FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENT RETENTION AT A MIDSIZED PRIVATE UNIVERSITY

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In this study, I identified institutional actions that reduce student attrition using a mixed-methods research design. The research question asked, “What multitheoretical retention levers can be identified to reduce student attrition at CVU?” A theoretical framework influenced by Braxton’s (2000) research on the complex problem of student departure guided the study. Quantitative data from a student satisfaction survey were used to develop and implement a qualitative protocol. A thematic analysis of phone interviews resulted in the generation of a number of institutional actions that are known to improve student retention. These included providing students with clear lines of communication about campus goals, values, policies, and procedures; communicating expectations related to academic policies and course requirements; and optimizing the advisor–student dynamic. The research findings demonstrated that multitheoretical retention levers can be identified using a mixed-methods design.

*Keywords:* mixed methods, student attrition, student departure student retention
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CHAPTER I

The numbers are startling: a person who completes requirements for a high school diploma will earn $650,000.00 less in his or her lifetime than a person who earns a baccalaureate degree (Tinto, 2012). That number should be economic motivation for thousands of Americans to flock to the ivory towers of higher education in pursuit of a degree. In fact, between 1980 and 2011, the number of college-going students doubled in the United States, from 9 million to almost 20 million (2012). During that same time, the graduation rate increased only slightly for the masses pursuing the dream of obtaining a baccalaureate degree (2012). According to Tinto (2012), one out of four students entering a university will leave without receiving a degree. The number of students leaving institutions of higher learning affects the stability of the institutions, their budgets, and the public’s attitude about whether these schools are competent to provide a quality education to students (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). Retaining students and having them persist to graduation is also a national concern (Tinto, 2012). For the country to stay competitive globally and maintain its economic stature in the present and into the future, institutions must become more effective at implementing institutional actions that help retain students (2012).

Student retention is also relevant within a larger social context because of its importance in the social advancement and improvement of the individual (Attinasi, 1989). According to Attinasi (1989), racial and ethnic minority students pursuing higher education in the United States have a history of gross underrepresentation on campuses throughout the nation. The consequence of this lack of representation is the inability of
those ethnic and racial minorities to gain access to occupational fields that require a college education. Attinasi concluded that these subpopulations cannot “enjoy equitable participation in the larger society’s social, economic, and political life” due to their underrepresentation within higher education (p. 247).

Within this context, the retaining of these underrepresented students on campus and guaranteeing their persistence to graduation requires that faculty, staff, and those in administrative positions in organizations be conscious of the problem and support underrepresented populations on campus through moral behavior and actions. Frameworks exist upon which organizations could model to guide them in their behavior and actions. Johnson (2012) stated that Rest’s four-component model of moral behavior provides a framework that could be used to guide institutions. Four psychological subprocesses guide ethical action: moral sensitivity (recognition), moral judgment, moral focus (motivation), and moral character (as cited in Johnson, 2012).

Finding strategies that increase the retention rates of all students is in the best interest of the individual student and society. When individuals invest in themselves by pursuing a degree in higher education, they are attempting to increase their human capital. An increase in human capital can contribute to personal, social, and economic well-being. Economist Theodore Schultz identified increases in human capital (education) as an important element facilitating the economic growth of individuals and societies (as cited in Keeley, 2007, p. 29).

In the midst of institution leaders coping with complex retention problems, they are also seeing accountability expectations for graduation placed on them at the state and federal levels. State and federal aid is increasingly tied to graduation rates. This shift in
policy has created a sense of urgency within the higher education community to seek out and implement best practices related to institutional actions that reduce student attrition (Tinto, 2009). What has proved to be elusive is a comprehensive strategy to accomplish that objective.

Researchers and practitioners should engage the problem of student retention in a participatory manner that focuses on continuous improvement of institutional actions that address student retention on campuses. The challenge ahead requires the development of strategies that address the complexity of the problem of student retention.

The first chapter of this dissertation presents the background of the study, specifies the problem of the study, describes its significance, and outlines the theoretical framework used to guide the study. Chapter I concludes by identifying the delimitations of the study.

**Background of the Study**

First- to second-year retention rates for college students in Ohio for the 2009 cohort who decided to attend a private, non-profit institution of higher learning in Ohio were dismal. Only 78% of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking freshmen returned to the same institution for their sophomore year based on information from the Ohio Board of Regents. In 2010, Central Valley University (a pseudonym), a private mid-sized liberal arts university located in Ohio, reported a first to second-year retention rate of 69% (Ohio Board of Regents, 2012). In 2009, 622 first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students enrolled at Central Valley University (CVU) and in the fall of 2010, only 430 of those students returned to Central Valley as sophomores (Ohio Board of Regents, 2012, p. 22). The fiscal implications of student attrition, if computed at current tuition levels for the
2013-2014 academic year, are significant. The attrition of 192 students would represent a loss of tuition and fees of $5.63 million for the university.

Central Valley University places a priority on valuing the individual and indicates this in its mission statement and core values. One of the university’s core values pledges the best individual and collective efforts will be made to challenge and encourage each student of Central Valley University within a supportive community. This proclamation would suggest that institutional actions to reduce student attrition at Central Valley University would be consistent with Tinto’s (1993) first principle of effective retention.

According to Tinto’s (1993) first principle of effective student retention, “Effective retention programs are committed to the students they serve. They put student welfare ahead of other institutional goals” (p. 146). The cornerstone of this principle is that the institutional mission is student-centered. Tinto described it as an ethos of caring that flows throughout institutional life. Student-centered institutions promote values that inspire members to put students first and direct the implementation of policy and procedures that support this goal. The premise of this first principle is that communities who care for their members will retain them as part of that community (Tinto, 1993). Institutions that commit to students will foster a sense of commitment in the students toward the university (Braxton & Mundy, 2001; Tinto, 1993). This requires proactive participation on the part of the institution. Tinto (1993) explained it is less about formal programming and more about an institutional orientation toward serving and meeting students’ needs in the present.

The student departure problem also presents complex challenges for practitioners and researchers alike who wish to find solutions that address the phenomenon of student
departure (Braxton & Mundy, 2001). Braxton (2000, 2001) described the student departure phenomenon as being an ill-structured problem that lacks a single solution. The causes of student departure within the higher education community are multi-faceted and multi-faceted problems often require solutions that are designed using a multitheoretical approach (Braxton, 2000; Braxton et al., 2004). Solutions constructed in this fashion would integrate approaches that include economic, organizational, psychological, and sociological perspectives in their design (Braxton, 2001).

There are indications that institutions are beginning to place an emphasis on institutional actions that build and strengthen a sense of community within higher education as a means to reduce student isolation and increase support structures (Nora, 2001). This is a critical shift because it acknowledges that students are walking onto campuses underprepared for the rigors of college life. Researchers also acknowledge that institutions must play a larger role in solving their retention problems (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 1997).

Statement of the Problem and Purpose

Student retention in higher education is a critical component in ensuring the fiscal health of institutions. High rates of first-year departure negatively affect the enrollments, budgets, and public perceptions of many colleges and universities (Braxton, 2000). The persistence rate of first to second year first-time, full-time, degree-seeking undergraduates at Central Valley University from fall 2009 to fall 2010 was 69% (Ohio Board of Regents, 2012, p. 22). Currently, a limited amount of qualitative site-based research is available to assist mid-sized, private, liberal arts universities in identifying key multitheoretical institutional levers that, when implemented, increase rates of retention
with first-time, full-time, degree-seeking undergraduates. A gap in available content exists due to a limited amount of research in this area. The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to identify multitheoretical retention levers using feedback from students at CVU who took the Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI) in the fall of 2012 (Noel-Levitz, 2013). By publishing the results, this study contributes to the body of literature on best practices that help to retain students (Braxton & Mundy, 2001).

**Significance of Study**

The significance of this study is that it broadens the knowledge base of practitioners by expanding the literature on multitheoretical institutional retention levers (Jones & Braxton, 2009) within the higher education community who seek to make informed decisions related to the identification and implementation of student retention interventions at their institutions. This study is also significant because it offers a model for practitioners wishing to investigate their institution’s administrative options aimed at increasing retention rates based on quantitative and qualitative feedback from students. Institutional policy is another area that will benefit from this study. Student-centered institutions looking to embed student voices into their institutional policymaking will also find this study relevant as they move to decision-making frameworks that are driven by both quantitative and qualitative data.

**Research Questions**

The research question for this study asked, “What multitheoretical retention levers can be identified to reduce student attrition at CVU?” Qualitative subquestions include the following:
• What multitheoretical retention levers can be identified by students at CVU associated with instructional effectiveness?
• What multitheoretical retention levers can be identified by students at CVU associated with concern for the individual?
• What multitheoretical retention levers can be identified by students at CVU associated with student centeredness?

Overview of the Methodology

Creswell (2008) asserted that a mixed methods design can strengthen a study and is appropriate when both quantitative and qualitative data are present. Quantitative data from the Noel Levitz Student Satisfaction survey instrument administered during the 2012-2013 academic year identified areas of focus and aided in the formulation of subquestions for the study. The sample group was comprised of students who completed the Noel Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory during the 2012 academic school year at CVU. The Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI) administered was the four-year college and university version published by Noel-Levitz (Noel-Levitz, 2013). The instrument collected importance data and level of satisfaction data from respondents for each survey question. Both scores combine to produce a performance gap score. Noel-Levitz stated the following about the SSI performance gap:

A performance gap is simply the importance score minus the satisfaction score. The larger the performance gap, the greater the discrepancy between what students expect and their level of satisfaction with the current situation. The smaller the performance gap, the better the institution is doing at meeting student
A quantitative analysis of data from the SSI will not identify specific institutional retention levers proposed by Braxton and Mundy (2001) that CVU can implement to reduce student attrition. Thus, the second phase of this mixed methods study did not consist of a qualitative analysis. Rather the objective was to identify multitheoretical institutional retention levers described by Braxton and Mundy (2001) that can be used at CVU to reduce student attrition.

**Delimitations**

Several delimitations were associated with this study. The first delimitation resulted from the fact that only students who chose to participate in the Noel Levitz SSI during the 2012 academic year at Central Valley University were included in the sample. The second delimitation of this study was that just one instrument, measuring student satisfaction, was utilized to identify and construct subquestions of the study. Another significant delimitation was that the interviews in the study were comprised of students who returned to Central Valley University after their first year and graduated in May, 2015.

**Summary**

This chapter was an overview of the economic and social implications of failing to retain students at institutions of higher education. The chapter also outlined the moral argument for implementing institutional actions that increase retention rates. This chapter presented a theoretical framework, which is grounded in the research of Braxton and Mundy (2001) that guided this research project. The central research question asked,
“What multitheoretical retention levers can be identified to reduce student attrition at CVU?” Chapter II contains the current literature on popular retention theory, integration theory, and research associated with multitheoretical retention levers.
CHAPTER II

Four sections comprise this literature review. Section 1 has an overview of currently accepted student retention theory. In section two, Tinto’s (1993) integration, model, and principles of effective retention (1993) were examined. Section 3 contains the theoretical framework of the study. The last section concludes with a review of the Noel Levitz Student Satisfaction Survey.

Popular Retention Theory

The successful retention of higher education students is and will remain a concern of policy leaders inside and outside the walls of higher education institutions in the United States. During the past 70 years, scholars have researched the phenomenon of student departure in higher education. The last 25 years have seen an increasing accumulation of research relating to the retention of students in higher education (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). The cornerstone of student retention theory can be traced back to William Spady’s work in the early 1970s (Berger & Lyon, 2005; Spady, 1970). It was during this time he wrote his seminal piece on dropouts in higher education. He was able to synthesize the literature written the previous decade associated with students dropping out of higher education institutions. Based on his investigation, Spady (1970) developed a sociological model to explain the departure of students from institutions of higher education. Spady was the first to articulate the idea that if students’ norms are congruent to those of the university, the likelihood of persistence for those students increases. In 1975, Tinto expanded on Spady’s research and theory, which yielded thirteen propositions as to why students voluntarily leave college. These
13 propositions were refined by Tinto in 1982, 1986, 1987, and 1993 (Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 1993).

When the high student enrollments at universities across the nation started to decrease in the mid 1970s, researchers developed enrollment management. This organizational concept was designed to provide institutional leaders with more control over their recruitment, enrollments, and retention within the institution (Berger & Lyon, 2005; Hossler, 1999). The university was to accomplish this by gathering data from multiple internal and external sources, and using the data compiled, to inform the decision-making and policy formation within the higher educational organizations. In 1980, Bean introduced a new retention theory in which he adapted organizational models of worker turnover to the retention of students in higher education. His research highlighted institutional commitment as a primary variable influencing the dropout of men and women students (Bean, 1980). As the 1980s progressed, researchers continued to elaborate and refine the work that their peers had completed earlier. An example of this scaffolding effect of building on prior research is visible in the research work of Braxton, Brier, and Berger during the 1980s (Braxton, 2000; Braxton, Brier, & Hossler, 1988).

During the 1980s, Braxton, Brier and Hossler (1988) challenged Tinto’s interactionalist theory with their research on organizational attributes. Within that research, they identified that organizational attributes such as rewards, institutional communication, and institutional engagement with the student body all contributed to the students’ abilities to persist (Berger & Lyon, 2005; Braxton et al., 1988). Although retention and persistence are very different constructs, researchers of student retention and student persistence tend to look at both to gain clarity.
During the 1990s, Braxton and others continued to test Tinto’s interactionalist theory (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Braxton, 2000). The data they derived from these studies led researchers to suggest that more institutional emphasis should be placed on social integration as opposed to academic integration (Berger & Lyon, 2005, p. 24). This period also saw an increased effort to understand student retention based on the diversity of the student body within higher education. Carter (2006) pointed out that researchers such as Tierney (1992) were critical of Tinto’s interactionalist theory. Tierney (1992) was opposed to the anthropological perspective of Tinto’s interactionalist theory because it failed to account for cultural factors affecting minority students. Carter (2006) explained that Tierney challenged Tinto’s interactionalist theory because it placed minorities into the dominant culture, then made assumptions about the subordinate culture’s integration and assimilation into the higher education community (Carter, 2006). This critical peer review of Tinto’s interactionalist theory led him to develop an integration framework of student retention, which focused on academic and social integration.

**Tinto’s Integration Model**

Tinto (1993) developed his integration model based on the academic and social integration of students within the institutional environment. He believed that students enter institutions with diverse background traits, but once they get on campus these diverse traits and characteristics lead students to make commitments about their goal of graduating from college. Students’ background characteristics, along with their initial commitments to the institution, influence how well a student will perform academically. Students who successfully integrate academically and socially after arrival on campus are more likely to be retained and persist to graduation. Tinto believed that a student must
abandon prior social ties and integrate into academic and social life of the university (Tinto, 1993). Although Tinto’s integration model has been widely accepted and studied with universities, the model’s usefulness with community colleges has been questioned primarily due to limited opportunities for social integration at those institutions (Karp, Hughes, & O’Gara, 2010).

**Principles of Effective Student Retention**

Tinto (1993) built on his integration model by examining successful retention programs, and then focused on the structural attributes of those programs to determine the common elements associated with effective institutional actions, which would reduce student departure. Tinto (1993) wrote:

> These commonalities, or what is referred to here as “the principles of effective retention,” can be described as an enduring commitment to student welfare, a broader commitment to the education, not mere retention, of all students, and an emphasis upon the importance of social and intellectual community in the education of students. (p. 145)

The principles of effective retention are comprised of the commonalities found at institutions that have been successful in their student retention efforts. These commonalities include the way they think about retention, the emphasis placed on retention efforts, and the outcome based on energy and focus of the institution (Tinto, 1993). Research found that institutional actions or recommendations that reduce student retention rates should be congruous with one or more of Tinto’s three principles of effective retention (Braxton & Mundy, 2001).
**Institutional commitment to students.** Tinto’s first principle of effective student retention focused on the commitment that effective retention programs place on the students they serve, by placing the students’ needs ahead of other institutional goals (Tinto, 1993). The foundation of this focus on students is that an ethos of caring will develop throughout institutional life. Tinto believed that institutions that care for their members would retain them as part of that community (1993). Institutions that commit to students will foster a sense of commitment in the students toward the university (Braxton & Mundy, 2001; Tinto, 1993, 1997). This requires proactive participation on the part of the institution. Tinto (1993) explained that it is less about formal programs and more about an institutional orientation toward serving and meeting students’ needs in the present.

**Educational commitment.** Tinto’s second principle of effective student retention stated, “Effective retention programs are first and foremost committed to the education of all, not just some, of their students” (Tinto, 1993, p. 146). Institutions that are committed to the education of all students understand that an integral part of retaining students involves proactive steps that support that mission-critical goal. Those proactive steps include ensuring that students who become part of the college community have the skills necessary to succeed. For those students who lack the skills when they enter school, providing them with an opportunity to acquire the skills needed to be successful academically is paramount in retaining those students (Tinto, 1993). Proactive institutions engage in ongoing dialog with the students about their progress in ways that promote individual learning.
The classroom plays a pivotal role because it is the institution’s front line with regard to student retention efforts. The importance of having classrooms that actively involve students in their learning tend to promote rather than hinder students’ learning (Tinto, 1993).

Social and intellectual community. Tinto’s third principle of effective student retention stressed the need for community. Tinto stated, “Effective retention programs are committed to the development of supportive social and educational communities in which all students are integrated as competent members” (Tinto, 1993, p. 147). The emphasis of this principle is in building the communal elements of college life. Institutions that have high rates of student retention on campus also have cultivated and established a sense of social and intellectual community on their campuses that integrate each student into the community. This philosophy of inclusion as opposed to exclusion, if applied uniformly to the entire student body, has the potential to support personal relationship building across gender, race, and cultural lines (Tinto, 1993). The importance of building personal bonds between students, faculty, and staff cannot be overstated.

Having gained an understanding of Tinto’s integration model and principles of effective student retention, one is encouraged to ask practical questions related to their implementation. What are specific institutional actions that can be implemented and are known to reduce college student departure at residential institutions that align with one or more of Tinto’s effective principles student retention? A review of the literature yielded an answer to this question.
Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that guided the research questions, research design, choice of sample, and data collection strategies in this study were Braxton’s (2000) assertion that the ill-structured problem of student departure requires a multitheoretical approach. Braxton and Mundy’s (2001) research on multitheoretical retention levers from economic, organizational, psychological, and sociological theoretical orientations also comprised the framework of this study.

Researchers Braxton and Mundy (2001) were instrumental in using empirical research amassed over the last 30 years to improve the institutional practices within higher education. These efforts have translated into professional development and implementation of best practices which, when used effectively, increase student retention and persistence within higher education. Braxton (2008) commented on the disconnect between theory and practice; “The need for a scholarship of practice emanates from the inability of most colleges and universities to translate their knowledge and understanding of college student retention into actions that result in substantial gains in student retention and graduation” (p. 101). Future research will continue to investigate how institutions can become more effective at retaining their students. This research will have to consider the diversity of the student body and the instability of the economic forces that affect student retention.

Braxton and Mundy (2001) synthesized the research of their peers e.g. (Berger, Kuh, Braxton & McClendon, Bean & Eaton; Nora) who used organizational, cultural, psychological, and sociological theories to identify intuitional levers that align with one or more of the principles of effective retention. The research is of particular interest
because they compiled a list of 46 recommended levers that practitioners could implement that align with one or more of Tinto’s principles of effective student retention (Braxton & Mundy, 2001). For the purposes of this study, the focus was on recommended levers that apply to Tinto’s first principle of effective retention only. Of the 46 recommended levers identified by Braxton and Mundy, 40 apply to Tinto’s first principle of effective student retention. Braxton and Mundy’s research (2001) concluded that these 40 institutional levers are aligned with Tinto’s first principle of effective retention.

**Organizational Behavior Levers**

Berger (2001) identified 10 researched-based institutional actions related to organizational behavior that could be implemented to improve student persistence on campus. He defined organizational behavior as those actions taken by agents of the organization such as faculty, administration, and staff (2001). Because no one theoretical perspective represents organizational behavior within higher education, Berger used a multitheoretical approach to construct his recommendations. He used research associated with the five core dimensions of organizational behavior (bureaucratic, collegial, political, symbolic, and systemic). The reason that Berger used these particular dimensions of organizational behavior is, in large part, because all colleges and universities exhibit behaviors associated with one or more of the five core dimensions stated above (2001). Using this framework, Berger was able to formulate 10 best practices related to organization behavior that could positively affect student retention rates:
1. provide students with information and clear lines of communication about campus goals, values, policies, and procedures;

2. provide opportunities for students to participate in organizational decision-making;

3. provide a campus environment characterized by fairness toward students;

4. provide balance between structure and responsiveness;

5. actively engage students in political activity on campus;

6. provide students with advocates;

7. build shared meaning through authentic symbols that are used with integrity;

8. pay attention to structural and symbolic connections with the external environment;

9. understand the nature of the organizational environment on campus; and


Braxton and Mundy (2001) identified seven out of ten recommendations found in Berger’s work that aligned with Tinto’s first principle of effective retention. They are one, two, three, five, six, seven, and eight.

**Organizational Culture Levers**

Braxton and Mundy turned to the work of Kuh (2001) and his research focused on organizational culture within higher education to identify best practices that facilitate positive campus cultures. Kuh saw culture as the sum of “collective, mutually shaping patterns of institutional history, mission, physical settings, norms, traditions, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups and
institutions of higher education” (2001, p. 25). Kuh’s 6 recommendations for institutional actions that affect positive changes in organizational culture contributing to increased student integration are

1. clarify institutional values and expectations early and often to prospective and matriculating students;
2. conduct a comprehensive examination of the student experience inside and outside the classroom;
3. consistently use good practices in teaching, learning, and retention programs;
4. intentionally tie the curriculum to students’ lives outside the classroom to bring students into ongoing contact with one another and with campus resources especially after the first year of study;
5. remove obstacles to student success associated with disciplinary cultures; and
6. determine the effects of proximal groups on persistence decisions (Kuh, 2001 p. 32-36).

Braxton and Mundy (2001) determined that Kuh’s (2001) first, second, third, and fourth recommendations for creating positive cultures were aligned with Tinto’s first principle of effective retention. Kuh’s first, second, third, and fourth recommendations were tested empirically and found to have significantly decreased rates of student departure (Kuh, 2001).

Social Integration Levers

Social integration remains an integral component in deciphering the puzzle of retention within higher education. The research of Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson as cited in (Braxton & McClendon, 2001) yielded strong empirical evidence that links
effective social integration strategies with the positive persistence of students within higher education. Braxton and McClendon (2001) understood the complexity of fostering social integration and retention within the higher education community. Braxton and McClendon utilized the empirical research on social integration to construct 20 recommendations for institutional action, which spanned across eight domains of practice within higher education. Those eight domains are academic advising, administrative policies and procedures, enrollment management, faculty development, faculty reward system, student orientation programs, residential life, and student affairs programming (2001).

Braxton and Mundy (2001) identified 18 out of 20 of Braxton and McClendon’s recommendations institutions could implement that aligned with Tinto’s first principle of effective student retention. The 18 recommendations are listed below and the corresponding domain placements are identified (2001). The domain placements were developed by Braxton and McClendon to help facilitate implementation of the recommendations (2001). Two recommendations fell into the academic advising domain and did not align with Tinto’s first principle of effective student retention and were excluded from the study. Braxton and McClendon’s 18 recommendations:

- effective methods for the communication of rules and regulations important to students should be developed. (administrative policies and procedures);
- rules and regulations governing student life should be enforced in a fair manner. (administrative policies and procedures);
- residential colleges and universities should require that all first- and second-year students live on-campus. (administrative policies and procedures);
• commuter colleges and universities should develop social environments for students (administrative policies and procedures);
• residential colleges and universities should develop social environments for commuter students and students who live off-campus (administrative policies and procedures);
• recruitment activities and publications should accurately portray the characteristics of a college or university to prospective students (enrollment management);
• programs and practices should encourage prospective students to visit the campus (enrollment management);
• some financial aid should be given to all students who demonstrate financial need (enrollment management);
• the techniques of cooperative/collaborative learning should be the focus of faculty development workshops and seminars (faculty development);
• active learning should be the focus of faculty development workshops and seminars (faculty development);
• some weight in the faculty reward structure should be given to faculty members who use teaching practices that foster the retention of students in college (faculty reward system);
• the teaching skills of organization and preparation and instructional skill and clarity should be appraised on student course rating instruments and by colleagues conducting classroom observations (faculty reward system);
• student course rating forms, colleague assessments, self-reports, and teaching portfolios should include indices of active learning (faculty reward system);

• orientation programs should develop multiple opportunities for first-year students to socially interact with their peers (student orientation programs);

• first-year students should be assigned to residence halls in a manner that encourages a sense of community in each residence hall (student orientation programs);

• residence halls should provide opportunities for residents to interact socially (student orientation programs);

• student affairs offices should conduct workshops on coping with stress (student affairs programming);

• student affairs offices should conduct workshops on educational and career planning (student affairs programming); and

• student affairs offices should conduct programs that honor the history and cultures of different racial/ethnic groups on campus {student affairs programming} (Braxton & McClendon, 2001, p. 61-67).

This list of 18 institutional levers provides evidence that multiple sources influence social integration as it relates to student retention. Braxton and McClendon (2001) concurred with Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) in recommending that multiple social integration levers be implemented to achieve positive outcomes with the retention of students in higher education.
Psychological Levers

Braxton and McClendon (2001) turned to the work of Bean and Eaton (2001) to find recommendations that incorporated psychological theory into an effective retention program. Bean and Eaton (2001) posited that programs targeted at the psychological needs of students can promote academic and social integration on campus. Bean and Eaton recommended four programs:

- design service learning programs;
- design learning communities/freshman interest groups;
- design freshman orientation programs; and
- design mentoring programs (Bean & Eaton, 2001, p. 78-83).

Three psychological theories are critical and should be folded into the programming they include coping behavior theory, self-efficacy theory, and attribution theory.

Family and Community Levers

Nora (2001) addressed the importance of significant others as levers in the persistence process when she conceptualized the importance of support from family and community in reducing student attrition. Her research can be linked to Tinto’s “rites of passage” (Tinto, 1993). Nora (2001) developed institutional recommendations based on the three stages of integration theorized by Tinto that students experience upon entering an institution. The first phase is the separation phase, which can be described as that link between support and encouragement from students’ families and community after going off to college. The transition phase comprises the second stage in a student’s assimilation into the higher education community. The third phase is incorporation of the student into daily life within the campus community.
Braxton and Mundy (2001) put forth six recommendations derived from the work of Nora (2001) for on-campus programming that align with Tinto’s (1993) first principal of effective retention:

- engaging and involving parents through such programs as Parents’ Weekend, a Parents’ Office, and through written communication such as newsletters benefits students by keeping parents connected to their children’s collegiate experiences, as well as the institution in which their children are enrolled;

- faculty, staff, academic advisors, and administrators should attend to the holistic development of the student—both academic and co-curricular by promoting growth and learning not only in the classroom but in the university community as well;

- promote student awareness of and access to appropriate co-curricular programs and resources i.e., support groups, peer counseling, mentoring programs, faith-based groups, residential colleges, and community service groups that connect and support students in their incorporation into the university community;

- promote faculty, staff, and administrator awareness of and access to appropriate co-curricular programs and resources i.e., support groups, peer counseling, mentoring programs, faith-based groups, residential colleges, and community service groups that connect and support students in their incorporation into the university community;
• conduct trainings for faculty, staff, and administrators to promote awareness and knowledge of appropriate resources within both Academic Affairs and Student Affairs that connect and support students in their transition process;

• conduct assessments of the student transition and adaptation process for perceived at-risk students by appropriate and well-trained faculty and staff to ascertain whether referrals or interventions are necessary; and

• provide specific services (i.e., tutoring or day care) and address student concerns (i.e., excessively high attrition rates or exceedingly low transfer rates) to foster students’ perceptions of the institution as supportive and caring (Braxton & Mundy, 2001, p. 98-99).

**Student Satisfaction Inventory**

Research studies have shown (Noel & Levitz, 1985) that the assessment of retention efforts should be comprehensive in nature and assess the three critical domains on campus. Noel and Levitz were concerned with identifying the strengths and weaknesses in the academic affairs department, administrative policies and procedures of the institution, and the student affairs department (Wang & Grimes, 2001). Assessments of the three domains (academic affairs, administrative policies and procedures, and student affairs) have been undertaken using instruments that measure student satisfaction (2001). Higher satisfaction scores on student survey instruments have shown a positive correlation with institutional commitment and student persistence (Fischer, 2007; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004).

Student satisfaction instruments have expanded their scope of assessment related to student persistence. Current instruments such as the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction
Inventory combine composite measures of multiple items into clusters that, when analyzed, provide more specific feedback on retention programming on campus (Schreiner & Nelson, 2013).

Laurie Schreiner and Stephanie Juillerat designed the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Survey (SSI), with support from Noel-Levitz (Bryant, 2006), based on the principles of consumer theory. The SSI allows students to provide feedback on the perceived importance to them of an item on the survey instrument. It also allows students to indicate their perceived satisfaction with a survey item. The perceived importance of and satisfaction with an item are both measured using a 7-point Likert scale. The satisfaction and importance scores are subtracted to produce a gap score. The instrument is comprised of 12 scales consisting of 83 survey items (Bryant, 2006). A list of survey items is included in Appendix A.

**Summary**

The purpose of this literature review was to provide an overview of popular retention theory. A review of the multitheoretical research of Braxton and Mundy was covered. This review was not intended to be an exhaustive examination of all literature pertaining to retention theory. A description of the methodology of the study, statement of the central research question and subquestions, and explanation of data collection procedures are in the third chapter.
CHAPTER III

This chapter contains the methodology, primary research question, research design, data collection, data analysis, and limitations of this study. Phases one and two of this mixed-methods study also are presented. The purpose of this mixed-methods study is to identify multitheoretical retention levers that might reduce student attrition by using feedback from students at Central Valley University (CVU) who took the Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI) in the fall of 2012. The theoretical framework that guided this study is Braxton and Mundy’s (2001) assertion that the ill-structured problem of student departure requires that multitheoretical institutional levers are implemented to solve them. The following quotation from Braxton and Mundy elaborates their assertion related to the ill-structured problem:

Ill-structured best depicts the characteristics of the problem of college student departure. Ill-structured problems defy a single solution, but rather require a number of possible solutions which may not alleviate the problem (Kitchener, 1986; Wood, 1983). Thus, the problem of college student retention requires possible solutions derived from the theory and research of several theoretical approaches. (p. 91)

Research Question

The research question for this study asked “What multitheoretical retention levers can be identified to reduce student attrition at CVU?” Qualitative subquestions include the following:

- What multitheoretical retention levers can be identified by students at CVU associated with instructional effectiveness?
• What multitheoretical retention levers can be identified by students at CVU associated with concern for the individual?
• What multitheoretical retention levers can be identified by students at CVU associated with student centeredness?

This study incorporated a two-phase, mixed-methods design, which strengthened the study and is appropriate because both quantitative and qualitative data are present (Creswell, 2008).

Quantitative Methods

The quantitative data analysis of the sample identified areas of focus and aided in the formulation of subquestions that refined and narrowed the focus of the central question. Participation in the SSI was voluntary for students. Data points were gleaned from the raw data generated when the SSI was administered in the spring of 2012, during which 165 freshmen (23.31%), 163 sophomores (23.02%), 195 juniors (27.54%), 178 seniors (25.14%), five others (.71%), and two special students (.28%) completed the survey. Of the 708 students who responded to the SSI, 2.54% were African American; .42% were American Indian or Alaskan Native; .99% were Asian Pacific Islander; 90.14% were Caucasian/White; and 1.97% were Hispanic. Of the 708 students who took the survey, the overwhelming majority attended classes during the day, and 696 students indicated that they were taking a full class load. The sample for the quantitative portion of the study was comprised of students who were freshmen and sophomores at CVU when the SSI was administered in 2012 (freshmen: n=165; sophomores: n=163).

Although CVU administered the SSI to identify areas of student satisfaction, student responses were sorted into a four-cell matrix based on student reactions to level
of importance and level of satisfaction for each item. Creswell (2008) stated that one method of analyzing quantitative data with a mixed-method explanatory design is to look at extreme cases. Survey items on the SSI that were found to be low in student satisfaction and high in level of importance based on gap scores were considered the extreme cases in this study. Specific cases with high gap scores were analyzed and incorporated into the study for use during the qualitative phase to formulate questions for the interviews.

**Reliability and Validity**

The internal reliability of the SSI is high, as it possesses a Cronbach’s coefficient alpha of .97 for importance scores and .98 for satisfaction scores (Noel-Levitz, 2013). Score reliability is also very high for this instrument. When score reliability was checked after three weeks, the test-retest reliability coefficient was .85 for importance and .84 for satisfaction (2013). Since 1994, more than 2,600 institutions have administered the instrument to monitor feedback from students and guide institutional retention efforts. Longitudinal studies conducted by Noel-Levitz (2013) suggested that the SSI is valid for university use with college students.

**Data Analysis**

The SSI was administered during the spring 2012 semester. The instrument was administered to students attending the main campus of CVU. Students were able to access the SSI online. Student identification numbers were collected as identifying information for the assessment.

For the quantitative portion of this study, the data generated from the SSI administration at CVU was used to identify extreme cases, which informed question
development for the qualitative exploration. Extreme cases were defined as those items on the SSI that had high gap scores. Extreme cases also indicated that an item was low in satisfaction and high in importance. These specific items were identified using a matrix schema developed to interpret SSI results (Noel-Levitz, 2013). Additional justification for highlighting these issues for further qualitative exploration was provided using gap scores. Theoretically, gap scores should corroborate identification of extreme cases. Any items that are high in importance and low in satisfaction should also have a large gap score. The gap score, as calculated by Noel-Levitz, reflects the difference between the importance and satisfaction scores of survey items (2013).

**Variables**

The variables for the quantitative portion of this study consist of Braxton and Mundy’s (2001) 40 multitheoretical institutional retention levers that align with Tinto’s (1993) first principle of effective student retention. Key references were provided for each variable in Chapter II, so additional discussion on each variable is not warranted.

**Qualitative Methods**

Quantitative data from the SSI does not identify specific institutional retention levers that CVU can implement to reduce student attrition. Thus, the second phase of this mixed-methods study implemented a qualitative protocol. The objective was to identify multitheoretical institutional retention levers that can be used at CVU to reduce student attrition.
Sample

A purposeful sampling strategy (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 2009) was implemented in the selection of participants for the qualitative phase of the study. Students who took the SSI in the spring of 2012 and who were freshmen \((n = 165)\) and sophomores \((n = 163)\) at CVU comprised the sample from which participants for interviews were solicited. Demographic data pertaining to the sample were retrieved from CVU’s Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. The freshman sample was comprised primarily of White females \((n = 116, 70.3\%)\), and were Caucasian/White \((n = 155, 95.0\%)\). The sophomore sample was also comprised primarily of White females \((n = 112, 68.7\%)\). The ethnic makeup of the sophomore sample was very similar to the freshman sample, Caucasian/White \((n = 155, 9\%)\). Permission was granted to study SSI survey data from the administration at CVU and the Noel Levitz Corporation. The Human Subject Review Board of CVU also granted approval for the study to be undertaken. A copy of those approvals can be found in Appendix B.

The SSI survey items that students identified as extreme cases at CVU during the quantitative phase of the study, guided the construction of structured interview questions that were administered in the initial portion of the semi-structured interviews with participants. Interviews facilitated the collection of response data from students who were administered the SSI survey at CVU and have knowledge of the subject being studied (Merriam, 2009).

Participants for the interviews were solicited by using contact information provided by CVU. An e-mail was sent to former CVU students who were freshmen or sophomores during the 2012-2013 academic year. Participants were selected with the aim
of a balanced representation of males and females in the sample. Each participant signed a consent form to participate in the study. The form is included in Appendix C.

**Interviews**

Individual phone interviews were conducted with participants to explore the areas identified as high importance, low satisfaction. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed by an outside firm who possessed no knowledge of the participants’ true identities. The length of the interviews ranged from 18-40 minutes. As primary investigator, I functioned as the primary data collector. Interrater reliability was established by consulting with an individual knowledgeable in both quantitative and qualitative research who reviewed a random sample of the audio recorded interviews. This individual documented his review and the two of us conferred and compared notes from the interviews (Armstrong, Gosling, Weinman, & Marteau, 1997).

**Interview Procedures**

The interview procedures involved selecting a location in which the confidentiality of the participants’ responses could be maintained during the taping of the interview sessions. Once connected with the interviewees, they were welcomed and advised of the study’s purpose. Participants were then read the consent to participate form that had been e-mailed to them earlier. Ground rules were established at which time the interviewees were also advised how long the interview usually takes. At the conclusion of each interview, the subjects were debriefed and informed of next steps.
Confirmability and Credibility

Triangulation of sources (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 2009) that analyze data from different cohorts from the same survey administration period were incorporated into the study to insure that the inquiry is comprehensive and well-developed. Interview data from two different cohorts of students (freshmen and sophomores) who experienced college life from different perspectives during the 2012-2013 academic year at CVU comprised the two cohorts. The data from these two cohorts of students was compared and crossed-checked to confirm emerging findings. Respondent validation after the conclusion of the interviews included feedback from selected participants. Participants were identified and a post-interview follow-up phone call was made, asking if their responses were interpreted accurately.

At the conclusion of the study, an audit was performed to examine the procedures involved in collecting the data to determine the effect of researcher bias and if that bias distorted or impacted the findings of the study (Creswell, 2008). A peer scholar, knowledgeable in qualitative research methods, was asked to audit the qualitative procedures of the study.

Data Analysis

Transcripts from the interviews were analyzed by using NVivo qualitative data analysis software; QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 10, 2012. Creswell (2008) stated that NVivo software is an efficient program to organize, and create text data matrices for comparisons. NVivo assisted in exploring the transcript data from the interviews and with creation of codes based on the analysis. The codes were reduced to a list of themes.
(Creswell, 2008). An attempt was made to identify four or five themes as a result of examining the codes.

**Thematic analysis**

Meaning was found by searching across the data set generated from the phone interviews. An inquiry was performed using a thematic analysis protocol outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step of their six-phase thematic analysis involved becoming familiar with the data collected. The verbal data was transcribed to allow for reading and rereading of the data (2006). The second phase of the thematic protocol involved generating initial codes. After initial codes were developed, a search for themes within those codes was initiated (2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) placed an emphasis on sorting codes into potential themes, then checking to see if the themes align with the initial codes that were generated in phase two (2006).

Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis protocol (2006) is recursive so phase four involved reviewing the themes that were generated and checking each to insure that the themes aligned with the codes produced from the data set. This recursive analysis was continued in the fifth phase leading to further refinement of each theme with the goal of generating specifics for each theme that told the overall story of the analysis (2006). The protocol was complete when a report was generated that provided select examples that related back to the analysis of the research question and literature (2006).

**Summary**

This study incorporated a two-phase mixed methods design, which is appropriate because both quantitative and qualitative data are present. An explanation of how Noel Levitz calculates the gap scores and the nexus between the gap scores and the qualitative
phase of the study was outlined. Chapter IV contains analysis of the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study as well as the results.
CHAPTER IV

Quantitative Results

Description of Sample

The aim of the quantitative portion of this study was to identify extreme cases from the Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI) that would inform research question development for the qualitative portion of the study. The sample for the quantitative portion of the study consisted of Central Valley University (CVU) students who were freshmen ($n=165$) and sophomores ($n=163$) when the SSI was administered in 2012. Table 1 presented the demographic characteristics of the sample used in the quantitative portion of the study. Most of the students in this sample were women ($n=228$, 69.5%), were between 19 to 24 years old ($n=266$, 81.1%), and were Caucasian/White ($n=292$, 89.0%). Almost all of the students were enrolled full-time ($n=325$, 99.1%), and most students had GPAs ranging from 3.0 to 3.5 or above ($n=239$, 72.9%). The educational goal for most of these students was a baccalaureate degree ($n=237$, 72.3%). Most of the students were employed either full-time or part-time ($n=203$, 61.9%). A vast majority of students were in-state residents ($n=285$, 86.9%) and lived on campus in a residence hall ($n=272$, 82.9%). Finally, most of the students indicated that CVU was their first choice among college institutions ($n=244$, 74.4%), with 20.1% indicating it was their second choice ($n=66$), and only 5.5% indicating it was their third choice or lower ($n=18$).
### Table 4.1

**Demographic Characteristics of Quantitative Sample**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Item</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>69.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>30.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 and under</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 to 24</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>81.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 to 34</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 to 44</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity/Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaskan Native</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian or Pacific Islander</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian/White</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>89.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to respond</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Load</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>99.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshmen</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>50.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>49.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.99 or below</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.0 - 2.49</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 - 2.99</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.0 - 3.49</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>35.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 or above</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>37.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.1 (continued)

**Demographic Characteristics of Quantitative Sample**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Item</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational Goal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate degree</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>72.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master degree</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate or professional degree</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-improvement/leisure</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time off campus</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time off campus</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time on campus</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time on campus</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>31.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not employed</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence hall</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>82.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fraternity/sorority</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own house</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent room or apartment off campus</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ home</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence Classification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-state</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>86.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-state</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International (not U.S. citizen)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>96.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CVU choice among college institutions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st choice</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>74.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd choice</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd choice or lower</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis Procedures and Results

In order to identify specific cases from the SSI, gap scores were calculated for each of the SSI items related to instructional effectiveness, concern for individual, and student centeredness. Gap scores were calculated by subtracting the satisfaction score from the importance score for each item. Means and standard deviations of the gap scores for the items are presented in Table 4.2. The items relating to instructional effectiveness with the highest gap scores were “Faculty provide timely feedback about student progress in a course” \( (M = 1.01, SD = 1.44) \), “Faculty take into consideration student differences as they teach a course” \( (M = 0.83, SD = 1.43) \), “The quality of instruction I receive in most of my classes is excellent” \( (M = 0.79, SD = 1.19) \), and “Faculty are fair and unbiased in their treatment of individual students” \( (M = 0.76, SD = 1.34) \). The items relating to concern for individual with the highest gap scores were “This institution shows concern for students as individuals” \( (M = 0.78, SD = 1.54) \), and “Faculty care about me as an individual” \( (M = 0.61, SD = 1.25) \). The items relating to student centeredness with the highest gap scores were “It is an enjoyable experience to be a student on this campus” \( (M = 0.90, SD = 1.43) \), and “Most students feel a sense of belonging here” \( (M = 0.73, SD = 1.59) \). These items were identified as extreme cases and used to develop the interview questions for the qualitative portion of the study (see Appendix D for the complete set of questions).
Table 4.2

*Means and Standard Deviations for SSI Gap Scores*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instructional Effectiveness</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Faculty provide timely feedback about student progress in a course.</em></td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Faculty take into consideration student differences as they teach a course.</em></td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The quality of instruction I receive in most of my classes is excellent.</em></td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Faculty are fair and unbiased in their treatment of individual students.</em></td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The content of the courses within my major is valuable.</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The instruction in my major field is excellent.</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjunct faculty are competent as classroom instructors.</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>1.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a good variety of courses provided on this campus.</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nearly all of the faculty are knowledgeable in their field.</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a commitment to academic excellence on this campus.</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am able to experience intellectual growth here.</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate teaching assistants are competent as classroom instructors.</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty are usually available after class and during office hours.</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Concern for Individual</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>This institution shows concern for students as individuals.</em></td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Faculty care about me as an individual.</em></td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling staff care about students as individuals.*</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence hall staff are concerned about me as an individual.</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My academic advisor is concerned about my success as an individual.</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Centeredness</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>It is an enjoyable experience to be a student on this campus.</em></td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Most students feel a sense of belonging here.</em></td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>1.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The campus staff are caring and helpful.</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>1.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are made to feel welcome on this campus.</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrators are approachable to students.</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>1.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Identified as an extreme case based on gap score.*
Qualitative Results

Description of Sample

The sample for the qualitative portion of this study consisted of nine former CVU students who were freshmen or sophomores during the 2012-2013 academic year. The demographic information of the participants reported here is based on their responses to the SSI. There were four participants from the freshman cohort and five participants from the sophomore cohort. Six of the participants were women, and eight of the participants were in the 19-to-24 age range when they completed the SSI, and one participant was 18 or under. All of the participants reported their ethnicity as Caucasian/White. At the time of completing the SSI, all participants had full-time course loads with daytime enrollment status. Participants’ reported GPA when they completed the SSI ranged from 3.0 to 3.5 and above. Five of the participants reported that their educational goal was a bachelor degree while four participants indicated that their goal was a master degree. Eight of the participants indicated that they had a part-time job on campus, and only one participant was not employed. At the time of completing the SSI, all participants were in-state residents and lived in a residence hall. Finally, five participants indicated that CVU was their first choice among college institutions, three indicated that it was their second choice, and one indicated that it was the participant’s third choice or lower.

Data Analysis Procedures

In order to address the research questions, a thematic analysis of the phone interview data was conducted according to the protocol outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed into text format and then imported into NVivo qualitative data analysis software; QSR International Pty Ltd.
Version 10, 2012 to facilitate the organization and analysis of the data. The transcripts were read and reread in order for the researcher to gain familiarity with the data and an overall understanding of the transcripts’ contents. Then initial codes were created for the data and sorted into potential themes. In the next step, the themes were reviewed to ensure that they aligned with the codes generated from the data. I then further refined the themes by generating specifics within each theme that told the overall story of the analysis. Finally, I produced a report relating the themes back to the research questions while providing select examples and excerpts from the interviews.

Results

Several themes emerged over the course of the data analysis. These themes were assessed collectively across participants and across the freshman and sophomore cohorts. The following results are organized by the research subquestions relating to each set of themes.

Research subquestion 1. The first qualitative subquestion was, “What multitheoretical retention levers can be identified by students at CVU associated with instructional effectiveness?” During the data analysis, two primary themes related to instructional effectiveness emerged: (a) practical experience and knowledge, and (b) consistency in communication and policies. Table 4.3 shows the frequency of appearance in the data and the number of participants who mentioned each of these themes.
Table 4.3

*Frequencies and Participant Counts for Research Question 1 Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency of appearance</th>
<th>Number of participants who mentioned theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practical experience and knowledge</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency in communication and policies</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Practical experience and knowledge.* Many participants expressed that they valued practical or real-world experience and knowledge as part of their instruction. The participants wanted to learn information and gain experience that would apply to their careers and, more generally, their lives in the real world. Participant 1 from the freshmen cohort commented, “I would have loved to have more in the field experience.” Participant 3 from the sophomore cohort reiterated this sentiment by saying, “Connections to the real world, connections to the importance of this, um, outside examples, things like that were all very helpful.” Another participant from the sophomore cohort added, “the most important thing is taking theory and showing how it's applicable in the real world.”

Several participants also expressed appreciation for faculty who had relevant practical experience and used this experience in their instruction. When asked about assessing the quality of instruction, Participant 1 (freshmen cohort) mentioned that, “I like to take into, um, consideration how much experience they themselves have had in the field, so if they have been out in the field, what they did while out there.” Participant 5 (freshmen cohort) said he considered “if they're using experience and prior knowledge as opposed to maybe what they prepared.” Participant 9 (sophomore cohort) added:
A lot of my professors had real world experience, so I felt like that was good. I know a lot of my friends have, like, professors who were under, like, undergrads being a TA or something, but my professors had actual experience in the field that they were teaching and were able to communicate and use cases to show how theory is applied in the real world.

**Consistency in communication and policies.** Participants also expressed a desire for consistency in their courses, both in terms of communication and course policies. Many of the concerns about communication consistency stemmed from inconsistent implementation of course portals. Several students mentioned that Angel, the predominant course portal at the university, was not utilized consistently across courses. For instance, Participant 3 (sophomore cohort) explained that this inconsistency made it difficult to keep track of course information:

> It was difficult because there's a lot of different means, you know. You're following up via Internet, via Angel or some teachers that use Angel, some that don't, and it was very difficult for the student to say, you know, to look in one place for all of the, uh, all of their coursework information and the questions that they had.

Participant 2 (sophomore cohort) also noted the inconsistency with implementing Angel and suggested, “I think they need to be more uniform, whether we're using Angel or not.”

In addition to consistency in communication methods, the participants also desired consistency in course policies. Specifically, they wanted faculty to stick to the policies outlined in the syllabus and enforce the policies equally across students. For
example, when asked about assessing the quality of instruction, Participant 6 (sophomore cohort) stated:

Whether or not they have like a strict guideline that they are following, and if they stay to it, or if they have to continuously change it around, because they change their mind about what they want to do, things like that.

Several participants discussed how faculty upheld their policies and did not show favoritism when enforcing rules. Participant 2 (sophomore cohort) mentioned, “if . . . there was something written in their syllabus that you couldn't do—turn in late work, nobody could turn in late work, that was it.” Participant 8 (freshmen cohort) corroborated this by stating:

They, uh, held everybody to the same standard, so if, like, there was a deadline, they kept the deadline. Nobody got a longer deadline, uh, in most cases. Just that sort of thing, they kept everybody on a fair ground for grades.

This participant went on to explain that faculty should be strong on maintaining deadlines in order to be fair to all students, saying that “because everybody else got it done, so that means that person has an opportunity to get it done as well, unless there was a very extreme circumstance.”

**Research subquestion 2.** The second qualitative subquestion was, “What multi-theoretical retention levers can be identified by students at CVU associated with concern for the individual?” During the data analysis, three primary themes related to concern for the individual emerged: (a) faculty accessibility; (b) individualized advising and mentorship; and (c) size of classes, school, and community. Table 4.4 shows the
frequency of appearance in the data and the number of participants who mentioned each of these themes.

Table 4.4

_Frequencies and Participant Counts for Research Question 2 Themes_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency of appearance</th>
<th>Number of participants who mentioned theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty accessibility</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualized advising and mentorship</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size of classes, school, and community</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Faculty accessibility.** A recurring point of discussion among the participants was the accessibility of the faculty. Specifically, many participants commented on faculty members’ open-door policies and their great willingness to meet with students one-on-one. For instance, Participant 5 (freshmen cohort) commented, “I wanted to know why I did well, professors were very—more than willing to meet one-on-one and go over those with you and that feedback was really helpful for me.” Participant 2 (sophomore cohort) reiterated this by saying, “one of the things that I just loved, I mean, they would schedule time to meet with you.” The consensus among participants was that the open door policies among faculty were common across the university and that it was easy to approach and talk to the faculty. Several participants also noted that one-on-one meetings with faculty were one of the main avenues for getting feedback about their course progress and performance.

Participants also appreciated the fact that faculty and other staff members were available to discuss non course-related issues. For example, Participant 2 (sophomore cohort) explained:
They [the faculty] would help you through everything, and they would . . . be there and talk about anything, if you needed to talk through anything. They would be there for you no matter what, even if it had nothing to do with your class.

Resources besides faculty also offered individual meetings with students. Participant 1 (freshmen cohort) stated, “I know I've utilized the, like, counseling agency at . . . the university. And so that, to me, was, like, great for an individual one-on-one counselor at the university.” Another participant from the freshmen cohort added, “I think greatest things that [CVU] has to offer is . . . they offer one-on-one student faculty advisors that help with the planning of the four-year plan.” The accessibility of the faculty generally gave participants the sense that faculty were concerned for them as individuals and allowed participants to develop more personal relationships with faculty. Participant 3 (sophomore cohort) underscored this sentiment by saying, “a lot of people are looking for that personal relationship with their professors which is one of the things I really did appreciate about [CVU].”

**Individualized advising and mentorship.** A related theme centered around the advising and mentorship tailored to individual students. Several participants mentioned the fact that their advisors were also faculty members with various other responsibilities. The perception among many participants was that faculty members were spread thinly over their many responsibilities and this negatively impacted their ability to effectively advise students. Participant 1 (freshmen cohort) said “I barely met with my advisor, because my advisor was a teacher and trying to advise.” This participant went on to say that “she was trying to teach, like, three different classes while advising, like, 27 of us.” A different participant from the freshmen cohort corroborated this stating, “I had some
professors that . . . would just get stressed and they were involved in a lot of other things and a lot classes . . . .”

Many participants wanted more individualized advising and feedback. More specifically, participants wished that faculty and advisors took a more active approach to providing them feedback, even when they were doing well in their courses. For example, Participant 3 (sophomore cohort) claimed that there was not much checking in on the part of advisors to see how courses were going, and further explained:

My advisor probably didn't even know my name because I was pretty self-sufficient, but you know having an advisor to check in and say, "Hey, how are you doing? Start of the semester, how do you like your new courses?" Something like that would really, uh, could help.

Several participants echoed this sentiment by expressing their desire for more active check-ins from advisors. For instance, Student 6 (sophomore cohort) said:

I think that it could benefit students to hear the good stuff as well. Even if they're not doing poorly that they should get some sort of midterm report that says you're doing great. Because that kind just boosts morale.

Participant 4 (sophomore cohort) believed it would have been beneficial to have an advisor proactively suggest clubs or internships based on his strengths. This participant went on to say, “Nobody ever pulled me aside and tried to put me on any sort of elevated track, you know. Um, some sort of mentorship program or something like that.”

Finally, participants valued individualized attention to their career goals and issues unrelated to their coursework. Several participants acknowledged that the
university was invested in helping students succeed outside the classroom. Participant 7 (freshmen cohort) noted, “They made so many resources available for each, like, individual person. Like just, I mean, having, like, the job resources office who would help any major with resumes and jobs and interviews.” The same participant also mentioned that “if you were stressed or had some type of, like, psych issue they had, um, people who could talk to you there even if it was just, like, testing anxiety.” Participant 8 (freshmen cohort) emphasized the concern for individual student’s success by saying, “They [the faculty] would ask you about your plans after college, like, they don't really have to. Like, there's this one that, um, still keeps up with me today even after graduating.”

Size of classes, school, and community. The final theme relating to the individual was the small size of the classes, school, and surrounding community. Most participants viewed the small size of the classes, school, and community as a positive aspect of their college experience. The small size allowed them to get to know other students and faculty on a more personal level. Having these more personal relationships gave participants a greater sense of individuality and made them feel like more than just a number. For example, Participant 1 (freshmen cohort) said, “I like that [CVU] was small. Like, I thought that made it enjoyable. The fact that I wasn't just a number.” Participant 6 (sophomore cohort) echoed this saying, “It's a smaller university so the classes are smaller and so you have a lot more individual attention.” Another participant from the freshmen cohort explained in more depth that the small campus facilitated more personal interaction, saying:
I loved being able to walk to class and see three, four, five people I would know. Just say hey to them or talk, stop and have a conversation. You know, you're walking through study areas and you're always going to see someone you know and . . . that made it more enjoyable to me because it make me feel less like I'm just a number here, and it made me really feel like, you know, I've been here a while.

In addition, several participants commented that having faculty that knew them by name made them feel more like an individual. Participant 1 (freshmen cohort) noted, “Professors tried to know you by name and at least know like, some part of you, outside of just, ‘You're a student in my class.’” Participant 2 (sophomore cohort) added to this by saying, “You could walk down the street, and they'd [the professors] be like, ‘Oh, hey.’ You know, it's—I felt like I was being treated like an adult, but wasn't in the masses.” Other participants noted that the university’s small class sizes (i.e., student-to-faculty ratio) fostered more personal interaction with faculty. Participant 4 (sophomore cohort) emphasized this saying, “Students-to-faculty ratio is small so you have more one-on-one interaction, personal interaction, with your professors than you would have say like a big school.”

**Research subquestion 3.** The third and final qualitative subquestion was, “What multitheoretical retention levers can be identified by students at CVU associated with student centeredness?” During the data analysis, four primary themes related to student centeredness emerged: (a) restrictive policies, (b) disconnect with the administration, (c) friends and peer groups, and (d) involvement in activities. Table 4.5 shows the frequency
of appearance in the data and the number of participants who mentioned each of these themes.

Table 4.5

*Frequencies and Participant Counts for Research Question 3 Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency of appearance</th>
<th>Number of participants who mentioned theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Restrictive policies</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disconnect with administration</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends and peer groups</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in activities</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Restrictive policies. Several participants brought up the university’s alcohol and housing policies when asked about their experiences as a student. Participants generally perceived these policies as too restrictive and that these policies negatively impacted the student experience. More specifically, participants felt that older students (i.e., 21 years and older) should have more freedom and should not be subjected to the same restrictions as underage students. For example, Participant 1 (freshmen cohort) said:

They gave us the same rules that they were giving, like, people in the dorms. ‘Cause I know dorms are very strict, you can only have so many people in your dorm at a certain hour. They can't have any alcohol at all. But at 21, we're in apartment-style living. I thought that was a little, like, mommy and daddy are looking over you at school.

Participant 3 (sophomore cohort) agreed with this sentiment by saying, “It felt very coddled, like you know, you felt like a child a lot of the times especially within the dorm rooms and things like that.” However, one participant from the sophomore cohort
believed that the policies reflected a certain level of concern for students’ safety
explaining, “I mean, that's a concern for your health, your life, things like that . . . They
had a concern for you, they always . . . you know, wanted you to make sure that you were
always safe.”

The participants believed that these restrictive policies limited their options for
leisure activities, and this made larger schools with less restrictive policies seem more
appealing. Participant 3 (sophomore cohort) noted, “Fridays and Saturday nights are the
things that really help you develop a sense of belonging, and [CVU] did their very best to
uh, prevent those types of activities.” The same participant later went on to say, “I mean
people look for a place to hang out where they feel comfortable, where they don't feel
like they're, you know, uh, under any strict center rules. There's so many rules around
everything.” Participant 4 (sophomore cohort) spoke directly to the policies’ potential
impact on retention, going as far to say that relaxing the alcohol and housing policies may
help fix retention problems “overnight.” This participant later explained in more detail:

People that I saw that left [CVU], they go to Ohio State. They go to Ohio
University. They go to Miami, um, because their first semester, second semester
in [CVU] they'd go visit their friends from high school to watch the other schools.
Shit, this is way more fun than [CVU] . . . if they just let the students have a little
bit more freedom, um, a lot more kids would stay.

**Disconnect with administration.** A related theme was the disconnect that the
participants felt with various levels of the university’s administration. Although
participants were generally satisfied with the faculty, they perceived a lack of concern
from the administration and higher-level staff. For instance, Participant 9 (sophomore
cohort) said, “My advisor was very invested. I think overall university policies and higher-ups are not at all.” The same participant went on to explain, “Higher-up [sic], uh, were concerned with the bottom line, which is understandable, but, um, it showed that they did not put students first.” Similarly, Participant 6 (sophomore cohort) noted a lack of concern from the administration when it came to financial aid:

The administration workers, they don’t really care about students. They don't necessarily try and . . . make it as easy as possible for you to get through the financial process. Uh, and they are often rude. Um, and so they don't show any concern for, you know, how the financial hardship might be affecting you as a student.

Much of the negative sentiment toward the administration stemmed from communication issues. A lack of effective communication with the administration caused many participants difficulty in areas such as graduation information and financial aid. Participant 2 (sophomore cohort) explained:

Scheduling was always a hassle, terrifying, or like, when I was graduating, they tried to say that I didn't have enough classes, but, it was like, the last semester. I was like, "Why wouldn't you have let me know this before the last semester?"

This participant also noted communication issues regarding financial aid and suggested, “. . . the financial aid process, I mean, I always got it done. But, maybe, if they could have a class, explaining it to us.” A participant from the freshmen cohort also had difficulty communicating with the administration about financial aid saying, “I had a couple times they'd give me wrong information, or I had, um, my financial advisor leave, and nobody told me. Um, just like that kind of thing over and over again.”
Additionally, there was general desire among participants for the administration to listen to them so their voices could be heard. For example, Participant 9 (sophomore cohort) recalled an instance where she felt that the university could have used student input about a new logo. She was surprised that the university did not reach out to the student body and went on to explain:

That's one example of how administration kind of ignores the talent and assets it has on campus, and that would be, like, really helpful for students' input and feeling more heard. But it's something I brought up and was ignored.

The same participant further noted, “If there was more open communication between the higher-ups, the student body, the faculty, and staff, I think that would be better.” Finally, a participant from the freshmen cohort gave an example of when effective communication between students and higher-level staff was beneficial. This participant was part of a student organization that collaborated with the college dean to address issues within their program. The participant explained, “They would come and listen to what we had to say and we would collaborate on ways to better [ourselves]... better the program and I thought that was really cool to be a part of and see.”

**Friends and peer groups.** One of the most prominent factors contributing to participants’ sense of belonging and student experience was their friends and peer groups. Many participants cited their friends and peer groups as one of the most important positive aspects of their lives at the university. For example, when asked what aspects of the university contributed to her sense of belonging, Participant 6 (sophomore cohort) said, “Mostly the peer group that I was with. Um, I have, um, a peer group that... I
Participant 7 (freshmen cohort) reiterated this sentiment by saying:

I just had, like, a really good study group of friends. I feel like . . . one of the big problems on the university campus is that a lot of people go home on the weekends and I had a big group of friends and we all never went home and just that, I mean, the university was my home.”

Another participant from the sophomore cohort added to the point about friends staying on campus saying, “One thing about [CVU], it's definitely a commuter school where people go home every weekend. But I lucked out, and I had a great group of friends who . . . never wanted to go home, unless it was necessary.”

Several participants also discussed the importance of finding a good peer group and how different peer groups (i.e., “cliques”) were very apparent on campus. Some of the peer groups that participants mentioned in their discussions included fraternities, sororities, athletic clubs/teams, academic departments, and even political affiliates (i.e., conservatives and liberals). In one case, finding the right peer group directly impacted the participant’s decision to stay at the university. Participant 8 (freshmen cohort) said, “My freshmen year, I considered transferring to another school, um, until I actually found a group that I felt I fit in. It took about a year before I . . . felt like I fit [in].” The same participant later explained, “The university can be kind of cliquey, so, like, if you don't fit into a group, sometimes it's hard to find one you do fit in.” Participant 3 (sophomore cohort) perceived segregation among peer groups and underscored the importance of finding the right group of friends:
Because of the large percentage of athletes, there was [sic] already some, you know, I guess cliques. There was some groups. Uh, and different individuals, you know, all those different groups, uh, were very segregated . . . there wasn't much fraternization . . . between the different groups and things like that, so I had a sense of belonging with my friends.

Additionally, some participants felt that the conservative climate of the university impacted their peer groups. Participant 2 (sophomore cohort), for example, discussed being on the left side of the political spectrum and the difficulty in forming a like-minded peer group, saying, “They allowed us to have a Young Democrats, but to see the nature of the campus, we could barely keep anybody.” Another participant from the sophomore cohort even suggested that the political climate on campus could potentially alienate some students and cause them to leave:

It's a pretty conservative campus for the most part. And so I think that can affect . . . somebody's experience there. Um, and . . . I know several people who . . . have either transferred or just been miserable because it's such a conservative campus and they lead not such a conservative life. Um, and so they never really felt at home there.

**Involvement in activities.** The final theme relating to student centeredness was students’ involvement in activities. The participants generally agreed that the university offered many different clubs, activities, and other ways for students to get involved. Some of the activities that participants mentioned in their discussions included Greek organizations, dorm/residence hall activities, the recreation center, jobs, and clubs in general. Additionally, specific individuals and organizations, such as the campus activity
board (CAB) and resident assistants (RAs) were central in facilitating student involvement. Getting involved in these activities positively contributed to participants’ experiences and sense of belonging at the university. For instance, Participant 1 (freshmen cohort) said, “I got really involved. That's what made me feel like . . . I was meant to be at [CVU].” Similarly, Participant 2 (sophomore cohort) explained how activities within the residence hall fostered a sense of belonging:

One thing, definitely, that gave [CVU] a sense of community, for me, was kind of, the set-up of the dorm itself . . . . So it's very open, cause it's a big circle, and . . . there was always a lounge, and a TV, with a DVD player set up so that you could sit out there, and there were study tables right out your door, so you could sit out there, and then you would be connected.

Although participants felt that the university offered many opportunities to get involved, they also wished there were more things to do within the community, particularly on weekends. Some participants commented that the small size of the community meant that there was not much to do. For example, Participant 2 (sophomore cohort) said:

In the town of [Central Valley] itself, there isn't a whole lot to do . . . but I think . . . the university itself, could try to get people to come in more to do open businesses and things like that. Just to get people to stay and wanna [sic] do things on the weekend.

Another participant from the freshmen cohort echoed this sentiment, noting that staying on campus over the weekends (as opposed to going home) may help students feel like they belong. This participant suggested that the university should take a proactive
approach to keeping students on campus by hosting events on the weekends. Participant 5 (freshmen cohort) added that the university and community should actively engage with each other to create more opportunities for students:

The [Central Valley] community doesn't want to engage the university and that might just be how they are, but . . . that's something that, like, looking back I wish . . . the community and the university would be able to create more opportunities for students to kind of engage in both.

**Summary**

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to identify multitheoretical retention levers by using feedback from students at CVU. This chapter began with a description of the quantitative analysis and results from the SSI data that were used to develop the interview questions for the qualitative portion of the study. This was followed by a demographic description of the interview participants and the results of the qualitative analysis of the interview data. The thematic analysis yielded several themes relating to the three research questions. Specifically, there were two themes related to instructional effectiveness: (a) practical experience and knowledge, and (b) consistency in communication and policies. There were three themes related to concern for the individual: (a) faculty accessibility; (b) individualized advising and mentorship; and (c) size of classes, school, and community. Finally, there were four themes related to student centeredness: (a) restrictive policies, (b) disconnect with the administration, (c) friends and peer groups, and (d) involvement in activities. Chapter V contains a discussion of these results as they relate to previous literature and the theoretical framework of the study. This chapter also contains directions and suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER V

A quantitative analysis of Central Valley University’s (CVU) freshmen (n = 165) and sophomore (n = 163) samples was used to identify extreme cases from questions related to instructional effectiveness, concern for the individual, and student centeredness. Extreme cases were identified by calculating gap scores for each SSI survey questions within those categories. Survey items with the highest gap scores were incorporated into the study for use during the qualitative phase to formulate questions for telephone interviews.

The quantitative analysis identified four specific SSI survey questions with high gap scores related to the item instructional effectiveness: “Faculty provides timely feedback about student progress in a course” (M=1.01, SD=1.44), “Faculty takes into consideration student differences as they teach a course” (M = 0.83, SD = 1.43), “The quality of instruction I receive in most of my classes is excellent” (M = 0.79, SD = 1.19), and “Faculty is fair and unbiased in their treatment of individual students” (M = 0.76, SD = 1.34). The survey items with the highest gap scores associated with concern for the individual were (a) “This institution shows concern for students as individuals” (M = 0.78, SD = 1.54), and (b) “Faculty cares about me as an individual” (M = 0.61, SD = 1.25). The items relating to student centeredness with the highest gap scores were (a) “It is an enjoyable experience to be a student on this campus” (M = 0.90, SD = 1.43) and (b) “Most students feel a sense of belonging here” (M = 0.73, SD = 1.59).

A thematic analysis of the phone interviews generated several themes that were assessed collectively across the cohort of participants and across the freshman and sophomore cohorts. For the first research question, “What multitheoretical retention
levers can be identified by students at CVU associated with instructional effectiveness?” the analysis of the responses by participants yielded two themes: (a) practical experience and knowledge and (b) consistency in communication and policies. The second research question, “What multitheoretical retention levers can be identified by students at CVU that are associated with concern for the individual?” produced three primary themes related to concern for the individual: (a) faculty accessibility, (b) individualized advising and mentorship, and (c) size of classes, school, and community. For the third research question, “What multitheoretical retention levers can be identified by students at CVU associated with student centeredness?” four primary themes related to student centeredness emerged: (a) restrictive policies, (b) disconnect with the administration, (c) friends and peer groups, and (d) involvement in activities.

Limitations

The first limitation is that only degree-seeking students who chose to participate in the Noel Levitz SSI during the 2012 academic year were included in the sample. The freshman participation rate was 23.3%. The sophomore participation rate was 23.0% (Noel-Levitz, 2013). The second limitation of this study is that just one instrument for measuring student satisfaction was used to develop the qualitative questionnaire during the phone interviews. The third limitation was that the sample consisted primarily of white females between the ages of 19-24.

Research Subquestion 1

The research findings are organized according to each research subquestion. The first subquestion was “What multitheoretical retention levers can be identified by students at CVU associated with instructional effectiveness?” The analysis found that the
theme “consistency in communication and policies” could be associated with a recommended institutional lever identified in the literature (Berger, 2001; Braxton & Mundy, 2001). Six out of nine participants mentioned this theme in the study. “Consistency in communication and policies” appeared in the study 20 times. Berger (2001) recommended providing students with information and clear lines of communication about goals, values, policies, and procedures.

Students indicated two specific areas of concern. The first was an expressed desire for consistency in their courses, both in terms of communication and course policies. Students interviewed expressed a lack of consistency due to inconsistent implementation of course management systems. Participant 3 (sophomore cohort) indicated that this inconsistency made it difficult to keep track of course information. Participant 2 (sophomore cohort) made the following suggestion, “I think they need to be more uniform whether we’re using Angel or not.” Participant 6 (sophomore cohort) stated he had professors who lacked consistency in their classes. They would provide a course syllabus that clearly outlined the expectations for the class, only to change their minds about what they wanted from the students.

Implications. The findings indicated that the students want to see more consistency and predictability as it relates to communication between faculty and students. Policies and procedures also need to be consistent and administered equally. The findings also implied the possibility of increased anxiety among students whose instructors were inconsistent in their practices.

Implementing institutional actions that would address and potentially remediate these concerns would require action on the part of CVU administration that take into
consideration the current organizational behavior of the institution (Berger, 2001). Research shows that retention is more likely when students think their institution is doing a good job at communicating expectations related to academic policies and course requirements (Berger, 2001). Since the start of this study, CVU has implemented actions to move from two-course management systems to just one. In order to address consistency in course policies, professional development should be implemented campus-wide so that all faculty stakeholders understand the importance consistency of course policies plays in relation to the retention of students.

**Research Subquestion 2**

“What multitheoretical retention levers can be identified by students at CVU associated with concern for the individual?” The qualitative analysis found that the theme “individualized advising and mentorship” could be associated with the recommended institutional levers identified in the literature (Braxton & Mundy, 2001; Nora, 2001). Every participant in the study mentioned this theme. The frequency that “individualized advising and mentorship” appeared was 29. Nora (2001) believed that academic advisors should attend to the holistic development of the student by promoting growth and learning in the classroom and the university community. Nora (2001) addressed the importance of significant others (advisors) as levers in the persistence process when she conceptualized the importance of support from family and community in reducing student attrition.

Faculty members serve as advisors at CVU. Participant 1 (freshman cohort) stated that he barely met with his advisor because of the demands on the faculty member to teach and advise. The student shared that her instructor was teaching three classes while
also advising 27 students. Another participant from the freshman cohort stated that the dual roles caused stress in some of their professors. Still other participants in the study wanted to see their advisor take on a more proactive role that individualized the student-advisor experience. Participant 4 (sophomore cohort) stated that she was never pulled aside and counseled by anyone on the different tracks available to her.

**Implications.** The findings for subquestion 2 indicated that the high faculty-to-student ratio for advising is reducing the quality of advising for students on campus. Students want to see faculty advisors increase their engagement with students.

In order for the advisor-student dynamic to be an effective institutional lever to retain students at CVU, faculty advisors must have workloads that optimize their effectiveness to attend to the holistic development of CVU students and promote growth and learning inside and outside the classroom. One way to remediate this problem is to rethink responsibilities of the adjunct faculty. The administration at CVU should undertake a study that investigates the utility of adjunct faculty advising undergraduate students. If optimizing the faculty advising of undergraduate students leads to increased retention rates for CVU, it would be in CVU’s best interest to consider it.

**Research Subquestion 3**

“What multitheoretical retention levers can be identified by students at CVU associated with student centeredness?” The qualitative analysis found that the theme “disconnect with the administration” could be associated with recommended institutional levers identified in the literature (Berger, 2001; Braxton & Mundy, 2001). Six out of nine participants in the study mentioned the theme. The frequency that “student centeredness” appeared in the study was 32. This disconnect with administration was primarily centered
on lack of effective communication between the administration and the students at CVU. Participant 9 (sophomore cohort) said, his advisor was invested but did not feel that the administration was as invested as the faculty on campus. For him, this demonstrated a lack of concern for the students at CVU.

Other students described breakdowns in communication within specific departments like the Registrar’s Office and Financial Aid. Participant 2 (sophomore cohort) commented that the scheduling was a hassle and somewhat frightening. He even experienced having somebody from the Registrar’s Office tell him that he lacked enough credits for graduation. This occurred during his last semester at CVU.

Participant 2 commented on issues with financial aid and said he was able to get through the financial aid process, but felt that maybe the university could have offered some classes to make the process easier to navigate. A participant from the freshmen cohort also had difficulty communicating with the administration about financial aid, saying that there was a time when his financial advisor left the college and no one informed him. There were also times when incorrect information was shared.

**Implications.** CVU needs to provide students with information and clear lines of communication about campus goals, values, policies, and procedures (Berger, 2001). The administration at CVU has not effectively communicated to students that they care about the individual. A core theme of CVU’s rhetoric related to the institution-student relationship is that CVU sees students on campus as individuals. The study results indicated that students at CVU feel the faculty are doing a better job of focusing on them and seeing them as individuals. CVU should strategically use its bureaucratic structures, meaningful symbolism, and collegially based personal contact to strengthen the lines of
communication with students (Berger, 2001). This would require an organizational change in behavior on the part of CVU administration. A change in organizational behavior also holds the most promise for increasing student retention on campus long term.

The current practice of relying on primarily quantitative surveys like the Noel Levitz Student Satisfaction Survey and other similar tools creates gaps for administrators looking for specific institutional actions that can be implemented to reduce student departure. The purpose of this study was to implement a mixed-methods approach that allows decision makers the ability to identify specific research-based retention actions that could reduce student departure on campus.

The results of this study also highlight the importance of student voice. These findings suggest that the administration at CVU look closely at how it communicates with all stakeholders within the university community, both student and nonstudent. The interconnectedness of the university community require it.

**Central Research Question**

The central research question used for the investigation was “What multitheoretical retention levers can be identified to reduce student attrition at CVU?” The focus of the central research question was refined after a quantitative analysis of the sample. Three subquestions were generated to help clarify and answer the central question. Findings from the three subquestions identified specific multitheoretical retention levers that could be implemented to reduce student attrition at CVU. The multitheoretical levers that answer the central question are discussed below.
Communicating expectations related to academic policies and course requirements was a multitheoretical retention lever recommendation of Berger (2001). Berger’s focus on organizational behavior (2001) is evident in the specific administrative actions recommended. To address the consistency in course policies it was recommended that the administration implement campus wide professional development targeting faculty stakeholders. The objective of the professional development is to increase awareness of the importance consistency of course policies plays in reducing student attrition.

The retention lever identified in subquestion two was taken from Nora’s (2001) assertion that faculty, staff, academic advisors, and administrators should attend to the holistic development of the student by promoting growth and learning in the classroom and university community. She believed that it was beneficial for the university to develop support systems for students that build community (2001). Faculty advisors were identified as key personnel in the transitional phase in which students assimilate into the higher education community. Institutional actions that optimize the faculty advisor-student dynamic would need to be implemented to promote the holistic development of the student’s growth and learning in the classroom and university community suggested by Nora (2001).

Subquestion three also produced a multitheoretical retention lever developed as a result of Berger’s research (2001). Providing students with clear lines of communication about campus goals, values, policies, and procedures (Berger, 2001). Based on Berger’s research (2001) this multitheoretical retention lever shows promise of addressing the perceived disconnect between administration and students. Institutional actions would
require that CVU strategically use its bureaucratic structures, meaningful symbolism, and its relationships with faculty to strengthen the lines of communication with CVU students. This would require that the organization (CVU) modify its behavior to increase student retention on campus.

**Recommendations**

There are several recommendations for practice that, if taken under consideration by CVU, have the potential to influence student retention at CVU. The first recommendation would be to conduct sustained research related to retention and to analyze data prior to students graduating. To accomplish this, the CVU needs a staff researcher at the central administration level whose primary responsibility is to engage in ongoing action research focused on continuous improvement of the institution’s retention of students. The second recommendation is that CVU formalize attention to the retention of students. Formalizing attention to retention would convey to the university community that retention is a critical component for the stability and health of the institution. It also would demonstrate that the university leadership is taking a proactive approach in addressing the problem of student departure. The third recommendation calls for campus-wide professional development for faculty and staff. This professional development needs to focus on the importance of retaining students along with ongoing training of best practices that faculty and staff can implement to positively impact retention.

**Implications for Future Research**

This study’s implications for future research include the need to replicate this mixed-methods design at a similar institution as an action research project. The action research model, especially when used in participatory action research, is recursive in
nature and well-suited for organizations seeking continuous improvement of a targeted area that has been identified as suboptimal (Creswell, 2008). An integral part of this research study is the reflective analysis of student voice. This study provides a framework for institutions that are trying to incorporate qualitative data to solve or improve retention problems at their school.

**Summary**

Chapter V contained a summary of this mixed-methods study’s results and what they mean, as well as its practical implications for practice, research, and education and training within higher education. This chapter also included conclusions and recommendations for future studies. The retention of students within higher education has become a top priority of administrators across the nation. High rates of attrition affect the stability of these institutions and call into question whether these institutions are able to recruit and retain students from a declining college-age population (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). Braxton (2001, 2000) referred to this complex problem of student departure as an ill-structured problem that he believed calls for solutions designed using a multitheoretical approach (Braxton, 2001). This study implemented a mixed-methods design to identify institutional retention levers used by Berger (2001), Kuh (2001), Braxton and McClendon (2001), Bean and Eaton (2001), and Nora (2001).
REFERENCES


Ohio Board of Regents. (2012). *First to second year retention at Ohio’s public and private colleges and universities: Fall 2004 to fall 2009 cohorts of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking undergraduates.* Retrieved from


APPENDIX A

STUDENT SATISFACTION INVENTORY SCALE
Student Satisfaction Inventory Scales

The academic advising effectiveness scale consisted of five survey items

- questions six, 14, 19, 33, and 55

The campus climate scale consisted of 17 survey items

- questions one, two, three, seven, 10, 29, 37, 41, 45, 51, 57, 59, 60, 62, 66, 67, and 71

The campus life scale consisted of 15 survey items

- questions nine, 23, 24, 30, 31, 38, 40, 42, 46, 52, 56, 63, 64, 67, and 73

The campus support services scale consisted of seven survey items

- questions 13, 18, 26, 32, 44, 49, and 54

The instructional effectiveness scale consisted of 14 survey items

- questions three, eight, 16, 25, 39, 41, 47, 53, 58, 61, 65, 68, 69, and 70

The recruitment and financial aid scale consisted of six survey items

- questions four, five, 12, 17, 43, and 48

The registration effectiveness scale contained five survey items

- questions 11, 20, 27, 34, and 50

The safety and security scale contained four survey items

- questions seven, 21, 28, and 36

The student centeredness scale contained six survey items

- questions one, two, 10, 29, 45, and 59

The scale assessing concern for the individual contained six survey items

- questions three, 14, 22, 25, 30, and 59
The service excellence scale contained eight survey items

- questions two, 13, 15, 22, 27, 57, 60, and 7

The responsiveness to diverse populations domain scale contained six survey items

- questions 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, and 89.
APPENDIX B

HSRB APPROVAL
TO: Gary McPherson and Harold Wilson  
FROM: Carol Reece, HSRB Chair  
DATE: October 28, 2014  
SUBJECT: Human Subjects Review Board Approval  
PROJECT TITLE: Correlation of Institutional Action and Tinto’s First Principle of Effective Retention  
HSRB APPROVAL CODE: 10-28-14-#042 E 01-09-14-#067 O  

The Human Subjects Review Board has approved your request for an extension on your research project. You may proceed with the project.

The primary function of the HSRB is to ensure protection of human research subjects. As a result of this mandate, we ask that you pay close attention to the fundamental ethical principles of autonomy, justice, and beneficence when establishing your research proposal. These ethical principles pertain specifically to the issues of informed consent, fair selection of subjects, and risk/benefit considerations.

If you have any questions, please contact me.

Sincerely,

Carol Reece, DNP, APRN-CPNP  
Phone: 415-321-6577  
E-mail: creece1@ashland.edu
Use of SSI Data for Doctoral Student Gary McPherson

Frank Pettigrew <fpettlgr@ashtao.eo.edu>  
To: Carol Reece <creece1@ashtand.edu>, Harold Wilson <h wilson@ashland.edu>

Dear Carol,

To get this ball rolling the right way, I want to inform you officially of my approval for our doctoral student, Mr. Gary McPherson to have access to data from of the 2012 Student Satisfaction Inventory collected by Kathy Stone, Director of the Center for Academic Support. My approval is dependent on all other policies and procedures conducted in the project are approved by the HSRB. I understand that access to this data is a critical component of his doctoral dissertation. Please feel free to contact me if I can be of further assistance.

Frank E. Pettigrew, Ph.D.,  
Provost
Hi Gary,

Thank you for your email. You do have the permission of Noel-Levitz to use the SSI data, however ultimately it is up to Ashland University if they want to release the 2009 survey results.

Our contact at that time was Sue Heiman and since then was Kathy Stone, who worked with the SSI in 2012.

I have copied both of them on this email and will not release any data to you until further approval from either Sue (for the 2009 data set) or Kathy (2012 data set).

Have a great afternoon.

Shannon Cook
Director of Retention Solutions
Noel-Levitz
APPENDIX C

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE
Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Investigating Student Perceptions to Identify Institutional Actions That Improve Student Retention

Invitation to participate in a research study
Primary researcher (PR) Gary McPherson, a doctoral student at Ashland University in the College of Education, invites you to be part of a research project that he will conduct in order to complete requirements for an advanced degree. He is supervised by Harold E. Wilson, Ph.D. The project looks at multi-theoretical retention levers. The purpose of the study is to identify multi-theoretical retention levers using data from phone interviews of former Ashland University students that took the Noel Levitz Student Satisfaction Survey in the spring of 2012. We are asking you to participate because you completed the Student Satisfaction Inventory in the spring of 2012 while attending Ashland University.

Description of your involvement
If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be asked to participate in one phone interview session. You will be asked to discuss your experiences while being a student at Ashland University. The discussion topics are student centeredness, concern for the individual, and instructional effectiveness. The primary researcher will guide the discussion. The interview will last about 20-30 minutes and will be audio recorded. You must agree to be recorded to participate in the interview.

Benefits
While you may not receive a direct benefit from participating in this research, some people find sharing their stories to be a valuable experience. We hope that this study will offer a model for practitioners wishing to investigate their institution’s administrative options aimed at increasing retention rates.

Risks and discomforts
Answering questions or talking with others about college experiences can be difficult. You may choose not to answer any discussion question and you can stop your participation in the phone interview at any time.
Compensation
Participants will not be compensated for their participation in the study.

Confidentiality
We plan to publish the results of this study, but will not include any information that would identify you. To keep your information safe, the audio tape of the interview will be placed in a locked file cabinet until a written word-for-word copy of the discussion has been created. The researchers will enter study data on a computer that is password-protected and uses special coding to protect the information. To protect confidentiality, your real name will not be used in the written copy of the discussion. The researchers intend to keep this study data, and the audio for future research about multi theoretical retention levers.

There are some reasons why people other than the researchers may need to see information you provided as part of the study. This includes organizations responsible for making sure the research is done safely and properly, including Ashland University.

Voluntary nature of the study
Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You may choose not to answer a interview question for any reason.

Contact information
If you have questions about this research, including questions about the scheduling of the interview, you can contact Gary McPherson at (330) 323-6341, gmcphers@ashland.edu. You can also contact his faculty advisor, Harold E. Wilson, Ph.D., Ashland University, College of Education, (419) 289-5339, hwilson@ashland.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Carol Reece, Human Subjects Review Board Chair at (419) 521-6877, creece1@ashland.edu.

Consent
By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in the study. You will be given a copy of this document for your records and one copy will be kept with the study records. Be sure that questions you have about the study have been answered and that you understand what you are being asked to do. You may contact the researcher if you think of a question later.

I agree to participate in the study. As part of my consent, I agree to be audio recorded.

_____________________________________  ____________________
Signature      Date
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Interview Questions

**Issue identified by SSI:** The quality of instruction I receive in most of my classes is excellent.

**Interview questions to address issue:**

How do you feel about the quality of instruction that you receive in your classes?

What are some things you take into consideration when assessing the quality of instruction that you receive?

What do you think could be done to improve the quality of instruction in your classes?

**Issue identified by SSI:** Faculty provide timely feedback about student progress in a course.

**Interview questions to address issue:**

How do faculty provide feedback about student progress (i.e., what forms of communication)?

How do you feel about the timeliness of the feedback that faculty provide?

What do you think could be done to improve the timeliness of feedback from faculty?

**Issue identified by SSI:** Faculty take into consideration student differences as they teach a course.

**Interview questions to address issue:**

Do you think faculty consider student differences as they teach?

How are faculty addressing student differences as they teach?
What do you think faculty could do to better address student differences as they teach?

**Issue identified by SSI:** Faculty are fair and unbiased in their treatment of individual students.

**Interview questions to address issue:**
Do you think faculty are fair and unbiased in their treatment of students?
What do faculty do to ensure that their treatment of individual students is fair and unbiased?
What do you think faculty could do to better ensure fairness in their treatment of students?

**Issue identified by SSI:** This institution shows concern for students as individuals.

**Interview questions to address issue:**
Do you think the university shows concern for you as an individual?
How does the university demonstrate concern for individual students?
What do you think the university could do to better demonstrate concern for individual students?

**Issue identified by SSI:** Most students feel a sense of belonging here.

**Interview questions to address issue:**
Do you feel a sense of belonging at this university?
What are some things about the university that make you feel like you belong?
What do you think the university could do to increase students’ sense of belonging?

**Issue identified by SSI:** It is an enjoyable experience to be a student on this campus.
Interview questions to address issue:

Is being a student on campus an enjoyable experience for you?

What are some things that make this experience enjoyable?

What do you think the university could do to make this experience more enjoyable?