his course work and organized himself, so he could balance the academic and social demands of college.

Here is another participant, Angel. He described himself as more prepared for college than Sam, George, and Oscar. He was very successful in high school and had a



good understanding of the rigors of college. “Beginning from middle school they taught about transitioning yourself in high school and then how to go to college. They prepared me well. My school was a great school...I did well for myself.” Still, when Angel described the different topics the CSS course covered, he acknowledged, “I didn’t know much about anything. I know more, I do...time management and going to tutoring for extra help.” Angel illustrated below how he applied what he learned about time management:

“Well, I definitely practiced time management better; much more efficient for me. Having a boundary between college, being a student and also work, I balanced those two. I think I balanced those two perfectly. On those days that I have classes, I would separate my time. Make sure my work is done as soon as I get out of class, get it over with, and the day before when I do have class, I would go over what I learned the following week. Also, free time is more essential. Obviously, you would have a gap between your classes. Between them, I would try to find a way either to do work or if not, just do another free thing.”

By his second semester, Angel used different time management and organizing strategies learned from CSS to his benefit, so he could juggle more efficiently his personal and academic life.

Although these participants began college with different levels of understanding the expectations and rigors, especially when it came to time management and prioritizing college, work, and other social activities, they all shared a commonality after taking CSS. The participants had a newly found understanding of time and prioritizing, which now

works to their benefit. They reframed their approach towards study time in a more meaningful way; thus, becoming better students. These findings reflect that by the second term, six out of ten participants were organizing and managing their time intentionally, making college their priority. They recognized something had to change in their time management approach, so that they can be more organized and efficient students.

For the other four participants, the topic of time management covered in CSS was not as meaningful or did not come up at all. Carmen described that she learned time management strategies through her college preparatory program prior to starting at SCC:

“I feel like I already had a good basis that was taught in CSS besides EOF, already teaching us that. I was part of college prep thing class in itself, so I felt like it was just a repeat of it, but in college.”

For Carmen, this topic was not as useful, as she described her experience with CSS and other ways the course contributed to her adaptation from first to second term.

For another participant, Sherry, who described herself as successful in high school, time management was already something she practiced, “yeah, I had good time management and what homework should be done first and what studying, how many hours I should study for this class or that class.” Sherry knew about time management strategies, so to her, this CSS topic was not as meaningful. As for two of the remaining participants, Dina and Manny, time management did not come up in their interview responses, when describing how CSS contributed to their adaptation from first to second term.

## **Theme 2: Knowledge of college services promotes development and**

**engagement.** Discovering college services through CSS encourages students to use campus services, seek support and remain engaged. Throughout the duration of the CSS course, one topic faculty covered extensively was college services. This is part of CSS's overarching goal in helping first-year students adjust to college and to enhance their college experience (Skylands County College, 2017). One of the learning outcomes of the course is to examine campus support services and their functions (CSS Academic Outcomes Assessment, 2017). Not only do CSS professors spend time speaking about college services; in addition, students must complete a team activity that requires them to select a college office, interview an administrator within that department, collect literature and then present the information they learned back to the class as their final group assignment (College Student Success, 2016). This is a way for students to engage actively with the college, while learning about its offerings.

During their interviews, six out of ten participants described that learning about campus resources while taking CSS was important in their development as college students. They shared a lack of knowledge that certain offices existed and that they could access these for their educational benefit. During CSS, the participants discovered campus services like tutoring and the library, and actively used these services during their second term. In addition, they learned about other campus services like the bookstore and financial aid, which the participants stated contributed to their overall college experience. Gaining this knowledge allowed the participants to make connections with others on campus; therefore, understanding that they are not alone, becoming more engaged by their second term. Dina illustrated this sentiment, based on what she learned in CSS:

“I am more familiar with how this college works and signing up for classes, financial aid and the bookstore and renting books and buying books or finding them online. Just more comfortable with the college life. The motivation the class gives, it helps students become more comfortable with everything around them and how to do certain things.”

Discovering campus resources for Dina was critical in her process of acclimating to the SCC college environment. She learned how to access services and use these, which helped her during her second term.

Other participants described learning about college services in the context of the required CSS group assignment where they had to explore the campus, learn about different departments and their offerings, and present on these findings in class. Manny is a very social person and one that would talk to people, not very shy. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that asking questions and assistance around campus was not big for him, “I didn’t know...like, get to know the college and go ask people around, I didn’t know. I had to ask questions to members of the college...in a way it helped me.” CSS pushed Manny into getting to know the college by completing this activity. For another participant, just learning about one department on campus made a difference in his college experience. Angel learned in CSS that the college has a Tutoring Center where he can go for extra help; something he did not know existed:

“Going through tutoring help for example, I didn’t know anything about that and other ways to study. Because normally, I don’t get help from people. I don’t really

like to, but I am trying to push myself. I think the CSS course kinda pushed me into asking people.”

Angel illustrated below how he became more comfortable when accessing resources at SCC, like tutoring:

“Use your resources properly. Books, tutoring, those are resources. I would say most importantly, tutoring. I feel like having a one to one face with anybody is a lot better than one to a group of 20 kids or 50 kids. That really helps a lot. I feel that’s definitely a valid way of a student learning material a lot better, a lot faster...definitely tutoring.”

One of Angel’s biggest takeaways from CSS was learning about tutoring and using these services, which he emphasized he continued to access throughout his second term.

Like Angel, other participants explicated that because of CSS they learned and accessed other types of campus support services. A department like the library, for some, was completely new. For Gloria, CSS covered, “resources here at school that you go. Like the study groups and the library and everything. I had no idea.” As she entered her second term, she described the library as an asset to her academic experience. “Getting around school, the library has been very helpful to me knowing about their system and you can check out books. I didn’t even think you can do that.... I didn’t know that, but now I do.” Because of CSS, Gloria learned about the benefits of using her campus library, which assisted her academically throughout her second term.

Margie shared during her first term that she was very unaware of the types of services SCC offered students; however, this changed during CSS:

“The things that SCC offers, I didn’t know there was a transfer counselor. I didn’t know there were jobs and internships. We have so many services, like I had no clue...I took a lot from CSS. I don’t know it kinda like really opened your eyes to this whole college and the things you need to do to be successful.”

Discovering and accessing campus resources changed Margie’s view about her college and what she needed to do as a student, which she attributed to CSS. By her second term, she was more prepared.

Even a participant like Carmen, who had a strong foundation transitioning into college from her college preparatory program, and who is in the EOF program, found value in CSS, “I already had a really good basis that was taught in CSS, besides EOF already teaching us that.” She followed this by describing how the course assisted her, “honestly, just, I guess...knowing what the school itself has to offer because this is a new environment. There are things that other classes don’t go over, that’s not their job. CSS really helps.” Carmen learned about campus resources that she acknowledged she did not know before taking the course.

Uncovering and accessing campus resources and support allowed these six participants to learn about these and to use such services like tutoring, the library, and others, which helped them feel more at ease about their college experience. Regardless of how much or how little they knew about college in general, the participants were not aware of the various services offered at their institution before CSS that helps support their academic experience. By their second term, the participants were actively seeking and using these resources, resulting in better-informed and engaged students. As for the

other four participants, Sam, George, Sherry, and Oscar, the topic of college services did not come up in their interview responses, when describing how CSS contributed to their adaptation from first to second term.

**Theme 3: Communication supports self-confidence.** Required communication with faculty and campus staff in CSS promotes self-confidence that is evident in the students' second term. Communication was a topic that consistently came up with all ten participants during interviews. They all indicated that CSS contributed to their social adaptation from first to second semester by helping them become more comfortable when speaking to their professors, campus staff, and/or peers. This was reflective within this theme, as well as Theme 4.

The participants explicated, at times, they did not know how to approach their professors. Many of them did not realize that making social connections in college could contribute to their overall student success. As part of CSS's curriculum, faculty covered social adaptation within the context of expectations of college students and the dynamics of effective communication in college (College Student Success, 2016). These class discussions included ways students should approach their professors, why they should communicate with their faculty, and the importance of engagement and involvement with their fellow students. In addition, as part of the CSS course curriculum, professors required students to engage in icebreakers, team activities, and practice public speaking as part of their class assignments.

For Carmen, learning about communication in college and social engagement with professors gave her the confidence to reach out and connect with them. For her, this

was a very meaningful topic that CSS covered, and that contributed to her social adaptation. She described new students, including herself, as having poor communication skills, which causes them not to ask questions because they are afraid of saying something wrong. Instead, students remain quiet and steer away from engaging with their professors:

“A lot of times students are afraid to say anything to a teacher and may be failing or struggling. Then they just say I don’t want to do this anymore, but maybe if they just communicated with the professor that this is a little hard and I need help, it would help a lot more.”

Carmen today practices what she learned in CSS:

“I took away interpersonal communications. More of, you have to communicate with everyone around you, especially your teachers, that’s what I probably took. I think different students will take different things. I am more of a communicator type person, so anything that has to do with connections, I will take. For example, on the first day, if the teacher comes to class early, I would introduce myself if they didn’t at all at the end of class. I would shake their hand, so they knew who I was and they can put a face to the name.”

After CSS, Carmen was more comfortable communicating with her professors. Angel, another participant, shared the same sentiment as Carmen:

“I’d say communication CSS taught you. They teach you really well. Obviously, everything is about communication. Communicating with your tutors, of course. Speak up and ask for help. That’s a big part because if you just stay quiet and



don't do anything, you won't get anything done. You won't be as successful as you'd expect it to be.”

For him, communication was a very valuable lesson learned in CSS, which he continued to practice during his second term to seek academic support.

For other participants, gaining self-confidence after CSS contributed to them feeling comfortable when approaching their professors and others around campus to seek assistance. Sam described that prior to CSS he did not know he had to talk to professors. After CSS, he felt more confident by, “just talking to my professors more after class.” Furthermore, he credited his CSS professor for this, “the teacher, the professor had confidence in us, so that helped.” Sam's professor maintained a high level of engagement with the class, which made him feel more at ease and confident when reaching out to other faculty members. Another participant, George shared he learned in CSS, “how to make connections with teachers, how to become a better student in general and make sure you don't like fall off or fall behind.” He discovered in CSS that he could speak up and bring class issues to the attention of college staff. For example, “like how you can complaint about, like if you don't like the teacher, you can complaint to one person and if that person doesn't reach out, you can complaint to a higher position, I didn't know about that.” George learned in CSS that when things are not going well in his classes, it is ok to speak up.

For Manny, being social was usually not an issue, when it came to connecting with other students. “I consider myself a social person; I like to talk a lot and like to know the person.” However, to engage with campus support, professors, and anyone

expect for students was not his strength. When it came to classes and studying he thought he was on his own, “I didn’t know who actually helps you. You have to be on your own, but I was wrong.” After taking CSS, Manny’s outlook changed, “yeah, I had to ask questions to members of the college; yeah...in a way it helped me.” Manny learned that to receive academic support, he had to engage more.

Like Manny, Gloria described an isolated perception of college that she would have no one to turn to for help. Unlike Manny who was very social, Gloria was more introverted. Socializing was not in her mind, as she felt that would take away from her academic focus; she was very shy:

“I felt like I would not meet as many new people. I wouldn’t be socializing because I am shy, but that wasn’t the case. I thought college was going to be this brand new thing, I was going to be scared of...I was scared at first.”

However, this perception changed after taking CSS:

“I definitely have evolved because I feel more confident now when I come to school. I feel like I know a little bit more than I used to before. I don’t have that fear on me and I know I can ask for help.”

Gloria acknowledged CSS helped her grow from first to second term, as she gained new knowledge about the college and resources available, which contributed to her feeling more self-assured. Margie shared a similar growth, as Gloria:

“I probably have become a stronger student because of CSS. Before I was shy to ask questions about...you know what I mean, college, I was shy. It kinda shaped

me to be a more aware student and more stronger academically and even personally.”

Margie also evolved while in CSS, from being shy to becoming more self-confident. She was no longer afraid to ask questions when she needed assistance.

During CSS, these participants learned to communicate with professors and engage with other departments around campus. The course taught these students how to approach their professors and campus staff and served as a form of reassurance that it is okay to communicate, engage, and ask for help. By their second term, the participants were more self-confident, they were asking questions, and seeking campus support when needed.

**Theme 4: Communication and campus engagement.** Greater understanding about the importance of communication and engagement supports on-campus social engagement. Other ways the participants felt CSS contributed to their social adaptation from one semester to the next was by understanding the importance of communication in relation to connecting with fellow peers and by getting involved in campus clubs and organizations. Professors not only covered the topic of communication in CSS in the context of faculty, staff, and general student interactions, but also from an overall social perspective that it is important, as part of a student’s college experience to connect with fellow students and to become part of the college community by getting involved (College Student Success, 2016). By the end of CSS, students had to have meaningful interactions with fellow students and faculty in a variety of ways (CSS Academic Outcomes Assessment, 2017).

At the start of CSS, many of the participants seemed apprehensive and unsure about approaching one another or getting involved in student clubs and organizations. As CSS progressed, students described feeling more at ease when talking to one another and when having to engage in-group activities, as the course required them to get to know each other, get into teams, and to participate in discussions. Margie illustrated her CSS course environment as intimate and easy to engage with, which made her feel better about talking to other students in her class. As a new college student, Margie had somewhat narrow social college expectations, “you would know no one because it is kind of a big school. I expected to make a couple of friends, never to be that social because it is so big. I was just kinda like my mentality...maybe, I will make friends.” By Margie’s second semester, this had changed:

“CSS did help because it was kinda like a more personal class, our teacher made us work with each other and work with other kids in our class, so like I met more people in class because you had to get to know them and interview them sometimes. You actually had to work together on group projects.”

Because of the required group activities students had to partake in CSS, Margie became more comfortable to engage socially around campus and to work in teams.

Like Margie, because of CSS, Dina was able to engage socially with her class, do group work activities, and speak in public, which she would eventually apply those skills in other classes during her second term. “In classes I am really nervous to speak up and present, but in the CSS class, being it was so small, it just felt a bit easier. I was able to share and everything.” Her biggest CSS takeaway were presentation skills. “I took away

pretty much presentation skills. Definitely that class helped with that, getting more comfortable.” During her second term, Dina shared she used these skills in her history class, where she had to conduct presentations and work in teams.

For other participants, CSS served as a bridge to adapt socially by learning how to make friends and become more involved in campus. In the case of Sherry and Oscar, CSS motivated them to make friends and join campus clubs. Oscar had previously described himself as coming into college with very low academic and social expectations. For him, you just get in and then get out. Instead, CSS changed his perspective about college in general and the importance of connecting with other students on campus. “Well, CSS brought me to some new students in the class and those students and I ended up making friends. They are some of my friends I still consider today.” Additionally, the course compelled him to find ways to help others on campus by getting involved. During his second semester, Oscar was involved in various clubs and worked with other students. Oscar took the skills he learned in CSS and applied them in his clubs:

“Being helpful with others. In my clubs, I help a lot of people. Like, SGA, PALS....ASA. The friends I’ve made around campus, I help them with any situation they may need. I’ve seen like I am a different way. Here, I do my work and try to help other people if they need it and I see that things that I have been taught can help others.”

Oscar credited CSS for his social growth, “I think CSS helped because I don’t know what kind of student I would have been if I hadn’t taken it.” The course contributed to him becoming better adapted to college during his second term,

Like Oscar, Sherry also benefited from the social skills learned in CSS, as it helped her make friends. When college began, Sherry was very unsure of herself and did not know how to engage with others; however, during CSS, she learned how to make friends and connect with her peers, which continued into her second term. “When I first came to this college, I was really shy...I had a really low self-esteem.” Sherry learned in CSS ways she can connect with other students, especially in her art classes, as she is an art major:

“I know more about making new friends, transitioning from high school to college. In class, we got a workbook and had a lot of activities in there. We played making new friends and having an interest in people, that helped a lot. It teaches me how to make new friends in my art classes.”

Sherry further described how she evolved socially by her second term:

“Like it was a fun experience and it was exciting. You now can like look forward to the next semester that is not like the first one. My second semester I made even more new friends. I’ve had some good teachers. I am actually still in contact with my CSS professor.”

For Sherry, CSS was critical in her social adjustment from first to second semester. While in the course, she made meaningful connections, which continued to be part of her collegiate experience.

CSS contributed to the social adaptation of these participants by teaching and helping them understand that colleges expect their students to communicate with their fellow students, work in groups, and collaborate in and outside of the classroom.

Professors teaching CSS encouraged students to seek one another, make friends, and to become involved. Consequently, the findings show, after CSS, the participants engaged more with their fellow peers, they were comfortable when working in teams, and more open to making friendships and to participant in campus clubs and organizations.

**Theme 5: Implementing academic strategies.** Students who persisted in their second term are implementing and using the academic strategies learned in CSS during their first term. CSS covered studying, note taking and other academic success strategies, as part of the course curriculum. This included discussions and exercises on learning styles and types of good study and test taking habits (College Student Success, 2016). By the end of CSS, students had to be able to analyze, develop, and utilize their personal learning styles to achieve academic success in addition to using other proper resources to assist them academically (CSS Academic Outcomes Assessment, 2017). These findings indicate that six out of ten participants learned various types of academic strategies and put these into practice during their second term.

The academic strategies used by the participants included learning how to maximize readings, organize course material, and study more efficiently. For instance, Gloria shared that CSS helped her sharpen her academic strategies, which she put in use during her second term. “Oh yeah, it definitely helped me improve my academic skills. Especially, the test taking skills, writing things down, definitely helped.” Gloria further illustrated this:

“Definitely being prepared, doing things in advance, especially writing down what I need. I had to get ready for that cause I had a course with microeconomics,

so I learned to start reading, go over, writing things down in a little corner, making little notes, definitely helped. Specifically, I started recording. I asked if I could record, so that helped me and writing things down, going over it in my own time.”

Gloria very effectively applied a variety of academic strategies taught in CSS, which she actively used during her second term, as described in the examples above.

Like Gloria, other participants shared how they are applying the academic strategies learned in CSS during their second term. For example, Angel, explicated after CSS how he became more organized, “I make sure my work is done as soon as I get out class, get it over with, and the day before when I do have that class, I go over what I learned.” Angel evolved as a student since CSS, “I’ve improved slightly...it is better than I was last semester, that’s for sure. I feel like I can improve myself even more for the third semester, which I definitely be planning on doing.” Angel learned to approach his studies in a more organized manner, which helped him academically.

For Sam, implementing these strategies has shown positive results. “Well, second semester was like more even though I only had two, it was my best semester, I started implementing the strategies of the course.” These strategies included:

“The time management, the note taking strategies, and test taking skills, all of that. I would use the tips from there to prepare for tests and the way I would take notes. CSS explains to take notes your own way, don’t do what everyone else is doing. I took that into consideration and started using different colors and stuff...organized my notes more.”



Sam actively used different academic strategies taught in CSS, based on what his needs were. By his second term, he learned to adjust his studying and note taking approach accordingly.

Like Sam, Sherry used a variety of academic strategies taught in CSS that she continued applying in her second term classes:

“It showed us you have to study more, that there’s going to be a lot more challenging work, and for example, in my English class our first day we had to do a 1000-word essay and the teacher wanted to know what kind of writer we were. CSS helped with that because it taught me from the activities in the book to practice at home with the writing, so I did.”

Sherry followed this by illustrating another important strategy her CSS professor taught her:

“My teacher, she said use colorful post it notes for organizing subjects, so I used that a lot. We did from the brightest color to the dullest color. The most important things that needed to be done in the brightest and the dullest could be done last. She worked with me because I told her I was an Art major and she said I needed to prioritize my projects and she said organization is good for that. She also said highlighting, don’t highlight everything. You know in high school, I did that a lot and it was overwhelming, until she said highlight the most important things in your textbooks, not everything.”

While in CSS, Sherry realized that her high school studying approach was not as efficient and with the strategies taught by her CSS professor, she made some adjustments that would benefit her academically.

George was another participant who evolved during CSS and changed some of his old poor study habits:

“I’ve seen better results in my grades. I learned to become generally a better student. Studying strategies definitely...I am not really big on studying, really wasn’t, but now that I see the studying strategies and the results of it, it’s making me become more of a studying person.”

George implemented new academic strategies learned in the course during his second term, which has strengthened him as a student.

For other participants, like Manny, these academic strategies learned in CSS translated into a better understanding of using online educational platforms, such as Blackboard Learn. CSS is a hybrid course, with the goal of teaching and exposing new students to online courses and the expectations of such. CSS requires students to do a few online weeks where they go into Blackboard to submit journals, assignments, and engage in discussions (College Student Success, 2017). Manny had no prior knowledge of what Blackboard was and how to navigate it. However, by his second term, “CSS helped me with Blackboard, because I had no idea how to use it or what it was before. So when I started my other classes, when they gave me homework, I knew. That actually helped me.” Manny now understood how to approach online/hybrid courses, the expectations, and what to do in these types of courses.

Overall, for these six participants, learning about academic strategies in CSS, such as note taking, testing, and different ways of studying changed their approach towards their classes in a way that was more efficient and meaningful. The participants demonstrated through various examples how they applied the strategies learned in the course in their second term, which included organizing readings, reviewing material prior to class, highlighting main ideas, and learning how to post and use Blackboard Learn. For some of the participants, this even resulted in improved academic performance. In the end, the material on academic strategies covered in CSS was meaningful for these participants and they actively applied it during their second term. As for the other four participants, Carmen, Dina, Oscar, and Margie, the topic of academic strategies did not come up in their interview responses, when describing how they adapted to college from first to second term.

## **Conclusion**

The CSS course assists first-year students in the transition from high school into college (College Student Success, 2017). The participants in this study took CSS during their first semester, Fall 2016 and returned for their second term, Spring 2017, completing their first year of college. This was a very diverse group of students based on gender, major, student type, and high school aptitude, who shared their experiences with CSS. To add to this diversity and student dynamic, some interviews even uncovered two participants were part of college preparatory programs prior to starting at their post-secondary institution and that these programs covered some of the material in CSS.

Still, these findings illustrated through their response and examples that even for these participants, their understanding of college structure, expectations, and the requirements of being a successful student, varied. All the participants gained new knowledge about transitioning to college, expectations, and strategies that they applied during their second term and that contributed to their adaptation into the college environment as new students. The goal of this study was to explore how traditionally aged students who took CSS during their first term adapted to the college environment during their second term, both socially and academically, and why CSS may have contributed to this adaptation and persistence at their institution. The overall findings of this study indicate that CSS indeed contributed to the college adaptation of all these participants from first to second term in a variety of ways, through five emerging themes.

Theme one, the importance of time management in CSS, and what students learned about time management changed students' priorities. Students now approach their academics in a more structured and intentional way, which was not the case prior to CSS. Theme 2, discovering college services through CSS encourages students to use campus services, seek support, and stay engaged. Many of these participants were not aware of the types of campus support services available, as new college students. Because of CSS, these participants learned that they could get help in several places on campus to assist them with their academics and for other needs. They realized they are not alone; they connected with their institution. Theme 3, required communication with faculty and campus staff in CSS promotes self-confidence that is evident in the students' second term. The participants described, at times, an aversion to communicating with professors or others around campus. Students were shy to ask questions. CSS provided a

comfortable venue for these participants to engage in conversations with their professors. By their second term, the participants felt more self-confident and willing to ask questions and reach out to professors and campus staff.

Theme 4, greater understanding about the importance of communication and engagement supports on-campus social engagement. Communication continued to be a very important topic covered in CSS. Not only on how to approach faculty, but also about the value of connecting with fellow students, work in teams, and to be involved in campus clubs and organizations. By their second term, these students made stronger on-campus connections, made new friends, felt more at ease about working in teams and presenting, and were more compelled to become involved in campus clubs. Theme 5, students who persisted into their second term are implementing and using the academic strategies learned in CSS during their first term. Participants learned a variety of strategies that included note taking, testing, and studying. For them, just simple changes in how they are reading course material, organizing class notes, and studying for tests has made a difference in their academics. By their second term, the participants were actively implementing these strategies in their various courses.

In summary, the above five themes illustrated how these participants who took CSS during their first semester adapted to college during their second term. The findings presented confirm that the course contributed to their social and academic adaptation, and, most importantly, that what they learned became practice during their second term. In the next chapter, I expand the discussion of my findings by addressing each research question in the context of my theoretical propositions and rival explanations. In addition,

I address my study limitations, implications and recommendations in relation to theory, practice, and future research.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion, Limitations, and Implications

This qualitative critical single-case study explored the college adaptation of traditionally aged community college students who completed a college student success (CSS) course during their first semester, Fall 2016 and returned for a second term, Spring 2017. The study focused on how these participants adapted to the college environment from first to second semester after taking CSS by exploring how, if at all, CSS contributed to the students' social and academic adaptation in addition to exploring why the course may have facilitated such adaptation and persistence during their first year of college. I accomplished this by using Yin's (2014) case study approach (Yin, 2014; Baxter & Jack, 2008). A descriptive critical-single case study design allowed me to investigate a phenomenon and its real-life context in relation to my theory and theoretical propositions (Yin, 2014). I gathered this data from course documents, student interviews, and field notes (Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Creswell, 2014).

College success courses like CSS are very popular across college campuses. Close to 89.7 percent of two and four-year institutions in the United States, indicate having a first-year seminar or college success course (Greenfield et al., 2013; George-Young & Keup, 2015). Practitioners and theorists alike agree that college success courses assist in the transition of first-year college students from a social and academic lens, which ultimately contributes to their adaptation, persistence, retention, and success (Tinto, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; George-Young & Keup, 2015). First-year seminars/college success courses attempt to demonstrate to new students, how to do college (Kuh, et al.,

2010). However, researchers have identified issues with the administration of college success courses, course curriculum, and student access (Greenfield et al., 2013; Tobolowsky, et al., 2003; Mechur-Karp & West Stacey, 2013). In addition, there are questions about the limited qualitative research available within college success courses (O’Gara et al., 2008; George-Young, 2013).

This study focused on three research gaps found in the literature. First, by contributing to the need of expanding the research of college success courses through a qualitative lens, as there is not enough qualitative research and evidence that helps understand the student experience in a meaningful way (George-Young, 2013). Second, by exploring how college success courses contribute towards student adaptation and persistence in college. Third, by determining why the information covered in these courses may facilitate such adaptation and success (Schnell & Doetkott, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Porter & Swing, 2006; Zeidenberg et al., 2007; Kuh et al., 2010).

This chapter addresses the gaps in the literature and answers this study’s research questions, based on the findings that emerged in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 begins with a discussion of each research question, theoretical proposition, and rival explanation within the context of its respective findings and the literature. The discussion begins by answering my three research questions and culminates with my overarching research question. The subsequent sections discuss the limitations of this study, implications, and recommendations in relation to practice, future research, and theory. The chapter ends with my conclusion.



## **Research Question 1: How, If at All, Does CSS Contribute to Students' Social Adaptation at SCC?**

**Theoretical proposition 1.** This theoretical proposition posits that CSS contributes to students' social adaptation at SCC by teaching skills on how to communicate with faculty, how to work in teams, and how to become involved with the campus community. Furthermore, CSS also contributes to students' social adaptation by encouraging students to have frequent and meaningful social interactions with other members of the institution including faculty, staff, and other fellow students (Tinto, 1993). My findings support my theoretical proposition, as CSS contributed to students' social adaptation by teaching and requiring the participants to engage with faculty, college staff and peers. Additionally, by teaching the students about the importance of socially connecting with one another in and outside of the classroom, and by promoting campus involvement.

The course served as a communication and practicing tool for students through various icebreakers, discussions, and team activities that required them to engage with their professors and with one another. All of the participants described different ways CSS contributed to their social adaptation through communication. Prior to CSS, the participants shared they did not know how to connect with their professors, to ask questions, or even speak publicly in front of a group. The perception of many participants was of a lonely college experience. Even those that described themselves as very social still lacked an understanding of the constructs of social engagement in college, its importance, and its connection on how it can promote a well-rounded collegiate experience. For the participants, CSS served as platform that allowed them to

communicate and engage in a more intimate setting. The course required these students to connect with their professors and learn about the different types of college services available to them; therefore, contributing to them feeling more self-confident and willing to ask questions. These participants knew who to seek and where to go for support.

This social adaptation extended to making personal friendships. The participants understood after CSS that it is important to connect in and outside of the classroom, so that they can remain engaged with their college. For some, even reaching out to other peers was intimidating when they began college. By the second term, participants revealed they were connecting with other students. Some of the participants shared that they even became friends with other CSS classmates, who were still part of their social network during their second term. In some cases, these friends were in the same campus clubs and organizations. For other participants that felt CSS contributed socially in a more limited way, they still acknowledged and credited the course for pushing and teaching them to work in teams with their peers, and to learn public speaking skills. Some participants described practicing these skills in their classes during their second term; they felt more at ease and confident to speak in public.

By the second term, with what these students learned and did in CSS, they were actively communicating with faculty, they were asking for help, they were more comfortable working in teams, and they were more involved with their campus and peers. These students had meaningful and frequent interactions with various parties throughout SCC. CSS ultimately served as a learning tool for these students on *how to* communicate in college, and, most importantly, that it is ok to connect with faculty, peers, and ask for assistance, as it contributes to their social adaptation and college experience.

**Rival explanation 1.** This rival explanation states that CSS does not contribute to students' social adaptation. Instead, this happens individually, based on students' demographic, aptitude, situation, and need. Students who are independent, open, respect others, and have a sense of self-acceptance adjust. This informal interaction process takes place with faculty and other students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). My study findings neither support nor refute this rival explanation, as the data that I collected centered on students' experience with CSS and the course's contribution to their social adaptation. However, I cannot dismiss this possible explanation because the participants did not provide information outside of their CSS experience. What emerged in the data was that participants indicated numerous times that CSS contributed to their social adaptation in different ways, as described in the above theoretical proposition. My study still allows for the possibility that students adapted on their own or that they had informal interactions with people in the college community during their first term, as suggested by Chickering and Reisser (1993) and that contributed to their social adaptation.

### **Research Question 2: How, If at All, Does CSS Contribute to Students' Academic Adaptation at SCC?**

**Theoretical proposition 2.** This theoretical proposition posits that CSS contributes to students' academic adaptation at SCC by teaching them effective study skills, study habits, supplementing academic preparation, and encouraging them to use college resources (Tinto, 1993). My findings support my theoretical proposition that CSS contributed to these students' academic adaptation. The data indicated that CSS contributed to students' academic adaptation by understanding the meaning of time management and its importance, making college a priority. In addition, CSS contributed

to students' academic adaptation by teaching them about accessing and using campus resources, and by students applying academic strategies taught in the course. Coming out of high school and prior to CSS, many of the participants shared that their understanding of time management and prioritizing was poor. Many would wait until the last minute to complete assignments. During CSS, these students learned to adjust their time and to become more organized, so they could meet the demands of college life.

Another way the participants explicated how CSS contributed to their academic adaptation was by learning about campus resources. Prior to CSS, the participants stated that they knew very little of the types of college services available around campus. However, while in the course, these students had to visit departments, interview college staff, learn about various campus services, and present this information back to the class. By the second term, the participants described using campus services/resources like the library and tutoring regularly to assist them academically.

In addition, CSS contributed to these students' academic adaptation by teaching these students about the different types of academic strategies/study skills they could use in their classes. Some of the participants described themselves as having poor study habits during their first term. Even those that did well in high school explained they still struggled with the academic demands of college. Some did not know how to organize their notes, how to approach their readings, and/or how to study. Instead, by their second term, the participants learned to take time and review material before class, they learned to highlight only what was most significant in their readings, and they used tools like color post-it notes to break down course material and organize their notes. In some cases, even recording lectures and listening afterwards served as a useful learning tool for some

participants. These findings align with Tinto's (1993) Student Departure Theory that explicates students enter college with different backgrounds and educational experiences they bring into the college environment, which can affect their adaptation. However, college success courses like CSS that teach study skills, study habits, academic preparation, and usage of college services, can contribute to their adaption, which may not take place otherwise without it, which was evident based on these findings.

**Rival explanation 2.** This rival explanation posits that CSS does not contribute to students' academic adaptation. Instead, this happens individually, based on a student's demographic, aptitude, situation, and need. Students who are open to learning new things, want to develop intellectually, have problem solving ability, are persistent, and acknowledge and embrace differences with others, adjust. This is a type of formal interaction that takes place in class, by grades earned, co-curricular activity involvement, and regulations set by the institution (Chickering & Riesser, 1993). My data neither support nor refute this rival explanation, as the data that I collected centered on students' experience with CSS and the course's contribution to their academic adaptation. The participants did not include or provided information outside of their CSS academic experience. What emerged in my findings was that participants indicated numerous times that CSS contributed to their academic adaptation in different ways, as addressed in my above theoretical proposition. My study still allows for the possibility that students adapted on their own or that they had formal interactions within their classes or other academic related activities during their first term, as suggested by Chickering and Reisser (1993) and that contributed to their academic adaptation.

**Research Question 3: If Evidence Exists for the Contribution of CSS to Students' Adaptation, Why Does CSS Facilitate Students' Adaptation and Persistence at SCC?**

**Theoretical proposition 3.** This proposition states that CSS facilitates students' adaptation and persistence because the course eases the social and academic transition and teaches students how to navigate college. Through CSS, students have more frequent and rewarding interactions, which makes them more likely to adapt and persist (Tinto, 1993). These findings support my theoretical proposition. CSS facilitated these students' adaptation and persistence from first to second term because the course contributed to the expansion of their knowledge and understanding of the constructs of college, the expectations of college students, and the navigation of such, which these participants numerous times stated was not there prior to taking the course.

The participants mentioned repeatedly when they began college and CSS that although they knew college would be difficult; they did not know how different it would be than high school. These students described struggling with time management, organizing their workload, studying, communication, and navigating their campus with little information on where to seek support. Instead, because of CSS, these students stated they became more aware of the type of student they were entering college and the adjustments they needed to make to evolve as students. The participants learned about their college and became more comfortable with their institution and the community that surrounds it. In addition, they learned and applied various time management, organization and study strategies taught in the course, and they had to engage in various interactive activities that required them to connect with one another and their professors.

CSS understood the needs of these new students as they transitioned into college and provided them with the necessary support, exercises, and strategies so they could navigate their first term, which the participants stated multiple times they put into practice during their second term. These participants credited what they learned CSS for helping them transition and persist into their second term; therefore, becoming self-confident and willing to adapt to their institution socially and academically. Ultimately, because of CSS, these participants engaged in meaningful and rewarding interactions, as Tinto (1993) illustrated that attributed to their adaptation and persistence from first to second term.

**Rival explanation 3.** This rival explanation posits that CSS is not the only component that facilitates students' adaptation and persistence at SCC. The course contributes to adaptation and persistence by teaching students about college expectations, life skills, and career explorations; however, CSS is part of a series of activities that allow adaptation and persistence. This adaptation and persistence happens by offering support services geared to traditional and non-traditional students. Things like childcare, peer advisors and other institutional supports facilitate adaptation; in addition, to providing a combination of academic and social types such as student government, athletics, and other organizations or services that sharpen interpersonal skills (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Additionally, this adaptation and persistence is part of a student's personal desire to learn, persevere, and be purposely involved in their college experience; they are gritty individuals (Duckworth et al., 2007).

My study findings partially support this rival explanation in relation to adaptation and persistence happening by offering on-campus services to students. The participants

did indicate it was important for them to have campus services available and departments that have helped them academically like the library and tutoring. The participants expressed an appreciation for having supportive faculty and staff they felt were easy to approach and willing to assist. Others spoke about campus involvement and the opportunity to make friends, which enhanced their social experience and contributed to their adaptation and persistence at SCC from first to second term. These students, as Chickering & Reisser (1993) suggested, encountered at SCC a combination of academic and social services and support that facilitated their adaptation.

Nevertheless, these findings do not entirely support this rival explanation. As the participants described their CSS course experience, they connected CSS with learning about these services and using them for support. Most of the participants did not provide data on accessing or knowing about support services outside of the context of what they learned in CSS. What emerged from my data indicated that although these services and support were available, the participants did not know they were there or how to access them. They described themselves as having a limited understanding of the constructs of being a college student when they began the course. They did not know how to prioritize their time or how to study. They did not understand how to communicate and why it is important to communicate with their professors and peers and to become involved in campus clubs and organizations.

Furthermore, the participants explicated they did not know how and where to access campus resources to seek for assistance and support when they began CSS. Some participants stated they were very shy, while others were very social. Some were academically weak, while others were strong. Some even participated in college



preparation programs prior to starting college and/or were involved in academic support programs in college, like EOF. Certainly, some of these participants fit the profile of gritty individuals, as described by Duckworth, et. al., (2007). The participants expressed a willingness and eagerness to learn and become involved; however, they did not know how. Their consistent perception was that they had to navigate college on their own without support, while still wanting to be part of their college environment.

**Overarching Research Question: How Do Traditionally Aged Students at SCC Who Have Taken CSS During their First Semester of College Adapt to their Second Term?**

**Overarching theoretical proposition.** This theoretical proposition states that traditionally aged students who took CSS during their first semester adapt to their second term by applying study strategies learned in CSS, managing their time, understanding college expectations, and by using campus support services. Additionally, these students adapt by being comfortable in connecting with one another and with their professors. Through CSS, these students learned the academic components of college life, how to improve their study skills, be more academically prepared, and to have the social skills needed in a college environment, which contributes to their social and academic integration (Tinto, 1993) during their second term.

My findings support my theoretical proposition that students who took CSS used strategies learned in that class to help them adapt to their second term. This adaptation began by these students going through a self-reflective process that required them to assess their practices from high school and the alignment of these as college students.

Through CSS, these students stated that they learned about time management, college expectations, communication, campus services, study strategies, and other topics. Tinto (1993) described these as important components that college success courses need to teach to help students adapt, which CSS addressed. These students, multiple times, as illustrated in the above three research question responses, stated a lack of understanding of the college process and expectations of such. Study findings indicated that this was even the case for those that considered themselves high achieving students. They also described facing many of the same challenges and limitations, as their other peers in relation to how much they knew about academic rigor, time management, study strategies, college expectations, communication and engagement, and/or types of college services available to them.

These participants adapted to their second term by putting into practice what they learned from CSS in a variety of ways. The participants more purposely approached time by using planners, organizers, and/or creating schedule grids that helped them fit time for studying, working, and other responsibilities. The participants also adapted by connecting with campus departments and by utilizing their services regularly. Offices like tutoring, library, financial aid, and campus life, the participants felt were important in their academic and social adaptation. By their second term, these students made connections with departments and felt supported. Another way these participants adapted to their second term was by implementing and using academic strategies taught in CSS that included organizing readings, reviewing course content techniques, and test taking/study strategies in their other classes. Students were now reviewing material before class,

highlighting only what is most significant in their readings, and breaking down course content.

In addition to prioritizing time, accessing college services, and using academic strategies, the participants stated they adapted to their second term by being more willing to communicate with faculty and campus staff, which helped promote their self-confidence during their second term. During CSS, the participants engaged in faculty-student discussions and exercises that included icebreakers, team activities, and group presentations. Some of the participants even spoke very highly of their CSS faculty and believed that connecting with them made a difference in them feeling more at ease about being in college and confident about seeking out other professors. These connections were so meaningful, some of the participants shared they still communicate with their CSS faculty.

This adaptation expanded past faculty and staff interactions by also making connections with peers, in addition to getting involved in campus clubs and organizations. By the second term, the participants shared they continued some of the friendships made in CSS. Furthermore, the participants were now more comfortable collaborating with their peers when required to work in teams, which they described has been very helpful when completing group projects in their second semester courses. As Tinto's (1993) Theory posits and these findings reconfirm, social and academic adaptation happens by students becoming more acclimated to their college, by developing relationships on campus, and by learning strategies to help them academically, all that a college success course can address, as CSS did for these participants.

**Overarching rival explanation.** This rival explanation states that traditionally aged students who took CSS during their first semester adapt to their second term, not because of CSS, but because of SCC's capacity to be creative in an effort to address the needs of their students. Additionally, these students demonstrate grit characteristics of perseverance and interest (Duckworth et al., 2007) as they approach their college experience. They try to stay engaged with the institution, even when facing difficulties. These students adapt by connecting with faculty, staff, and one another through methods different from those addressed in CSS.

My findings partially support this rival explanation. The participants did explicitly speak of making connections with campus services, reaching out for support, and the willingness of these departments to help them in their academics. In addition, they engaged with their professors and their peers, who assisted them to become better adapted as well. These students shared they made friends; they became involved in campus clubs and organizations and continued these friendships and faculty connections during their second term. Certainly, the fact that their institution offered them various services to enhance their academic experience like tutoring and the library, and that the college had available faculty and staff willing to engage with these students, along with CSS contributed to their adaptation, as suggested by Chickering and Reisser (1993). Furthermore, the participants did demonstrate grit characteristics (Duckworth et al., 2007), as they voiced their desire to succeed in college and an interest in their institution, as they became more connected.

However, my findings do not support my rival explanation in that by offering CSS and other support mechanisms on campus like tutoring, campus life, or the library

the students would just make these connections organically and adapt on their own. The participants consistently credited CSS for teaching and encouraging them to make these connections with faculty, staff, and peers. In addition, for teaching them about the importance of time management and organization, different types of study strategies to apply in their classes, and by requiring them to explore their college and learn about its offerings and services. At the start, the participants described feelings of isolation and that they had to navigate college on their own, which changed after CSS and they put into practice during their second term contributing to their adaptation.

### **Research Gaps and Study Findings**

This study addressed three research gaps within the literature of college success courses, as previously described in chapter 2 and at the start of this chapter. The section below explains how I addressed each of these research gaps, based on the findings of this study.

**Expansion of qualitative research.** The findings in this qualitative single critical case study provided valuable insight on the experience of second semester students, who enrolled in a college success course during their first term and returned for a second term. Through these students' shared experiences, I was able to learn how they adapted to college during their second term, after taking the CSS course. In addition, I was able to understand how CSS contributed to their social and academic adaptation, and why the course may have facilitated such adaptation and persistence at their institution, all told through students' own voices and perceptions.

**How college success courses contribute to student persistence.** These findings illustrated how a college success course like CSS, contributed to participant's persistence from first to second term by assisting these students in becoming socially and academically adapted into the college environment. Throughout the course, the participants became aware of their shortcomings; they learned and understood college's social and academic expectations, and ways they could become better students, based on many topics and activities taught in CSS that they applied to the studies from first to second term. What CSS taught these students contributed to their persistence by them changing their priorities to focus more on their academics, by communicating with faculty, and by asking questions when they needed help. Furthermore, by the participants' continuous networking and connections made with peers, by discovering and using campus services to seek support, and by applying different types of academic strategies learned in their classes. By the second term, these students were more self-confident about their college experience, which contributed to their persistence at SCC.

**Why college success courses facilitate student success.** The content covered in CSS facilitated the success of these participants because prior to the course, as these study findings indicated, these students struggled with time management, organization and studying, with making connections with faculty and peers, and with a lack of understanding of their college offerings and expectations, which the CSS course addressed. The participants spoke of having a perception that college would be difficult and that they would have to navigate it alone. At times, they brought with them many of the same habits from high school, which created even more challenges in their adaptation. However, CSS allowed these students to evolve, self-reflect, and explore

their practices. Because of what the participants learned and applied in CSS, they felt more successful and prepared during their second term. These students successfully learned to manage their time more intentionally, they learned to communicate, get more involved, and engage with faculty and fellow students. In addition, these students accessed and used campus resources, and applied academic strategies, which helped transform them into more prepared college students.

### **Study Limitations**

This critical single case study (Yin, 2014) took place at a suburban community college in Northwestern New Jersey. The unit of analysis was traditionally aged first-year students (under 24 years of age), and the phenomenon explored was CSS, an extended-orientation hybrid type of college success course. The goal of this study was to explore students' experience with a college success course, specifically to determine how this course contributed to their adaptation from first to second term, both socially and academically, and why CSS may have facilitated such adaptation and persistence at their institution. Nonetheless, based the structure of this study and findings, there are five limitations I need to address, which includes location and population, course structure, study focus, student experience, and interview protocol.

**Location and population.** I conducted this study at a suburban community college with a predominant traditionally aged student population, which is unique, as community colleges tend to serve a more adult non-traditional student. College students over 25 years of age are very common at most community college campuses (Harper & Quaye, 2015). These students have unique academic and social adaptation issues in

relation to identity development, having a sense of mattering and validation, cultural adjustment, and just accessing resources due to their schedules and non-traditional status (Chaves, 2006). Based on this institution's profile and geographic area, the outcomes of this study may not be applicable to a two-year institution that may be urban and/or supports predominantly non-traditional students. Their first semester college experience and expectations may be much different from those that took part in this study, as well as their interpretation and usability of a college success course, like CSS. If looking to make comparisons, this may not be feasible.

**Course structure.** The structure of CSS is an extended-orientation hybrid college success courses that is a required class for students who tested into developmental English and who were majors under the School of Liberal Arts, as well as other selected student groups at SCC. Still, this was an open course, so any student could take it if recommended by their advisor. Depending on the institution either two or four-year, college success courses do vary greatly in content, format, requirement, and outcomes. College success courses or first-year seminars are found in a variety of themes that includes extended orientation, academic, academic variable content, basic study skills/remedial focus, and pre-professional/discipline oriented (George Young & Keup, 2015; Swing, 2002). For other community colleges that may run college success courses in a different way, the findings from this study may not align with their course structure and outcomes. Furthermore, I conducted this study at a two-year institution, which is different from a four-year one from the administration, course curriculum, student needs and population, so a comparison may not be accurate.



**Study focus.** The goal of this study was to explore the experiences of traditional first-time full-time college freshmen who took a college success course during their first term and persisted into their second term. I accomplished this by examining their experiences with CSS to determine how and why the course may have facilitated their adaptation and persistence at their institution. This study did not focus on students whom the course did not meet their needs, which could make their adaptation more difficult and put them in danger of dropping out after the first year. This study did not explore the financial, personal, and/or academic issues that students may face, while enrolled in a college success course, as they try adapting to the first year of college.

Instead, this study explored the participants' experience with CSS and how the course may have contributed to their adaptation. These findings reflected ways the course assisted these students in their adaptation from first to second semester, how they are applying what they learned, and why the course may have helped, as they remained enrolled in their second term. If the reader is looking for data on students that did not make it past the first term after taking a college success course or if the reader is looking to explore the reasons why students may have not persisted even with a course like CSS, this study will not serve that purpose.

**Student experience.** This study examined the college adaptation of traditionally aged students from first to second term in the context of CSS. My interview protocol questions and the findings that emerged centered on students' first term experience with CSS and the relationship the course had with this experience, as these participants adapted to college socially and academically. If the reader is looking for data on students' experience from first to second term outside of CSS and other factors that may have

contributed to their social and academic adaptation, from this research, there is no way of knowing.

**Interview protocol.** Although my interview questions helped answer my research questions, confirmed my theoretical propositions, and partially addressed two rival explanations, I was not able to address two other rival explanations. My interview questions centered on the student experience with the CSS course and how the course contributed to their adaptation and persistence from first to second term at SCC. I did not include questions centered on the participants' experience outside of CSS and other individual or environmental factors at SCC that may have contributed to their adaptation and persistence.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

**Practice.** The findings of this study indicate that an extended-orientation college success course like CSS, at this suburban community college likely contributed to the adaptation of their students from first to second semester. This adaptation was both social and academic and it happened because CSS teaches these students to manage and organize their time better, to engage and communicate with the college community, to apply academic strategies into their courses, and to know how and where to access campus services, when needed. With this type of data available, practitioners could make better-informed decisions when assessing courses like CSS and when determining ways they can enhance and improve these courses, as well as the potential student populations who may be required to take them. Currently, these courses do vary in their structure and content. Some college success courses range in credits, some are combined with other

academic courses, and some are more focused on college readiness skills, while others may take a more holistic approach, focusing on topics like personal wellness (Mechur-Karp & West-Stacey, 2013). Practitioners can use the findings of this study to evaluate the curriculum of their college success course and possibly use it as a guide to adjust the content they may want to cover, focusing more on the areas that are valuable to students. Topics such as time management, campus resources, teamwork activities, college expectations, and campus resources, which this study indicated as valuable in supporting student adaptation from first to second term.

In addition to looking at college success course curriculum, depending on the direction an institution may go to support first-year student retention and persistence, if it is not through a college success course, practitioners should consider possibly incorporating these findings into introductory or gateway courses during the first year. Faculty can consider adding in their course content time management strategies, information on campus services and where to seek support for these classes. They could also include activities in these courses that would allow them and their students to have active and lively discussions and group activities. Furthermore, faculty can incorporate academic strategies in relation to their specific discipline, which may better equip students as they make progress in these courses during the first year of college.

Another way practitioners can use the findings of this study may be to review and determine the types of student populations that should take a college success course at their institution. If a college is looking to offer a college success course or may only be offering it to a selected group of students, these findings may provide insight on what student groups benefit greatly from these types of courses. Currently, the way post-

secondary institutions administer college success courses does vary. Some institutions require these of all new students, while others only offer it to targeted student groups like students enrolled in developmental courses, athletes, at-risk, or students in probation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Greenfield et al., 2013). This study centered on traditionally aged students who enrolled in a college success course during their first term at a community college. This was a diverse population based on demographic profile, gender, and high school background. Still, the course contributed to these students' community college adaptation from first to second term. Practitioners could use the information to select student groups and/or adjust those that may currently be taking their college success courses.

For SCC, these findings may be of most value for practitioners as they assess the CSS course. Currently, CSS is at a crossroads, as the institution is assessing the course and considering making changes to it. Presently the course is only a requirement for selected groups of students, although it is open to anyone who wants to take the class. Even if the direction of the course changes or CSS evolves into another type of college success course/first-year seminar, the administration should take into consideration these findings when it comes to evaluating CSS course content and curriculum that may be included in a revamped CSS course or other offerings like it. In addition to these findings, SCC should consider the available literature that also supports college success courses like CSS, as a way to aid first-year students in their transition to college. CSS is an extended-orientation theme type of college success course, which is one of the most popular college success course/first-year seminar offerings at two-year institutions (George-Young & Keup, 2015). The research continues to indicate that students find

extended-orientation theme courses like CSS as effective in assisting them with improved study strategies, improved out of class engagement, and knowledge of academic services (Swing, 2002). Students view these courses positively, as they feel it helps them build a sense of confidence and belonging that was not there before (Bailey et al., 2015).

Furthermore, SCC should think about the required population who is taking CSS and the students who were part of this study. They were diverse in major and student type. For some, CSS was a required course, while for others it was not. Still, there is no question that the findings of study confirm that the course contributed to the adaptation of this group of traditionally aged students from first to second term, regardless of major, student type, or if required to take the course or not. This could provide insight for practitioners at this institution as they look at the student populations required to take CSS versus the not required populations. The need to address college readiness during the first year reaches across different student groups, even those that appear to be college ready (Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011). SCC may reconsider expanding CSS, based on the different types of students that benefited from the course, as this study indicated.

***Community college leaders.*** For community college leaders, addressing matters of first-year student success and persistence is not an easy task. Public two-year colleges have an open access admissions policy (Bailey & Morest, 2006) and enroll many academically underperforming students (Mechur-Karp, 2011). The outcomes of this study can provide insight for community college leaders on what areas initial students, many underprepared, need most support socially and academically, as they transition into college. This can help guide different types of ideas when thinking about high-impact practices that community colleges can implement to support these students, like a CSS

type college success courses, summer bridge programs, learning communities, new student orientations, and others (Greenfield et al., 2013). The findings of this study indicated that time management, learning about campus services, communicating with the college community, and applying study strategies, were most meaningful to students based on what they learned in CSS. Community college leaders can work with their faculty and staff to incorporate these topics into activities they can embed into a more comprehensive first-year experience, like new student orientations.

As community college leaders consider implementing first-year experiences, like new student orientations that capture larger student audiences, they should make sure these do fit the needs of their diverse incoming student populations. In addition, leaders should consider making these activities mandatory for full-time, part-time, traditionally aged, and/or non-traditional students, so that all students coming in are being supported in their transitional first term. Leaders can use the findings of this study as a guide as to what topics they may include in these activities that are most meaningful to students, as this study indicated. Nonetheless, as they use these findings, they should consider customizing the support for their diverse student populations. For example, topics like time management and access to campus services may look a little different for a traditionally aged student versus a non-traditional student, who may have other service needs or may be juggling other responsibilities in addition to college. Leaders should be sensitive to these factors, as they plan new initiatives and implement these, so that they can be sure they are reaching a broad student base in the most effective way possible.

Ultimately, colleges are encouraged to use a variety of high-impact practices that indicate most impact towards student success and retention. Those that provide academic,

social, and personal components encourage persistence (Tinto, 1999). Community college leaders can use this as an opportunity to move the needle for a diverse underprepared student population in a more equity cognitive mind frame that allows them and other stakeholders to take charge of their students from the very first term, address them in varied ways, and take responsibility for the needs (Bensimon, 2005).

Additionally, by expanding offerings to new incoming students in addition to just college success courses community college leaders would need increased support from the college community, which may help bring together a variety of areas within their institution that work more independently from each other. This can promote a healthy level of democratic leadership (Northouse, 2012), which allows various stakeholders (faculty, staff, administrators, and students) to take ownership of the success of their students. Colleges that create a collaborative environment amongst faculty and administration, help increase new student learning and success (Cornell & Mosley, 2006).

**Research.** The findings of this study indicate that the CSS course contributed to the adaptation of these participants socially and academically from first to second term by these students learning and applying proper time management, by engaging in communication with faculty and peers, accessing campus resources, and applying academic strategies. The participants felt the course gave them confidence and guidance on how to be better college students, which by their second term they felt they had mastered. The outcomes of this study open the doors to future research. This research can be conducted longitudinally to monitor the academic performance of these students over time, determine if what they learned in CSS or other courses like it affects students'

entire academic experience, and results in overall academic success, as measured by persistence, GPA and, ultimately, graduation.

Additionally, CSS type course research needs to expand to other community college student populations such as non-traditional adult students, as these students draw the highest gains in numbers and percentages of two-year college enrollments (Schuh et al., 2011). Although adult learners are a commonplace at community colleges (Harper & Quaye, 2015), they are frequently overlooked when it comes to academic and social adaptation within their college environment during their first year (Chaves, 2006). Researchers need to explore more the experiences of adult learners and the different types of support these students need during their transitional first semester, as it is much different from those of traditionally aged students. These students deal with family responsibilities, scheduling issues, and feelings of inadequacy, as they return to college (Johnson & Nussbaum, 2012). Knowing what these students need the most to succeed can help build college success courses that are customizable to support this population in a way that is meaningful and that will help them persist in college.

**Theory.** There are several theories that connect college readiness, first-year students, high-impact practices, and college success course with student retention and persistence (Terenzini, 1987; Tinto, 1993; Astin, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). There is a push within the research community to explore the development of students during their first year. Additionally, to explore the differentiation and integration of new students as they encounter complex ideas, values, and other people, while still struggling with their own ideas values and beliefs, as they try to make it past the first year of college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Kuh et al., 2010, Schuh et al., 2011).



Two major student development theories grounded this study, Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure, which looks at the reasons why students withdraw after the first year of college, because of lack of social and academic adaptation and what institutions must have set in place to assist with such adaptation. In addition to Tinto's theory, I used Chickering and Reisser's Theory of Identity Development: Seven Vectors (1993) to complement Tinto from a psychosocial lens that looks more specifically at diverse student populations, their challenges, and specific needs, such as community college students. This is in relation to their adjustment into the college environment and the types of individual support these diverse students may need implemented at their institutions to help increase their chances of success.

As the findings of this study indicate and Tinto's (1993) theory reaffirms courses such as CSS contribute to the social and academic adaptation of students like these participants. The information they learned and the support they received in the course provided these students with an awareness that did not exist when they started college and helped during their second term, contributing to their adaptation and persistence during their first year of college. These students were diverse from demographic, gender, and major. In addition, some were first-generation and second-generation, which Chickering and Reisser (1993) discuss in relation to the complexity of students and how they individually adapt to the college environment, especially in community colleges.

Still, regardless of student demographical differences, this study uncovered commonalities in their experiences from first to second term, that if it was not for CSS, for some, it may have been difficult to make it past their first term. Participants expressed feelings of loneliness and inexperience when it came to navigate their college, to

understand academic expectations, and to connect with people throughout campus. They felt very disconnected from their institution, again directly aligning with Tinto's (1993) Student Departure Theory.

Overall, my research extends the understanding of Tinto's (1993) and Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theories by providing insight specifically on how traditionally aged students experienced the first semester of community college, as they transitioned to college, adapted, and persisted from first to second term with the support of a college success course. For Tinto's (1993) Student Departure Theory, my findings expand on how traditionally aged community college students adapted socially and academically during the first year, and what these students found of value to assist them in this process of adaptation with the help of a college success course. Tinto does not emphasize this adaptation when it comes to the community college student population, as most of his focus is on the traditional four-year college student experience.

As for Chickering and Reisser's (1993) Student Development Theory: Seven Vectors, my findings expand on how traditionally aged community college students from diverse backgrounds develop during their first term through their first vector of identity development, *developing competence*. This vector focuses on developing intellectual, physical and manual, and interpersonal competence. Students master college content and build an inventory of skills to understand, analyze, and synthesize. Furthermore, students become involved in college activities and they learn to develop socially and to apply communication skills, as described by Chickering & Reisser (1993). My findings provide detail through the lens of this vector, as these traditionally aged community college students went through a process of reflection from what they knew, to what they

learned in a college success course, and how they applied this from first to second term to adapt socially and academically, based on their individual needs.

Ultimately, many current theories have addressed the challenges community college students face, the disconnect that takes place during the transition from high school into college, and the gaps they endure as they try to adjust during their first semester of college. We know college success courses can assist in support of this, based on the outcomes of this study and the current research and theories available (Tinto, 1993; Chickering & Reisser (1993); Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Zeidenberg et al., 2007; O’Gara et al, 2008; Barton & Donahue, 2009; Kuh, et al., 2010; Greenfield et al., 2013; Mechur-Karp, 2015; Bailey, et al., 2015). However, unlike some of our other available theories, this study used an anti-deficit achievement framework that inverts the research and puts focus on what makes students succeed (Harper, 2010). The participants in this study though acknowledged challenges, provided a strong narrative that focused on what helped them adapt from first to second term with the knowledge learned in CSS that they continued to use into their second term of college. They focused on the positive aspects of the course that helped in their adaptation and persistence at their institution. This anti-deficient achievement framework (Harper, 2010) is an evolving area of theory that researchers needs to continue expanding and that is necessary, so that higher education institutions can set practices that truly align with the needs of their first-year students; therefore, increasing their chances of retention, persistence, and graduation.

## Conclusion

College success courses are part of several high-impact practices that institutions use today to bridge first-year students into the college environment (Greenfield et al., 2013). The research community supports these courses, as there are indicators that they contribute to student retention, persistence, and overall college success (Terenzini, 1987; Tinto, 1993; Astin, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Activities that support student retention and persistence, especially at community colleges, are of special interest due to students' high attrition rates. This study situates itself in an area of research that is expanding and that needs more qualitative studies that will help understand the student experience with college success courses in a more meaningful way. Additionally, research that is looking to determine how and why these courses support college student persistence and success.

The goal of this study was to understand how traditionally aged students who took a CSS course at SCC have adapted to their second term. Specifically, by examining how, if at all, these students adapted socially and academically, and why this course may have facilitated their adaptation and persistence this institution. CSS covered topics such as time management, college expectations, and the importance of communicating with faculty and engaging with fellow students, academic strategies, and other topics related to first-year student success. The findings of this study confirm that the participants who took CSS during their first term adapted to their second term by becoming better informed and by learning how to be a college student. These students learned about college expectations and went through a process of self-reflection from the students they were coming out of high school to the students they became by their second term. Their

shared experiences reflected that CSS contributed to their adaptation socially and academically, by changing their priorities and by managing their time with a focus on their academics. The participants now more comfortably and confidently engaged with faculty, asked questions, and looked for support with various campus departments. In addition, the participants learned and applied academic strategies in their courses to improve in their classes.

These students thanked CSS for helping them become better-informed students. At first, they acknowledged that college would be much harder than high school; however, they did not know the complexity of a post-secondary education and institutional structure. Some of these participants were fearful, disengaged, and somewhat intimidated during their first term of college. By their second semester, they had direction; they knew what the expectations were at their college and what they needed to do to be better students. These findings provide valuable insight when thinking about college success courses and aspects of these courses that help students. Institutions of higher education, including SCC should consider these findings as valuable data that illustrates how a college success course helps their traditionally aged first-year students adapt to college from first to second term. Nonetheless, more studies on college success courses should continue to take place and expand to other student populations such as the non-traditional adult student. The experience of the student should be at the forefront of the research community and so more extended longitudinal studies that explores this diverse experience from first semester, until graduation.

Colleges expend financial and operating resources each year to implement new initiatives in support of first-year student success and persistence. Although colleges

strive to be student-centered, at times, due to a variety of internal and external factors in relation to policy, government, budget, and administration it may not always be the case. Still, even with limitations, we, as college leaders have a responsibility to provide our students with a post- secondary education. We must do everything possible to increase their chances of success, so that they can go back and contribute to their communities and to our economy. This requires us to assess our operations, as our students evolve and change.

The complexity and diversity of our students creates an exciting time for the research of college success courses. Nevertheless, we must remain efficient and engage in evidence-based practices that truly use student data, like this study, to make decisions about what best supports first-year students. College student success is a priority at the national, state, and institutional level. Through the implementation of various types of high-impact practices, such as college success courses, like CSS, we can accomplish this. These courses are an effective way to support new incoming students, as this study indicates. Still, we should be cautious and make sure that as we run college success courses or other first-year experiences that we continue researching them consistently and we use the outcomes of such research to focus on the areas that students need the most support to succeed.

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## Appendix A

### Student Qualitative Consent to Take Part in a Research Study

**TITLE OF STUDY:** *Academic and Social Adaptation through a College Success Course: A Case Study of Second Semester Students at a Suburban Community College in Northern New Jersey*

**Principal Investigator:** *Dr. Monica Kerrigan*

**Co-Investigador:** *Jenny Pamela Marcenaro*

This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide information that will help you to decide whether you wish to volunteer for this research study. It will help you to understand what the study is about and what will happen in the course of the study. If you have questions at any time during the research study, you should feel free to ask them and should expect to be given answers that you completely understand.

After all of your questions have been answered, if you still wish to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this informed consent form.

The *researcher, Jenny Pamela Marcenaro* will also be asked to sign this informed consent. You will be given a copy of the signed consent form to keep. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by volunteering for this research study or by signing this consent form.

#### A. Why is this study being done?

*The purpose of this qualitative case study is to examine traditional age first year students at Skylands County College(SCC) that completed the institution's college student success (CSS) course during their first semester, Fall 2016 and returned for their second term, Spring 2017.*

*Specifically, this study assesses how students that took CSS during their first term have adapted to the college environment in their second term. Specifically, the study will explore how, if at all, CSS may contribute to student's college adaptation socially and academically, and if evidence exists for the contribution of CSS to students' adaptation, why may CSS facilitate students' adaptation and persistence at SCC?.*

#### B. Why have you been asked to take part in this study?

*You have been asked to participate in this study because you completed the CSS course during your first semester at SCC and your experience with the course is of value to this research.*

**C. Who may take part in this study? And who may not?**

*Any second semester traditional-age student that took CSS during their first semester of college. Any student that is older than 24 years of age that is not a second semester student will be excluded from the study.*

**D. How many subjects will be enrolled in the study?**

*This study will enroll between 8 to 10 participants.*

**E. How long will my participation in this study take?**

*The study will take place over the span of one academic year. As a participant, you will be asked to come in for your in-person interview one time. Your session should not exceed one hour. Once the researcher reviews the interview information, if necessary, you will be asked to come in for a follow up interview so that any information you provided can be reviewed and clarified.*

**F. Where will the study take place?**

*You will be asked to come to CH 211 located at Skylands County College– Cohen Hall. You will be asked to come to the above location potentially during the months of June/July to complete your interview. During the week of August 7-11, 2017 you may be contacted to complete a follow up interview, if necessary.*

**G. What will you be asked to do if you take part in this research study?**

*You will be asked a set of prepared questions by the primary investigator that are based on your experience with the CSS course.*

**H. What are the risks and/or discomforts you might experience if you take part in this study?**

*There are no physical or psychological risks involved in this study. You are free to withdraw your participation at any time without penalty.*

**I. Are there any benefits for you if you choose to take part in this research study?**

*The general benefits of taking part in this study may be that through your shared experience with CSS others can learn about the course that may not know about it. Furthermore, your participation will help the SCC community understand CSS better and the role the course plays during a students' first year of college.*

*The benefits of this study are general in nature. You, as the participant, will not gain any personal benefit from taking part in this study. However, your participation may help*

*other new students starting college for the first time learn about the college transition process and how CSS may contribute to that process.*

**J. What are your alternatives if you don't want to take part in this study?**

*There are no alternative treatments available. Your alternative is not to take part in this study.*

**K. How will you know if new information is learned that may affect whether you are willing to stay in this research study?**

*During the study, the researcher will update you about any new information that may affect whether you are willing to continue taking part in the study. If the researcher learns new information that may affect you, you will be contacted immediately.*

**L. Will there be any cost to you to take part in this study?**

*There will be no cost to you for being part of this study.*

**M. Will you be paid to take part in this study?**

*You will not be paid for your participation in this research study. However, you will receive a \$10 Starbucks gift card as a thank you for taking part in this study.*

**N. How will information about you be kept private or confidential?**

*All efforts will be made to keep your personal information in your research record confidential, but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Your personal information may be given out, if required by law. Presentations and publications to the public and at scientific conferences and meetings will not use your name and other personal information.*

*Data collected from this study will be stored in a secured location and only accessible to the primary investigator, Pamela Marcenaro. Your name will not be used. You will only be known by an identifier code that the researcher will have set next to your record.*

**O. What will happen if you are injured during this study?**

*If you are injured in this study and need treatment, contact Counseling Services and seek treatment. We will offer the care needed to treat injuries directly resulting from taking part in this study. Rowan University may bill your insurance company or other third parties, if appropriate, for the costs of the care you get for the injury. However, you may be responsible for some of those costs. Rowan University does not plan to pay you or provide compensation for the injury. You do not give up your legal rights by signing this form. If at any time during your participation and conduct in the study you have been or are injured, you should communicate those injuries to the research staff present at the*

time of injury and to the Principal Investigator, whose name and contact information is on this consent form.

**P. What will happen if you do not wish to take part in the study or if you later decide not to stay in the study?**

*Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may change your mind at any time.*

*If you do not want to enter the study or decide to stop participating, your relationship with the study staff will not change, and you may do so without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.*

*You may also withdraw your consent for the use of data already collected about you, but you must do this in writing via email to Jenny Pamela Marcenaro - [marcenarj6@students.rowan.edu](mailto:marcenarj6@students.rowan.edu).*

*If you decide to withdraw from the study for any reason, you may be asked to participate in one meeting with the Principal Investigator.*

**Q. Who can you call if you have any questions?**

If you have any questions about taking part in this study or if you feel you may have suffered a research related injury, you can contact:

Principal Investigator: *Dr. Monica Kerrigan – [kerriganm@rowan.edu](mailto:kerriganm@rowan.edu)*  
Co-Investigator: *Jenny Pamela Marcenaro - [marcenarj6@students.rowan.edu](mailto:marcenarj6@students.rowan.edu)*

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you can call:

Office of Research Compliance  
(856) 256-4078– Glassboro/CMSRU

**What are your rights if you decide to take part in this research study?**

*You have the right to ask questions about any part of the study at any time. You should not sign this form unless you have had a chance to ask questions and the study's investigator has answered these.*

**Incentive information**

*For taking the time to participate in this study, upon completion of your interview, you will receive a \$10.00 Starbucks gift card.*

## AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

I have read this entire form, or it has been read to me, and I believe that I understand what has been discussed. All of my questions about this form or this study have been answered.

Subject Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Subject Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Signature of Investigator/Individual Obtaining Consent:

To the best of my ability, I have explained and discussed the full contents of the study including all of the information contained in this consent form. All questions of the research subject and those of his/her parent or legal guardian have been accurately answered.

Investigator/Person Obtaining Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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## ROWAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

### AUDIO/VIDEOTAPE ADDENDUM TO CONSENT FORM

You have already agreed to participate in a research study conducted by **Jenny Pamela Marcenaro**. We are asking for your permission to allow us to **audio record your interview** as part of that research study. You do not have to agree to be recorded in order to participate in the main part of the study.

The recording(s) will be used for **interview transcriptions, data analysis, and citation by the research team**.

The recording(s) will include **everything that you shared during your interview**. **The researcher will only use an identifier code to recognize you; your name will not be used**.

The recording(s) will be stored **in a secure location. In a locked file cabinet and the equipment used to store the data will be password and face recognition protected with the researcher being the only one with access to this information**.

Your signature on this form grants the investigator named above permission to record you as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

Check one:

\_\_\_\_\_ I GRANT permission for my interview to be audio recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_ I DENY permission for my interview to be audio recorded.

Subject Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix B

### Participant Invitation Email Draft

Hello,

My name is Pamela Marcenaro, co-investigator working on my dissertation research alongside with the study's primary investigator, Dr. Monica Kerrigan at Rowan University. Currently, I am researching SCC's College Student Success (CSS) course. Specifically, I am looking to learn from your experience after taking the course during your first semester of college. My focus centers on how CSS may contribute to students' college adaptation socially and academically and why the course may (or may not) help students adapt and persist, as they completed their first year of college.

Because you took the course this past Fall 2016, your experience with CSS is of value to me; therefore, I would like to invite you to participate in this study.

I will be conducting student interviews throughout the month of June. These will take somewhere between 30 – 45 minutes. Participation is **voluntary** and the information you share with me is **confidential and anonymous**. *As a thank you for your time, once you complete the interview you will receive a \$10 Starbucks gift card.* If you are interested in participating, please provide me with your name, a contact phone number, preferred email, and possible times that may work for you. I will be in touch with you to schedule the interview and to answer any questions you may have. In the meantime, if you have any questions, feel free to reach me at [marcenarj6@students.rowan.edu](mailto:marcenarj6@students.rowan.edu) or you may reach the primary investigator, Dr. Monica Kerrigan at [kerriganm@rowan.edu](mailto:kerriganm@rowan.edu) .

Thank you in advance!

Sincerely,

Pamela Marcenaro  
Rowan University

## Appendix C

### Dissertation Interview Protocol

#### Script

I would like to thank you for your participation today. My name is Pamela Marcenaro and I am a doctoral candidate enrolled in the Educational Leadership program at Rowan University, currently working on my dissertation research. The title of this study is *Academic and Social Adaptation through a College Success Course: A Case Study of Second Semester Students at a Suburban Community College in Northern New Jersey*.

Today's interview will take approximately 30 to 45 minutes and will include 22 questions focused on your experience with the College Student Success (CSS) course that you took during your first semester at SCC. Specifically, I will be exploring how, if at all, CSS may contribute to student's college adaptation socially and academically, and if evidence exists for the contribution of CSS towards students' adaptation, why this course may facilitate such adaptation and persistence at SCC.

I would like to remind you that you have signed a written consent form allowing permission to be audio recorded for this interview and you have received a copy of the signed consent form by both you and me. The reason for recording is to be certain that I have captured every detail of this interview. However, if at any time, you do not want me to record you, please let me know and the interview will conclude immediately. Ultimately, I am here to learn from you and from your experience with CSS. All the information given today will remain confidential and for the use of this dissertation. Your participation in this interview is strictly voluntary. If at any time, you need to pause or stop the interview let me know and we will stop immediately.

Before we begin, do you have any questions or concerns? If there is none, with your permission, I will now proceed with the interview.

#### Lead Questions

1. Are you a second semester student at SCC (started your studies during the Fall 2016)?
2. Is your age range between 18 to 24 years old?
3. Did your parents go to college and earned a degree?

4. What is your major?
5. Was CSS a required or recommended course for you?
6. Did you take CSS as an 8-week course or 16-week course?

### **Main Questions**

7. Did you consider yourself a successful student in high school?
8. Prior to starting at SCC and as you transitioned out of high school, what did you expect of college socially?

*Other potential follow up questions based on student answers (if necessary) –*  
What did you expect when it came to making friends? What did you expect when it came to joining clubs or organizations? What about connecting with your teachers?

9. Prior to starting at SCC and as you transitioned out of high school, what did you expect of college academically?

*Other potential follow up questions based on student answers (if necessary) –*  
What did you expect when it came to studying and completing assignments?  
What did you expect when it came to looking for extra help in your classes?

10. What about what you just described regarding your expectations from high school into college was like what you experienced during your first semester at SCC?
11. What about what you just described regarding your expectations from high school into college was **NOT** like what you experienced during your first semester at SCC?
12. Could you provide me with some highlights of what topics the CSS course covered?
13. When you began CSS, what did you know about the topics you just described?
14. Now that you completed your second semester, do you feel you know more about the topics you just described? If so, which ones?
15. How did (or did not) CSS assist you socially? – *Other potential follow up questions based on student answers (if necessary)* This is in relation to making friends and/or connecting with other students? Working in teams? Connecting with professors? Joining campus clubs/organizations?

16. How did (or did not) CSS assist you academically? - *Other potential follow up questions based on student answers (if necessary)*. This is in relation to studying and completing assignments? Testing strategies? Managing your course load? Looking for campus resources to assist in your studies?
17. What did you take away, if anything, from the CSS course?
18. What did CSS teach you, if anything, that you practiced in your second semester?
19. Based on what you previously stated, if you practiced what CSS taught you as a second semester student, how did you utilize it? Provide some examples.
20. How have you evolved (or not) as a student since taking CSS?
21. Why do you think CSS may have helped (or not) to become better adapted to college during your second semester?
22. What would you describe, if anything, as most important that was taught in CSS and that contributes to students persisting (returning) for a second semester.

### **Concluding Script**

Now, we are ready to conclude our interview. Before we finish, do you have any further questions for me? I would like to thank you for your time and valuable information provided. Our interview is now complete.