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College Success Class: A Targeted Soft Skills Inventory For Student Success

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COLLEGE SUCCESS CLASS: A TARGETED SOFT SKILLS INVENTORY FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

by

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DEDICATION

First, this dissertation achievement is dedicated to my husband Jeffrey for his graciousness throughout this journey. For listening to me and spending countless hours waiting patiently for me as I worked, researched, taught, read, and wrote. He is my rock, my best friend, and my support. Jeffrey and my son Connor were unfailingly present throughout this entire process. To my family, my parents and sisters who believed in me and who instilled the belief that I could do anything I set my mind to. And finally, a special thank you to Dr. Toby Jenkins-Henry for her guidance as my dissertation chair, as well as a thank you to my dissertation committee members: Dr. James Kirylo, Dr. Andrea Henderson-Platt, and Dr. Spencer Platt. Their thoughts and advice were instrumental to the successful completion of this dissertation.

ABSTRACT

College Success, Freshman Seminar, College 101, or University 101—all of these courses have the common theme of providing students with the knowledge and skills necessary for them to be successful in navigating higher education. This might mean attaining a certificate or degree, or in some cases, transferring to a four-year institution. While content knowledge is unquestionably important, the ability to employ multiple soft skills and learning strategies is also essential for a student to successfully transition to college (Conley, 2013). At Middletown Tech, a designated public, two-year, associate degree-granting institution in the U.S. South, the College Success course is intended to help students overcome the personal and academic challenges that might impede their success in college while helping them develop study skills, writing strategies, and test-taking skills. For students in such courses, the integration of a soft-skills inventory aimed at increasing their non-cognitive proficiencies may cultivate the drive, focus, and competencies necessary to be successful in their academic journeys.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This action research study is focused on assisting technical college students in the development of competencies in specific non-cognitive skills linked to successful college retention and completion. Not only are at-risk students at an increased risk of failure to gain the academic skills necessary for college access and completion, but they may also be at risk for failure to develop the non-cognitive skills linked to success. According to Mendiola, Watt, and Huerta (2010), a challenging curriculum as well as supplementary instruction in soft skills, such as time management, have been shown to be valuable for increasing the success rates of students. Nagaoka et al. (2013) describe the interplay among non-cognitive factors and explain how student attitudes, mindsets, and access to learning strategies all play critical roles in the development of the academic behaviors students need to be successful in college.

College Success, Freshman Seminar, College 101, or University 101—all of these courses have the common theme of providing students with the knowledge and skills necessary for them to be successful in navigating higher education. This might mean remaining in school, attaining a certificate or degree, or in some cases, transferring to a four-year institution. While content knowledge is unquestionably important, the ability to employ multiple soft skills and learning strategies is also essential for students to successfully transition to college (Conley, 2013). The integration of a soft-skills inventory aimed at increasing students' non-cognitive skills may help students develop

the drive, focus, and skills necessary to be successful in their academic journeys. The research has identified motivation, goal-setting, and self-authorship of learning as non-cognitive skills linked to student success.

Introduction to the Study

It is one thing to understand why students leave; it is another to know what institutions can do to help students stay and succeed (Tinto, 2006, p. 6). With a national focus on student success and institutional accountability, colleges are pressed to ensure students' success and retention until they receive their degree and/or certification. This is particularly challenging for community and technical colleges, which typically have open-door policies that welcome a diverse range of students from various backgrounds and whose student populations often include a large number of unprepared or underprepared students. Goldrick-Rab (2010) described this "second-chance" policy as an essential function in an educational system in which substantial numbers of poor and traditionally marginalized students leave high school without a diploma—and even more leave without developing strong writing, reading, and mathematics skills (p. 438). Because of the number of students who are underprepared or unprepared for college-level coursework, many students require remediation, resulting in delays in program coursework and degree or certificate completion (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Pascarella, Wolniak, & Pierson, 2003). Yet, the idea that persistence in college is determined solely by student preparedness (or unpreparedness) fails to explain why students who are academically prepared for college still fail to thrive, retain, or make good degree progress (Roska, Jenkins, Jaggars, Zeidenberg, & Cho, 2009).

Education is one of the primary means of attaining economic mobility; therefore, it is important to consider educational outcomes (Moreno, 2014, p. 179). However, students who are relegated to developmental or remedial coursework may experience delays in their programs and be at an increased risk for failure to persist. It becomes the responsibility of the college to monitor if coursework meets the needs of all students. A study by Roderick, Nagaoka, and Coca (2009) revealed that traditionally marginalized students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are much more likely to be placed in remedial coursework than students with middle to upper socioeconomic statuses, which suggests that their pre-college experiences were less effective in preparing them for college. This may be the result of a misalignment between secondary and postsecondary education. Tracking in secondary schools commonly takes the form of placing higher performing students into college preparation or advanced placement academic classes while placing lower performing students in general education, remedial, or vocational courses (Werblow, Urick, & Duesbery, 2013, p. 270). Tracking condemns many students—a disproportionate number of whom are traditionally marginalized students—to an inferior education, both in terms of what and how they are taught (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2004). As a result, these students may be less likely to develop confidence in learning and may lack non-cognitive skills linked with success (Adebeyo, 2008). With today's increasingly diverse student population, there should be a conscious and concerted effort made toward creating and sustaining multicultural learning environments in which students have equal opportunities to engage in challenging coursework to prepare them for postsecondary education or the workforce (Boboc & Nordgren, 2013).

Institutions have responded to this situation with a host of academic policies, curricula, and interventions, all designed with the goal of helping students overcome challenges and be successful in degree attainment. Among these interventions, a curriculum surrounding the first-year experience continues to gain popularity as a pathway for helping first-year students, particularly unprepared or underprepared students, become accustomed to the college environment. Often called Freshman Seminar, College 101, College Success, or University 101, these courses are intended to help bridge the gap for students challenged with the transition to college by increasing their familiarity with the services, processes, and procedures that they have to navigate within higher education systems. According to Moreno (1997), the freshman seminar, often listed as "College 101," is a revival of a movement from the late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries in which many colleges instituted seminars for freshmen taught in small groups by professors as an antidote to the large lecture hall courses (p. 48). Rooted in the work of researchers such as Tinto (1988), these programs have been based on the need for institutions to focus on the earliest stages of students' higher education experiences in an effort to prevent early attrition.

Problem of Practice

According to Tinto (2006), while access to higher education has increased, greater equality in attainment of four-year college degrees has not followed suit, and for too many students, access to higher education has become a revolving door, or the promise of a degree unfulfilled (p. 12). Research has largely identified constraints (e.g., GPA, parental income, ACT scores, English language proficiency, and academic preparation for college) that limit both matriculation and retention for students who fail to retain in

higher education until certification, transfer, or degree attainment (Jehangir, Stebleton, & Deenanath, 2015, p. 3). However, whether students are traditional, adult learners, first generation, or low income, community or technical college student persistence depends not only on students' academic preparedness, but also their ability to integrate, self-motivate, self-advocate, set goals, and collaborate. At greatest risk are students who have not developed confidence in learning. Motivation may help students overcome this lack of confidence. Differences in individual coping skills, educational goals, and motivation among students have much to do with individual students' responses to the stresses of transition (Tinto, 1988).

As students begin college, they must negotiate the new and unfamiliar expectations of their courses and instructors, the campus, and their evolving roles in the college environment. Tinto (1988) describes this period as a one of transition, as students separate themselves, to some degree, from past associations in order to make the transition to and eventual incorporation in the life of the college (p. 442). This process of transition may be delayed or complicated by the multiple roles students play as they try to balance their home, school, work, and family lives. If students have problems with motivation or goal setting, the addition of college-level work can be detrimental. This increased stressor may make it impossible for students to meet the requirements of their college careers when faced with conflict among their varied commitments.

Equally important, there are a large number of potential factors that contribute to student attrition. While it is enlightening to know that students' high school experiences and family contexts influence college persistence, such knowledge is less useful to institutional officials because they have little immediate control over students' prior

experiences or private lives (Tinto, 2006). However, colleges can address misalignments between secondary and postsecondary education by identifying and addressing gaps among key cognitive and non-cognitive factors to help create equitable access to degree attainment for all students.

Students who need help with the transition to higher education or who have difficulties imagining success or establishing goals that motivate them are at an increased risk of failing to persist. Even academically prepared students may find themselves feeling conflicted about their new roles and might have difficulty understanding their attitudes toward their academic careers, their goals, and their motivation for achieving those goals. Often students are expected to arrive at college prepared to collaborate and self-advocate, to have a voice, and to immerse themselves in their programs. In reality, students arrive with varying experiences and motivations for attending college.

Students who do not turn in their work on time, who miss class, who are less interested in learning, and who have unclear goals about getting a college degree may be lacking essential soft skills that could inhibit their access to cognitive achievements (i.e., high grades, program completion, graduation) (Laskey & Hetzel, 2010). According to Martin, Gallentino, and Townsend (2014), the typical predictors of low college persistence, including limited cultural capital, academic unpreparedness, and access, may be overcome by community or technical college students by developing their non-cognitive competencies, such as the management of external demands, goal setting, self-empowerment, and motivation. Non-cognitive coursework focused on helping students set goals and identify their reasons and motivations for attending college could help students reframe their ideas about attending college. According to Bailey, Leinbach, and

Jenkins (2005), students who set more modest goals tended to retain in programs at lower rates, pursue less education, and earn fewer degrees; furthermore, when these students did complete certifications or degrees, they tended to be lesser ones. In other words, students who are less clear about career goals or who cannot visualize career goals for themselves beyond the purview of "getting a better job" are much less likely to pursue higher level degrees or transfer to four-year institutions to pursue bachelor's degrees.

Kegan's (1980) theory of the evolution of consciousness explains that students exist at many different levels of consciousness. Furthermore, Steward and Wolodko (2016) explain that our concepts evolve through our lived experiences, including formal and informal education—in other words, how we come to know what something is, how it operates, what it is for, and when to use or not use it (p. 248). As individuals progress through developmental stages, they exhibit increased responsibility for how they make sense of and respond to their lived experiences (Stewart & Wolodko, 2016). An individual's meaning-making connections are revealed by increasingly sophisticated levels of mental complexity and a greater awareness of emotions and attitudes, as well as how one responds to and uses the information one accesses (Stewart & Wolodko, 2016). It is important to understand how these meaning-making connections relate to students' approaches to learning and to their academic careers. This knowledge can inform the creation of meaningful curricula to help students form connections while providing them with the non-cognitive skills necessary for their successful academic journeys. This calls for a more expansive understanding of the non-cognitive factors that influence college readiness, a consideration of the ways in which students interact with the educational

context, and the effects of these interactions on students' attitudes, motivation, and performance (Nagaoka et al., 2013).

Current Condition and Feasibility

The college where the researcher conducted this study will be identified as Middletown Tech. Since Middletown Tech set an ambitious goal of a 70% success rate for its students at the time of this study, faculty were motivated to integrate strategies that would increase student success and ultimately result in students' completion or transfer. The persistence rate at the time of the study was just above 60%. The college tracks the number of times students change programs, withdraw from coursework, and fail to complete programs. These data help the college determine the success rate for the student body.

The College Success course introduces students to the college environment by teaching them how to plan their coursework for degree or program completion, aiding them in examining their roles as students, and helping them develop deep and lasting learning skills through multiple strategies, including the cultivation of reading skills, note-taking strategies, writing skills, test-taking strategies, and study strategies. Blended into this curriculum are a significant number of soft-skill, non-cognitive instructional components aimed at helping students understand their attitudes toward their academic careers, visualize their goals, increase their motivation, and learn how to collaborate and self-advocate. This course is required for a significant number of degree programs and for students enrolled in developmental coursework.

At Middletown Tech, the College Success course is intended to help students overcome the personal and academic challenges that might impede their success in

college while helping them develop study skills, writing strategies, and test-taking skills. According to Martin et al. (2014), goal setting, internal motivation, and personal empowerment figure strongly in community college students' success, and successful students align their curricular choices with their goals and interests while also seeking out opportunities for personal growth and development. In light of research such as this, the College Success curriculum includes lessons intended to help students understand non-cognitive skills and how they relate to their learning and academic success. Students are required to complete guided journals as a graded activity (see Appendix B for examples of guided journals used in the course). These journals are utilized throughout the course to help students connect their coursework to their own experiences, thoughts, and ideas. With the addition of classroom observations and group discussions, the basic tools for the study are already integrated into the curriculum, which significantly increased the feasibility of this study.

Research Question

Students arrive at college with various levels of competencies in specific non-cognitive skills that are linked to college success. In an effort to provide insights into how to better structure the college experience to promote retention and completion, this researcher came up with the following research question: What impact will a focused curricular effort have on adult learners taking a College Success Class at Middleton Technical School?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this action research study was to determine what impact a focused curricular effort, in this case the introduction of specific non-cognitive instruction (or a

"soft skills" inventory), would have on adult learners taking a College Success Class. This was achieved through the use of carefully designed classroom assignments as a focused curricular effort designed to help students form meaning-making connections between the non-cognitive skills of interest and their own worldviews in the College Success class at Middleton Technical college.

Research Objectives

The first objective was to determine if focused non-cognitive assignments had an effect on adult learners in the College Success class, specifically motivation, goal setting, and the self-ownership of learning, by reviewing guided journal entries and group interviews for indications that students formed meaning making connections. The second objective was to track classroom group discussions using field notes for indications that students formed meaning making connections with these non-cognitive skills.

Action Research Design

In action research, the instructor becomes the change agent, introducing new practices in an effort to gain new perspectives, to redefine knowledge, and to address a specific problem of practice. Qualitative data are narrative, that is, the data themselves are words (Mertler, 2014, p. 126). Since the goal of this study was to determine whether the introduction of specific non-cognitive instruction related to a measurable, positive change in student attitudes as identified through learner reflection, or performance in observations, journals, and assessments, qualitative study measures were employed. In this manner, emerging themes could be examined to identify patterns specific to the non-cognitive factors of motivation, goal setting, and self-ownership of learning. These data

informed the researcher on the effectiveness of those specific interventions or actions so as to move the researcher toward their goals and another cycle of action research.

Rationale for the Study

According to Slattery (2006), we cannot simply rely on the improvement of past curricular methods in order to solve the complex schooling problems of the new millennium (p. 22). There is a real opportunity to develop curricula for social justice, especially targeting students who arrive at colleges like Middletown Tech by empowering them with key cognitive and non-cognitive skills that are linked to college success. The current College Success class, as it existed prior to this research study, did not consistently include a thoughtful process for helping students make meaning-making connections with the non-cognitive lessons. The guided journals often revealed that students, even if they understood the non-cognitive lessons, did not consistently connect with how these lessons applied to their own experiences and educational journeys. This is especially important as many students in the College Success Class were also enrolled in remedial coursework, and the soft-skills lessons aimed at helping them become more successful were not consistently evidenced as effective within the existing class instruction. There was a need to critically examine the curriculum and determine which assignments proved more effective and which assignments required redesign to facilitate creating meaning-making connections. A critical need to take active steps toward examining what was happening from a learning standpoint.

There are many ways of knowing and learning, and curricula must be responsive to the diversity of students in the classroom. This is significant for the Middletown Tech College Success classes because each student's connectedness to the curriculum is

dependent on their experiences, knowledge, and worldviews. To be effective, the curriculum cannot ignore the combined histories of the students in relation to the integration of non-cognitive instruction. Successful interpretations that lead to understanding and healing can be formulated only by uncovering the salient, unconscious factors affecting students' lives (Slattery, 2006, p. 223). Students need to understand these lessons in relation to how they connect to their own lives, with an emphasis on "cooperative relationships" (Slattery, 2006) in the classroom rather than instruction based on a singular method of learning.

Kegan's (1982, 1998) theory of the evolution of consciousness is a relational theory that places the thinking and acting person within complex contexts, reducing the dichotomy between "knowing" as either an internal construction or an external world to a relationship between these two philosophical perspectives (Stewart & Wolodko, 2016). As Ignelzi (2000) writes, the process of learning and teaching is strongly influenced by the ways in which participants make meaning; learning and new experiences are interpreted through our current constructions of reality (p. 6). By understanding how students' perspectives relate to their approaches to learning and their academic careers, educators can create more meaningful methods of instruction, ensuring that connections are made so that students can grow. Further, as students derive meaning from their experiences and as student levels of meaning-making evolve over time, these levels can become a measure of student development (Ignelzi, 2000).

The integration of non-cognitive lessons into students' worldviews can help them understand how such skills can be leveraged to further their own personal success. Thus, as prescribed by Kegan's theory of self-authorship, for students in the College Success

class, it is important that instruction follow curricular designs that connect the lessons on non-cognitive skills with students' lived experiences so that the students can develop meaning-making connections (Kegan, 1980). These connections help students bridge their own worldview with their purpose and role as college students. When students feel a sense of belonging in an academic community, believe that effort will increase their ability and competence, believe that success is possible and within their control, and see their work as interesting or relevant to their lives, they are much more likely to persist at academic tasks despite setbacks and to exhibit the kinds of academic behaviors that lead to school success (Nagaoka et al., 2013, p. 50).

Conceptual Framework

The researcher for this action research study spent the past eight years researching different variables that have the potential to influence student success and retention in college. Past work focused on the impact of state and federal policy on K–12 education and on students entering postsecondary institutions. Since joining the faculty of a small, urban technical college in South Carolina as an adjunct instructor teaching college skills, this researcher was concerned that the curriculum as not successful in its current format for helping students integrate the soft-skills lessons. It was not consistent or effective for helping students learn to utilize these lessons in their personal or academic lives. Instructors identified a critical need for effective ways to convey the lessons so that students would experience deeper learning and potentially have better academic outcomes. The goal was to help students develop positive, productive associations with their college careers and future goals. Students shared many of the same concerns,

insecurities, and fears, as well as varied competencies in terms of goal setting, motivation, and coping.

Pilot work involved developing a familiarity with the curriculum and comparing it with the existing research and literature. This researcher developed instructional activities for each of the non-cognitive lessons in the College Success course. This led to the development of carefully designed assignments and classroom lessons as part of a focused curricular effort to better communicate the soft-skills lessons. The researcher worked with fellow instructors in College Success to examine the curriculum with the goal of developing instructional tools to produce better methods for teaching non-cognitive skills.

This researcher hypothesized that the introduction of specific non-cognitive instruction (or a "soft skills" inventory) may have an impact on adult learners' thoughts, ideas, and attitudes as revealed through classroom discussion and self-reflective journal activities taking place during two sequential assignments: the Career Report and Advising Folder assignments. These assignments examine motivation, goal setting, and self-ownership of learning in relation to students' personal goals, beliefs, and future aspirations and follow the instructional units on personal responsibility, self-motivation, and self-management. This research may provide insights regarding how to better structure the curriculum for the College Success course to promote student connectedness—and, perhaps, retention and completion. This research may also aid college instructors in developing curricula that bridge students' lived experiences and instructional content in a meaningful manner.

Methodology

According to Mertler (2014), action research involves a systematic inquiry conducted by educational professionals (i.e., teachers, counselors, and administrators, among others) who have an interest in the teaching and learning process or environment. Meaningful teacher inquiry should not depart from the daily work of classroom teachers but become part of their daily work (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009). In action research, the instructor becomes the change agent as they work to understand, to gain new perspectives on, and to redefine their knowledge regarding a specific problem of practice. For educational practitioners, action research facilitates the process of systematically reflecting upon and then formally examining individual and collective practices with the goal of improving individual, collective, and institutional functioning (Ravitch & Wirth, 2007, p. 75). To that end, data collection allows the researcher to focus on the specific interventions or actions that will move them toward their goals or toward a new cycle of action research in which they can measure the effectiveness of new efforts. According to Kincheloe (1995), action research is the logical extension of critical theory in that it provides the apparatus for the human species to look at itself (p. 75).

Mertler (2014) describes the phases of action research as planning, acting, developing, and reflecting (p. 16). The planning stage for this study involved the identification of the problem of practice, a review of the literature, and meetings with the Developmental Studies faculty. It further necessitated the development of a complete understanding of the curriculum as well as collaboration with fellow instructors on lessons and activities that could be utilized as part of this study to increase students' grasp of non-cognitive skills. The acting stage involved the actual implementation of the

curriculum and data collection in the form of assignments, observations, guided journal writings, and group discussions. The developing stage involved developing the action plan and determining the necessary revisions and changes that should be implemented. The reflection stage occurred when the researcher summarized the results of the study, created a strategy for sharing the results, and reflected on the entire process (Mertler, 2014, p. 36).

Participant Selection

The participants were students enrolled in the spring 2017 College Success course. Since the number and composition of the classes being analyzed changed during the action research cycle due to enrollment and retention, only measures for students who were present throughout the entire course and who also completed the assignments of interest were included in this study. The composition and number of students in the class available for this study was determined by enrollment and registration numbers in the spring semester classes. The class composition varied, and students represented a range of ages, experiences, backgrounds, beliefs, races, and genders. Additionally, since assignment to a group or classroom was not random, this study utilized a non-equivalent groups design. Students enrolled in the semester-long College Success classes were the focus of this study because of the increased time available to examine curricular activities; however, future cycles could be adapted for the shorter success class.

Research Site

The research site is a technical college identified in this paper as Middletown Tech, a designated public, two-year, associate degree-granting institution. The institution is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on

Colleges to award associate degrees, diplomas, and certificates. The college's service area includes several counties, both rural and small urban. It has an open admissions policy for qualified students, and just over 7,000 students attended during fall 2014, of which nearly 4,000 maintained fulltime enrollment. In addition to offering credit programs, this institution provides continuing education classes to business people, industry employees, and residents of the region. According to fall 2013 data, 64.4% of the college's students are Pell-eligible due to low income, first-generation status, and/or disability (Canty & Scruggs, 2015).

The technical college system was established to serve the needs of the many, with a focus on workforce development for industrial jobs in the 1960s. Today, these institutions offer a wide range of academic programs in the following areas: industrial engineering technologies, health, human services, business, computer science, arts, sciences, and a transfer program for students interested in transferring to four-year institutions.

Sources of Data Collection

This study employed three primary sources of qualitative data collection. Qualitative data sources included classroom observations, semi-structured group and classroom discussions, and guided journal entries (see Appendix B for an example of the guided journal entries). Students were asked to consider deeply each journal assignment, and their answers were coded by keywords that were examined based on context and occurrence in the student's own "voice." Classroom observations and semi-structured group discussions provided opportunities to interact with students and ask clarifying questions. Observations are another means of collecting qualitative data, which for this

study were recorded in the form of field notes (Mertler, 2014, p. 127). The student responses recorded during classroom observation or in the semi-structured group discussions were also coded for keywords and examined for evidence that students were making meaning of the specific variables, or soft-skills factors, that the course focused on.

Curriculum

The College Success course is intended to introduce students to the college environment by teaching them how to plan their coursework for degree or program completion, aiding them in examining their roles as students, and helping them become focused and knowledgeable in regard to their academic goals. It is designed to orient students in the areas of computer skills, career exploration, study skills, and college resources and facilities. The purpose is to help students recognize, identify, examine, develop, and adopt successful strategies that will facilitate their lifelong learning. Blended into this curriculum is a series of soft-skill non-cognitive instructional pieces aimed at teaching students to understand their attitudes toward their academic careers, visualize their goals, motivate them toward achieving their goals, and understand how to collaborate and self-advocate.

This study focused on the non-cognitive factors of goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership of learning. These non-cognitive factors are already included in the curriculum, and the addition of instructional activities to help students form better connections between their lived experiences and the course content is the focus of this study. To cultivate these connections, students engaged in authentic activities designed to help them personally experience the feeling of achievement tied to reaching their

goals, to understand and connect with their motivations for attending college, and to gain an understanding and connection with their roles as part of self-ownership.

Lessons

Career Report for Motivation and Goals

Many students lack clear goals for their college experiences and careers (Zeidenberg et al., 2007, p. 1), a fact that hinders them in visualizing and ultimately creating clear pathways to achieving their long-term and short-term goals. The learning goal of the Career Report is to expand students' knowledge and understanding of the careers they may be interested in pursuing, to analyze their career options within a field, to position themselves as the experts about that field, and to visualize themselves within these careers (see Appendix B for the Career Presentation Instructions and Rubric). This exercise is important to learners as they work to solidify their visions of their future occupations. For example, rather than simply stating that they want to be a nurse, they can imagine what that means and what type of nursing position they would like to pursue.

An intentional effort to set a goal that is personal, specific, attainable, positive, and achievable within a set time frame is important for motivation. As part of this assignment, students have to examine their career goals thoughtfully with their education in mind as a critical step toward achieving those goals. In the process of researching their career options, students have to look at the outlooks for the particular careers they choose, as well as salary opportunities, geographic limitations, and the academic requirements for each position.

By requiring students to fully explore their career goals with their academic careers in mind, these learners are better equipped to visualize their careers as reachable

and attainable. This new belief system may help them develop flexibility and adaptability within their multiple roles, particularly their roles as college students. Zeidenberg et al. (2007) found that students who learned how to set goals were able to develop better plans and gain a better grasp on what it takes to be successful in college. Goal-setting theory states that individuals who set goals are more likely to perform at higher levels than individuals who do not set goals, and students who set measurable goals may be able to focus their efforts more efficiently than students who set vague goals or no goals at all (Friedman & Mandell, 2010, p. 230). Group discussions require that students explain why their career goals are appropriate for them, which encourages critical thinking skills and a deeper personal analysis of their motivations for attending college. In this lesson, the Career Report guided journal assignment serves as a tool to implement learner reflection.

Advising Folders for Goals and Self-Ownership of Learning

Students, particularly at-risk students, benefit from lessons on self-ownership of learning by gaining an understanding of the college environment, learning to work with advisors, and becoming knowledgeable about and comfortable with the college support systems. Often, students are left to take a back seat as they pursue their college careers by relying on others to tell them what classes they need to take for degree completion. They do not understand the process of registering for classes, they may not know to seek help from college resources, which makes it difficult to take ownership of their learning goals. Students who have not developed confidence in learning are at greatest risk, but they can overcome this by cultivating self-direction. Self-direction or self-ownership of learning is a non-cognitive process of self-direction by which students transform their

mental aptitudes into academic competencies (Valle et al., 2009). The Advising Folders for Goals lesson contains exercises that help students develop a sense of self-direction and ownership over their program requirements. This process requires that students learn where to find their program requirements, grades, and test scores. Students are also asked to map out their next two semesters in their programs. In addition to researching the college catalog and their program evaluations, students learn how to plan out their coursework to ensure they are making good degree progress. They must learn about the different college resources on campus, make an appointment or meet with their advisor, and learn how to calculate their grade point averages. In this manner, learners gain the knowledge required to take an active role in guiding their academic careers and learn to locate and utilize the resource offices on campus.

Conclusion

College Success class instruction represents a potential solution for helping students gain competencies in key non-cognitive skills linked to college success. When integrated into instruction, these non-cognitive skills intersect with students' worldviews in meaning-making ways that help these learners bridge gaps regarding how to apply these skills for their own advancement. This meaning-making is important for helping students build connections by increasing their understanding of how these concepts apply to their own their experiences and challenges.

Dissertation Overview

Chapter One introduced the problem of practice, explored the theoretical basis for the study, and identified the research questions that will guide this study. Chapter Two, the literature review, will explore the body of literature that relates to the problem of

practice and will provide a historical context. Chapter Three will explore the research methodology, research design, ethics, and data analysis strategies. Chapter Four will report the results and findings of the current action research study and offer an interpretation of the results. Chapter Five will discuss conclusions, implications, as well as recommendations for future research.

Glossary of Terms

Action research. According to Herr and Anderson (2005), action research is inquiry performed by or with insiders, includes a planning and reflective process (in that it is deliberately and systematically undertaken), requires evidence to be presented to support conclusions, and occurs in a cyclical manner or cycle of actions to address a situation or problem of practice. This type of research supports and acknowledges the idea that changes occur within the setting and/or within the researchers themselves (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Action research allows the researcher to focus on specific interventions or actions within their own work that move them toward their goals or toward a new cycle of action research in which they can continually measure the effectiveness of their efforts.

At-risk students. At-risk students may be defined as any student who may be at greater risk for failure to succeed in academics. The term may be applied to any student who faces circumstances that could jeopardize their ability to complete school, such as homelessness, incarceration, teenage pregnancy, serious health issues, domestic violence, transiency (as in the case of migrant-worker families), or other conditions, or it may refer to learning disabilities, low test scores, disciplinary problems, grade retention, or other

learning-related factors that could adversely affect the educational performance and attainment of some students (Concepts, 2013).

College success course. College Success, Freshman Seminar, College 101, or University 101—all of these courses are designed to help students gain the knowledge and skills necessary for their successful navigation of higher education and their retention until graduation, certificate attainment, or transfer to a four-year institution.

Goal setting. Goal setting is a soft-skill factor or series of factors that mediate or partially mediate motivation in various settings or life situations. Goal-setting theory, as described by Locke and Latham (2006), regards the effectiveness of specific, difficult goals; the relationship of goals to affect; the mediators of goal effects; the relation of goals to self-efficacy; the moderators of goal effects; and the generality of goal effects across people, tasks, countries, time spans, experimental designs, goal sources (i.e., self-set, set jointly with others, or assigned), and dependent variables (Locke & Latham, 2006, p. 265).

Kegan's theory of meaning-making development. Robert Kegan's (1980) theory of meaning-making development is a conceptualization of how human beings make meaning of themselves, of others, and of their experiences throughout the lifespan (Ignelzi, 2000, p. 6). Understanding how these perspectives relate to students' approaches to learning and their approaches to their academic careers helps inform meaningful instruction, ensuring connections are made so that students can grow.

Motivation. Motivation describes the willingness of individuals to do something. For Kirby et al. (2015), motivation is described as the convergence of three psychological needs: autonomy or freedom to choose paths for oneself, competence as individuals strive

for mastery or achievement in their own environments, and relatedness in terms of one's sense of belonging or ownership.

Non-cognitive. The term non-cognitive is used to describe nontraditional predictors that represent behavioral, attitudinal, and personality constructs, primarily derived from psychological theories (Allen, Robbins, & Sawyer, 2010, p. 2). For the purposes of this study, "non-cognitive" is used to describe those aspects of attitudes, worldviews, and thought processes that concern the process of knowing, understanding, or perceiving.

Self-ownership of learning. According to Valle et al. (2009), self-direction or self-ownership of learning is perhaps best described as a non-cognitive process of self-direction by which students transform their mental aptitudes into academic competencies. Perhaps the most important aspect is that each process or self-regulated behavior (such as establishing of a goal, writing a summary, or establishing self-consequences) can be directly taught or modeled by parents, teachers, or classmates (Valle et al., 2009, p. 2).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this action research study was to determine what impact a focused curricular effort would have on adult learners taking a College Success Class. This study will examine the relationship between the College Success course's non-cognitive skills curriculum and students' integration of the lessons through an examination of changes in students' "voices" (attitudes, thoughts, and discussions) via classroom observations, group interviews, and guided journal entries at one South Carolina technical college.

Background

Importance of College Student Retention

The issue of retention has changed. Colleges no longer simply focus on the reasons students leave, but also what can be done to help students stay and succeed (Tinto, 2006). With a national focus on student persistence and degree attainment (Lumina Foundation, 2015; The White House, United States Government, 2015; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Colleges, 2015), institutions of higher education are increasingly focused on interventions, curricula, and programming that will increase student success. A 2006 report by the National Center on Education and the Economy's New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce affirmed that Americans were no longer the most educated population in the world; the percentage of the world's college graduates

declined from 30% to just 14% in the past 30 years (Olica & Gordon, 2013, p. 360). According to this report, there has been a "remarkable absence of accountability mechanisms to ensure that colleges succeed in educating students," and "access to American higher education is unduly limited by the complex interplay of inadequate preparation, lack of information about college opportunities, and persistent financial barriers" (U.S Department of Education, 2006).

Community college funding models have traditionally been based on the number of students served, and entrance requirements allowed all who had a high school diploma or its equivalent to enroll in classes (Colleges, 2015, p. 3). However, according to a 2015 report by the American Association of Community Colleges, there has been a shift in public and legislative focus from access to completion. An important role of the community college system is to offer greater access to postsecondary education for a greater variety of students than have traditionally had that opportunity (Driscoll, 2007). Community colleges typically maintain open enrollment policies, and the nature of the student population can make it very difficult for two-year institutions to increase retention and graduation rates. There are many reasons for low rates of degree completion at community colleges (Karp & Bork, 2012; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Colleges, 2015), and in search of potential solutions, researchers and policymakers have focused on obvious targets, such as improving students' academic preparation (through remediation, high school outreach, and dual-enrollment programs) and strengthening their financial supports (through subsidized tuition, Pell Grants, and other forms of financial aid) (Scott-Clayton, 2011). Community Colleges are also increasingly focusing on the academic (math, reading, and English competencies) and non-academic (study skills, motivation,

and mindset) skills and abilities that are necessary for successful college completion, transfer, or certification (Duggan & Mitchell, 2010; Schnell & Doetkott, 2003; Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2007).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015) the graduation rate for public two-year institutions was 20% in 2010, and 29% of first-time, full-time undergraduate students enrolled in two-year institutions who began their pursuit of a certificate or associate degree in fall 2010 attained it within 150% of the normal time required to do so. Retention is important not only for demonstrating the return on investment for higher education institutions but also because attrition costs students, colleges, and universities federal and state tax dollars. Increasingly, institutions are judged on a "value-added" basis, with the public and lawmakers wanting to know what the "product" of an undergraduate education is worth (Kallison & Cohen, 2009; Driscoll, 2007; Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

From the mid-1990s to 2012, college enrollment grew by 72% among African Americans and tripled among the Hispanic population, though postsecondary success rates for these students still lag significantly behind those of their White peers (Lumina Foundation, 2016). Whites outnumber minorities by a substantial amount at selective institutions, but at community colleges, minorities make up 45% of the enrollment (Mullen, 2015). According to Mullen (2015), when looking at community colleges, the National Conference of State Legislatures found remediation rates surpassing 50%, meaning that almost half of the incoming students need some type of preparatory course to meet the minimum standards of a specific college discipline. Roderick, Nagaoka, and Coca (2009) shared that students who were from low socioeconomic backgrounds or

were traditionally disadvantaged were more than twice as likely to be placed in developmental coursework than their White peers, suggesting a deficit in college preparation. Moreover, less than one-quarter (23%) of African American and only 20% of Latino high school graduates were deemed college-ready, compared with 40% of White graduates (Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009, p. 192), suggesting a potential misalignment between secondary and postsecondary education.

Tracking is the most commonly used term to describe ability grouping, which is the practice of lumping children together according to their talents in the classroom (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2004). The practice of tracking "permanently condemns many students—a disproportionate number of whom are traditionally disadvantaged populations—to an inferior education, both in terms of what and how they are taught" (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2004). Fabbi (2015) shared studies that assert that primary and secondary students who have been placed into higher level academic tracks are more likely be exposed to high critical-thinking learning activities that require higher order thinking skills, while those placed into a lower academic tracks are more likely to experience rote-learning teaching styles that significantly decrease the likelihood that lower track students will become skillful at employing higher order cognitive skills. Furthermore, Chambers (2009) explored the effect that tracking had on learners' beliefs in their own academic abilities and their comfort levels with their assigned tracks. Not only has tracking has been linked to poor college preparation for students from underrepresented and lower socioeconomic groups, but it may also significantly impact these students' personal belief systems with regards to their ability to succeed (Chambers, 2009; Fabbi, 2015; Chen, 2015). If a

disproportionate number of students in low-level tracks belong to lower socioeconomic or traditionally disadvantaged populations, and if a significant number of this population attends community colleges rather than four-year institutions, it is likely that a significant number of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and/or underrepresented communities who are attending these two-year institutions have deficiencies in key cognitive and non-cognitive factors that are linked to college success (Fabbi, 2015; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009; Chambers, 2009; Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2004).

According to Chambers (2009), historically, tracking helped reinforce the superiority of white students in newly desegregated schools. Tracking was started after World War II, when 20% of the population was earmarked to be doctors or lawyers, 20% skilled workers, and the remaining 60% were destined for farm or factory work (Chen, 2015). Today, schools with limited funding and pressure to demonstrate annual yearly progress are more likely to resort to differentiated instruction. Loveless (2013) shared that teachers default to ability grouping to help manage different skill levels among students in order to make instruction easier, and federal policies, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), have ensured that schools treat the lowest performing students differently. However, as Chen (2015) pointed out, the United States is growing in terms of high-skill, high-pay job fields, and there is a pointed lack of connection between the type of education that is perpetuated in our schools and employment trends. Thus, tracking does not provide all students with an equal opportunity to obtain an education that will give them an advantage as they pursue their future careers.

First-year experience courses like College Success and University 101 are designed to help new students, particularly at-risk students, acclimate to higher education by increasing their familiarity with the services, processes, and skills required for successful college coursework completion. The University of South Carolina piloted the use of one curriculum in the form of University 101 in 1972 to help integrate students to the college environment as well as to help them develop interpersonal skills. The Freshman-Year Experience is based on a belief in a holistic approach to education that attempts to educate students by addressing all aspects of student development, including the academic, social, personal, physical, and spiritual dimensions of learning, growth, and change during students' college years (Hankin & Gardner, 1996).

There are a number of studies linking student success courses with improved retention and academic performance. A study by Schnell and Doetkott (2003) found significant differences in the numbers of students retained who participated in freshman seminar coursework as opposed to those who did not. Substantiating the first-year seminar as one tool contributing to such improvements establishes the seminar as a worthwhile investment on the part of the institution (Schnell & Doetkott, 2003, p. 388). Zeidenberg et al. (2007) found that participation in Student Life Skills classes had a positive relationship to success by helping students early in the college experience obtain clearer goal-setting skills, more effective success strategies, and a better grasp on what it takes to be successful in college. Cuseo (1997) reviewed the body of literature on the freshmen seminar and concluded that not only did these courses improve student outcomes, but they also fit well with the needs of the diverse population of students found at community colleges. Community colleges, according to Cuseo, may be uniquely

positioned to use the freshman seminar to foster appreciation of "cross-aspirational" differences by offering heterogeneous sections of transfer-oriented and vocational-oriented students (p. 17). In contrast, Covete and Kopera-Frye (2006) did not find that first-year experience courses had any significant impact on student persistence in their quantitative analysis but proposed that the curricula could be utilized to improve self-efficacy and mastery of the college experience. Furthermore, Rouche and Rouche (1996) found a great variance among community colleges in the subject matter content in success classes: Some institutions simply introduced students to college resources, while others focused on helping students develop life skills in conjunction with education regarding financial aid, study skills, and the college environment (Rouche & Rouche, 1996).

Though the primary purpose of the freshman orientation seminar has been to facilitate students' transition to and success in college, with the ultimate goal of increasing student retention and academic achievement, the course may also serve to realize a number of other important goals, all of which are consistent with the history and mission of the American Community College (Cuseo, 1997, p. 3). A number of researchers suggested there is a need for students to develop not only academic skills but also non-cognitive skills through improved services and programs (Hodum & Martin, 1994; Schnell & Doetkott, 2003; Zeidenberg, 2007). Driscoll (2007) identified associations between motivation and early performance and transfer among community college students. Furthermore, Roska et al. (2009) found that even outside of the population of students in developmental coursework, those students who were academically prepared for postsecondary work did not always make good degree

progress. However, as Hodum and Martin (1994) noted, when a higher education institution focuses on improved programs and services that contribute to student satisfaction and success variables rather than focusing only on student retention, students are more satisfied and, in turn, remain in school longer (p. 9).

The process of helping students cultivate attitudes, habits, behaviors, and skills for college success in their first 6 weeks of college assists them in developing relationships within the social and academic communities on campus (Tinto, 1988; Stovall, 2000; Allen et al., 2010; Adebayo, 2008). According to Adebayo (2008), colleges need to examine the non-cognitive factors that predict college success to determine how these can be properly leveraged via programming aimed at helping students develop such traits and skills. The research shows that measures of psychosocial factors (PSFs) and other non-cognitive factors are incrementally predictive of college outcomes and that measures of PSFs significantly contribute to the proportion of an outcome's explained variance, beyond what is already explained by traditional predictors (Allen et al., 2010, p. 1). Thus, as the literature shows, these non-cognitive factors are important for student success.

Student Transitions to College

As students begin college, they must learn to navigate the college environment and accommodate the expectations of their courses and instructors, the campus, and their evolving roles in the college environment (Tinto, 1988; Stuber, 2011; Martin, Gallentino, & Townsend, 2014; Nagaoka et al., 2013). Tinto (1988) described this period as a one of transition, as students separate themselves, to some degree, from past associations in order to make the transition to eventual incorporation in the life of the college (p. 442).

Considering the multiple roles students balance, including work, school, and family, this process may become conflicted (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2007; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). College-level work can have a huge impact on students, particularly if they have difficulties with motivation or goal setting, and the effects may manifest in feelings of helplessness or hopelessness as students feel overwhelmed and unable to meet the workload of college coursework (Bailey et al., 2005). The value students place on their academic careers may decrease in the face of the varied stressors and conflicts among their differing associations (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2007; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). First-year student experiences, as they related to preparedness for college, are predictive of retention (Tinto, 1988; Driscoll, 2007). Multiple researchers have found that, while there are many issues that affect student college persistence, institutions have little influences or control over students' prior lived experiences skills, or preparedness prior to admission (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2007; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Tinto, 2006).

Aside from the obvious role of personality, differences in individual coping skills, educational goals, and commitments have much to do with individual responses to college (Tinto, 1988). Unpreparedness among college students is typically viewed in terms of deficiencies in students' basic academic skills, specifically in those skills integral to reading, writing, and mathematics, but community college educators maintain that many entering students are also unprepared in other important ways (Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2007, p. 1). As an example, according to the faculty members interviewed in a study by Martin et al. (2014), students who are academically underprepared in general do not take advantage of tutoring services and faculty office

hours, expect faculty to take responsibility for selecting their classes, and do not engage in self-authorship, goal setting, or self-motivation. Non-cognitive factors are similarly significant for predicting student success (Stovall, 2000; Conley, 2013; McFarlane, 2010; Wells et al., 2000). Nagaoka et al. (2013) explain there is a need for a more expansive understanding of non-cognitive factors and college readiness, looking beyond individual-level skills to consider the ways in which students interact with the educational context within which they are situated—and the effects of these interactions on students' attitudes, motivation, and performance (p. 46). Context, students' motivation, and their mindsets about academic work and the college setting are all important for determining whether students are able to grasp the academic skills required to perform well in college (Nagaoka et al., 2013).

The development of goal-setting competencies, including the ability to employ them within students' multiple roles, is important for the cultivation of adaptive solutions to varied stressors and barriers to learning. Goal setting is a soft-skill factor or series of factors that mediate or partially mediate motivation in various settings or life situations, and effective goal setting is important for student perseverance (Bailey, 2005; Duggan & Williams, 2011; Nagaoka et al., 2013). As such, Student Life Skills classes have been found to be valuable for students as they have been found to help students develop better goal-setting skills, success strategies, and an understanding of how to be successful in college (Zeidenberg, 2007). Duggan and Williams' (2011) study found that students reported that goal setting, motivation, and time management classes were helpful, and Fauria and Zellner's (2015) study confirmed that students believed that determination and goal setting were crucial for college success.

According to Downing (2015), in order for a goal to be motivating, it must have five qualities: It must have a deadline, be achievable, be personal, be positive, be specific, and be tangible. Kirby et al. (2015) describe motivation as the convergence of three psychological needs: autonomy or freedom to choose paths for oneself, competence as individuals strive for mastery or achievement in their own environments, and relatedness in terms of one's sense of belonging or ownership. Furthermore, as Walter (2014) notes, students need to learn to self-motivate and develop intrinsic motivation for their educational careers. Walter (2014) describes intrinsic motivation as that which comes from within each person; for example, if a person enjoys an activity, they are more likely to do it as opposed to something that they do not enjoy (para. 3). Moreover, a study by Martin et al. (2014) found that "the most evident theme demonstrated by every one of the graduates interviewed is their intense motivation to succeed," and motivation had to come from within. Without clear goals, student motivation could be diffused in different directions and course majors with little return (Martin et al., 2014, para. 51). Students who are able to clearly visualize their goals are more likely to be successful in their academic work and more capable of working with faculty and staff (Martin et al., 2014; Walter, 2014; Nagaoka et al., 2013).

While many researchers point to motivation as being a key aspect of student success, self-direction also is an important factor by which students transform their mental aptitudes into academic competencies (Valle, 2009; Nagaoka et al., 2013; Martin et al., 2014). Valle et al. (2009) note that the most important aspect of self-direction and self-ownership is that each process (such as the establishment of a goal, writing a summary, or establishing self-consequences) can be directly taught or modeled by

parents, teachers, or classmates (p. 2). Positive academic mindsets help students to be more persistent and display better academic behaviors, which are predictive of improved performance (Nagaoka et al., 2013). As multiple studies have found, students who learn to take self-ownership of their learning are much more likely to experience success and retain to certificate, transfer, or degree completion (Valle, 2009; Nagaoka et al., 2013; Martin et al., 2014). Moreover, according to Martin et al. (2014), what matters is how students learn to manage and overcome academic difficulties because successful students are empowered to do things for themselves and take responsibility for finding and utilizing the resources needed for their own success.

According to Baxter Magolda (2001), in order for colleges to foster students' developmental growth, they must create learning experiences that have substantive meaning for everyday life, require real responsibility on the students' part, and connect to students' internal self-evolution (p. 286). Multiple researchers note that students exist at many different levels of consciousness and that fostering an understanding of how these perspectives relate to students' approaches to learning and their academic careers can inform the development of meaningful curricula (Evans & Forney, 2009; Ignelzi, 2000; Baxter Magolda, 2001; Zeidenberg et al., 2007). In an effort to develop meaning-making experiences to facilitate student transitions to college, this action research study will examine the relationship between the College Success curriculum and students' integration of the non-cognitive skills lessons on goals, motivation, and self-ownership of learning.

Methodology

Somekh (1995) supports action research as a methodology grounded in the values of the teacher-researcher(s), who has full control over the research process and uses it to address problems of practice, bridging the gap between research and application in informed theory and practice. Action research facilitates the process of systematically reflecting upon and then formally examining individual and collective practices toward the goal of improved individual, collective, and institutional functioning (Ravitch & Wirth, 2007, p. 75). A review of the literature allows educational practitioners to develop a more holistic understanding of the frameworks, theories, and existing body of research. Action research is concerned with exploring the multiple determinants of actions, interactions, and interpersonal relationships in unique contexts (Somekh, 1995, p. 341).

The action research process is cyclical, with opportunities to make adjustments, reflect on the efficacy of those changes, and examine what it means for future iterations. Results and connections are fed directly back into the process with the goal of enacting change and making improvements for future practice (Somekh, 1995; Mertler, 2014), enabling researchers to employ lessons learned in future cycles. With each repeated cycle, the researcher learns more and works toward establishing greater credibility (Mertler, 2014; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009; Ravitch & Wirth, 2007). Professional reflection is essential to the teacher-researcher as a meaning-making process, as the researcher reviews the activities and results and determines what has worked, what requires further work, and the potential for future cycles. It is in this manner that the action researcher can work toward continual improvement and potential breakthroughs within their spheres of influence. According to Mertler (2014), action planning provides

researchers with opportunities for reflecting on where their action research has taken them, reflecting on what they have learned from engaging in action research, and reflecting on where action research can take them as they move forward. When teachers utilize the reflective process, they move beyond the rote classroom functions and develop the skills and capability to make meaningful change in the classroom as they invent new strategies to meet the needs of their classrooms, programs, or institutions.

Helping College Students Succeed

Improving College Student Retention

Goldrick-Rab (2010), Driscoll (2007), and Karp and Bork (2012) share insights on the community college system and theorize about the reasons for low retention and graduation rates. According to Scott-Clayton (2011), the search for potential solutions has focused on academic preparation (remediation, high school outreach, and dual enrollment) and financial support (subsidized tuition, Pell Grants, and other forms of financial aid). Duggan and Mitchell (2010), Schnell and Doetkott (2003), Zeidenberg, Jenkins, and Calcagno (2007) discuss the increasing focus by colleges on the non-cognitive skills (mindset, goal setting, motivation) necessary for successful college completion. Kallison and Cohen (2009), Driscoll (2007), and Goldrick-Rab (2010) also discuss the shift in focus from access to retention and how colleges are being judged on a "value-added" basis, with the public and lawmakers wanting to know what the "product" of an undergraduate education is worth.

Among studies linking student success courses with improved retention, Schnell and Doetkott (2003), Zeidenberg et al. (2007), and Cuseo (1997) discuss the positive relationship between these courses and improved student outcomes. As noted before,

Zeidenberg et al. (2007) found that participation in Student Life Skills classes had a positive relationship to student success by helping them strengthen their goal-setting skills, improve their success strategies, and increase their understanding of how to succeed in college. Schnell and Doetkott (2003) found freshman seminar coursework had a significant impact on the numbers of students retained. Substantiating the first-year seminar as one tool contributing to such improvements establishes the seminar as a worthwhile investment on the part of the institution (Schnell & Doetkott, 2003, p. 388).

College success courses have a long historical precedence, and as previously noted, Moreno (1997) discusses the history of college success courses and their relationship to efforts to create small-group seminars for freshmen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (p. 48). Hankin and Gardner (1996) describe the purpose of The Freshman Year Experience, a program piloted by the University of South Carolina to better integrate students to the college environment and to help them develop the interpersonal skills necessary to be successful in higher education. Cuseo (1997) reviewed the body of literature on freshmen seminars and concluded that not only did these courses improve student outcomes, but they also fit well with the needs of the diverse populations of students found at community colleges. Community colleges, according to Cuseo (1997), may be uniquely positioned to use the freshmen seminar to foster the appreciation of "cross-aspirational" differences by offering heterogeneous sections of transfer-oriented and vocational-oriented students (p. 17). In contrast, Covete and Kopera-Frye (2006) did not find that first-year experience courses had any significant impact on student persistence in their quantitative analysis, but they proposed that the curricula could be used to improve self-efficacy and mastery of the college experience.

Furthermore, Rouche and Rouche (1996) found that community colleges varied greatly in the subject matter content in success classes: Some institutions simply introduced students to college resources, while others focused on helping students develop life skills in conjunction with education about financial aid, study skills, and the college environment (Rouche & Rouche, 1996).

Hodum and Martin (1994), Schell and Doetkott (2003), and Zeidenberg (2007) discuss the importance of the facilitating the student transition to college and the need to develop not only academic skills but also non-cognitive skills through improved programming. Tinto (1988) stresses the importance of students' early integration into the college environment for improved retention outcomes, and Tinto (1988), Stovall (2000), Allen et al. (2010), and Adebayo (2008) all stress the importance of helping students develop attitudes, habits, behaviors, and skills for college success in the first 6 weeks, as it helps them cultivate relationships within the social and academic communities on campus. Adebayo (2008) goes on to discuss how colleges need to examine the non-cognitive factors predictive of college success so that they can be better leveraged in college programming. Allen et al. (2010) review the psychosocial factors that significantly contribute to positive outcomes.

A review of Tinto (1988, 2006) reinforced that first-year student experiences are predictive of retention and reinforced the importance of providing students with the services and programs that help them develop early connections in their academic careers. There were many sources that focused on socioeconomic status, grades, first-generation status, and standardized test scores as predictive for different groups of students, but many others, including Jehangir et al. (2015), Conley (2013), Stovall

(2000), McFarlane (2010), and Wells et al. (2000), discussed non-cognitive factors as being similarly significant for predicting student success. Tinto (1988), Martin et al. (2014), and Nagaoka et al. (2013) all discuss the importance of students integrating into the college environment early in the college experience, and Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2007) and Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005) describe factors that confound students when non-cognitive skills are not in place.

As noted earlier, many researchers have identified deficiencies in students' basic academic skills, specifically in those skills integral to reading, writing, and mathematics, but many students are also unprepared in other important ways (Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2007). Furthermore, Martin et al. (2014) describe how academically unprepared students were less likely to engage in goal setting, expected faculty to do their academic planning for them, were less likely to engage in self-authorship and motivation, and were less likely to take advantage of tutoring and faculty office hours. Nagaoka et al. (2013) describe the non-cognitive factors that play a critical role in the development of students' academic behaviors that affect their success in college.

Societal Implications of College Student Success

Student success and persistence has garnered a great deal of public attention, including the attention of the White House, the popular press, and organizations focused on changing the way that higher education functions. On January 9, 2015, President Barack Obama unveiled the America's College Promise proposal to make 2 years of community college free for responsible students, letting students earn the first half of a bachelor's degree and learn skills needed in the workforce at no cost (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2015). The Lumina Foundation (2015) webpage offers

perspectives regarding how outside organizations view higher education and how they are driving efforts aimed at the redesign of higher education to improve outcomes for all students. Colleges are being held accountable for student outcomes and persistence, and nationally, higher education is under scrutiny regarding how postsecondary institutions go about the business of education. The American Association of Community Colleges (2015) report *Community College Completion: Progress Toward Goal of 50% Increase* reveals that community colleges are responding and working to clarify the nature of the student body and outcome measures.

The Chronicle of Higher Education offers several articles and surveys that discuss how coping skills, non-cognitive skills, and other non-academic factors are connected to student success. According to a recent article, two out of three students surveyed said they felt more emotionally unprepared than their peers in both their final year of high school and their first semester of college (Stoltzfus, 2015). In another *Chronicle* article, Schwartz (2015) posited that the right way for colleges and universities to defend themselves is by describing themselves as nurturers of intellectual virtues and then devoting themselves to the task of developing a whole student rather than simply focusing on academics. This also supports the idea that students can benefit from a soft-skills inventory to further their progress.

Educational Administration and Policy Concerns

Community college funding models were established on the number of students served, and admission has historically been open to anyone with a high school diploma or equivalent (Colleges, 2015). However, with the increasing public and legislative focus on return on investment, community colleges are being pressed to demonstrate not only

the value of a college education but also that students are successfully earning degrees and certifications or are transferring to four-year institutions. With the national focus on outcomes-based assessment in K–12 public education, higher education institutions and educators must recognize that their efforts will continue to be increasingly exposed to speculation (Scruggs, 2012). Research by Gildersleeve, Kuntz, Pasque, and Carducci (2010) reveal a crisis in higher education, and they argue that action is required to shift the focus of higher education from a capitalistic, market-driven emphasis to one that better serves the public good. For many, this increasingly prevalent move to judge the value of an undergraduate education on a value-added basis is concerning (Kallison and Cohen, 2009). Higher education is challenged with decreases in state funding and an increased focus on financial aid and student success. The implications include the possibility of state and federal governments tying funding to conceptual factors, such as how well colleges and universities are preparing students for the workforce. Kallison and Cohen (2009) clarify the impracticality of implementing state accountability systems for higher education due to the incredible variance in curricula and institutional missions among American institutions. As they further argue, the curricular diversity available to the faculty in a particular discipline at a college or university is partly what distinguishes postsecondary education from K–12, and this flexibility is needed to advance knowledge (Kallison & Cohen, 2009).

Since the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* blamed schools for weakness in America's ability to compete in global markets, American education policy focused on improving schools for global competition (Spring, 2014, p. 425). Thus, education has evolved from a form of human development serving personal and civic needs into a product our nation

produces to compete in a global economy, and schools have become a place to mass-produce this product (Flinders & Thornton, 2013, p. 282). According to a 2006 report by the National Center on Education and the Economy's New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, there has been a "remarkable absence of accountability mechanisms to ensure that colleges succeed in educating students," and "access to American higher education is unduly limited by the complex interplay of inadequate preparation, lack of information about college opportunities, and persistent financial barriers" (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). This report also blames substandard high school preparation, which is compounded by poor alignment between high schools and colleges, a misalignment that often creates an "expectations gap" between what colleges require and what high schools produce (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

Just as curricula have been frequently leveraged as a tool for the maintenance of power and American competitiveness in the global marketplace, our education system has been and continues to be leveraged as a tool for resolving societal problems, issues, and inequalities (Spring, 2014; Driscoll, 2007; Lumina Foundation, 2015; The White House, United States Government, 2015; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Colleges, 2015). The result of outcomes-based assessments is the expectation that higher education should demonstrate results in return for the funding received (Kallison and Cohen, 2009). This is further evidenced by the closing of certain for-profit colleges because of their low student success rates and failure to properly report employment outcomes for graduates. Additionally, colleges, as recipients of federal financial aid funding for students, are held responsible for student success outcomes in the form of retention and graduation (Kallison & Cohen, 2009; Driscoll, 2007; Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

As mentioned earlier, for community colleges, the use of retention as a measure of a college's success can be challenging (Colleges, 2015). Community colleges welcome diverse students from various educational and socio-economic backgrounds, and their student populations often include a large number of unprepared or underprepared students (Colleges, 2015). Goldrick-Rab (2010) describes this "second-chance" policy as an essential function of community colleges, particularly as substantial numbers of poor and traditionally disadvantaged students leave high school without a diploma and even more often without developing strong writing, reading, and math skills (p. 438). This also means that there is a significant diversity among students, including a number of students who are underprepared or unprepared for college-level coursework, requiring remediation and resulting in delays in program coursework and degree or certificate completion (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Pascarella et al., 2003).

Conclusion

Chapter Two provided a review of the literature, examining the current national focus on student persistence and degree attainment, discussing methodology, and describing the importance of student retention. The literature revealed higher education's responses to the demand for increased rates of graduation and retention, including new academic policies, curricula, and interventions. Among these interventions, a curriculum surrounding the first-year experience continues to gain popularity as a pathway for helping first-year students, particularly unprepared or underprepared students, become accustomed to the college environment. The literature has also shown an increased focus on soft skills as effective for improving student outcomes. These studies provided insights into the specific non-cognitive factors that contribute to student success and

guided the development of research strategies for this action research project. They provided guidance and grounded theory for identifying the constructs of interest and determining the behaviors and attitudes that reveal the integration or lack of integration of non-cognitive factors. This understanding is central to formulating a functional framework for this study. Chapter Three will explore the purpose, methodology, and design of this action research study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In Chapter Two, a review of the literature set forth a greater understanding of how student learning progresses, how students develop competencies, and how they further their meaning-making. The literature review provided insights into the specific psycho-social factors that contribute to student success and that guided the development of research strategies for this researcher's action research project. The literature provided guidance and grounded theory for identifying constructs of interest and determining the behaviors and attitudes that reveal students' integration or lack of integration of non-cognitive factors, which was central to formulating a functional framework for this study. In Chapter Three, the purpose, methodology, and design of this action research study will be discussed.

Purpose Statement

Specific Purpose

The purpose of this action research study was to determine what impact a focused curricular effort, in this case the introduction of specific non-cognitive instruction (or a "soft skills" inventory), would have on adult learners taking a College Success Class at Middletown Tech.

General Purpose

This study sought to increase student success via three methods: first, by determining the effectiveness of the College Success curriculum to improve future

instructional effort; second, by helping instructors become better informed and more knowledgeable about the methods and practices that make meaning-making connections for students in non-cognitive instruction; and third, by increasing peer interaction among full-time faculty and adjunct faculty to improve instruction of the College Success course. This is important as the college where this researcher conducted their research has set an ambitious goal of a 70% success rate for students; thus, faculty are motivated to integrate success strategies to increase student completion or transfer.

Problem of Practice

Middletown Tech's current persistence rate at the time of this study was just above 60%, which means that nearly 40% of the college's students were not successful in completing a certificate, degree, or transfer to a four-year institution. The college's student body is diverse and includes first-generation college students, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, traditional and non-traditional students, students with disabilities (including learning disabilities), ESL students, dislocated workers, and veterans. Approximately 46% of Middletown Tech's degree-seeking student population are first-generation students or low-income and first-generation students. It is more common for first-generation students to experience difficulties navigating the higher education environment (Stephens et al., 2014). These students may find it more difficult to acclimate and find a sense of belonging among their college peers, and if they are struggling, they may have less knowledge as to how to seek out the resources they need to succeed (Tinto, 2006). In addition to financial and academic aid, many first-generation students also require personal counseling to aid them in making a successful transition to college (Canty & Scruggs, 2013). Since first-generation students account for nearly half

the student population at Middletown Tech, it is important to create equal opportunity for degree achievement through the implementation of success strategies and use of institutional assistance to help students tackle the background-specific obstacles that they are likely to encounter and improve their academic performance (Stephens, et al., 2014).

The problem of practice was identified by this teacher-researcher who found that students who may have has difficulties forming meaning-making connections between goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership and their own academic careers may also have other problematic habits, thought processes, and attitudes both specific to the College Success classroom and in general with regards to their other classes. The non-academic challenge most often identified by Middletown Tech students, particularly first-generation students, is the fear that they will not be able to complete their degrees (Canty & Scruggs, 2013).

For some students, the fear of failure can undermine their feelings of self-worth and make it more difficult for them to believe that they can succeed in college. Their unfamiliarity with the college environment also puts them at greater risk of not understanding the support services available to them on campus and of failing to take advantage of those services because they do not understand how to utilize them (Tinto, 2006). They are at greater risk of misunderstanding the college and career-planning process and the college transfer process, and they do not know how to plan and gauge their academic progress at Middletown Tech in a way that will help them progress within their chosen program or field (Canty & Scruggs, 2013). They may resist establishing effective goals and experience difficulties developing competencies in self-motivation and self-ownership of learning (Canty & Scruggs, 2013).

As the only open enrollment institution in the region, the college serves a student population that typically requires some level of remediation before students can enroll in college credit coursework. For many of these students, the need for remedial coursework constitutes a major barrier to success, and household income represents another barrier. Students who are eligible for the South Carolina Legislative Incentive for Future Excellence (LIFE) Scholarship cannot use their aid if they are relegated to remedial coursework. (The LIFE Scholarship is a merit-based scholarship program administered by the financial aid office at each eligible public and independent college and university in South Carolina [South Carolina Commission on Higher Education, 2018]). Without knowing the different levels of rigor and different types of programming available among the high schools in Middletown Tech's service area, it is difficult to determine why eligible LIFE scholars might find themselves required to take remedial classes. For Middletown Tech students, this creates a significant issue for families and individuals who are living below the federal poverty level as these students are highly reliant on financial aid to help them remain in college. Moreover, the increased time to graduation can exhaust financial aid resources and undermine students' confidence and motivation to succeed. Tinto (1993) identified three reasons for a student's departure from college: academic difficulties, inability to resolve education and occupational goals (career counseling), and failure to become engaged with the higher education institution. Bearing this in mind, success strategies are critical to the success of students at Middletown Tech to help them persist and to create equal opportunities for completion.

Research Question

This researcher questioned what effect a focused curricular effort through the introduction of specific non-cognitive instruction (or a "soft skills" inventory) have on adult learners taking a College Success Class at Middleton Technical School. This was examined using focused classroom assignments designed to help students form meaning-making connections between the non-cognitive skills of interest and their own worldviews in the College Success class at Middletown Tech. The goal of such assignments was to increase student integration of specific soft skills linked to academic success in an effort to create successful meaning-making connections for students. Based on the literature, the researcher determined that the integration of such skills could be particularly important for increasing equality in college outcomes. Using an action research design allowed the researcher to address the research question by developing specific classroom lessons with the goal of identifying changes in the personality inventory examination, changes in student classroom discussions, and changes in guided journal entries.

Research Objectives

By determining the efficacy of specific, focused non-cognitive lessons through action research, the researcher endeavored to examine the effect of these lessons on adult learners by reviewing guided journal entries and instructors' classroom field notes and group interviews for narrative that may indicate that students understood and communicated a personal interpretation or application of the non-cognitive skills of goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership of learning.

Research Design

Action Research Design

A qualitative research approach was appropriate for this study. Since the goal was to determine if the introduction of specific non-cognitive instruction, or a "soft skills" inventory, makes any change in the adult learners' narratives (classroom attitudes, thoughts, and discussions, as measured via class discussions, group interviews, and guided journal entries), a qualitative research design allowed the researcher to better understand the efficacy of this curricular effort. As an action research study, the concern is not the generalizability of the results but their application to the specific problem of practice for the research study.

This study gathered data communicated by participants regarding their viewpoints and worldviews and examined these data for insights into how students generate meaning-making connections to the non-cognitive factors introduced in the curriculum. During this qualitative case study action research process, the researcher determined the sources of data for the chosen topic and began to collect data while concurrently exploring, analyzing, and reviewing those data in order to make decisions about future directions or steps in the study (Mertler, 2014, p. 92). Prior to the start of this study, the researcher first considered exploring a qualitative prioritized mixed methods study. However, when the data was delivered from the study institution, it became evident that the quantitative data was not reliably present. Using the funnel analogy, this researcher narrowed the focus of the study to the two instructional interventions most represented among the work from study participants and those most aligned with the constructs of interest: goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership of learning.

Qualitative studies are often referred to as naturalistic inquiry and as having an emergent design that is guided by general questions and not an *a priori* hypothesis (Henscheid & Keup, 2011, p. 41). Since the purpose of this action research study was to examine if learner reflections revealed integration of the soft-skills inventory based on the learners' viewpoints, this researcher will not attempt to describe the varied outside influences (backgrounds, socio-economic backgrounds, and age, among others) and will focus instead on students' own manifestations of meaning-making in relationship with the lessons. During exploration, the researcher compiled detailed information regarding this specific problem of practice. In the inspection stage, the researcher analyzed the data collected with the goal of cultivating some fully developed concepts from initial ideas. Using constant comparison, the researcher continued to both expand and hone these ideas in order to progressively refine the concept of the relationship. Finally, to confirm the results, the researcher put the ideas and relationships discovered among them into a more testable form (propositions) and rechecked propositions against all the cases that were collected during the exploration stage (Athens, 2010).

Participants

The participants were students enrolled in the researcher's College Success course. Since the number and composition of the classes being analyzed changed during the action research cycle due to retention, only measures for students who were present throughout the entire course and who also completed the assignments of interest were included in the study. The class composition varied, and a range of ages, experiences, backgrounds, beliefs, races, and genders was represented. Additionally, since assignment to a group or classroom was not random, this study utilized a non-equivalent groups

design. Students enrolled in the semester-long College Success course were the focus of this study because of the increased time available to examine curricular activities; however, future cycles could be adapted for shorter College Success courses. The composition and number of students available to the study was determined by enrollment and registration numbers in the spring 2017 semester classes. The class started with 24 students, but concluded with 19. Table 3.1 (below) further breaks down the participant group by gender, age (traditional college age versus non-traditional college age), and race.

Table 3.1: 2017 College Success Class Demographics

Gender	6 Female	13 Male
Age range	4 Traditional College Age	15 Adult Learners
Race	9 African American	10 White

The Setting

Institution. The research site was a technical college identified in this paper as Middletown Tech, a designated public, two-year, associate degree-granting institution accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges to award associate degrees, diplomas, and certificates.

Community. The community in this action research project were the students who attend Middletown Tech, a technical college located in a small urban region in South Carolina. Specifically, the community consisted of students enrolled and retained in the researcher's semester-long College Success class in 2017.

Gatekeepers. The gatekeepers will be the Department Manager for the Center for Teaching and Learning, the Quality Learning Council (QLC), and the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Student Engagement.

Building Trust

Before the study started, participants were ensured that all data would be stripped of identifying features so no student, class, or instructor could be identified. The college was not identified, and the approval of the University of South Carolina College of Education dissertation committee and the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board were obtained prior to the initiation of research activities to ensure ethical research practices. It was important to ensure that instruction continued without interruption, that the curriculum was provided as intended, and that the curriculum was in compliance with the Middletown Tech's guidelines and the policies of the Quality Learning Council (QLC). Approval for any additions to the curriculum as written and approved by Middletown Tech also required the approval of the Department Chair and the QLC.

At the start of the spring 2017 semester, students in Middletown Tech's College Success course were informed of the study and the college's role in the study. Informed consent forms were distributed to all students in the College Success course, and students had the opportunity to ask questions prior to consenting as participants. They were informed of their rights as participants, including their right to withdraw at any point during the study. Students were also informed of the manner by which their anonymity would be preserved. Student work was collected and given to the Department Manager for the Center for Teaching and Learning. This individual coded student work and

removed names and other identifying factors. Only those students who signed a written consent form and who completed the entire semester were included in the study. The Department Manager met with the class at the start of the semester, provided students with information regarding the study, and distributed the permission forms. Students did not know the identity of the teacher-researcher. Once the data was coded and stripped of all personal identifiers, the Department Manager then provided the data to this researcher for analysis.

Positionality

I acknowledge that my own positionality may have affected my own viewpoints and my interpretations of the data from interviews, journals, and discussions. This researcher is a white, heterosexual, married with one child, middle class woman who grew up in rural central Pennsylvania. Raised by a stay-at-home mother with three siblings in the country outside a small town, it was comfortable sheltered existence. As the oldest with significant age gaps between siblings, this researcher was always expected to take on significant responsibilities for the well-being of the household. The researcher's father worked fulltime and the mother had three more children to care for, so responsibility and motivation were an early educative experience. It was established early on that all things were carefully planned, that there was always a tangible goal, and completion of those goals was expected. It was a structured, lower middle class household that worked together. In school this researcher was expected to always have high grades, attended a Methodist Liberal Arts college immediately after high school, and qualified for Federal Pell grants. College was acknowledged as the next step, and the researcher's high school advising office, the researcher's peers, and the researcher's

parents all reinforced the importance of higher education for career success. These experiences undoubtedly shaped this researcher's understanding and feelings on college and education.

It is crucial for the researcher to acknowledge the privilege that this position might hold and how that privilege could influence the researcher's lens when attempting to understand the challenges that other students face in higher education. This researcher grew up in a college-educated, lower-middle-class family and earned an undergraduate degree in large part courtesy of Pell Grants. Family involvement and attitudes toward education have a huge impact on how children engage in their academic careers, and raised in a family where college was recognized as the next step towards career success, this researcher had a particular perspective regarding college and, thus, different ideas when first questioning why some students might fail to be successful in higher education. This conundrum became a personal interest for the researcher as well as a frustration because the solution seemed deeply entangled and far from obvious. In pursuit of these answers, the researcher's previous work dealt with the impact of state and federal policy on K–12 education and the effect such policies have had on students entering postsecondary institutions. While certainly contributing to an understanding of systems of inequity, this research did not reveal the whole story.

Terkel (2010) explains that what we define as reality can be described as having multiple "truths"—realities, understandings—that represent interpretations different actors make based on the earlier experiences and perspectives that they bring to an encounter (p. 85). Students whose families do not focus on their academics and do not participate in their school activities may not learn to place the same value on education as

other students with more academically engaged families. When there are so many other challenges disrupting their home lives, an academic career may be challenging. It is obvious that every person experiences privileges or oppressions on the basis of class position as shaped and complicated by race or racism, gender and sexism, ability or disability, youth or elder status, and ageism or adultism (Adams et al., 2010, p. 144). While this researcher enjoyed college and never considered that it was an option to just stop attending, there is a great deal of privilege that can be attributed to this story when compared to the experiences of students who have had different experiences. This researcher had peers who were also journeying toward college completion, parents who were college educated, financial support, and other factors that contributed to this belief system. Thus, it was crucial to look beyond the commonly held stereotypes attributed to student dropouts and consider that there were multiple truths that had an impact on the students at Middletown Tech and their motivations for both attending and leaving college. In other words, their "truths" will be different.

Since teachers do make decisions and plans on the basis of their beliefs or conceptualizations of their students, students' daily lives are strongly affected by the influences on their teachers' thinking (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008, p. 2524). This is reinforced by Henfield and Washington (2012), whose interviews revealed that educators who deny the existence of racism in educational settings are less likely to be sensitive to African American students' academic needs (2012, p. 158). Thus, teachers must acknowledge their own attitudes—and how they are "privileged in the system"—in order to see how they help or harm students in their work (Andrews, 2014). Furthermore, teachers must critically reflect of their work to identify any hidden issues in

curricula and curriculum design that might systematically disadvantage different groups of students while privileging others.

In this way, diversity coursework has been extremely beneficial for this researcher, helping the researcher to identify those rights and privileges that might have otherwise obscured a deeper understanding of the students' perspectives when attempting to navigate college. Despite the body of research linking college unpreparedness to factors including students being first generation, of low socioeconomic status, or of particular races, there are many additional commonalities among students at Middletown Tech who are enrolled in College Success courses. Many have experienced challenges throughout their academic careers, and, in addition to being wary of education, may display deficiencies in key non-cognitive factors such as confidence, motivation, self-advocacy, collaborative skills, trust, and positive thought processes that would benefit them in their academic careers. An important first step is to challenge personal beliefs, to build intentional relationships, and consider each student as an individual with individual ideas, beliefs, thoughts, and challenges. This researcher always believed in treating each student as an individual, but understanding and acknowledging learners' multiple, diverse needs, backgrounds, and perspectives was central to this study, and an opportunity for this researcher to critically examine her teaching and research in relationship to one's own personal belief systems. To make certain that this researcher did jump to conclusions or make assumptions regarding students when they did not display the same beliefs or priorities with regards to college. This represented an opportunity for this researcher to use these new perspectives to improve and to work harder at creating opportunities for students to succeed while working to overcome barriers to learning. To

be positive and supportive without forcing one's own beliefs and experiences regarding higher education. Discovering what is possible, and what is not, can feel a little risky, but being willing to step out of one's comfort zone is necessary to break down the social barriers that divide people (Smith, 2010, p. 137).

Ethics

Under the paradigm of the profession, it is important to question "what are the needs of the child" (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016, p. 25), or in this case, what are the needs of the learner. Through servant leadership, practitioners have the opportunity to view schools as learning communities in alignment with the ethics of the profession or as places where teachers, administration, staff, and the community come together for the benefit of the student. According to Sergiovanni (2013), stewardship represents primarily an act of trust, whereby people and institutions trust a leader with certain obligations and duties to fulfill and perform on their behalf (p. 388). Stewardship and servant leadership relate to the creation of a just environment, embracing "all members of the school as community and all those who are served by the community" (Sergiovanni, 2013, p. 388). There are many teachers who "with curiosity and the right supports, can spread their ideas and lead in new ways" (Berry, 2013, p. 436).

There are several ethical concerns to be addressed in this research study. First, the researcher had to ensure that curricular additions did not interfere with a curriculum intended to prepare these students for the college experience; instead, ideally, this opportunity would help improve students' abilities to synthesize information and apply it throughout their college careers. Second, the anonymity and privacy of the research participants had to be protected. No student, class, or instructor were identified during

the study. The college was not identified before, during, or after the study. Instructors participating were informed of the importance of student anonymity and were responsible for protecting participant privacy. Additionally, data collection was conducted in a manner that maintained participant privacy, and all information collected was stripped of any identifying features, including names, section, or instructor. Third, each instructor ensured that there were no conflicts of interest implicit in the design or implementation of the study. Fourth, this study did not interfere with the teacher-researcher's responsibility to instruct the students enrolled in Success Classes nor did the teacher-researcher change the curriculum without prior approval. The curriculum was provided as intended in compliance with the College's guidelines and the policies of the Quality Learning Council (QLC). Any additions or changes to the curriculum had to be introduced with the approval of the Center for Teaching and Learning Department Chair.

Data Collection Strategies

This study employed three primary methods of qualitative data collection. Qualitative data sources included classroom observations, semi-structured group discussions, and guided journal entries (see Appendix B for an example of the guided journal entries). Students were encouraged to consider deeply each journal narrative, and their answers were coded by keyword and examined for context and occurrence in the student's own "voice." Classroom observations and semi-structured class and group discussions provided opportunities to interact and ask clarifying questions. Observations, another means of collecting qualitative data (Mertler, 2014, p. 127), were recorded in the form of field notes. Student responses provided valuable sources of insight and, like the guided journal entries, these responses were coded for keywords or evidence that students

were making personal connections with the specific variables, or soft-skills factors, of interest in this study.

According to Mertler (2014), the constant comparison method is a research design for studies involving data collection coming from multiple sources or occurring simultaneously, and through comparison, the researcher is able to develop a theory more or less inductively, namely by categorizing, coding, and delineating categories and then connecting them (Boeije, 2002). Qualitative data from observations of students' responses in class in conjunction with guided journal entries and group discussions provided material for early data collection and offered insight into the specific research topics. Each study activity (classroom interview, group discussion, journal entries, and individual discussion) began with an empty data matrix that was gradually filled as data were collected, and the filled matrix then became a qualitative data set that was used to become a concept model for understanding the phenomena under study (Padilla, Trevino, Gonzalez, and Trevino, 1994, p. 6).

Data Analysis

Observations and guided journal entries were an important part of this study, as they revealed the thought processes of the students participating in the study. The body of data was large, which made the task of developing effective data codes an important component of data analysis for field notes gathered from observations and other sources (Henscheid & Keup, 2011). Throughout the analysis process, qualitative researchers must draw and verify preliminary conclusions about what the data mean until that meaning has passed a final test of confirmability through verification by colleagues (i.e., intersubjective consensus or inter-rater reliability) or through efforts to replicate the

findings of another data set (Henscheid & Keup, 2011, p. 57). The central idea of coding is to move from raw text to research concerns in small steps, each one building upon the previous (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 35).

Artifact Collection

Prolonged engagement was valuable for this study as the researcher had the benefit of the entire spring 2017 semester for the study, as well as time to review the qualitative data at length to identify patterns within the data. This course lasted for an entire semester, which provided an opportunity for increased time in the field to observe classroom behavior, learn the settings, and observe the potential relationships between the students' attitudes and non-cognitive instruction. The researcher became intuitively familiar with the data collected by reading, taking notes, and categorizing the themes that emerged. In this study, after the data was read and re-read, initial thoughts and patterns were identified in the data. Mills (2014) describes the process of qualitative data analysis as a process of breaking data down into smaller units, determining their import, and putting pertinent units together in a more general, analytical form (p. 134). Coding, a process for trying to find patterns and meaning in the data collected, was employed to analyze student data (Mills, 2014). In reviewing the data, the researcher began by attaching labels and highlighting sections of text sections worthy of further review. Student work, guided journal entries, field notes, and group discussions all were reviewed in this manner.

Once data analysis was completed, chunks of data were transferred into matrixes and coded so that the source information could be easily identified and mapped. According to Padilla's (1994) theoretical framework, unfolding matrixes allow the

researcher to group similar examples into categories of meaning. The resultant concept map then represented the lived experiences of the participants during the study.

Conclusion

The purpose of this action research study was to determine what impact a focused curricular effort, in this case the introduction of specific non-cognitive instruction on goals, motivation, and/or self-ownership of learning, would have on adult learners taking a College Success Class at Middletown Tech. This was achieved through the use of focused classroom assignments designed to help adult students form meaning-making connections between the non-cognitive skills of interest and their own worldviews in the College Success class at one South Carolina technical college. To that end, a qualitative study design was employed to examine students' lived experiences as they engaged with the lessons of interest, responded to guided journal entries, engaged in classroom discussions, and interacted in group discussions. This researcher posited that there should be a change in the observable student "voice" (classroom attitudes, thoughts, and discussions) as a result of a focused curricular effort to communicate a limited number of non-cognitive skills in class.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS FROM THE DATA ANALYSIS

Chapter Four outlines the findings and interpretations of the results of the qualitative action research study designed to explore whether the introduction of specific non-cognitive instruction (or a "soft skills" inventory) would have an impact on adult learners as identified through learner reflection or performance in observations, journals, and discussions. The action research study employed an evidence-based strategy in the College Success classrooms of one South Carolina technical college that was designed to strengthen students' connections with their goals, motivations, and self-ownership of learning. The problem of practice was identified by the teacher-researcher, who found students who had difficulties forming meaning-making connections between goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership and their own academic careers might also have other problematic habits, thought processes, and attitudes both specific to the College Success classroom and with regard to their other classes.

Research Question

In an effort to provide insights on how to better help students develop positive associations with their current college careers and future career goals, this researcher came up with the following research question: What impact will a focused curricular effort have on adult learners taking a College Success Class at Middleton Technical School?

Purpose of the Study

This purpose of this study is not intended to generalize findings to the population as a whole but to address a specific, current, present, local situation at one South Carolina technical college based on theory and literature supporting goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership of learning as soft skills associated with success in postsecondary education. This teacher-researcher explored curricular strategies employed in a College Success classroom, and according to this action research study's findings, data collected and analyzed revealed an increase in student connections with their current college careers and future career goals. Outlying student responses and challenges encountered within the Career Report unit and Advising Folder lessons will also be discussed in this chapter.

Each study activity (classroom interview, group discussion, journal entries, and individual discussion) began with an empty data matrix that was gradually filled as data were collected, and the filled matrix then became a qualitative data set that was used to become a concept model for understanding the phenomena under study (Padilla, Trevino, Gonzalez, & Trevino, 1994, p. 6). According to Padilla's (1994) theoretical framework, unfolding matrixes allow the researcher to group similar examples into categories of meaning. The resultant concept map then represents the lived experiences of the participants. For this action research study, the matrices illustrate the data collected before, during, and after the Career Report and Advising Folder assignments, which were organized into appropriate categories and coded.

Background and Description of the Classroom Setting

The College Success course introduces students to the college environment, helps them plan their coursework for degree or program completion, acclimates them to their role as students and the higher education environment, and helps them develop a personal connection with their learning while working on their reading, writing, test strategies, and study skills. Blended into this curriculum are a significant number of soft-skill, non-cognitive instructional components aimed at helping students understand their attitudes toward their academic careers, visualize their goals, increase their motivation, and learn how to collaborate and self-advocate. While teaching these classes, this teacher-researcher noticed that students often did not make personal meaning-making connections with the lessons intended to increase their success rates. This was especially evident in the guided journal exercises and class discussions in which students responded to prompts and volunteered their own feelings and thoughts. For example, several students in the teacher-researcher's class volunteered that they were studying to become nurses but never considered what type of nursing they wanted to pursue or what responsibilities those roles might hold. When one student was asked what motivated them to pursue nursing, she responded, "A lot of people take nursing here," and "Nurses make good money" (Tamara, 2017).

Goals and motivation are intrinsically linked (Bailey, 2005; Duggan & Williams, 2011; Nagaoka et al., 2013), and both may lead to self-ownership of learning as part of the motivation to achieve goals (Valle et al., 2009). For a goal to be motivating, it must have five qualities: have a specific deadline, be achievable, be personal, be positive, and be specific (Downing, 2015). The deadline has to be linked to a specific timeline or else

it becomes a moving target that is easily set aside. For a goal to be motivating, it has to have a personal connection for the individual establishing the goal. A goal must be achievable, otherwise, the individual is more likely to become discouraged and fail to continue. Lastly, the goal must be both positive and specific, meaning that negative goals or intangible goals are not motivating (Downing, 2015). According to Madden (1997), students are much more motivated by and work harder for goals they plan for themselves. Students who choose a degree based on a catalog description without personally motivating goals are less likely to form a positive, meaning-making connection with their role as a student as the next step to achieving those goals. As such, they are more likely to fail to take self-ownership for their learning and future (Madden, 1997).

The Career Report and Advising Folder assignments represented opportunities to connect students with their personal motivations and goals for attending college. These assignments were designed to help them take ownership of their learning and their future and to visualize themselves in their chosen careers as well as active participants in their educations. The Career Report required students to research their career and learn what the requirements, daily functions, and opportunities for advancement are for such a career, and they were also asked to research the differing employers in the region. This was an opportunity for students to speak to individuals employed in the field and network with possible employers. Participants reviewed employment outlook resources to determine regional job opportunity, industry growth, and salary potential. While the Career Report was intended to help students connect with their long-term goals, the Advising Folder assignment addressed students' short-term goals. While working on the Advising Folder assignment, students worked through their program requirements,

learned about elective courses, identified their advisors, and planned their next two semesters. If a student's goal included transfer to another institution of higher learning, they learned how to review the transferability of their courses, what institutions participated in bridge programs with Middletown Tech, and how to make contacts at the other colleges and universities.

Participating students in the College Success class were informed of the study during the first day of class, advised of their rights, and given the opportunity join the study by signing consent forms. This teacher-researcher met with the Department Manager for the Center for Teaching and Learning prior to the start of the semester to discuss the assignments and curriculum so that the tools and instruction methods would be consistent with course guidelines. The Department Manager worked with this researcher prior to class to construct the curriculum and to clarify the specific assignments of interest to this study. The Department Manager also did the introduction, distribution, and collection of consent forms to the class. In this manner, the identity of the teacher-researcher was not revealed to class participants. The Department Manager also stripped all identifying student information from the data at the end of the semester and provided the researcher with the student participants' classwork.

The spring 2017 College Success classroom at Middletown Tech consisted of 24 students representing a diverse range of backgrounds, ages, and genders (see Table 3.1). At the close of this study, only 19 students remained in the course while 5 students did not retain. It was unknown at the time of this report whether these students simply dropped the class or dropped out of college entirely. Prior to the Career Report assignment and the Advising Folder assignment, students participated in classwork

focused on the non-cognitive factors of goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership of learning. Students responded to classroom and peer group discussions regarding their knowledge of their own goals and motivations for attending college. Following the Career Report and Advising Folder assignments, students participated in class discussions and group interviews and responded to guided journal questions regarding new knowledge and connections made with their own goals and motivations for attending college. An exploration of student responses regarding connections with the themes of goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership of learning revealed patterns during review and reflection. These data helped reveal when and how students made meaning-making connections among their experiences, instructional materials, and the non-cognitive variables of goals, motivation, and self-ownership of learning. For this study, this researcher will focus on the lived experiences of six study participants whose responses were particularly revealing with respect to this study.

Findings of the Study

Classroom Discussion Preceding Career Reports

Prior to introducing the Career Report assignment, the teacher-researcher initiated a classroom discussion regarding student career choices. During this discussion, only one student, Samuel, volunteered a specific career plan, which was to become a high school chemistry teacher, and addressed the specific academic steps (course of study and transfer to a four-year institution) required to reach that goal:

> I am going to be a chemistry teacher. High school, and I want to transfer to ___ University when I finish my general education courses here. I need to take the PRAXIS too (Samuel, 2017).

Samuel was able to describe his academic plans in relation to his career and was able to describe what steps he needed to complete to start his career. Other class discussion responses were much less specific, and included nursing, entrepreneur, and farmer as potential career objectives. One of the nurse respondents, Lizza, volunteered a personally motivating reason for pursuing nursing, which was to provide for a child and to provide a home for their family:

> I want whatever [degree] is quickest. No really, I have my daughter to take care of and I want to make enough money to have our own house. I like kids so I thought I could be a nurse and work with kids (Lizza, 2017).

Another pre-nursing student identified financial reasons for their career choice. Except for Samuel and his goal to become a chemistry teacher, none of the adult student-participants polled were able to describe their chosen career in detail with respect to where they would like to work, what roles interested them most, or if they had experience speaking with or interacting with individuals currently working in those roles. Their goals lacked focus and substantive planning.

Classroom Discussion Following Career Reports

After students completed the Career Report assignment, the teacher-researcher initiated classroom and group discussions regarding what students learned as part of this process. Classroom discussions revealed that two of the students who volunteered their experiences prior to group discussion had clarifying moments while researching their career reports. Kaye, who was studying early childhood education, connected with a potential employer and learned about the employer's business model and potential employment opportunities after graduation.

> I knew I wanted to be a teacher and work with kids. I knew that before we did this project. But I was did learn about the Goddard Schools and I learned that they pay much better. I like what they do with the kids. While working on this report, I called them and spoke with the director on __ street. He was really helpful and he is a good contact. (Kaye, 2017).

Amber discovered that the dental hygiene field offered great flexibility in scheduling coupled with great income potential:

> I found out that by being a dental hygienist I can make a really good living, even being part-time. I can have a family and still make money. And I like teeth (Amber, 2017).

Kaye and Amber both expressed positive experiences in classroom discussions with regards to the career report. Kaye made a great contact and had the opportunity to visit one of the schools she was interested in teaching at, which provided her some great insights into what type of teaching position she would enjoy. She spoke with their director and learned about how the school runs and learned about their teaching philosophies. Amber was pleasantly surprised to learn her love of teeth translated well to a position with a good career outlook as well as income potential.

Group Discussion Following Career Reports

Students broke into their success teams and began talking about their projects while one person in each group took notes. Four students in this classroom failed to complete their reports at the time of the group discussion session, and therefore did not contribute to the group discussions. In the group interviews, students were more involved and spoke more freely about their career reports than they did during classroom

discussion or in the guided journal entries. One student from each group was assigned to summarize, and the teacher-researcher visited each group to discuss the summaries.

A few students shared experiences that significantly impacted their worldview in terms of their goals and motivations. Three individuals changed their educational direction in response to new information that more closely aligned with their own needs. Bertrand shared the meaning-making moments he experienced as he worked through this process. His own career exploration and research led him to new networking opportunities, scholarship information, and even a new job to support him during college:

> I just want to say that I love this assignment. My research led me to speak with __ at the __ hospital and did you know that they are hiring? I talked to her for a long time. Then she took me to human resources and today I got a call and I got the job. And they will help me become an EMT while I am in school so I will be able to make even more money. They have scholarships too. If we didn't have to talk to people or learn more about what we want to be I would never have gotten to talk with them. And I know I want to be an emergency room nurse too. So I wrote [that] down for my goals and this assignment helped me see the path to my goal of being a nurse. I see now what you mean (Bertrand, 2017).

Through his discussions with the director of nursing at a local hospital, he was able to make the informed decision to pursue a career as an emergency room nurse. He also discovered new employment pathways and opportunities to expand his experience. Two students discovered different careers and identified educational institutions where they could pursue education in those fields. One of those students, Josh found the degree program that would give him a pathway to the career he truly wanted, to pursue a career

as a screen writer. This was a significant change from his current program choice and aligned better with his interests and goals. He was able to find his program at a different institution, and already spoke with advisors about how to begin the transfer process.

Several students shared clarifying moments during the group session, meaning they learned important information through the Career Report process that increased their knowledge and helped them feel motivated toward their goals. One student met with a local family law practice and had great success locating the information she needed. The individuals she met with introduced her to instructors at the university where she hoped to transfer in the coming year so she could get some idea of the work ahead of her. Another student learned about the multiple career outlets for a nutritionist, which in turn made him excited about the future. This helped clarify the opportunities available for him when he finished school. Kaye found multiple employers with differing levels of work and compensation in the childcare industry. In response to what she learned, she considered taking business courses to expand her skill set and perhaps help her reach a management position:

> I am studying early childhood education, and I looked at employment opportunities at day cares and children's' centers. There is always a need for certified child care specialists but there is a big difference in pay scales. I might take some business classes so that I can work in management and be more valuable. I looked at the Goddard schools, and there are more schools like that in Charlotte that pay good. I want to find a place to work where I can also take my daughter (Kaye, 2017).

Samuel was happy to learn about scholarship information that aligned with his degree interests as well as information about the possibility of tuition forgiveness after he graduates and starts teaching:

> I found out that I can get STEM funding as part of lottery [financial aid] and get even more money towards my education. I am going to transfer after I finish here. There is a big market for science teachers, chemistry teachers right now. Many school districts really need teachers and there is even tuition forgiveness if I goes to a needy school to teach. Salary can vary depending on the state where you teach (Samuel, 2017).

Samuel had some well thought out career plans before the Career Report Assignment, but he still discovered valuable and motivating information that directly related to his personal career goals. He learned that students studying for careers in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) were in high demand, and there were special financial aid forgiveness opportunities that may be open to him after he graduates.

A couple students expressed no new knowledge or motivation in response to their career reports during the group interviews. One student wrote his report on teaching but expressed that he did not want to be in school and that he wanted to be a radio host instead. When questioned as to why he did not change his report to reflect his new career choice, he said it was too much work.

Career Report Guided Journals

Of the students who completed the career report journal, eight indicated clear goals, motivations, and learning plans. Lizza discovered that nursing was a growing field in this region and there were many opportunities available to her. After her discussions

with potential employers, she was considering positions as a labor and delivery nurse or an emergency room nurse and clarified the education she needed to meet that goal:

> I learned that with my program I have a lot of medical classes coming in the near future and I don't have many classes left before I can try to get into my course of study. I learned that I want to help people as a labor and delivery nurse or an emergency room nurse (Lizza, 2017).

Lizza went ahead and made an appointment to meet with her advisor so she could plan out her next steps toward pursuing her career. Since the results of the post-Career Report group interviews and class discussions communicated more candid meaning-making results, students responding to the career guided journals may have been simply been less detailed in the journal exercise. The group interviews provided valuable data collection strategy feedback. Contrary to expectations, the guided journal exercise was revealed to be a less viable strategy and future cycles should examine other tools for future research.

Advising Folder Assignment

Students who are having issues in college, either academic or personal, may benefit greatly from self-ownership of learning skills, specifically by gaining an understanding of the college environment, learning to work with advisors, and becoming knowledgeable about and comfortable with the college support systems. While working on the Advising Folder assignment, students were required to find the contact information for their advisors and either meet with them or schedule an appointment to meet prior to turning in this assignment. The Advising Folder assignment was introduced during class, and students were tasked with bringing their program evaluations and test score summaries to class. In class, students worked through their specific program

requirements, learned about the elective courses available to them, and planned their class schedules for the next two semesters. They learned to navigate the college catalog and look up class descriptions. If a student's goal included transfer to another institution of higher learning, they learned how to review their courses against the requirements of the other institution, what institutions participated in bridge programs with Middletown Tech, and how to make contacts at the other colleges and universities. During this class period, students were able to determine what their next two semesters would look like and to identify their next steps. The teacher-researcher explained why students were required to take elective courses and what went into determining the requirements for a program because several students volunteered that they did not understand why they had to take so many classes that seemed unrelated to their degree.

Advising Folder Classroom Discussion

During the Advising Folder Classroom discussion, several students expressed that they had acquired new knowledge or confidence in the process of scheduling and planning coursework, understanding transfer requirements, or seeking help from their advisors. Kaye expressed relief in the fact that she had a plan now for the next two semesters. She felt that working ahead was very helpful, and it gave her confidence:

> Planning out my next semester is a big deal with what I want to do in life. My major is early childhood and that is one of the programs that fills up quickly. I learned that you don't have to do planning for your next semester by yourself, you have an advisor that will help you and will make sure that everything is correct before submitting your information. Early childhood has a lot of course

> requirements you have to complete before graduating, you also have to maintain a C average to stay in the classes (Kaye, 2017).

Several students expressed frustration while trying to contact their advisors. Samuel had difficulty getting in contact with his advisor despite multiple calls and emails:

> My advisor would not answer my calls or emails at all. So I took your advice and went to the department head, and she helped me with my classes. I thought heh that's cool. She took the time to help. They really care (Samuel, 2017).

Samuel made his own solution and took control of the process. Josh not only checked out his classes on the South Carolina Transfer and Articulation website but also contacted his destination college for program information and transfer advice. Since his destination college was out of state, this demonstrated that he was motivated to make a plan and start initiating the process. Out of 19 students, 12 made contact with their advisors, and six already scheduled their classes.

Advising Folder Guided Journals

Examination of the Advising Folder guided journal revealed that many students found the information they learned valuable. In students' journal responses to the Advising Folder assignment, most students mentioned linkages to goal setting in their journal. As this researcher examined the narratives for meaning-making connections between student goals and motivations as part of the Advising Folder assignment, several identified a personal or motivating connection in the narrative. Lizza expressed such a connection between the exercise and her goals:

> This process helped me feel not as overwhelmed, I thought I had way more pre-requisites to do than I actually did. This process helped me realize that my short-

> term goals are only going to take a year. I will be done with my pre-requirements next spring if I follow the plan my advisor and I came up with. This process helped me realize that my long-term goals aren't that far away either. I should be in the nursing program by fall 2019 and that's only two and a half years away. (Lizza, 2017)

Lizza discussed dated goals that are personal, achievable, positive, and specific. There was an increase in the number of student narratives that evidenced self-ownership of learning as part of the Advising Folder journal assignment. Several students identified new knowledge they had gained and new steps that had to be implemented for their education, and shared meaningful dialog in their journals. For example, Amber wrote about a meaning-making connection regarding her learning during a discussion with her advisor:

> When I spoke to my advisor, I informed her that it [was] difficult applying the knowledge I learn from classes like chemistry and biology to dental. I did not see how the information connects. She informed me and gave me examples of why that those classes were important because when a patient[']s mouth is infected parts of their bodies can become infected as well. We all want to jump into our careers right away, but there are steps we need to follow in order to gain a better understanding of our career so we can be well-rounded. (Amber, 2017)

This student experienced a jump in her personal understanding as she bridged her own world-view and preconceptions during her discussions with her advisor in a manner that was both meaningful and motivating. As part of self-ownership of learning, her inquiry led to a leap in knowledge that was personally motivating.

Interpretations of the Study Findings

The findings of the action research study support the positive relationship between non-cognitive instruction (or a "soft skills" inventory) and a positive change in student attitudes as evidenced by students' strengthened connections with their goals, motivations, and self-ownership of learning, as demonstrated by students in College Success classes at one South Carolina technical college. The findings of this study include the following: (1) Soft-skills or non-cognitive instruction that links to students' lived experiences is effective for helping students form meaning-making connections, and (2) meaning-making connections among goal setting, motivation, and student self-ownership of learning help students identify positive strategies for success. The goal of this section is to discuss and analyze the current action research study and its implications for Middletown Tech and institutions with similar student populations.

Implications for Forming Meaning-Making Connections with Instruction

Students discussed goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership of learning in class. Students then became active participants in the examination of their personal goals, motivations, and self-ownership of learning during focused lesson activities. Learning and teaching are strongly influenced by the ways in which participants make meaning, and new experiences and learning are interpreted through our current constructions of reality (Ignelzi, 2000, p. 6). Instruction that crossed students' lived experiences influenced their ability to make meaning. This supports the importance of personalizing soft-skills instruction as part of first-year experience instruction.

Positive Student Engagement with Instruction

The current action research study's career and advising units appeared to have a positive effect on students' connections with goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership of learning. Students' ability to engage with instructional material that was both meaningful and valuable for them allowed for a level of ownership when it came to writing about their own futures and dreams. As Kirby et al. (2015) describe, motivation can be understood as the convergence of three psychological needs: autonomy or freedom to choose paths for oneself, competence as individuals strive for mastery or achievement in their own environments, and relatedness in terms of one's sense of belonging or ownership. During the study, students engaged with topics and concerns that had an impact on their worldviews, choosing their paths through examinations of their future careers and their academic plans. Students had the opportunity to become the subject matter experts in regards to their academic planning and career aspirations, thus increasing their personal mastery or achievement in their environments (Kirby et al., 2015). Furthermore, students' experiences were central to the instruction received.

Implications for Positive Student Associations with Goals

Goal setting was central to the students' instructional experiences and appeared to have a positive impact on student responses in class discussions, group interviews, and guided journals. Just as Zeidenberg et al (2007) explained that participation in Student Life Skills classes had a positive relationship to success by helping students early in their college experience obtain clearer goal-setting skills, so the respondents in this study appeared to express increased confidence, focus, and motivation in regards to their personal goals.

Whereas academic achievement is the level of achievement that students must attain in order to satisfy a standard established by the teacher, goal setting is a level of achievement that students establish for themselves (Madden, 1997, p. 411). Curriculum designed to create opportunities to bring these two factors into alignment can increase meaningful connections for students and greater motivation and self-ownership of learning. Student participants, overall, exhibited positive responses to the Career Report and Advising Folder in terms of their goal-setting skills. Classroom and small-group interviews revealed that most students were able to find valuable information with regards to their future careers, and their goals became increasingly well-conceived. Students mentioned making new connections, learning of job opportunities, finding new information on their career fields, discovering salary information, and identifying new opportunities discovered as a result of this exercise. The personal connection with students' own worldviews helped bridge meaning-making connections in the College Success lessons, and as a result, student goals were personal, achievable, dated, positive, and specific (Downing, 2015).

Implications for Positive Student Associations with Motivation

Students evidenced motivation during the process of exploring their own goals for their academic and career futures. Martin et al. (2014) found that "the most evident theme demonstrated by every one of the graduates interviewed is their intense motivation to succeed," and motivation had to come from within. In this study, the process by which students personalized their goals helped them connect with their own individual motivations. Well-defined goals are essential for motivation, and this project often

helped students refine their goals, which invigorated their motivations. Josh illustrated this well when he discussed his discoveries and new education direction:

> I found the Atlanta Film School where I can actually get taught screen writing. I looked up the outlook for that job and it is really great and I can even find work here in Charlotte. I already talked with admissions. I was happy because that is what I am interested in. I can even intern with some major companies which will make my resume better. (Josh, 2017)

Students who communicated well-considered goals during the Career and Advising assignments also communicated personal motivations.

Implications for Positive Student Associations with Self-Ownership of Learning

In addition to the confidence and knowledge gained, the study's activities encouraged students to develop self-ownership of learning as they planned their future academics, engaged with their advisors, and expressed positive outlooks about their academic futures and careers. The findings from this study support Nagaoka et al.'s (2013) conclusion that self-ownership is central to student success and encourages positive academic mindsets. Students who completed the Advising Folder project expressed future learning goals and academic plans in guided journals, evidencing positive mindsets. Keywords often present during classroom discussions included "confidence" and "new knowledge" as motivating for self-ownership of learning. According to Josh:

> I got to talk to an advisor there who help[ed] me make sure that after next semester I am all aligned to start immediately. The part I like is now I can read

the catalog and use my paperwork to determine what I have to do for my classes. It makes sense now. (Josh, 2017)

Students who are able to confidently envision their future college career path confidently are more likely to remain on the path to certificate, transfer, or degree attainment.

Implications for Student Populations

The current action research study appeared to have a positive effect on students' connections with goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership of learning using curriculum designed to connect the course materials with students' lived experiences and worldviews. Not only do the results of this study support the importance of connecting lessons to students' lived experiences, but they show the importance of what Slattery (2006) described as encouraging "cooperative relationships" in the classroom by employing diverse methods of learning. The students exhibited these skills by communicating with their advisors, planning their next two academic semesters, seeking knowledge regarding their future careers, talking with employers in the community, and demonstrating an active grasp of goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership of learning within the context of their lived experiences (Slattery, 2006). Furthermore, curriculum that is responsive to the diversity of students in the classroom can reveal significant results. In this study, each student's connectedness to the curriculum was dependent on their experiences, knowledge, and worldviews. It is not possible to ignore the combined histories of the students in relation to the integration of non-cognitive instruction, particularly when working with populations who may find it difficult imagining themselves successful in the postsecondary environment.

Conclusion

This action research study addressed a need for an evidence-based strategy in College Success classrooms designed to strengthen students' connections with their own goals, motivations, and self-ownership of learning. The problem of practice was identified by the teacher-researcher, who found students who had difficulties forming meaning-making connections between goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership and their own academic careers also frequently demonstrated other problematic habits, thought processes, and attitudes both specific to the College Success classroom and, more generally, with regards to their other classes. This researcher proposed the current action research study as an opportunity to increase student engagement with the lessons of concern.

The overarching result of this study found that students, when engaged in instructional activities that helped them connect their own experiences with the lessons of interest, communicated increased competencies with respect to goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership of learning. The major findings of this study include: (1) When students conducted research on their careers of choice, they exhibited and communicated better goal-setting skills and an increase in motivation with respect to their long-term plans; (2) when students conducted research on their academic careers with respect to their academic schedules and met with their advisors, they exhibited better goal-setting skills and an increase in self-advocacy with respect to their short-term goals; and (3) when students conducted research on their academic careers with respect to their academic schedules and met with their advisors, they communicated an increase in knowledge of and confidence in navigating the collegiate environment.

When considering goal setting, curricula designed to create opportunities that bring standards-based academic achievement into alignment with students' personal achievement can increase meaningful connections for students, creating greater motivation and self-ownership of learning (Madden, 1997). Student participants, overall, exhibited positive responses to the Career Report and Advising Folder in terms of their goal-setting skills. Overall, classroom and small-group interviews revealed that students were able to find valuable information with regards to their future careers, and through these classroom exercises and discussions, their goals became increasingly specific and personal.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter Five discusses the current research study, the implications, and what conclusions can be drawn in terms of whether the introduction of specific non-cognitive instruction (or a "soft skills" inventory) is related to a positive change in student attitudes with respect to goals, motivation, and/or self-ownership of learning. This study utilized focused classroom assignments designed to help students form meaning-making connections between the non-cognitive skills of interest and their own worldviews in the College Success course at one South Carolina technical college. To that end, a qualitative study design was employed to examine students' lived experiences as they engaged with the lessons of interest, responded to guided journal entries, participated in classroom discussions, and interacted in group discussions. This researcher posited that there would be an effect, a change in the observable student "voice" (classroom attitudes, thoughts, and discussions) as a result of a focused curricular effort to communicate a limited but crucial number of non-cognitive skills in class.

Overview of the Current Action Research Study

The current action research study was designed to explore what impact the introduction of specific non-cognitive instruction (or a "soft skills" inventory) would have on adult learners taking a college success class as identified through learner reflection, including performance in observations, journals, and discussions. The problem of practice was identified by this teacher-researcher, who found that students

who exhibited difficulties forming meaning-making connections between goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership and their own academic careers also frequently demonstrated other problematic habits, thought processes, and attitudes both specific to the College Success classroom and, more generally, in regard to their other classes.

The study explored an evidence-based strategy that one teacher-researcher implemented in College Success classes to strengthen student-participants' goal-setting skills, which contributed to students' motivations and self-ownership of learning according to the study's findings. This researcher concluded that instructional activities that helped students connect their own experiences with the lessons of interest resulted in an increase in students' competencies with respect to goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership of learning.

Major Findings of the Study

The overarching result of this study found that when engaged in instructional activities that helped them connect their own experiences with the lessons of interest, students communicated increased competencies with respect to goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership of learning. The major findings of this study include the following: (1) When students conducted research on their careers of choice, they exhibited and communicated better goal-setting skills and an increase in motivation with respect to their long-term plans; (2) when students conducted research on their academic careers with respect to their academic schedules and met with their advisors, they exhibited better goal-setting skills and an increase in self-ownership of learning with respect to their short-term goals; and (3) when students conducted research on their academic careers

with respect to their academic schedules and met with their advisors, they communicated increased knowledge of and confidence in navigating the collegiate environment.

Action Plan: Implications of the Study Findings

When students conducted research on their careers of choice, they exhibited and communicated better goal-setting skills and an increase in motivation with respect to their long-term plans. Students engaged in traditional classroom instruction regarding goal setting, motivations, and self-ownership of learning prior to this study's focused assignments, and discussions prior to the Career Report and Advising Folder assignments revealed that most students had not formed meaningful connections between the non-cognitive or soft-skill elements included in the instruction and their personal experiences. After the Career Report assignment, students wrote detailed goals and communicated motivations for achieving those goals. This is significant for further instructional planning and experiential learning opportunities in College Success classes. Further, this represents an opportunity to help students understand and apply the non-cognitive skills of goal setting and motivation and equips them for further use of these skills as they continue their academic journeys.

When students conducted research on their academic careers with respect to their academic schedules and met with their advisors, they exhibited better goal-setting skills and an increase in self-ownership of learning with respect to their short-term goals. In the assignments completed and the discussions conducted, they communicated their short-term goals in terms of what they needed to do, what grades they needed, and exhibited a better understanding of what was required of them to succeed. Students also communicated self-ownership of learning with regards to their discussions with advisors,

research on transfer opportunities, and future opportunities for learning. This focus on short-term goal setting is important for helping students see where they are and what is required of them for their degree, transfer, or certificate programs. The goals they expressed after these assignments were typically dated and specific, which means they would likely be more motivating as they see their learning as an actionable plan.

When students conducted research on their academic careers with respect to their academic schedules and met with their advisors, they communicated increased knowledge of and confidence in navigating the collegiate environment. It was significant that students mentioned several times that they felt increased confidence and belonging in the college environment. The non-academic challenge most often identified by Middletown Tech students, particularly first-generation students, is the fear that they will not be able to complete their degrees (Canty & Scruggs, 2013). The ability to see their goals as achievable within a reasonable timeframe increases the likelihood that they will retain until completion.

Suggestions for Future Research

The Career Report and Advising Folder assignments were written to help students connect their own perspectives, experiences, and worldviews with the non-cognitive skills of goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership of learning. Overall, students exhibited increases in the non-cognitive skills of interest as reflected in students' guided journal entries, classroom discussion, and group interviews. While working on the literature review, this researcher found confidence and belonging mentioned several times as important for student persistence. As such, it was significant that many students noted that the Advising Folder assignment helped increase their confidence and sense of

belonging. Future research exploring the concepts of confidence and belonging as part of the technical college experience may prove beneficial for educators seeking to strengthen student connections.

The current action research study was conducted during semester-long College Success courses. Middletown Tech started offering a shorter College Success course starting in fall 2017. Given the time required to conduct these assignments in the semester-long course, future research should explore how these same results might be replicated in a shorter course. Can students demonstrate the same non-cognitive gains using different instructional tools in the abbreviated course design? Future research should focus on modifications that increase student integration of the soft-skills curriculum while remaining within the course's time allotment.

Since the technical college population represents a significantly diverse audience, there is a distinct opportunity for future research to focus on increasing equal opportunities for success. For example, future cycles of research could focus on developing strategies to reach the students who don't participate. To truly understand why, when offered resources that walk you through the process, they don't access them. The researcher could follow up with all students who don't complete assignments, and design a study to understand why based on feedback from interviews and group discussions. This would be valuable for mapping out new strategies based on student feedback, particularly since the experience of the dis-engaged student continues to be a mystery to educators. Implementing non-cognitive instruction appeared to be helpful for student-participants, but future cycles might track the class composition to see if adjustments might prove more effective for creating equal opportunities for all students.

A longitudinal study, tracking students through their college experience and after, would be valuable for determining the long-term value non-cognitive instruction for college completion and career achievement.

Another recommendation for future cycles would be to increase instructor training to help increase student engagement. One of the biggest challenges for this study involved student participation and completion, both of which run counter to the variables of goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership of learning. It was also not evident at times whether some student-participants formed meaning-making connections to the non-cognitive variables in the study because assignments were not turned in, or they were turned in late. This may be the result of this teacher-researcher's failure to communicate the assignment parameters and deadlines. It may also be a result of students' engagement, or lack of engagement, with the lessons. A focused effort to work on curricular activities that help encourage active learning for students in class may help increase student engagement.

Similarly, the interview and group discussion formats allowed for more fruitful discourse than the guided journal entries for the Career Report. Since the results of the post-Career Report group interviews and class discussions communicated more candid meaning-making results, students responding to the career guided journals may have simply been less detailed in the journal exercise. Additionally, since the students had just turned in their Career Reports the week before, it may have been their assumption that the details needed were already covered in that assignment. Because the interviews and group discussions were most effective and often allow for following up with probing

questions (Mertler, 2014), suggestions for future cycles would include opportunities for more interviews and classroom discussions.

There is a great deal of research yet to be completed in the area of goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership of learning for students, specifically students in the technical college system. This action research study contributes to the body of knowledge that positions soft-skill or non-cognitive instruction as effective for improving student goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership of learning, as seen through the students at one South Carolina technical college. However, this researcher has developed more questions as a result of data analysis and this study as a whole. It is important to review possible future cycles as opportunities to continue researching and to develop instructional tools with the potential to further increase student success.

Conclusion

The current action research study was designed to explore whether the introduction of specific non-cognitive instruction (or a "soft skills" inventory) related to a measurable, positive change in student attitudes as identified through learner reflection, including performance in observations, journals, and discussions. The identified problem of practice was as follows: This teacher-researcher found that students who had difficulties forming meaning-making connections between goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership and their own academic careers also frequently demonstrated other problematic habits, thought processes, and attitudes both specific to the College Success classroom and, more generally, in regard to their other classes. This action research study was developed to address the need for better instructional methods for communicating goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership in a meaning-making

manner for students at one South Carolina technical college. This teacher-researcher focused on instructional activities that helped students bridge their own interests and worldviews with the non-cognitive instructional variables of interest.

The major findings of this study include the following: (1) When students conducted research on their careers of choice, they exhibited and communicated better goal-setting skills and an increase in motivation with respect to their long-term plans; (2) when students conducted research on their academic careers with respect to their academic schedules and met with their advisors, they exhibited better goal-setting skills and an increase in self-ownership of learning with respect to their short-term goals; and (3) when students conducted research on their academic careers with respect to their academic schedules and met with their advisors, they communicated increased knowledge of and confidence in navigating the collegiate environment.

The overarching result of this study revealed that when engaged in instructional activities that helped them connect their own experiences with the lessons of interest, students communicated increased competencies with respect to goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership of learning. The results support the value of personalized soft-skills instruction as part of first-year experience programming. Future research is needed to explore non-cognitive instruction in the abbreviated class schedule, the concepts of confidence and belonging as part of the technical college experience, opportunities for increasing the effectiveness of instruction for the diverse technical college student body, and teacher/adjunct training as a way to increase the effectiveness of student success instruction. It is important to continue developing adjustments to this research to see if further opportunities exist that could increase students' understanding and application of

goal setting, motivation, and self-ownership of learning. Similar training in other developmental subjects such as English, writing, and mathematics could help increase student retention and completion. Personalized non-cognitive instruction is valuable for helping students grow their mental complexity through learning events that encourage students to see the world via different meaning-making systems (Stewart & Wolodko, 2016).

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APPENDIX A

PERSONAL CAREER EVALUATION REPORT

Title: Personal Career Evaluation Report
Assignment: This assignment is a written report.

The learning goal of the career evaluation report is to expand students' knowledge and understanding regarding careers they may be interested in pursuing, to analyze their career options within a field, to position themselves as the experts about that field, and to visualize themselves in these careers.

Directions:

1. Take the TypeFocus assessment.
    a. The website is http://www.typefocus.com
    b. The access code is 67GD6772

2. Research your career choice.
    a. Your research should include research from:
        i. information from the TypeFocus – Explore tab
        ii. links from Career Services
        iii. company and organizational websites online.

3. Research professional sites and professional people on LinkedIn to learn about your future career.
    a. Consider the following questions when you are researching:
        i. What education and accomplishments have you seen among others in your field?
        ii. What professional organizations do they belong to?
        iii. What organization and business pages do you find on LinkedIn?

4. Write a two-page, Arial, 12-point, double-spaced report that demonstrates your knowledge and understanding of this career. Follow the outline from Part 1: Career Written Report. Make certain to address each section.

CAREER WRITTEN REPORT

Purpose: The learning goal of the career evaluation report is to expand your knowledge and understanding regarding careers you may be interested in pursuing, to analyze your possible career options within a field, to position yourself as the expert about that field, and to visualize yourself in this career.

- For those who are searching for career options, this will be a place to begin exploring your career interests.

- If you know what your career plans are, use this assignment to explore other avenues within your field.

Content:

Section 1 – Explain your results from the TypeFocus Assessment. Consider the following questions as you review your results.

- How do the results match up with your interests?
- Are there any areas that seem to contrast with your interests?
- If so, what may have influenced the assessment results?

Section 2 – Research your chosen career (if you already know) or a possible career choice.

- Use the TypeFocus Explore Tab, the links from the Career Services website, LinkedIn, company websites, and professional organizations to research further.
- Look for information pertaining to career outlook/stability, opportunities for advancement, salary ranges, etc.
- You can put any information in your report that might prove helpful to you now or later as you make career decisions.
- Show evidence that you have thoroughly researched the career, and include a Reference page or references in parentheses at the point of reference.

Section 3 – Explain the type and amount of education you will need for your career.

- Think long term as well as short term. You should include information on particular colleges and programs for your chosen career.
- What undergraduate degree will you need?
- Many fields today require a master's degree. What colleges offer a master's degree in the area that you would need?
- Is there any special certification or licensing required to work in your field?
- What about funding for your education? Are there scholarships available? Where do you look for financial aid information on the college websites?

Section 4 – Close your report with your final thoughts about your level of interests in this career. Review the following questions to help you reflect on your research.

- Are there other avenues you may explore?
- Did you learn anything that was surprising?
- Are there companies you are interested in working for?
- Begin to think about how you can build a resume. You may already have experience that relates, or you may need to think about what type of experience you can gain before applying for a job. Keep in mind that this report is about your personal career decision or possible ideas for a career. It's okay if you're undecided, but you still need to do the research and report on your findings for a possible career.

Format if using a Reference Page:

- Set up the report in MLA style (see instructor for more information if you have not taken ENG-101 and the YouTube video listed in the Help area below.) See instruction sheet "How to Format Final Copy" in D2L Content.

- You may use subheadings, charts, graphs, etc. to enhance your written report.
- Type the report using double-spaced, 12-pt., Arial font.
- Minimum page length – 2 pages, double-spaced.
- Include a Reference page or references in parentheses at the point of reference
- The cover page and the reference page do not count towards your 2-page presentation.

Help Section:
Review the rubric so you clearly understand the task.
Ask questions if you are confused at any point.
MLA formatting resource: https://youtu.be/nnfl5itNJ3Y

APPENDIX B

CAREER REPORT GUIDED JOURNAL

Career Report Guided Journal
Please write a paragraph addressing the following prompts, and turn in on Dropbox on D2L.

1. What did you discover during your research for the Career Report? Did you learn anything that surprised you? Please detail what you learned or experienced while completing this project.
2. Did you decide to make any changes or adjustments to your goals because of your research? Whether you decided to make changes or adjustments, please detail why or why not.
3. Did you make any good networking connections as a result of this project? Did you connect or learn about potential employers?

APPENDIX C

ADVISING FOLDER ASSIGNMENT

Title: Advising Folder
Assignment: This assignment includes a completed schedule for the next two semesters and an advisor meeting.

The learning goal of the advising folder is to expand students' knowledge regarding their academic careers and the details of their programs, to help students learn to navigate program requirements and scheduling, to introduce students to advisors and encourage meetings, planning, and scheduling, and to advise students regarding resources for transfer.

Directions:

1. Prior to class, go to webadvisor, and print the following:
    a. Program Evaluation
    b. Test Score Summary

2. Bring these resources to class.
    a. Your research will include:
        i. Navigating your program evaluation
        ii. Utilizing the College Catalog
        iii. Reviewing the Mathematics English/Writing Ladder
        iv. Reviewing English and writing requirements

3. When you leave class, you will have:
    a. Working knowledge of the College Catalog to:
        i. Plan your next two semesters or
        ii. Finish planning your next two semesters
        iii. Knowledge regarding how to register for classes
        iv. Working knowledge of transfer resources, bridge programs, and articulation guides

4. Locate your advisor's information and:
    a. Meet with your advisor and finish your scheduling or
    b. Make a future appointment

Advising Folder

Purpose: The learning goal of the advising folder is to expand your knowledge and understanding regarding navigating your academic career, your degree, certificate,

or transfer requirements, and a working familiarity with your advisor to help you in your academic planning and short term goals.

- For those who are searching for a program, this will be a place to begin exploring your academic interests. If you know what your academic plans are, use this assignment to explore your program requirements.

Advising Folder Content for Submission:

1. Advising Syllabus – under Your Program of Study and Academic Plan http://www.yorktech.edu/campus-life/support-resources/academic-advising/
2. MAP - this is what we filled out in class planning next your next two semesters http://www.yorktech.edu/uploadedFiles/Pages/Campus_Life/Academic_Support_Resources/_content/NewMAPForm.pdf
3. Test Score Summary Webadvisor
4. Program Evaluation Webadvisor
5. Registration Instructions http://www.yorktech.edu/campus-life/support-resources/academic-advising/
6. Appointment or results of advising meeting

APPENDIX D

ADVISING FOLDER GUIDED JOURNAL

Advising Folder Guided Journal

Complete this journal once you have completed the Advising Folder project and scheduled a meeting with your advisor. Please write a thoughtful response of at least one paragraph.

1. Now that you have the next two semesters figured out, how did this process help you with your short-term goals? What about your long-term goals?
2. What did you learn about your program and the program requirements?
3. What did you learn about your program department? What about contact information for your advisor, and your program department? Did you meet with or schedule a meeting with your advisor?

APPENDIX E
COL 103 STUDY PERMISSION FORM

College 103 Study

An adjunct instructor here at Middletown Tech will be conducting a study this spring for their doctoral program at the University of South Carolina. Middletown Technical College has given permission for this study to be conducted for the College 103 classes.

This study will examine the instructional methods as they relate to specific lessons taught during College 103. During this study, the researcher has requested permission from students to use work discussions from the College 103 class as data to measure real-world connections to the instructional materials presented during class.

As a student, you are being asked to participate and have your work contribute to this study.

- This study will be looking at the all COL 103 classes for the spring semester.
- Your participation would mean that you would agree to have your data contributed to this study anonymously. From start to finish, the college, the instructors, the class, and the students participating will not be personally identified.
- All data would be stripped of personal identifiers (name, instructor, class) and given a code number so your privacy would be ensured. At any time if you decide that you do not wish to contribute to this study, you may request removal. There is no penalty for non-participation or withdraw.

- Only students who remain in the class for the entire semester and who agree to participate will contribute to the study.

By signing below, I agree to participate in this study and have my work contribute to the body of data gathered for this study. I understand that I will not be personally identified at any time before, during, or after this study and that my data will be kept completely anonymous. I understand that I have the right to withdraw at any time, and that in order to participate I have to be in the COL 103 class for the entire semester.

Name: _____ Date: _____