THE EXPERIENCES OF HIGH-ACHIEVING, UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS WHO DEPARTED FROM BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY IN THE FIRST YEAR: A CASE STUDY

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A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2014

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The purpose of this case study was to understand the organizational, psychological, sociological, and financial experiences of high-achieving students who departed within their first year of study from Bowling Green State University. Although the literature suggests high-achieving students have special educational needs that must be recognized, supported, and nurtured in primary and secondary education, little is known about the experiences of high-achieving students in college. The goal of this qualitative research study was to gain a deeper understanding and explanation of student behavior within this student-institution context.

Participants in this study were selected from the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 cohorts, based upon the following criterion: the student intended to graduate from BGSU, departed with the dean’s list designation, was enrolled in at least 12 credits, lived on campus at least one semester, and was 18 years or older. Ten participants were interviewed at their new college or university or via Skype, and represented a variety of experiences personally and academically.

Four broad themes emerged from the data: (1) High-achieving students did not establish a sense of belonging psychosocially in the residence halls, which negatively affected social integration; (2) participants, almost unanimously, felt “underchallenged” or “bored” by the curriculum in the general education courses; (3) participants needed more guidance to navigate course of study and career ambiguity; (4) participants demonstrated a deeper desire for intellectually stimulating conversations and meaningful engagement in the classroom and in campus life experiences.
A number of implications for student and academic affairs are presented as a result of the findings. First, campus administrators must work with student and academic affairs to create a campus culture that nurtures a sense of belonging for high-achieving students. Second, an emphasis on faculty development to promote more active learning environments, more challenging curriculum, and the continual emphasis on learning communities and student-faculty relationships is recommended. Third, an emphasis on the first-year experience that creates clearer pathways for undecided students in terms of course of study and career is also recommended.
This dissertation is dedicated to

my mom and dad

who generously supported and nurtured my educational goals
and vocational aspirations from a young age
and who inspire me to give my best in all areas of my life . . .
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Almost 20 years ago, I sat with my grandma Rygg who edited my college entrance essay to Pacific Lutheran University. The title of that essay was “No Man is An Island,” as I was asked to reflect upon and share with the admissions committee how individuals have shaped my life. As I finish my terminal degree, it seemed appropriate to acknowledge both John Donne’s quote and the many individuals who have helped me achieve this academic milestone. I have been blessed to have so many wonderful family, friends, and mentors in my life, and, as a result of their investment and generous support, I have been able to pursue my academic and vocational dreams.

To my most influential English teacher, my grandma Rygg. You taught me how an education can liberate the mind and enrich the soul. You inspired me to pursue graduate school, and helped me develop my ideas and put them into words. The skills and knowledge I learned in my graduate programs were built upon the foundation you helped create. I sensed your steady presence through all stages of my program, and you will be in my heart as I cross the stage at graduation.

To my parents who selflessly created opportunities for me throughout my formative years that would set me up to be successful. I love you. Dad, your positivity and determination have always been a shining example to me, and the way you have persevered this past year has been an inspiration to me in completing this dissertation. Mom, your strong work ethic and resilience in the face of obstacles have also been an encouragement to me. Your laughter and grace have picked me up and carried me through these tough years. Together, your unconditional love and enduring support have made this process possible for me.

To my sisters, Allison and Erin, who are two of my closest friends. You have persisted with me and have been my greatest cheerleaders. I love you and couldn’t be more grateful for
your friendship, sense of humor, and dependability through life’s challenges. To Brett, Kenny, Kaitlyn, Blake, and Brayden, I love you.

To my grandma and grandpa Porter who were fierce advocates for my education, and inspired me to pursue my dreams. I drew upon your strength and the work ethic you instilled in our family as I persisted in this Ph.D. program. To grandpa Rygg, aunt Jayne, aunt Carol, uncle Denny, and aunt Jackie, your support throughout this process has been felt and appreciated greatly.

To my uncle Bobby who has been a steady support and confidant through this process. You reminded me of the big picture, and helped me keep moving forward with my eyes focused on the finish line. To Max Bahr, Nick Hanson, and Sharon Hanson, your pep talks and generous support of my family allowed me to focus on finishing this doctoral program. In the words of my dad, each of you have “redefined the definition of friendship.”

To John Amato, our “Sunday Runday” rituals and your friendship throughout my time in Ohio made all the difference. Thanks for teaching me how to brew coffee, appreciate vegetarian cuisine, and for pushing me to run two marathons with you.

To Ryan Bronkema, your positivity and comradeship were a constant source of encouragement to me through our Ph.D. journey. Thank you for being my cohort “bestie” and peer reviewer, and for all of those coffee talks. A special thank you to the rest of my cohort and other HESA students for enriching my life and our classroom experience.

To one of my favorite Falcons, Jill Carr, who took me under her wing and created an meaningful experience administratively and personally. The compassion and understanding you showed me, and the time you invested during my first two years of coursework, had a profound impact on my professional development and personal resiliency. Thank you for your instruction, grace, and care with the unwritten curriculum of life.
I would like to recognize the following supervisors and mentors in my higher education career who have had a significant part in my academic and professional growth and development: Tom Scheuermann, Cindy Empey, Scott Etherton, Dr. Larry Roper, Shelley Griffiths, Dave Craig, Melissa Yamamoto, Dr. Wayne Strickland, Dr. Jackie Balzer, Melissa Trifiletti, Dr. Ed Whipple, and Bill Belden. Each of you, in your own way, have shaped the way I think about student development, managing and leading staff, and creating effective organizations.

To Paul Johnson, my high school Spanish teacher and cross country coach. It took me many years to realize that Spanish and cross country were just avenues for you to teach students important life skills such as developing goals, creating a strong work ethic, and persisting through obstacles towards self-actualization. Your high standards in and outside the classroom inspired me and set me on a trajectory academically and personally that has profoundly changed my life.

Finally, I would like to thank the faculty of the higher education and student affairs program at BGSU. Dr. Maureen Wilson, thank you for your steady support and sense of humor, and, most of all, your belief in me. Your expectations and guidance inspired me to be my best, and I will always be appreciative of your mentoring through the Ph.D. program. Thank you, Dr. Mike Coomes, for helping me feel at home in Bowling Green, and for deepening my understanding of higher education administration. Thank you, Drs. Lunceford and Early, for your support in the classroom and on my prelim and dissertation committee. Your wisdom, positivity, and care enriched my experience academically and personally.
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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Understanding factors that influence college student retention has been of great interest to practitioners and researchers for decades (Braxton, 2000; Braxton et al., 2014; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Tinto, 1975, 1986, 1993), and remains a chief concern for higher education today (Braxton et al., 2004; Hsieh, Sullivan, & Guerra, 2007). According to the American College Testing Program (2012), only 55% of students at two-year, public institutions persist from the first year of college to the second year, and only 25% graduate in three years. For students at four-year public institutions, 76% matriculate from the first year to the second year, and only 48% graduate within five years (American College Testing Program, 2013). These attrition rates have held constant from 1987 to present (American College Testing Program, 2013), and are of concern to practitioners and researchers. Such low completion rates affect the stability of college and university enrollments, institutional budgets, and public perception of quality (Braxton et al., 2004). While complex and very challenging, Kezar (2004), in her justification for the study of college student retention, argued “few issues could be judged so important to the future of higher education and society” (p. xi).

Statement of Problem

The cost of a college education has been shifting from a public good to a private good as state and federal support for higher education dwindles and the burden of paying for college slowly shifts to students and their families (Duncan, 2011; Oliff, Palacios, Johnson, & Leachman, 2013). Between 1995 and 2007, the net price of college for full-time undergraduate students rose 48% at for-profit schools, 26% at public two-year institutions, and 20% at public four-year institutions (adjusted for inflation) (Duncan, 2011). Likewise, Oliff, Palacios, Johnson, and Leachman (2013) reported average annual tuition at four-year public colleges and
universities has increased by 27% since 2007-2008 (when adjusted for inflation); in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, and Washington, tuition at public colleges and universities has increased by more than 50%, and more than 70% in Arizona and California. It is not surprising, then, the cost of education has outpaced student and family income.

Between 1991 and 2011, the median household income increased by approximately three percent, after adjusting for inflation, while the cost of attending a four-year public college or university increased 159% (58% when adjusted for grants and tax benefits) (Oliff et al., 2013). Further, graduating seniors in 1996 entered the job market with an average of $12,500 of debt while today the average graduating senior has an average debt load of more than $25,000 (Duncan, 2011).

According to Oliff et al. (2013), states are spending, on average, 28% less per student in 2013 than they did in 2008. Because states’ priority for higher education has diminished “sharply” over the past two decades (Mortenson, 2001, p. 52), Duncan (2011) called for institutions to control costs and find efficiencies to deal with the challenges of the iron triangle. The iron triangle provides an important economic and political framework from which policy makers can better understand the mutually dependent relationship or “levers” in attracting, retaining, and graduating students. This model highlights the “mutually conflicting choices” between access, affordability, and accountability (Duncan, 2011, p. 2). More specifically, increasing quality, in most cases, will increase costs. Expanding access will also increase costs due to tuition discounts as well as increased support services needed. Likewise, reducing costs may “impair both quality and access” (Duncan, 2011, p. 2). As campuses look for ways to control costs and create efficiencies in the current economic climate, policy makers and
practitioners must work together to minimize attrition by taking a close look at the student experience and factors that influence student departure.

Because reduced state spending has had the most significant impact on tuition growth at public institutions (Duncan, 2011), maintaining a healthy student enrollment is the “key” to effective enrollment management (Braxton et al., 2004, p. xi). The cost of recruiting one student is more than the cost of retaining one student (Bean, 1990; Hagedorn, 2012). For undergraduate students who depart after their first year, the loss of tuition represents three or four years not just one year (Bean, 1990). Thus, retaining students is central to a thriving enrollment and is especially important as funding for higher education diminishes. To that end, Bean (1990) asserted an enrollment management plan absent of a strong retention plan is ineffective.

**High-achieving Students**

In the management of college enrollments, higher education practitioners must take into account special populations of students attending their campuses in an effort to improve student retention. High-achieving students, historically, have not been a population of students administrators have concerned themselves with due to the higher-than-average retention rates of this population. The literature suggests, however, this special population has specific educational needs that must be identified and accommodated, in order for students to achieve personal excellence (Le Sueur, 2002). The retention of high-achieving students at Bowling Green State University, while above the average BGSU student retention rate, has caused concern for the administration. As such, this student population was explored in this study.

**Definition of Terms**

The terms retention, student completion, graduation rates, persistence, attrition, and student departure need to be briefly defined as they are used throughout the paper and have
slightly nuanced meanings. A retention rate is the percentage of students who reenroll the next academic year (Arnold, 1999; Hagedorn, 2012) and is studied as an organizational phenomenon (Reason, 2009). First-year retention is reported as the percentage of new students who returned for their second year of college. Student completion and graduation rates are most commonly studied and reported by institutions as an institutional benchmark, reflecting the percentage of students who completed college, evidenced by graduation from the institution in which they enrolled. Persistence is an individual phenomenon (Reason, 2009) that describes a student’s behavior or psychological posture to continue pursuing a specific goal to achievement (Arnold, 1999). Similarly, retention is a dichotomous descriptor, defining the institution’s official relationship with a student as it relates to the student’s enrollment status from semester to semester. As Reason (2009) noted, a student may persist without being retained to degree completion as students determine their individual goals. Conversely, attrition, commonly reported as a percentage rate, refers to the number of students who left an institution during a given time. And finally, student departure is synonymous to attrition, and an antonym to student retention. It is a term researchers use to study the “puzzling” phenomenon of students’ (often complex) decision to leave institutions of higher education (Braxton, 2000).

**Definitions of Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM)**

SEM is a comprehensive, institution-wide approach that merges functions and blurs functional responsibilities as well as divisional silos to optimize recruitment (input), retention (process), and graduation rates (output) of students (Dolence, 1997; Whiteside, 2001). Dolence (1997) stated, “SEM is not a process conducted by a unit or division, but a holistic process that involves virtually the entire institution” (p. 22). Hossler and Hoezze (2001) posited SEM is the process of aligning institutional resources to achieve institutional goals, as a response to
environmental, economic, and political changes. Bontrager (2004) added that strategic enrollment management has emerged as a result of changing environmental influences and is a “performance-based, outcomes-oriented enterprise” (p. 13). Because enrollment is the key determinant of a balanced budget between revenues and expenditures, strategic enrollment management has become “one of the most significant administrative movements in American higher education” (Henderson, 2001, p. 7). To that end, Dolence (1997) argued, “institutions cannot increase productivity, service, quality, and competitiveness without a comprehensive strategy to manage their enrollments” (p. 8). Due to the complexities and resulting affects of managing enrollments, SEM is an essential part of retaining students in college.

**Purpose of Study**

Several seminal works have informed both research and practice, and demonstrate significant understanding of the complex problem of college student departure (Braxton, 2000; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Tinto, 1975, 1986, 1993, 2012). Student attrition is a “nettlesome problem” (Braxton et al., 2014, p. 1) that many colleges and universities face. Researchers (Reason, 2003; Tinto, 1993) have called upon practitioners to study particular populations of students within institution-specific contexts to better understand the complex nature of the student departure puzzle (Braxton, 2000). To that end, the retention rates of high-achieving students at Bowling Green State University declined from 90.7% in fall 2012 to 88.5% in fall 2013 while the retention of all students increased from 69.5% in fall 2012 to 70.1% in fall 2013 (C. McRoberts, personal communication, October 3, 2013). As such, this qualitative study will explore the experiences of high-achieving students at Bowling Green State University who departed prior to their second year. The findings of this study can be used to inform institutional leaders’ understanding of high-achieving students and why some students chose to depart from
the institution. More specifically, results will hopefully shed light on academic and social environments, and students’ organizational, psychological, sociological, and financial experiences (Braxton et al., 2004) at Bowling Green State University. While this study cannot be generalized to all high-achieving college students, the results may be transferred to similar populations in like contexts.

That said, the findings of this study will add to the body of retention literature and specifically to the departure of high-achieving students. There is little research conducted on high-achieving students in higher education that does not focus on a special population of students. Most of the high-achieving literature focuses on the retention of African American males (Bonner et al., 2009; Fries-Britt, 1997; Moore et al., 2006) or focuses on high achievement in secondary institutions (Bonner et al., 2007; Le Sueur, 2002; Matthews, 2006). Further, in most academic communities, the retention of high-achieving students is overlooked or, perhaps, even assumed as practitioners are focused on other populations of students. Special attention and intentional strategies are employed to support and retain academically at-risk students, students who need remedial or developmental education, and racially or ethnically underrepresented students. In this study, I will focus on attrition of high-achieving students, in hopes to provide insights and recommendations for retaining this population of college students.

**Research Questions**

This qualitative research study has one overarching research question and three supporting research questions. Those questions are:

What are the experiences of undergraduate, dean’s list students who departed from Bowling Green State University (BGSU) after one semester or one year?

a. What was the students’ level of social and academic integration?
b. What organizational, psychological, sociological, or financial experiences positively or negatively impacted students’ decision to persist or depart?

c. Why did the students leave Bowling Green State University before graduation?

**Significance of Study**

Because “retention programs, just like the institutions they serve, are very diverse” (Plascak-Craig, Stage, Maclean, & Bean, 1990, p. 202), research on student departure should focus at the institutional level or by institutional type (Tinto, 1993). Reason (2003) reinforced this notion that the complexities involved and depth required to study college student retention is due to the diversity of students today, the types of programs, and variety of schools. Bean and Eaton (2000) encouraged qualitative researchers to study how the psychological processes unfold at various types of institutions with a broad spectrum of students. As a result, research on individual campuses, inviting the voices of specific student populations, is recommended to better understand why some students depart early.

The stakes have never been so high for colleges and universities to retain students to degree completion. As part of the increased accountability for higher education, many states are adopting new funding models to make retention and completion programmatic and organizational priorities. In September 2012, Ohio Governor John Kasich organized a meeting with public college and university leaders to “recast” the funding formula for the state’s public colleges and universities to “reward student success and completion” (Ohio Higher Education Funding Commission, 2012, p. 2). With an emphasis on “outcomes, rather than outputs,” Ohio is a frontrunner in a national movement to increase college attainment (p. 2). Among the many features of the new state funding model are to increase the funding formula from 20% to 50%
awarded based on degree attainment for four-year institutions in year one, and to move all community college funding into completion-based awards for year two (p. 10).

Such state funding reforms are an effort to incentivize increased graduation rates of students at college and universities, and to produce more workforce-ready graduates. Recognizing that a link exists between educational attainment and excelling in a knowledge-based economy, Ohio has tied state appropriations to completion and graduate rates, which signals a dramatic shift in retaining students to graduation. As a result, public colleges and universities in Ohio must look critically at issues that affect, and be willing to make the necessary changes to improve, college student retention.

Summary

Policy makers, politicians, and the general public understand that a college-educated workforce is essential to remaining competitive in a global economy (Tinto, 2012). A college education is a requirement for most jobs in a knowledge-based economy, and that trend does not appear to be reversing. While the United States was once the world leader in college participation and completion rates, the U.S. has fallen behind many other countries (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2006). Given this present-day reality, colleges and universities must improve student retention and completion rates.
CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review has four parts. First, college student retention is explored within the context of strategic enrollment management (SEM). Second, the literature on academic integration is presented, and specifically the role faculty, peers, and the classroom have in retention. Third, literature on high-achieving students is presented. Finally, theoretical perspectives and conceptual frameworks that provide organizational maps of the student “departure puzzle” are discussed (Braxton, 2000, p. 1).

Student Retention in Strategic Enrollment Management

After unprecedented growth in the 1950s and 1960s, college enrollments began to decline in the 1970s (Hossler & Bean, 1990, p. xiii). Paired with diminishing federal and state funding for higher education and a recession in the 1980s, higher education practitioners and researchers began to be more concerned about the recruitment and retention of students (Hossler & Bean, 1990, p. xiv); as a result of the environmental changes, the field of enrollment management began.

Today, practitioners and campus leaders should be concerned with retention rates of students on their campus as policy makers have called for retention rates to be an “indicator of academic quality and student success” (Arnold, 1999, p. 1) as well as an indication of the student experience (Braxton et al., 1997). As a result, policy makers and higher education practitioners have been concerned with student attrition not only as a benchmark of academic success and public relations worries (Ziskin, Hossler, & Kim, 2009-2010), but also for the economic impact of overall enrollment.

Student persistence and graduation rates vary greatly depending on the type of institution. Some private colleges boast a 90% graduation rate for their new students while some public
institutions graduate fewer than 30% of their new students (Tinto, 2012). Variations in retention rates are a result, in part, of pre-college attributes of matriculating students. For instance, those colleges and universities that are more selective (typically enroll students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, non-first-generation college students, and students with higher academic profiles) have higher retention and graduation rates (Horn & Carroll, 2006). That said, even among institutions with a selective admissions classification there remains substantial variation, which suggests “there is more to the ability of institutions to graduate its students than is reflected in the students they admit” (Tinto, 2012, p. 4). To that end, strategic enrollment management is concerned with students’ choice to persist towards degree completion or depart early from an institution.

**Operationalizing SEM**

SEM includes every functional area of the institution that relates to the recruitment, retention, and graduation of students. More specifically, SEM activities involve college choice, student transition, campus integration, student retention, and student outcomes (Hossler & Bean, 1990). These aspects of the student experience are studied to inform recruitment, student services, as well as curriculum and program development.

Strategic enrollment managers study the enrollment data and trends and urge the organization to adapt goals and strategies based upon environmental variables and opportunities consistent with the institution’s strategic plan (Henderson, 2001). Operationally, SEM aims to optimize student support services and institutional resources, improve institutional quality, expand access to information, increase access to higher education, and collaborate with academicians to demonstrate the relevance of academic programs (Henderson, 2001). To that end, Dolence (1997) asserted SEM is not just an administrative function or process, but rather
exists to optimize and advance the mission of teaching and learning. He linked academic programs to SEM when he said:

An institution’s academic program is inextricably codependent on enrollment management. The quality of the academic program can only be developed and maintained in a stable enrollment environment, and stable enrollments are only possible through sound planning, development, and management of academic programs. The alignment of institutional academic policies with SEM goals and objectives is essential to successfully structuring the SEM process (p. 9).

SEM should link the siloed organizational divisions on a college campus together to optimize campus resources, which is advantageous for all constituency groups, including students who are paying tuition and fees.

Goals of SEM

The goals of SEM vary by institution. Generally speaking, strategic enrollment managers make data-driven decisions to increase the admissions profile (the characteristics and size of the study body), retain and graduate students, promote financial stability, and enhance institutional quality (Hossler & Bean, 1990; Whiteside, 2001). Henderson (2001) asserted the goals of enrollment management are to: stabilize enrollments and institutional finances; optimize resources; improve efficiency, quality, and access to services; reduce vulnerability to economic and other environmental forces; and, link academic programs to strategic enrollment management.

As such, enrollment management is concerned with goal setting around the type and number of students to fulfill institutional mission, the promotion of “access, transition, persistence, and graduation” for student success, and strengthening synergies on campus for
improved collaboration among functions and activities to maximize the student experience and promote student success (Dolence, 1997, pp. 9-10). Because most student attrition takes place during the first year of college (Mortenson, 2001), the first year is important from a student success and strategic enrollment perspective, and is often a programmatic emphasis in curricular and co-curricular engagement efforts. To better understand the student “departure puzzle,” Tinto (2000) examined the impact social and academic integration had on student retention, which will serve as one of theoretical frameworks presented in this study in Chapter Three.

Social Integration

Braxton et al. (2014) described social integration as “the students’ perception of their degree of social affiliation with others and their degree of congruency with the attitudes, beliefs, norms, and values of the social communities of a college or university” (p. 84). Tinto (1975), in his interactionalist model of student persistence, posited that social integration occurs on an institutional level as well as on a subculture level of an institution which points to the importance of understanding the experiences that create social integration. Braxton et al. (2014), in their persistence in residential colleges and universities model, advanced the following six factors that serve as antecedents to social integration: (1) commitment of the institution to student welfare, (2) communal potential, (3) institutional integrity, (4) proactive social adjustment, (5) psychosocial engagement, and (6) ability to pay. Of the six antecedents, the three I focused on in this study were commitment of the institution to student welfare, institutional integrity, and psychosocial engagement. These antecedents to social integration were most described by the participants and were well supported in the literature.
Academic Integration

Braxton et al. (2014) described academic integration as “a student’s perception of their congruence with attitudes and values of the academic communities of the institution, and a perception that they are not intellectually isolated” (p. 118). Academic integration is a central focus of the college or university experience, and researchers have studied its impact on student retention (Braxton & Lien, 2000; Braxton et al., 1997; Tinto, 1975, 1986, 1993, 2012). While research has indicated that GPA is the most influential predictor of college retention and graduation (Nunez, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), strong empirical research also exists to support the relationship between academic integration and subsequent institutional commitment in commuter college contexts (Braxton et al., 1997). For residential colleges and universities, the relationship between social integration and subsequent institutional commitment has strong empirical support while academic integration and subsequent institutional commitment has modest empirical support (Braxton et al., 2004). As such, the research indicates that academic interaction plays a significant role at residential colleges and universities, but the relationship to institutional commitment is unknown. If that theory is accurate, social interaction plays a more significant role in retaining students at residential colleges and universities than academic integration.

Tinto (2000) purported the classroom can “become a gateway for subsequent student involvement in the academic and social communities of the college” (p. 82), especially for new students. He sought to understand how the student experience in the classroom was linked to persistence, and how models of student departure may be adjusted to also account for this important element of “learning and leaving” (p. 81). Included in his meta-analysis of the
classroom experience on college student retention, he specifically looked at student-faculty relationships, pedagogical styles, and communities of learning.

According to Tinto (2000), most classrooms are not engaging and historically have not played a role in institutional retention efforts. Most students, he argued, experience college in a silo fashion where learning is disconnected from peers, and the student engages in “solo performance[s]” and demonstrates “show-and-tell learning” where courses are unrelated and unlinked (p. 82). Focusing on active learning and interdisciplinary collaboration, practitioners are linking courses to create more intentional learning communities for students, especially during the first year of college.

**Role of the Classroom on Persistence**

Because the classroom serves as a focal point of a student’s higher education experience where the social and academic integration that ensues becomes a significant part of the overall learning experience (Demaris & Kritsonis, 2008), it is important to examine the effects of the classroom environment. For students attending college part-time or who commute to campus, the classroom may be the only opportunity for academic and social integration (Tinto, 1993). There are a number of studies that focus on how the psychological experiences of students influence student retention, but the college classroom and its direct impact on student retention is understudied.

The educational environment is essential in understanding student satisfaction and desire to persist. Students who do not feel they fit academically possess lower levels of satisfaction than those who feel they do fit (Demaris & Kritsonis, 2006). Further, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) suggested student involvement in the classroom promotes learning. Juillerat (1995) determined students who were active participants in their learning communities had higher rates
of satisfaction than those students who were less involved. Bean and Bradley (1986) found the following variables positively affected student satisfaction: deeper academic integration, greater interest in major or course of study, motivation, and affinity to the instructor. Juillerat (1995) found faculty members’ ability to teach and stimulating coursework both related positively to academic satisfaction. Endo and Harpel (1982) purported students’ expectations of peers within the academic experience also contributed to satisfaction and persistence. Demaris and Kritsonis (2008) asserted, “there is a rich line of inquiry of the linkage between learning and persistence that has yet to be pursued” (p. 6).

Learning Communities

Learning communities have proven to be an effective way for enhancing academic and social integration for institutions of all size and scope (Tinto, 2000). While first-year experience courses and set-up may vary, Tinto (2000) asserted that learning communities have: (1) a shared knowledge which is constructed through a shared curricular experience, (2) a shared knowing developed through social and intellectual involvement in the learning process, and (3) a shared responsibility for the process of gaining knowledge with others (p. 84). Further, central to a learning community is the involvement of faculty (Tinto, 2012), active learning strategies (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000), and student academic and social involvement (Tinto, Goodsell, & Russo, 1993).

Faculty contact inside and outside the classroom play a critical role in shaping student persistence (Tinto, 2012, p. viii) because “their actions, framed by pedagogical assumptions and teaching skills, shape the nature of classroom communities and influence the degree and manner in which students become involved in learning in and beyond those communities” (Tinto, 2000, p. 90). A study by Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000) with 718 first-year students at a
selective private research institution supported this notion that active learning strategies had a positive direct and indirect effect on social integration and, as a result, subsequent institutional commitment and intent to return the following academic year. First-year learning communities also revealed a significant impact on student academic and social involvement, and thus, persistence (Tinto, Goodsell, & Russo, 1993).

**Academic Performance**

Because first-year academic performance is the best predictor of student persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), first-year students and their adjustment are often the focus for practitioners and researchers. Allen, Robbins, Casillas and Oh (2008) examined the effects of academic performance, motivation, and social connectedness of 6,872 third-year students at 23 four-year universities. Their study revealed academic performance had significant effects on the reduced probability of retention and transfer. The study also empirically validated that academic self-discipline, pre-college academic characteristics, and pre-college educational skill development had an indirect effect on retention and transfer rates. Likewise, students who committed more to the college and integrated more socially also had a direct, positive effect on student retention (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008; Braxton et al., 2014).

In summary, first-year academic self-discipline and thus performance, not surprisingly, differentiated “stays from dropouts and, to a lesser degree, differentiated transfers from dropouts” (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008, p. 1). This research by Allen et al. (2008) supported the notion that first-year academic performance is the best predictor of student persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and social connectedness and motivation had positive effect on student retention (Tinto, 1975). Additionally, Gifford, Briceño-Perriott, and Mianzo
(2006) as well as Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) claimed first-year students who were retained to their second year of college had statistically higher GPAs than those who were not retained.

**Peer Relationships and Retention**

Faculty, staff, administrative leaders, and those charged with strategic enrollment management must understand their work supports and enhances the academic experience and mission of the institution. As such, achieving optimum teaching and learning environments are vitally important to the success of a strategic management program and, as the research has indicated, to integration, commitment, and overall retention. To highlight the importance of peer relationships and the affect on social and academic integration, Bean (1990) posited that if an institution admitted a large number of academically underprepared students who would not have been admitted previously, the “character of the school” may change, and high-achieving students, as a result, may no longer feel they fit at the institution (p. 158).

**High-achieving Students**

High-achieving learners, also referred to as gifted and talented students in some educational contexts, are students who demonstrate: heightened levels of curiosity (Gross, Sleap, & Pretorius, 2001), extraordinary knowledge attainment and retention skills (Gross et al., 2001; Le Sueur, 2002), ability to transfer and apply knowledge to new contexts (Le Sueur, 2002), evidence of creativity by generating knowledge (Clarke & Rowley, 2008; Le Sueur, 2002), exceptional motivation (Clarke & Rowley, 2008; Le Sueur, 2002), ability to maneuver abstract thinking (Gross et al., 2001), convincing opinions and strong feelings (Gross et al., 2001), and evidence of an advanced reading capacity (Gross et al., 2001). Bonner (2008) described giftedness as an “elusive and multifaceted concept” (p. 94) while more traditional definitions of giftedness include cognitive measures with objective standards, such as intelligence quotient...
tests which are an indicator of intellectual ability (Matthews, 2006). Renzulli (1986) provided a more general and contemporary description of giftedness as “the interaction among three basic clusters of human traits: above average general abilities, high levels of task commitment, and high levels of creativity” (p. 73).

There is a fine line between the study of high-performing students and high-ability students, due to the nuanced definitions and quantifiable measures employed in educational contexts. High-performing students in higher education are often identified by their achievement indicators, usually a high grade point average or designation on the dean’s list. A high-ability student is a designation often given in elementary and secondary contexts, which focuses more on talent. As such, high-ability students may or may not include students entering with college credit or advanced placement courses, a higher admissions profile (high school grade point average and standardized test scores), enrollment in honors college courses, or testing out of specific courses in academic programs. High ability is difficult to determine in higher education as the focus is on performance, unlike the focus in elementary and secondary educational contexts. For purposes of this research study, I will not delineate between these two populations; rather, I will refer to these students as high-achieving students. To understand the experiences of high-achieving students, research with secondary education students will be underscored.

**Attrition of High-achieving Secondary Students**

Attrition in secondary educational contexts has been considered a “serious problem,” affecting talented and gifted students, and some estimates suggest as many as 20% of high school student dropouts could be gifted students (Matthews, 2006, p. 216). These are estimates because how each institution defines talented, gifted, and drop outs varies. To understand this phenomenon in education, Renzulli and Park (2002) conducted a national, longitudinal study of
secondary education dropout rates of gifted and talented students. The researchers defined gifted and talented as those students who participated in the district’s gifted program or who enrolled in three or more advanced placement, enriched, or accelerated English, social science, or math courses. The researchers defined dropout as those students who had not been present at school for four or more weeks, but were not absent due to sickness or some other emergency. Based on these definitions, Renzulli and Park (2002) discovered that gifted and talented students who dropped out were 5% of the population of total gifted students, and 1.4% of students in secondary high schools. The researchers also discovered that the dropout rate for gifted and talented male students was three times higher than the dropout rate for gifted and talented female students. Likewise, being White and having higher socioeconomic status were positive predictors of retention among gifted and talented high school students, which is consistent with the secondary attrition literature (Matthews, 2006) as well as postsecondary attrition literature (Braxton et al., 2004; Moore et al., 2006).

Curricular Considerations

Clarke and Rowley (2008) asserted that it is important for faculty members to have an awareness of high-achieving students and their behaviors, attitudes, and skills to effectively provide educational opportunities for this population. Le Sueur (2002) urged institutions attempting to serve the educational needs of high-achieving students to support “exceptionally rapid development” through the formal curriculum. Gross (1999) argued that a “curriculum which differentiated in level, pace, and content” was essential in meeting the needs of gifted and talented students. While many colleges and universities have honors programs to provide the necessary intellectual challenge for students, a lack of support still exists among institutions for this population (Gross, 1999). This population “has special needs that must be recognized,
valued, and catered [to] in the interests of quality… to achieve personal standards of excellence” (Le Sueur, 2002, p. 1).

Achievement of Students of Color

Students of color comprise the fastest-growing population segment in our educational system, but this group of students continues to be underserved (Miller, 2006). As a result, an attainment gap exists between ethnic minority students and ethnic majority students in earning a college degree (Lorah & Ndum, 2013). The following mean scores are based on a 0 to 1 point scale with 1 being the highest score possible, and include data from Illinois, Kentucky, Nevada, Oklahoma, and South Carolina. At two-year colleges, White students outperform students of color in the following direct learning measures (Miller, 2006): Reading (White: .82; African American: .75; Hispanic: .74; Asian: .70), applied math (White: .79; Hispanic: .68; Asian: .65; African American: .60), locating information (White: .75; Hispanic: .68; African American: .59; Asian: .58), and business writing (White: .58; Hispanic: .56; African American: .52; Asian: .42). At four-year colleges and universities, White students also outperform students of color in problem-solving and writing measures (Miller, 2006): problem-solving (White: .70; Hispanic: .69; Asian: .62; African American: .57) and writing (White: .68; Asian: .61; African American: .60; Hispanic: .60). Further, when compared to White students, African American and Hispanic students earned “college grades lower than would have been predicted by their high school grades and test scores” (Lorah & Ndum, 2013, p. 4).

Racial or ethnic minority students have a higher likelihood of departing from an institution of higher education before graduation, compared to their ethnic majority counterparts (Carter, 2006). High-achieving students of color in post-secondary education are understudied, and most of the literature focuses on African American males. Many institutions have focused
on, and report the underachievement of, African American men, but few have focused on how the institution has contributed to this phenomenon of underachievement (Bonner, Lewis, Bowman-Perrott, Hill-Jackson, & James, 2009). Although Bonner et al. (2009) did not focus exclusively on African American men, the literature does point to the need for institutions to understand, beyond the underachievement and attrition rates, the experiences of these high-achieving students. African American students in gifted educational programs have higher attrition rates than their White counterparts at predominately White institutions (Moore et al., 2006). African American students attending predominately White institutions also reported feeling academically and socially isolated and alienated from community, as well as experiencing racial discrimination (Fries-Britt, 1997).

Sedlacek (1998) posited African American students require different skills and support systems to be successful academically in predominately White colleges and universities. As such, Sedlacek advanced the following eight non-traditional measures, known as non-cognitive variables, to predict academic persistence for African American students: (1) positive self-concept or confidence, (2) realistic self-appraisal, (3) ability to deal with racism, (4) exhibits a long-term perspective over short-term goal orientation, (5) external support for academic success, (6) successful leadership experience, (7) involvement in community service, and (8) previously acquired knowledge in a field or discipline. These measures have been employed to improve access to higher education, but research suggest institutions—and those employed by the institution—must move beyond “deficit thinking” in educating African American students (Bonner et al., 2009). This research points to the need for tailoring curriculum, pedagogical methods, and support systems for high-achieving African American students.
“Double Consciousness”

Because students’ experiences academically and socially support their ability to develop a sense of self-efficacy in college, it is imperative that educators focus on motivational characteristics of students and ensure environments foster a sense of efficacy. Various authors have identified factors that contributed to underachievement in African American males at predominately White institutions which include: an absence or lack of a curricular emphasis on multiculturalism (Milner & Ford, 2005), curricular topics that were disinteresting or unmotivating for African American men (Bonner et al., 2009), and classroom environments that were not inclusive of African American learning modalities or worldviews (Bonner et al., 2009).

A basic assumption of the eight non-cognitive variables is that African American students, in order to persist in predominately White institutions, have to dissociate themselves from their African American peers (Fries-Britt, 1997). Moore et al. (2006) asserted that African American students are “forced to abandon traditional, African American values and beliefs to be successful in predominately White settings or environments” (p. 5). W. E. B. Du Bois (1970) referred to this psychological tension as double-consciousness where the African American is always looking at self through the eyes of another human being. According to Moore et al. (2006), gifted and talented African American students in K-12 institutions experience “feelings of having to choose between academic success and social acceptance” (p. 5). Additionally, some African American students’ energies were “reprioritized with energy devoted to seeking and securing social acceptance and belonging” as the need for social affiliation prevailed over the desire for academic achievement (Ford, 2002, p. 159). Bonner (2008) asserted that for many African American high-achieving high school males, “their abilities and academic successes
move them farther away instead of closer to members of their peer groups and home communities” (p. 95).

Because students’ social integration at residential colleges and universities play an integral role in student persistence (Tinto, 1975, 1993), high-achieving students’ experiences with their social environment, as evidenced by researchers above, impact students’ motivation, persistence, and goal orientation. Likewise, faculty, student affairs practitioners, and administrators must understand the cultural experiences that students bring to college. Ford (2002) recommended faculty development include important pedagogical constructs and cultural awareness topics such as: identification of gifted students, appropriate curriculum, learning styles, and cultural beliefs of talented students of color.

The idea of “double consciousness” advanced by Du Bois (1970) raises the question of whether or not high-achieving students attending a regional institution have similar experiences where they are subconsciously encouraged to chose social acceptance over academic integration. Does their high-achieving capacity conflict with the sociocultural norms and customs of the institution? These questions emerge from the literature and deserve to be studied within this institutional context.

**Theoretical Perspectives**

There are two theoretical perspectives and one conceptual framework that provide an important backdrop to the literature and an organizational map of the complex phenomenon of college student departure. In this section, Spady’s (1971) theoretical model of student attrition and Tinto’s (1975, 1993) Interactionalist theory will be explained.
Spady’s Theoretical Model of Student Attrition

The first theoretical model of student attrition was developed by Spady (1971) who considered a student dropping out of college to be analogous to removing themselves from a social system, and commensurate with suicide. Spady purported the interaction between the student and the academic and social subsystems of a college or university best elucidates the dropout process. In this sociological model, a student successfully integrates into the academic subsystem of an institution either extrinsically (i.e., grades) or intrinsically (i.e., intellectual development). A student successfully integrates into the social subsystem of an institution by finding others they are compatible with and developing social support (Morrison & Silverman, 2012). Those students who do not successfully integrate, according to Spady, withdraw due to a lack of “shared values or normative support” (Bean, 1990, p. 150), meaning the student either didn’t share the value of academic work and/or did not have the support system to provide the needed emotional support or security to help persist in college. Morrison and Silverman (2012) asserted Spady’s attrition model was appropriate for evaluating student behavior within a single institution rather than a college or university system. Spady (1971) provided the theoretical foundation for Tinto by creating the first attrition model to predict attrition using multivariate statistics.

Tinto’s Interactionalist Theory

A pioneering work on college student persistence (Baird, 2000; Braxton et al., 1997) and a refinement to Spady’s model (Bean, 1990, p. 150), Tinto (1975, 1993), in his interactionalist theory, purported college students interact with the formal and informal dimensions of the institution. These sociological interactions between the student and the academic and social subsystems of the college, combined with individual characteristics students possess as they
enter college (e.g., family background, personal attributes, goal orientation, precollege preparation) as well as level of commitment to the institution at entry, all influence their level of integration. Further, students’ level of integration impacts their commitment to the institution, which impacts whether they are ultimately retained. Family background considerations include family socioeconomic status, parents’ education level, and family expectations. Personal attributes, according to Tinto (1975), include a student’s academic ability, race, and gender. Precollege preparation includes academic rigor and record of high school achievement. Tinto (1975) defined three terms pertaining to the level of integration for college students: structural, normative, and social integration. First, structural integration includes the meeting of “explicit standards” of the institution, such as minimum grade point average, financial commitments, or behavioral standards (Tinto, 1975, p. 104). Second, normative integration describes the students’ ability to resonate with the values, beliefs, and norms integral in the college or university culture. Third, social integration describes the congruency between the student and the social fabric of the institution at the corporate level (community at large) as well as the local level (subculture). Tinto’s (1975, 1993) theory postulates that the greater the students’ level of academic and social integration, the greater the influence on the students’ commitment to the institution and to the goal of graduation from that institution.

This theory has been criticized for not reflecting all of the variables needed to understand college student departure (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cabrera, Stampen, & Hansen, 1990); or, more specifically, the behaviors, family and work values, or financial obstacles of non-traditional (part-time) or underrepresented students or the role external communities play in the matriculation process for students (Braxton et al., 2004). As such, Tinto refined his theory (1993) to include a significant commitment to quality education and the strong commitment to
developing inclusive educational and social communities on college campuses. Likewise, he applied his interactionalist theory (1993) to minority, adult, graduate, and commuting students where the classroom becomes the predominant environment for social and academic engagement. Such engagement encourages investment and institutional commitment, persistence, and thus retention, according to Tinto (1993).

Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) were interested in classifying Tinto’s (1975) theory as a grand theory or middle-range theory in their empirical assessment. A grand theory could generalize student departure theory to students in all higher education contexts while a middle-range theory may explain student departure in a specific type of college or for a specific group of students. In their evaluation of Tinto’s (1993) thirteen propositions which are central to the predictive and explanatory power of his theory, Braxton et al. (1997) found the theory did not have the empirical support to be a “systems theory” but rather a “middle-range theory” whereby support for the theory was largely dependent upon type of institution (Braxton et al., 2004, p. 12). Residential universities had “strong” empirical support, commuter universities had “moderate” support, two-year colleges had “weak” support, and liberal arts colleges were not tested (Braxton et al., 2004, p. 12).

The following five propositions received strong empirical validation at the aggregate level:

Student entry characteristics affect level of initial commitment to the institution; the greater the degree of social integration, the greater the level of subsequent commitment to the institution; the initial level of institutional commitment affects the subsequent level of commitment; the initial level of commitment to the goal of graduation from college affects the subsequent level of commitment to the goal of graduation; the greater the level
of subsequent commitment to the institution, the greater the likelihood of student persistence in college. (Braxton et al., 2004, pp. 9-10)

To summarize the critique of Tinto’s model, Braxton et al. (2004) asserted that Tinto’s interactionalist theory does not apply uniformly across different types of college and universities, specifically commuter colleges and universities (pp. 79-80). Rather, parts of his theory apply to all, but Tinto’s theory applied primarily to residential colleges and universities. Academic dimensions have the most significant role in the departure process in commuter institutions while social dimensions have the most predominant role in the departure process at residential institutions (Braxton et al., 2004).

Conceptual Framework: Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon

Understanding the multiple and complex factors that influence college student departure has been characterized as an “ill-structured” problem (Braxton & Mundy, 2001-2002) and therefore requires a multi-theoretical approach. Tinto’s interactionalist theory, while it has mixed support, holds “paradigmatic status,” indicating “consensus among scholars” of the potential of the student departure theory (Braxton et al., 2004, p. 7). Building on Tinto’s (1987, 1993) interactionalist theory as a theoretical framework, Braxton et al. (2004) applied an inductive theory construction, and utilized existing research to advance the following four conceptual orientations to college student retention: financial, organizational, psychological, and sociological. Consistent with their framework, I have included studies relevant to my research question.

Financial Orientation

A financial orientation, according to Braxton et al. (2014), is focused on the “weighing of costs and benefits of attending a given college or university by the individual student” (p. 71).
According to State Higher Education Executive Officers, state and local funding for higher education was $87.5 billion dollars in 2011, which was down from $88.8 billion in 2008 (Inside Higher Education, 2012). This may seem like an astronomical amount of money, but as enrollments grow and more students attend higher education, fewer dollars are available per student, and institutions must rely on tuition hikes to cover university expenses. Due to the increase in tuition costs, much research has emerged to understand how prices and student financial aid impact students’ ability to persist through college.

Research focusing on financial need, aid packages, and amount of financial support for students have emerged as “central concerns” in studies focused on economic perspectives (St. John, Cabrera, Nora, & Asker, 2000, p. 30). To that end, students’ high school academic preparation is affected by “personal and institutional resources” (Reason, 2009, p. 664). Similarly, students’ socioeconomic status (SES) and academic resources are influential in their academic success and persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), particularly for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds with few academic resources (Reason, 2009).

A more exhaustive review of economic perspectives on student retention includes the following six conceptualizations of theories, according to St. John et al. (2000): the economic approach (Cabrera et al., 1990), student-fit approach (Cabrera, Nora, & Castanena, 1992), integrative approaches (St. John, Paulsen, & Starkey, 1996), early integrative models (Nora, 1990), ability-to-pay model (Cabrera et al., 1992), and college choice-persistence nexus model (Paulsen & St. John, 1997). More integrated models combine economic perspectives with social and academic integration, and treat financial aid (or perceptions of aid and value) as a form of commitment by the institution. Specifically, financial variables (cost of tuition, amount of aid,
proximity to work and home, and work study) have influenced students’ initial commitments to their institutions (St. John et al., 1996).

Two economic considerations, backed by empirical research, exist within Braxton et al.’s (2004) theory of student departure at residential colleges and universities: persistence likely occurs by the commuting student when they perceive the total amount and type of financial aid reduces the total costs (Schuh, 1999), and the educational benefit exceeds the cost of total expenses (Braxton, 2003). As such, the following proposition was advanced by Braxton et al. (2004): “the lower the cost of college attendance incurred by [commuting] students, the greater their likelihood of persisting in college” (p. 36).

The study of economic variables, perceptions, and perspectives is important to practitioners so, in a time of declining resources, student aid can be strategically used to maximize student success and provide a return on investment for the awarding institution. Like economic influences, there are many studies that focused on the organizational influences of college student retention.

Organizational Orientation

The direct or indirect role of “organizational structure[s] and organizational behavior in the college student persistence process” represents an organizational perspective on student persistence (Braxton, 2014, p. 72). Students who become frustrated by unnecessary bureaucracy or rules and regulations that feel controlling “become alienated and drop out of school—and this is particularly true of minority students” (Bean, 1990, p. 159). According to Tinto (1986) as well as Berger and Braxton (1998), the organizational orientation focuses on the organizational structures and organizational behaviors impacting college student departure. As has been stated, Braxton et al. (2004) reviewed sixty-two empirical tests that identified factors influencing the
social integration of traditionally-aged students at residential and commuter colleges to identify variables that were statistically significant. This process yielded six themes or factors, two of which were considered organizational orientations: integrity of the institution and the institution’s commitment to welfare (p. 22). Integrity of the institution, defined as the “extent to which a college or university is true to its espoused mission and goals,” is demonstrated when the faculty, staff, and administrators act consistently with the mission and values of the institution (Braxton et al., 2004, p. 24). Commitment to welfare, the second theme, was defined as “the institution’s abiding concern for the growth and development of its students” (Braxton et al., 2004, p. 22).

Two studies support this assertion. Nunez (2008) studied the relationship between student outcomes and organizational behavior in a less selective, public institution. While her study supports the notion that students’ entry characteristics were the best predictor of GPA, organizational characteristics as well as the student experience (number of hours studying each week, higher order cognitive thinking in coursework, and faculty-student engagement) were positive, statistically significant predictors of students’ perceptions of their academic development.

Ziskin, Hossler, and Kim (2009-2010) found the proportion of first-year students living on campus, level of support and funding for instructional expenses, and whether or not students were required to meet with an academic advisor each term showed significant effects on student retention rates. To their surprise, a designated retention coordinator showed insignificant effects on retention rates in this study, which supports the notion that retention must be a shared institutional goal and not the responsibility of a person, a department, or division.
Berger (2000) claimed college campuses with higher cultural capital have higher student retention rates. Knowing how students form perceptions of the campus climate is important since “the environment or climate have a central role in students’ coping and adaption efforts” (Baird, 2000, p. 67). Berger’s (2000) assertion supports the importance of an organizational orientation and provides insight into better understanding institutional climate. To the extent that a disparity exists, institutional climate (and, therefore, perceptions of the institution’s commitment to the welfare of its students) will impede the students’ engagement, and ultimately student success and retention.

**Psychological Orientation**

Braxton et al. (2014) posited a psychological orientation comprises the “psychological characteristics and processes that may affect student departure [which] include academic aptitude and skills, motivational states, personality traits, and student development theories” (pp. 72-73). Researchers have used a variety of psychological characteristics, including personality traits, motivation, and control, to better understand the psychological experience of students and why they depart from a college or university (Tinto, 1986, 1993). Braxton et al. (2004) asserted there are psychological processes and characteristics that distinguish students on the basis of whether they remain enrolled in or depart from a particular college or university. Furthermore, Bean and Eaton (2000) conceptualized four psychological theories that inform student departure in college, including attitude-behavior theory, coping behavioral theory, self-efficacy theory, and attribution theory.

The attitude-behavior theory, proposed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), linked beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behavior, and purported all have an impact on future behavior. Attitudes were defined as a positive or negative evaluation of an object while a belief represented
a link between the object and the attribute. As such, attitudes are based on beliefs, which, then influences intentions and behavior. Bean (1990) as well as Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, and Hengstler (1992) empirically tested this theory, and found a students’ intention— influenced by attitudes and beliefs— was the single best psychological predictor of student departure.

Institutional fit has been an important component of the research on student retention (Bean & Eaton, 2000). Students’ ability to evaluate self within a larger context informs their perceptions and attitudes about their institutional fit. As such, the coping behavioral theory suggests students cope, utilizing a variety of adaptive behaviors, to assist them in integrating into the larger social and academic environments within an institution (Tinto, 1975, 1987). Further, those students who successfully navigated the stress of adapting to the college environment by embracing academic and social activities (attending class, completing assignments, attending social events, and investing in relationships) were more likely to persist to graduation. A study by Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn, and Pascarella (1996) supported the notion that there was a positive correlation between a students’ social behavior and ability to positively deal with and reduce stress, and their perceptions of their campus environment.

Studies have demonstrated motivational factors, such as self-efficacy, have been an important determinant in the motivation or behavior of student persistence in college. Bean and Eaton (2000) asserted that individuals will “demonstrate higher aspirations for persistence, task achievement, and personal goals” as they recognize their competence and make gains in self-confidence (p. 52). Research has demonstrated that students with higher self-efficacy engage more readily in social and academic contexts, pursue goals with more vigor, spend more time on task in goal fulfillment, and persist through challenges (Bandura, 1997). Bandura’s (1986) model of self-efficacy emphasized individuals form perceptions about their ability to accomplish
a certain task or carry out a responsibility, based upon past experiences or even observations of
others. Likewise, students who observed peers succeed and began to envision their own success
were also more likely to invest the necessary energy for success. Motivation, then, becomes a
compounding force that not only drives success when students feel they have the skills and
abilities to succeed, but they may develop other competencies such as improved study skills
(Hsieh, Sullivan, & Guerra, 2007).

Hsieh, Sullivan, and Guerra (2007) examined the differences between undergraduate
students from a large, metropolitan, Hispanic-serving institution in good academic standing and
students at the same institution on academic probation. More specifically, they studied
differences in students’ self-efficacy beliefs and goals towards learning. They found that while
GPA was positively related to self-efficacy and goal mastery orientation, GPA was negatively
related to performance-avoidance goal orientation. Furthermore, the researchers found the less
students reported the adoption of performance-avoidance goals and the more students adopted
mastery orientations, the higher the GPA. This study supported the notion that self-efficacy
theory contributes to student retention by providing evidence of the motivational factors of
integration.

Rotter (1966), in his locus of control theory, asserted individuals have a locus of control
orientation about whether the outcomes of actions are based upon what they did (internal locus
of control) or based upon other individuals, events, or circumstances beyond their personal
control (external locus of control). Weiner (1986) claimed that individuals who believed they
had control over the result of a situation were more likely to be driven to respond while
individuals who believed the outcome was outside their control were less motivated to improve
the situation. Gifford et al. (2006) studied 3,000 first-year students’ ACT scores as well as the
students’ locus of control to determine whether or not they could effectively predict first-year academic achievement, measured by cumulative GPA. The study provided statistically significant evidence that those first-year students who entered college with an internal locus of control obtained a higher GPA. Additionally, this study found students retained to their sophomore year had a higher cumulative GPA at the end of their first year of college.

Bean and Eaton (2000) advanced a psychological model of student retention, and described the psychological process as the following:

Students enter college with a complex array of personal characteristics. As they interact within the institutional environment several psychological processes take place that, for the successful student, result in positive self-efficacy, reduced stress, increased efficacy, and internal locus of control. Each of these processes increases a student’s scholarly motivation. These internal processes are reciprocal and iterative with continuous feedback and adjustment (p. 58).

These processes, as a result, give way to greater social and academic integration, institutional loyalty and good fit, and to greater persistence in college (p. 58).

**Sociological Orientation**

The sociological orientation focuses on the social structures and social forces in a students’ decision to depart from an institution of higher education (Tinto, 1986), and is concerned with the student’s interpretation of their social and academic integration (Braxton et al, 2014). Braxton et al. (2004) asserted “the more a student perceives potential of community on campus, the greater the student’s level of social integration” (p. 23). Bean (1990) asserted the “social environment is crucial in forming the attitudes associated with fitting into and staying enrolled in a school” (pp. 159-160). In addition to personal support systems, faculty, residence
hall staff, counselors, administrators, secretaries, custodians, and executive leaders all influence students’ attitudes, perceptions, and “sense of fitting in there” (Bean, 1990, p. 163). This social identification with a student subgroup that shares similar values, beliefs, and goals is an important determinant of “communal potential” (Braxton et al., 2004, p. 23). Berger’s (1997) study provides evidence that three aspects of community develop in the residence halls have a positive impact on students’ social integration: identity, solidarity, and interaction. Berger’s (1997) work also supports the notion that a positive sense of community at the local level or residential community is important conduit for the successful socialization into the broader social system of a campus community. Further, Tinto’s (1993) revisions to his interactionalist theory assert community is formed within the classroom setting, especially in commuter college settings. He purported the classroom provides an access point for participation in community, and further involvement in the academic and social systems of the college or university.

**Racially or Ethnically Underrepresented, First-generation, & Adult Students**

Despite the increasing body of literature and improved support services for underrepresented students on college campuses, the attrition rates for racial and ethnic minority students “differ appreciably” from those of White students (Braxton et al., 2004, p. 3). Data from a six-year longitudinal study of students who matriculated into an institution of higher education in 1995 revealed (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003):

- women earn bachelor’s degrees more frequently than men (21.9% versus 19.6%);
- White students (22.6%) and students from Asia or the Pacific Islands (33.1%) more frequently than African American (14.0%), Hispanic (13.7%), and American Indian/Alaska Native students (8.8%);
- high-income students more frequently than low-income students (42.0% versus 19.0%);
- students from college-educated families more frequently than first-
generation college students (37.0% versus 12.2%); and students whose high-school grade-point average is greater than 3.25 more frequently than those whose grade-point average is less than 2.25 (29.6% versus 7.5%).

In light of these statistics, research has begun to focus specifically on special populations within the college and university community. Guillory and Wolverton (2008) compared Native American students’ perceptions with institutional leaders (university presidents and faculty) and state representatives about barriers to degree completion and persistence factors as they related to Native American students at Washington State University, the University of Idaho, and Montana State University. The researchers utilized the Family Education Model (FEM), which is an Indigenous-based model that focuses specifically on Native American student attrition. This action-oriented model suggested “replicating the extended family structure within the college culture enhances an American Indian student’s sense of belonging” and “consequently leads to higher retention rates for Native American students” (p. 61). Students identified the following barriers to retention, which included: family support, single parenting, being underprepared academically, and insufficient financial support. Institutional leaders identified the following two obstacles: insufficient financial resources and academically underprepared students as primary obstacles to graduation for Native American students. Besides inadequate financial funding and academic programming, there was little agreement on factors within groups (state officials, university presidents, and faculty) and across groups (the universities) that impacted Native American student retention.

The findings in this study reinforce the need to study student populations at the institutional level rather than replicating practices from other institutions or shaping practices based upon research from other institutions to influence student retention. Furthermore, the
study highlights important factors from the students that impact their ability to persist. Such a qualitative model may be a useful method in better understanding specific populations and barriers that exist for academic success. Lastly, a hallmark of the FEM is it allows institutions to tailor educational experiences by “using Indigenous-based knowledge, values, and beliefs and thus giving students an education that is relevant and appropriate to their cultural background” (p. 84).

African American students attending Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) persist and graduate at lower rates than African American students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Rodgers & Summers, 2008) even when precollege characteristics are held constant (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Cokley (2000) collected data from 206 African American undergraduate students attending both PWIs and HBCUs to better understand students’ academic achievement and self-concept in both academic contexts. While students attending PWIs reported entering college with a higher GPA, findings from the study indicated these students reported lower academic achievement and a lower self-concept when compared to African American students attending HBCUs. This is consistent with other research that PWIs have not been as effective in supporting and graduating African American students when compared to HBCUs (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Based on the meta-analysis of Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) and the research by Cokley (2000), environmental influences impact African American students’ completion rates. Understanding these obstacles can influence intervention strategies as well as environmental conditions that may lead to more effective persistence and graduation rates of African American students.

Hispanic student retention is of great concern to many institutions because the number of Hispanic students matriculating in higher education institutions is increasing (Garcia, 2010) and
high school Hispanic graduation rates are projected to increase by 54% between 2004-2005 and 2014-2015 (Prescott, 2008). Despite this fact, the number of Hispanic students dropping out or stopping out has also increased (Garcia, 2010). According to Nora and Rendon (1996), Hispanic students come to college with a variety of obstacles that prevent them from being successful, including issues related to poverty, under-resourced and poorly performing K-12 educational institutions, and lack of commitment to higher education goals, among others. Garcia (2010) studied the internal barriers of 461 first-semester Hispanic community college students between spring 2005 and fall 2006. The interviews revealed the following themes identified by Hispanic students: communication from the financial aid office was not timely or helpful regarding the process of securing aid and abiding by federal financial aid deadlines; processes such as online registration were intimidating and perceived as impersonal; online courses needed more personal support; and, overall, information about how to navigate the college experience was lacking. This research supports Berger’s (2000) assertion that first-generation students and racial minority populations lack the cultural capital to navigate the college experience. Further, the barriers identified by the participants in this study follow the theoretical framework of Braxton et al. (2004) in there exists organizational, psychological, sociological, and financial barriers that exist within the complex puzzle of college student departure.

Woosley and Shepler (2011), surveyed 3,581 students at a single, public institution, and looked exclusively at first-generation students’ first-year integration experiences and the impact on student retention. Utilizing Tinto's (1993) longitudinal attrition model, the study revealed commitment, campus environment, and basic academic behaviors were important variables in understanding academic integration of first-generation college students. Likewise, the study provided evidence that expected involvement and campus environments were important
variables in explaining social engagement. Additionally, results indicated expected involvement, commitment, and campus environments were important in clarifying variance in institutional satisfaction.

The “traditional” demographic in institutions of higher education (18–21 years old) is declining and it is estimated that only 40% of the students enrolled in public and private two- and four-year institutions are traditionally aged (Hussar & Bailey, 2013). As a result, more than half of today’s students attending college are non-traditional (older and choosing to take classes part-time) (Falk & Blaylock, 2010) and have specific needs that diverge from the traditional student. Because of this shift in demographics, adult student retention is a growing concern for many institutions of higher education (Fincher, 2010).

Fincher (2010) advanced a variety of academic and administrative practices to enhance the efficiency and overall educational experience of non-traditional students, based on his research of adult students and factors that influence retention. To enhance academic efficiency and the academic experience, institutions should create accelerated learning programs, provide tutoring and web-based learning support, offer subject placement testing and remediation programs, eliminate curriculum redundancy, create applied learning experiences, and increase international exposure and perspectives (pp. 15-16). There were a number of administrative practices also recommended by Fincher (2010), which include aligning financial aid dispersal with adult degree schedules (if different), reducing confusing terminology within the institution, increasing student expectation communication through an on-call help desk open non-traditional hours, and investing in current technology to deliver education (pp. 16-17).

The changing demographics in higher education will affect how higher education researchers and practitioners view and understand college student retention, going forward
Likewise, “the increasing diversity of undergraduate college students requires a new, thorough examination of those student variables previously understood to predict retention” (Reason, 2003, p. 173).

**Summary**

College student departure is a “complex behavior” and “neither the cause nor the cure is simple” (Bean, 1990, p. 148). Tinto (1993), in his revisions, purported his integrationalist theory seeks not to explain system departure, but rather student departure within specific institutional contexts. Hossler (1991) asserted there is no “one-size fits all” model for reducing student departure as each institution “exists in a specific context” (p. 86). These assertions, made approximately twenty years ago, could not be more accurate today, as institutions grapple with changing demographics and more complex structures within institutions of higher education (Falk & Blaylock, 2010).

While Tinto’s interactionalist model of college student departure has mixed reviews based upon empirical support (Braxton et al., 1997), it points to the complexity of the “departure puzzle” and the need for campuses to study their campus cultures, policies, practices, and students (Braxton, 2000). Knowing how students form perceptions of the campus climate is important since “the environment or climate have a central role in students’ coping and adaption efforts” (Braxton, 2000, p. 67).

There are many “best practices” for improving student retention, but one that seems most promising is likely the most difficult, which was asserted by Bean (1990): colleges and universities must be clear about their institutional identity, their mission, and strengths, and then recruit students whose academic needs match the institution’s strengths. If that is true, reducing college student departure requires a comprehensive, institutional effort to understand the
organizational, psychological, sociological, and financial (Braxton et al., 2004) constructs within a specific college or university context.

Understanding factors that influence college student persistence continues to be of interest to institutional leaders and scholars, as the political and economic landscape of higher education dramatically changes. As state support for instruction decreases and the burden of paying for higher education shifts to students and families, questions about quality, performance, and affordability have become of paramount importance. Students who depart from a college or university who do not meet academic requirements or who do not connect with a peer group are well studied; however, the experiences of high-achieving students who depart from college pose some interesting questions for faculty, staff, and administrative leaders. This phenomenon is understudied and deserves to be explored.
CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the interpretive framework, philosophical assumptions, and the theoretical frameworks that “situate” and “anchor” this research case study (Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2006, p. 1). Further, the role of the researcher, the research methodology, methods, and steps taken for data collection and analysis are discussed. Finally, trustworthiness, authenticity, and ethical considerations are explained.

**Review of Research Questions**

In consideration of the research questions, I will use the term high-achieving students to reflect those students who were high performing—evidenced by a 3.5–4.0 semester GPA. At Bowling Green State University, this population of students received the “dean’s list” designation. These high-achieving students with this academic designation are high-performing students, and could also be classified as having high ability.

This qualitative research study has one overarching research question and three supporting research questions:

What are the experiences of high-achieving, undergraduate students who departed from Bowling Green State University (BGSU) after one semester or one year?

a. What was the students’ level of social and academic integration?

b. What organizational, psychological, sociological, or financial experiences positively or negatively affected students’ decision to depart?

c. Why did the students leave Bowling Green State University before the second year?
Interpretive Frameworks

To understand dean’s list students’ experiences, I employed a constructivist paradigm as my interpretive framework. A social constructivist worldview recognizes that reality is multiple, complex, and not easily quantifiable (Guba & Lincoln, 1989a). Individuals “develop subjective meanings of their experiences” which are “formed through interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals’ lives” (Creswell, 2013, pp. 24-25). In this framework, the researcher-participant relationship is “subjective, interactive, and interdependent” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989a, p. 83).

Schwandt (2003) asserted the following:

Constructivism means that human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as we construct or make it. We invent concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of experience, and we continually test and modify these constructions in the light of new experiences. (p. 305)

It is important to acknowledge that in the constructivist paradigm, the researcher’s interpretations are context specific and not made in isolation, but “against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, [and] language” (Schwandt, 2003, p. 305). In this paradigm, the researcher acknowledges his or her own background and experiences, and the researcher invites a complexity of views, rather than singular realities, and weaves them together to create a meaningful interpretation of a phenomenon. Broido and Manning (2002) asserted that knowledge is “equally valid and jointly constructed” between the researcher and participant, and the “simple Cartesian dualism of either-or, black-white, and right-wrong, gives way to complex constructions of human living” (p. 436).
Philosophical Assumptions

Qualitative researchers, whether conscious of it or not, always bring their values, beliefs, and philosophical assumptions to the inquiry process (Broido & Manning, 2002; Creswell, 2013). In this section, I will acknowledge my philosophical assumptions, which will allow me to clearly and freely integrate my worldview into the research process. Guba and Lincoln (1994) advanced the following four philosophical assumptions that have guided qualitative research: ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological.

Ontology refers to the nature of reality and how truth is created in research. A social constructivist paradigm recognizes multiple voices and truths of individuals, whereby realities are evolving and constructed through human interactions with others (Creswell, 2013). Because people experience environments differently, one cannot know the reality for every individual. Even if we were to study that reality (at a certain point in time), that reality is evolving based on a person’s self-awareness, understanding of self in society, etc. Guba and Lincoln (1994) described reality within the constructivist paradigm as “socially- and experientially-based” and “dependent [upon] form and content on the individual persons or groups holding the constructions” (pp. 110-111). Research should be conducted in the most inclusive way possible, meaning all voices (especially those historically marginalized) ought to be included in the focus of the research. Because every person has a different reality, we come to know and understand truth only when we give voice to all people and study their individual reality.

Epistemology, in a constructivist paradigm, considers what is knowledge and how reality is known between the researcher and the participants (Creswell, 2013). Guba and Lincoln (1994) described this relationship as “interactively linked so that the ‘findings’ are literally created as the investigation proceeds” (p. 111). By offering a “rich description of the social world” in
which the interaction being studied exists for the participant, I aim to highlight and interpret the insider (emic) perspective, and how the participants understand themselves within this context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 10).

Qualitative research, as has been stated, is “value-laden” which means researchers’ bias are ever present in all stages of the research process (Creswell, 2013, p. 21). Lincoln and Guba (2003) described axiology as “part of the basic foundational philosophical dimensions” of the design process (p. 265). To that end, I plan to openly discuss and document values and beliefs that shape my interpretations and constructions, in combination with participant interpretations and constructions.

The methodological assumption refers to the process and language used in research. Lincoln and Guba (2000) described the methodology within the constructivist paradigm as “hermeneutical and dialectical,” meaning the social constructions are elicited and refined through collaboration between researcher and participant, and are interpreted by employing hermeneutical techniques to uncover the participants’ reality (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 168).

**Theoretical Frameworks**

The theoretical framework provides a “structure, scaffolding, or frame of the study,” which serves as a “disciplinary orientation” to approach the research questions (Merriam, 1998, p. 45). Tinto’s (1975) interactionalist model of student persistence, a theoretical framework that holds near paradigmatic status in the study of college student retention (Braxton et al., 1997), postulates that the greater the students’ level of academic and social integration, the greater the influence on the students’ commitment to the institution and to the goal of graduation from that institution. Tinto (1993) later revised his interactionalist model of student persistence to account
Scholars (Braxton et al., 1997) who studied the empirical support for Tinto’s (1975) model countered that none of the thirteen propositions within Tinto’s model were tested using racial and ethnic minority groups within a single university context. As a result, these populations “remain an open question for scholars to pursue” (Braxton et al., 2004, p. 18). To that end, Braxton, et al. (2004) advanced four conceptual orientations to frame retention research: organizational, psychological, sociological, and financial.

While Tinto’s (1987, 1993) interactionalist model of college student departure has mixed reviews based upon empirical support, it points to the complexity of the “departure puzzle” and substantiates the need for campuses to study their campus cultures, policies, practices, and students (Braxton, 2000). To that end, Braxton et al.’s (2004, 2014) theory for residential colleges and universities will serve as the theoretical frameworks for this research study.

**Role as the Researcher**

It is important to acknowledge that my background will shape my interpretations, which flows from my own personal, cultural, and historical experiences (Creswell, 2013). College student persistence is a personal topic for me. As an undergraduate student with academically competitive, pre-college characteristics from a small, rural town two-hours from my undergraduate campus, I struggled immensely the first semester with the academic and social adjustment. I came to rely upon institutional resources and programs, a strong social support system, as well as my own internal locus of control and motivation to persist through the first year. Approximately fifteen years later, in the doctoral program—albeit a different experience than my undergraduate—I also experienced significant hardships personally which forced me to
reflect continuously upon my initial and subsequent *goal commitment*, my initial and subsequent *institutional commitment*, as well as my *academic* and *social integration* (Tinto, 1975, 1993). These experiences have shaped who I am as a student, scholar, and educator, which I bring to the research field and my interactions with my participants.

**Interest and Experiences**

My interest in the study stems from my professional experience as a dean of student services at an independent college in the Northwest, just prior to beginning the doctoral program at BGSU. In this role, I supervised the traditional student affairs functional areas including health and wellness, housing, campus involvement, and academic support. Likewise, I worked with executive leaders across other functional areas, including academic affairs and enrollment management, to improve student satisfaction and engagement. Serving in this role, I realized how important student affairs could be—in partnership with other divisions across campus—to improve the retention of students. With an exceptional student services team and in partnership with business affairs, facilities, and many other functional areas across campus, we made significant improvements in student satisfaction and engagement, measured by increased student retention.

This leadership experience showed me the tremendous need for a campus retention plan, and the many voices that should be solicited and heard in constructing a retention plan. I quickly learned that retention was the responsibility of not one single person or office, but every employee—across divisions—of the university. To that end, great retention plans must be informed by good data. While the quantitative data gave a mile-wide and inch-deep description of the question, I wanted to understand the experiences of certain student populations. Specifically, I advised the multicultural student association, students with disabilities, and adult
students. Knowing these students experienced the college environment differently than White, traditionally-aged students without a physical, emotional, or learning disability, I wondered how, or if, we were adequately capturing their experiences in our positivist methodology. In my doctoral coursework, I realized the powerful potential of qualitative research to give a voice to underpowered individuals.

**Educational Background**

My academic experience the first two years of doctoral coursework prepared me for this research design. My interest in student retention allowed me to choose a cognate in strategic enrollment management. In these courses, I studied important levers institutional leaders can pull to change the characteristics and qualities of student populations by leveraging marketing and recruitment messages, financial aid packages, selection criteria, as well as transfer agreements. These courses provided an important complementary perspective to student affairs and the administration of colleges and universities.

Further, I conducted a research project in my qualitative research methods course that allowed me to experiment with a phenomenological methodology. This understanding was invaluable to my efficacy as a qualitative researcher as it exposed me to the challenges and opportunities of qualitative research methods, and it provided me an opportunity to wrestle with important design and data interpretation decisions.

**Assumptions**

To demonstrate reflexivity as the researcher and the human instrument, it is important to articulate the assumptions I have at the onset of the study (Jones et al., 2006). My first assumption is that high-achieving students in this study would not feel challenged enough by the academic culture of the institution (curriculum, faculty, or peer expectations for success). This
assumption was grounded in my observations of students in the undergraduate programs at BGSU as well as from the literature (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Similar to my first assumption, I assumed students would not connect with a peer group. This assumption was grounded upon my work with students over the years and consistent with the literature on retention of students in a residential college or university (Tinto, 1975, 1993). My third assumption was that high-achieving students expended the energy required to engage with faculty, peers, and the community. This assumption is based largely upon my own experience and perception of other high-achieving students. My final assumption was related to the three assumptions previously stated that high-achieving students would not feel personally inspired in this setting by their faculty, peers, or the institutional culture. This assumption is grounded in my discussions with students during my last two years as a mentor to undergraduate students within the Vanguard student organization. In Vanguard, I had the privilege of engaging in conversations with undergraduate students about character development, decision-making, goal setting, and personal values both in a group and one-on-one format. These conversations provided considerable insight into the student experience.

Research Strategies

My method of inquiry was qualitative in order to obtain a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of high-achieving students’ experiences at Bowling Green State University. The purpose of this research study is not to generalize the findings to other institutional contexts, but to provide insight into the departed student experience to inform institutional policies, procedures, and programs at BGSU. I plan to provide a thick description of the research context so the reader can judge whether the findings are transferrable to other settings. Furthermore, I
will utilize a case study protocol for the process of collecting and analyzing data, outlined by Merriam (1988, 1998), Stake (1995), and Yin (2009).

**Case Study Methodology**

I chose a case study methodology for this research study because I was interested in learning about the experiences of high-achieving students who departed from the institution before their second year of college at BGSU. This timeframe, space, and organizational structure are what Stake (2000) and Creswell (2013) referred to as a *bounded system*. When a “general understanding” of an issue, problem, or concern is needed, Stake (1995) recommended a case study and classified this method as an *instrumental case* (p. 3). Merriam (1998) asserted this methodology “offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon” (p. 41).

Positioned within a constructivist paradigm, I am interested in exploring the experiences of students as individual cases as well as joint cases, “in order to inquire into the phenomenon” (Stake, 2000, p. 437). This methodology, designated as *collective case study*, is often utilized when “individual cases in the collection may or may not be known in advance to manifest the common characteristics” and when cases may be alike or different, redundant, and each having variety and voice (Stake, 2000, p. 437).

Yin (2009) posited that case studies could cover individual cases and then “draw a single set of ‘cross-case’ conclusions” (p. 20). Further, participants’ choices within organizations or institutions, according to Yin, are a good fit for case study methodology and are often a major focus of this methodology. Finally, the case study methodology was selected as it has “value in refining theory and suggesting complexities for further investigation” as well as encouraging “limits of generalizability” (Stake, 2000, p. 448).
Sampling

Case study research does not employ random sampling. Further, researchers “do not study a case primarily to understand other cases” (Stake, 1995, p. 4). Rather, researchers investigate a question to understand that one case. That said, this study employed a multiple-case design as each student in the study was considered a separate unit. According to Yin (2009), “the evidence from multiple-case designs are often considered more compelling,” compared to single-case designs, and, as a result, the overall study is generally considered more robust (p. 53). In this section, I will outline sampling choices I made for this research study.

Case Selection

In case study methodology, selection of cases and the research site are not mutually exclusive processes, as context is essential to the research method (Creswell, 2013). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), the most important design decision for the case study researcher is the selection of cases. As the participants must meet the predetermined criterion (Appendix A) central to the study (Patton, 1990), I employed a criterion sampling to answer the research questions. In selecting cases, Stake (2000) recommended the researcher lean into those cases, which offer the greatest “opportunity to learn,” and suggested the researcher strike a balance, and have variety among the cases (pp. 446-447).

Site Selection

Because cases are positioned within a bounded system, the setting is an “integral part of the case” so “understanding the relationship of the case to the bounded system is critical” (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006, p. 54). To that end, the site of the study was Bowling Green State University, a public, mid-size, regional, four-year institution of higher education. Classified as “high research activity” by the Carnegie Classification (2014), there are approximately 17,286
students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs at the main campus, located in Bowling Green, Ohio, a rural, Midwestern college town (NCES, 2014). The campus has been described as traditional and houses approximately 6,500 undergraduate students and has a two-year, live-on housing requirement for students (BGSU, 2014a).

As a doctoral student in the higher education administration program at BGSU, students and faculty often use the campus as a laboratory for learning. Because BGSU has lost a sizeable population of high-achieving students from the first year class (C. McRoberts, personal communication, October 3, 2013), these research questions are germane to the institution as well as to the literature on retaining high-achieving students. Two cohorts of students were the target population in this study.

There were 3,809 full-time, first-time students who started in the fall of 2011. Sixty-nine and-a-half percent or 2,648 were retained to fall 2012. Twenty-four point nine percent of the cohort, or 949 students, were designated as on the dean’s list. Of the 949 students on the dean’s list, 90.7% were retained to fall 2012 while 88 or 9.3% departed from the institution.

There were 3,591 full-time, first-time students who started in the fall of 2012. Seventy point one percent or 2,518 were retained to fall 2013. Twenty-seven point four percent of the cohort, or 984 students, were designated as on the dean’s list. Of the 984 students on the dean’s list, 88.5% were retained to fall 2013 while 113 or 11.5% departed from the institution.

This study invited the perspectives of the 88 students from the fall 2011 cohort as well as the 113 students from the fall 2012 cohort who departed. While the retention rate of high-achieving students was higher than the overall retention rates in both years, the senior vice president and provost has expressed interest in understanding why BGSU is not retaining a higher percentage of the high-achieving students. Due to the high cost of recruiting and then
losing students, the administration is interested in understanding the experiences of high-achieving students in order to improve their college experience and retain them to graduation.

**Description of Criteria**

BGSU Institutional Research (IR) played an important role in identifying possible cases for this study. This office agreed to run a query and pull the names of full-time, first-time, first-year students from fall 2011, spring 2012, fall 2012, and spring 2013 who departed on the dean’s list, and did not return (defined as not registering for classes the subsequent semester) to BGSU. This office sent my recruitment letter (Appendix A) through students’ personal email address to all eligible students, asking students to voluntarily participate in the study. Included with the letter was a brief participant survey (Appendix B), which asked for demographic data to assist me in selecting “information rich” participants (Patton, 1990, p. 196). Based upon the potential participant returning the brief participant survey, I screened each case with the following selection criterion, and contacted students for an interview. The student must have:

a. been at least 18 years or older, *and*

b. enrolled at BGSU in the fall of 2011, spring 2012, fall 2012, or spring 2013 as a new, full-time, undergraduate student, *and*

c. acknowledged to the researcher that s/he enrolled at BGSU with the intent of graduating from BGSU, *and*

d. departed from BGSU with a GPA of 3.5 or higher semester GPA, at least a 2.0 cumulative GPA, and been enrolled in at least 12 credit hours the last semester *and*

e. lived on campus at least one semester, *and*

f. departed from BGSU after one-semester or one academic year.
**Description of Site**

BGSU is a regional, public university with the new, undergraduate class reporting an average ACT score of 22.6 and an average high school GPA of 3.31 (BGSU, 2014b). The undergraduate population is comprised of 86.2% of students with Ohio residency, 12% with non-residency, and 1.8% international residency (BGSU, 2014b). With a student enrollment of approximately 17,000 at the BGSU main campus, the BGSU community is a fixture in the quaint town of Bowling Green with a population of approximately 30,000 (BGSU, 2014b).

The following vision, mission, and learning outcomes describe the site selected for this case study. BGSU’s vision is as follows: “Bowling Green State University aspires to be a premier learning community, and a national model, for developing individuals and shaping the future through learning, discovery, collaboration and personal growth” (BGSU, 2014a). Additionally, BGSU’s mission statement is as follows:

Bowling Green State University provides educational experiences inside and outside of the classroom that enhance the lives of all of our students, other stakeholders, and the many publics we serve. BGSU students are prepared for lifelong career growth, lives of engaged citizenship and leadership in a global society. With our learning communities we build a welcoming, safe, and diverse environment where creative ideas and entrepreneurial achievements can benefit others throughout the region, the State of Ohio, the nation, and the world (BGSU, 2014a).

Additionally, BGSU articulated the following learning outcomes for students: critical and constructive thinking (inquiry, examining values, and solving problems creatively), communication (writing and presenting), and engaging others in action (participating and leading) (BGSU, 2014a). Within this context, I explored institutional culture, traditions, policies,
practices, and programs, in an effort to understand in greater depth the experiences of the participants in this study.

**Description of Cases**

My unit of analysis was former undergraduate students at BGSU main campus. More specifically, former undergraduate students on the dean’s list who, after their first semester or year, chose to depart from the institution. Dean’s List was a university designation for any student who has a 2.0 cumulative GPA, a 3.5 or higher semester GPA, and has enrolled in at least 12 credit hours within that semester. Participants are described in greater detail in chapter IV.

**Data Collection Procedures**

A distinguishing characteristic of case study research is it offers an “in-depth understanding” of the case through many forms of qualitative data (Creswell, 2013, p. 98). Case study researchers study “both what is common and what is particular about the case, but the end result regularly presents something unique” (Stake, 2000, p. 438). The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with participants to answer the research questions.

In case study research, the researcher exercises discretion about what data are important in accentuating the research questions; additionally, these judgments must be consistent with the chosen theoretical and interpretive frameworks (Merriam, 1998). To that end, I conducted one-on-one interviews with the participants and maintained a field log comprised of field notes and reflections.

Qualitative research, in general, but specifically case study research, requires the researcher to spend considerable time “on site, personally in contact with activities and operations of the case, reflecting, revising meanings of what is going on” (Stake, 2000, p. 445).
While I have spent considerable time understanding the culture of BGSU as a graduate student employee and doctoral student, I stepped back from my experience and listened to the experiences of my participants. Consistent with a qualitative inquiry and research design, I bracketed my educational and professional experiences so as to not bias the interpretations of my participants’ experiences (Creswell, 2013). It is important to acknowledge I did not have a relationship with any participant prior to the study, and my in-person interviews were not focused on their new educational environment, but rather their experiences at BGSU.

To entice participants to participate in this study—and to reward them for three to four hours of work—I offered an incentive. Mentioned in the recruitment letter (Appendix A), I gave $75 to participants at the conclusion of the study. This decision was made early in the design of the study as I anticipated getting former students to invest three to four hours of their time may be difficult. After consulting with a number of current BGSU students, the amount of the incentive was determined.

In an effort to adequately answer my research questions, I conducted in-depth, one-on-one interviews with 10 “information rich” participants (Patton, 1990, p. 196). Each case added depth to the research study; depth was not driven by the amount of time of an interview, but rather richness of conversation. The number of participants was estimated as it was difficult to know exactly how many interviews were needed to reach “a point of saturation or redundancy” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 202). That said, saturation and redundancy was reached with the number of participants in the study. I used a semi-structured interview format to create some consistency in question prompts while also allowing me to “build a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style”
We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe. We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. . . . We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person’s perspective (p. 196).

Individual interviews lasted between 28 to 84 minutes, were conducted face-to-face in a private location agreed upon by the researcher and participant, and were digitally recorded and later transcribed by a paid transcriptionist. Individual interview questions were developed and are listed in Appendix D. While I made every effort to meet the participant one-on-one “on their turf” to capitalize on opportunities for face-to-face dialogue, three interviews were conducted via Skype due to geographic obstacles. All in-person interviews were conducted over a week-and-a-half time period in Ohio and a neighboring state.

Data Analysis

In the data analysis section, the researcher must reflect upon the data—in a way that is consistent with previously asserted frameworks, assumptions, and research design choices—to interpret and make meaning of the data collected (Jones et al., 2006). Data analysis in qualitative research is not linear, but rather a circular process as “data collection and analysis should be a simultaneous process” (Merriam, 1998, p. 155). In this “emergent” design, the researcher’s “hunches, working hypotheses, and educated guesses direct the investigator’s attention to certain data and then to refining or verifying hunches” (Merriam, 1998, p. 155). As such, I
simultaneously analyzed the data throughout the data collection process while continuing to collect data until the point of saturation or redundancy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The first step of my analysis was to code the data with a descriptive word or phrase, which the following two levels of coding were recommended by Merriam (1998): “identifying information about the data” and “interpretive constructs related to analysis” (p. 164). With this parallel yet interrelated approach, I coded each interview, and highlighted salient quotes that related directly to the research questions. Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted that a unit of analysis—a word, phrase, or complete thought—should reveal something salient to the study as well as be a piece of information that can stand on its own. Concurrent with this step, I maintained a field log to capture my reflections, observations about the data, and speculations or attempts towards interpretation.

My second step was to identify categories among the units of analysis to, eventually, construct themes that convey recurring patterns. While this process was more intuitive, it was also “systematic and informed by the study’s purpose, the investigator’s orientation and knowledge, and the meanings made explicit by the participants themselves” (Merriam, 1998, p. 178).

Because I conceptualized this case study as a multiple case study, I analyzed not only cases within-case, but also across cases, as my third step of the analysis. The same process I followed to analyze the within-cases—coding, categorizing, and thematizing—I employed across the cases. At the conclusion of the across-case comparison, I checked for commonalities and patterns among the themes from the within-case and the across-case processes.
Measures of Quality

Guba and Lincoln (1989b) developed a set of criterion called the “trustworthy criteria” (originally the parallel criteria) that included the following categories: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (p. 245). These categories are widely accepted as sound criteria to ensure trustworthy qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). There are a number of techniques employed by qualitative researchers to ensure participants’ experiences mirror those expressed by the researcher. Guba and Lincoln (1989b) refer to this as credibility. I will list those techniques below that I will employ to have credible findings.

Trustworthiness

*Peer debriefing* is an opportunity for the researcher to invite other trusted qualitative researchers or topical experts to ensure all angles of the topic were thoroughly explored, and that the outlined procedures in the research design were followed. In addition to my dissertation committee, I chose a trusted peer within my doctoral cohort to discuss, debrief, and challenge my interpretations. This discussion helped me to more narrowly focus my interpretations to concentrate on the residence hall environment, and it affirmed the three other themes that emerged from the data. This trusted colleague, who is skilled in qualitative research design, also ensured my data analysis methods were consistent with a case study design. In addition, I chose a BGSU administrator with whom to process my interpretations and implications for practice. This step was important to me as I wanted to make sure not only were my interpretations appropriate for the institutional context, but I wanted to ensure my implications would be trustworthy and relevant.

*Member checking* is a process in which the participants are asked to evaluate rough drafts of data and interpretations for “accuracy and palatability,” once data collection is complete.
(Stake, 1995, p. 115). I conducted member checking by sending my participants an email with the themes I extracted from the data and across cases to ensure trustworthiness. All 10 participants replied to my email, affirmed themes, and provided additional clarification, if needed. Specifically, I had one participant who wanted to be clear her faculty advisor was a significant support to her while she was at BGSU. Other participants offered clarifications about activities they were involved with or classes they were required to take. Overwhelmingly, participants affirmed the themes with comments such as “I found your themes to be true of my experience,” “I would say I connect with the themes in the list,” “I feel the themes fit with my situation,” and “the themes, I think, are extremely accurate.”

The idea of researcher reflexivity—one’s thoughtful and critical reflection about self in the study—is essential in negotiating and managing this “self-other relationship” which is entwined (Jones et al., 2006, p. 113). Jones et al. (2006) posited, “how one responds to those involved in the study and the topic itself is probably the most elusive but important criterion of goodness of worthy research” (p. 112). Ballard (1996) described the importance of reflexivity when he stated:

We have critiqued the research method as if it were the foundation of our work. It is now time to look at the ghost in these research machines, that is ourselves. This means focusing on research as an essentially human activity and as therefore embedded in personal, social, cultural, political, historical, spiritual and gendered bodies and contexts (p. 103).

To that end, I intentionally demonstrated reflexivity with my participants throughout the research process by acknowledging my personal and social position as researcher, as well as assumptions, personal investment, and bias I brought to the research study.
Transferability is the second criteria, advanced by Guba and Lincoln (1989b). As such, it is important to acknowledge the goal of qualitative research is not to generalize, as is the goal of positivistic research; rather, the goal of this study was to provide a thick description of the research site (place and culture), insofar as the reader of this study may be able to determine whether or not the findings are relevant to their educational context.

Dependability refers to consistency in following stated methods throughout the research process. At each step of the scientific process, I consulted this research proposal and clarified steps with my advisor. At no point during the study did I have to modify my original research design.

Finally, confirmability is important to the trustworthiness of a study. This criterion ensures the data and findings of the research come from the research—and not from the researcher solely. To that end, I documented my biases and experiences, and articulated how I reached conclusions to convey to the reader my logic and evidence for my conclusions. This record keeping was done in a way that anyone interested in auditing my process and work could understand decisions made about the research design and interpretation of data.

**Authenticity**

The authenticity criteria are widely used today for “judging the kind of qualitative inquiry that has its origins in a constructivist epistemology” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 11). These additional standards are important because “relying solely on criteria that [speak] to methods, as do the parallel criteria, leaves an inquiry vulnerable to questions regarding whether stakeholder rights were in fact honored” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989b, p. 245). This criteria is concerned about researcher-participant interactions and the experiences of the participants in the study. Guba and
Lincoln (1989b) advanced the following five criteria for authenticity: fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity.

Fairness is the first criterion, which is necessary given that “inquiry (and evaluation) are value-bound and value-situated” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989b, p. 246). According to Guba and Lincoln (1989b), the researcher is obligated to seek a diversity of voices to include in the study. No values systems come into conflict during the study, due to emerging worldviews in interpretations or constructions. Had there been any values conflict, I would have acknowledged such “value pluralism” in my field log and negotiated, however appropriate, with the participant(s) (Guba & Lincoln, 1989b, p. 246).

Ontological authenticity is concerned with “improvement in the individual’s or group’s conscious experiencing of the world” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989b, p. 81). Do participants, as a result of participating in the study, have a heightened sense of self in the world and a better understanding of experiences? Schwandt (2001) explained ontological authenticity as “the extent to which respondents’ own constructions are enhanced or made more informed or sophisticated as a result of their having participated in the inquiry” (p. 11). As an educator, I made every attempt throughout the research study to honor participants’ time and experiences, and provide a meaningful space for reflection. Reflective of my desire to support students and their growth, I spent considerable time processing educational experiences and goals with a number of students at the conclusion of the interviews.

Educative authenticity, Guba and Lincoln’s (1989b) third criterion, is concerned about the participants’ increased understanding of others, as a result of the study. During the member checking process, I included unidentified quotes relevant for each theme. I was pleased that a few participants commented on enjoying reading other participants’ experiences or
acknowledged they looked forward to reading the final manuscript. Upon finishing many of the interviews, participants were curious what I was finding in my research. I shared some general thoughts regarding my findings, and participants seemed interested and appreciative of learning how other participants experienced BGSU.

Catalytic authenticity is concerned with “the extent to which action is stimulated and facilitated by the inquiry process” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 11). To that end, I plan to provide a copy of the full study and offer to discuss the findings and implications for research and practice with each participant, in hopes to bring a heightened sense of awareness about the themes of the cases individually and collectively. Perhaps, this introspective journey may provide some personal insight for the student to support their growth and development.

The fifth criterion, tactical authenticity, deals with participant empowerment, based upon their involvement in the study. Building on catalytic authenticity, I hoped to observe participant changes in goals, attitudes or beliefs about self, and clarity about the future, but admittedly this is difficult to observe based upon one interview and online correspondence.

Throughout the study, it was important for me to “do no harm” to my participants, given that we talked about personal and difficult issues, circumstances, or challenging decisions made about college (E. M. Broido, personal communication, November 26, 2012). Further, my goal was not to exploit the experiences of my participants, but rather I desired to “give back,” helping them to process their past and to bring clarity about their educational future. As such, it was my goal that this research project be reciprocally beneficial for the participants and me. I can say with confidence, based upon the email correspondence, most of the participants felt like their involvement was worthwhile.
Ethical Considerations

Because of the personal and intricate work of qualitative research, ethical considerations are an important part of the research design. First, the qualitative researcher should not use his or her positional power for any reason to deceive the participant; rather, every opportunity to protect the participant from harm must be made. The participants in this study were protected from any harm or deception by a clearly articulated informed consent form. This consent form (Appendix C) had three important considerations: the participants must voluntarily agree to participate without coercion, their agreement must be established on “full and open information,” and the participant may withdraw his or her participation in the study at any time (Christians, 2003, p. 217). Additionally, every effort was made to protect the identities of the participants and those in the research locations by allowing the participants to choose pseudonyms, which was used in all data collection, analysis, and reports related to the study. Finally, I ensured the data collected was accurate as accuracy is a “cardinal principle” in social science research (Christians, 2003, p. 219). As the researcher, I did not fabricate or omit difficult content as that would have violated my ethical standards and invalidated the process of scientific inquiry. Stake (2000) summarized the ethical role researchers have when he asserted, “qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict” (p. 447).

Summary

The objective of this research study was not to be able to predict student behavior regarding persistence, a goal of “objectivist science” (Broido & Manning, 2002, p. 436). Rather, the goal was to gain a deeper understanding and explanation of student behavior within this student-institution context. By understanding the realities (and truths) of high-achieving
students, the findings of this study may be transferred to similar educational contexts to increase retention for this population of students. Operating within a constructivist paradigm and adhering to the case study methodology, this study has the potential to uncover important experiences of a population of students who are understudied in the retention literature, and the results of this study stand to benefit all areas of the institution, including strategic planning, enrollment, faculty development, curriculum, student services, and housing.
CHAPTER IV. FINDINGS

The purpose of this case study was to explore the experiences of high-achieving students who departed from Bowling Green State University after one semester or one year. This qualitative research study had one overarching research question and three supporting research questions. Those questions were:

What were the experiences of undergraduate, dean’s list students who departed from Bowling Green State University (BGSU) after one semester or one year? (a) What were students’ level of social and academic integration? (b) What organizational, psychological, sociological, or financial experiences positively or negatively impacted students’ decision to depart? (c) Why did the students leave BGSU before graduation?

In this chapter, I present the results of the experiences of high-achieving students who were not retained at Bowling Green State University. To provide an important backdrop to this qualitative study, descriptive profiles of each participant are presented. Finally, the findings of my research questions are presented as emergent themes.

Participants

Participants were selected for this study based upon six criterion. The student must have (a) been at least 18 years or older, (b) enrolled at BGSU in the fall of 2011, spring 2012, fall 2012, or spring 2013 as a new, undergraduate student, (c) enrolled at BGSU with the intent of graduating from BGSU, (d) lived on campus at least one semester, (e) departed from BGSU with a term GPA of 3.5 or higher, and (f) departed after one-semester or one academic year. Based upon the sampling criteria, 201 students were eligible for the study, and were sent an invitation via email to participate in the study. Fifteen students responded and 10 participants were selected. Because of the timeframe of the study, the first 10 participants who responded and who
met the criterion were selected for the study. The five participants who were not selected either contacted me later in the selection process or, in one case, transferred back to BGSU, and began classes spring of 2014.

The participant sample selected was representative of the target population in terms of race and ethnicity and gender. The descriptive statistics for the target population was as follows (rounded to the nearest whole number): Asian (1%), Black (6%), multiracial (3%), ethnicity not specified (3%), and White (88%) (J. A. Brady, personal communication, April 23, 2014). The descriptive statistics for the sample population were roughly proportionate with the race and ethnicity of the target population, which were: Black (10%) and White (90%). In terms of gender, the sample was also fairly representative of the target population. The target population was 69.3% female and 30.6% male compared to the six women and four men who were selected for, and participated in, the study.

To honor the case study methodology and to provide important contextual information to the reader, this section will provide a descriptive background of each participant. A summary of the basic demographic information is provided in Table 1.

**Participant Profiles**

The participants in this study were fairly homogeneous in terms of race or ethnicity and age, but had wider representation in grade point average, residency, and academic programs. All participants were asked to choose a pseudonym at the beginning of the interview to protect their identities. Participant and transfer institution information are presented in Table 2.

**Amanda.** Amanda was drawn originally to BGSU because of its spirited community on campus. While she wanted a traditional, residential college experience, she did not form any long-term friendships and reported spending a lot of time alone. She lived in a residence hall on
campus and portrayed the experience there as “lonely” and ridden with conflict between her and her neighbor. Amanda struggled to find a social group with her music and radio interests, and her lack of social stimulation snowballed which eventually affected her psychosocially. Additionally, she described BGSU as a “party school where academics came second.”

Table 1

*Basic Demographic Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade Point Average</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.5-3.74</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.75-4.0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-Generation Status</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Program</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Honors Program</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential Honors Program</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-honors Program</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As a music major originally, she had a debilitating experience in marching band the first week on campus which caused her to quit. She expressed appreciation for the faculty support—evidenced by their availability—at BGSU, but felt the curriculum could have been more challenging. While she had a difficult experience socially, she is grateful to her academic advisor who advised her well in her general educational courses as most of them transferred to her new institution. As such, she felt the value of tuition paid was worth it at BGSU.

In her new educational context, Amanda is engaged in the radio station on campus and volunteers off campus. When asked what she liked most about her new institution, she replied the opportunity for applied learning in the curriculum and increased community support.

Table 2

*Participant and Transfer Institution Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Residency</th>
<th>Transfer Institution Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>OH</td>
<td>4-year, public, more selective, very high research univ. in OH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amelia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>IL</td>
<td>4-year, public, master's college abroad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>MI</td>
<td>Working Full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>NY</td>
<td>4-year, public, more selective research univ. in New England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>OH</td>
<td>2-year, public associates college in Ohio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>OH</td>
<td>4-year, public, selective master's college in neighboring state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>OH</td>
<td>4-year, private, selective, baccalaureate college in OH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>OH</td>
<td>4-year, public, selective, high research university in OH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serena</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>OH</td>
<td>4-year, private, more selective, very high research univ. in OH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>OH</td>
<td>4-year, public, selective, high research univ. in OH</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a Research Participants were asked to select a pseudonym.

*b Race as identified by participants: B = Black, W = White*
Amelia. Amelia was an out-of-state student from a neighboring state, and chose BGSU because the campus seemed “comfortable,” like a “fun place” to be where the “people were nice and helpful.” Going away to college was a draw for Amelia as she hoped to find a community at school. She lived on campus and described the experience as “difficult,” and wished the residence hall community was more “studious.” She was involved in a social work student organization, but overall made few friends at BGSU.

Amelia had some college experience, as the summer before her first year at BGSU she took a few courses at her local community college. She experienced some of her courses at BGSU to be challenging and reported her peers to have varying degrees of educational investment, skills, and desire to learn at BGSU. She liked her faculty and found them to be approachable, but admittedly did not take advantage of opportunities to develop relationships with them. Overall, she was not satisfied academically with her social work courses and it caused her to question her career choice. As Amelia’s first year ended, she realized she did not want to pay out-of-state tuition when she didn’t know exactly what she wanted to do vocationally. And, she reported, the experience at BGSU was not worth the “big loan” she took out to go there for a year. Currently, Amelia is attending an American university abroad and majoring in elementary education.

Ann. Ann was an out-of-state student from a neighboring state who was the only first-generation student in the study. She chose BGSU as she wanted to go somewhere different from her high school peers who stayed closer to home. She didn’t know anyone who attended or planned to attend BGSU, but liked the campus and had a positive experience when she visited. Ann lived on campus and participated in the Presidential Honors Program, which was a cohort-based program where students were enrolled in six credits of interdisciplinary, general education
courses that satisfied the general education requirements over two years. These classes were small and highly engaging, and the students were given formative feedback about their involvement and performance in the course, as opposed to summative feedback at the end of the course.

Being from a small town in the Midwest, Ann thrived in her new environment as she developed a sense of community within her presidential honors courses. She reported having an “active social life” and that most of her friends were not from her residence hall, but rather from her learning community. She described this program as “definitely the best experience I’ve ever had in my life.” At the end of her first semester in the program, she and her classmates received an email from the vice provost informing them the program was not accredited and was, consequently, being eliminated. This created a lot of stress for Ann as the Presidential Honors Program was intended to satisfy all of her general education requirements.

Ann also reported feeling “bored” and “unchallenged” in her non-honors courses. In addition to the program change, Ann changed her major from journalism to travel, leisure, and event planning, but reported she was not sure what she wanted to do in terms of her career which caused her to stop-out of college. In addition, Ann and her parents realized the financial aid, especially as an out-of-state student, was not enough to sustain her for four years. Without the Presidential Honors Program, Ann decided BGSU was not a good value for her given the amount of loans she would need to take out. To allow her time to reflect on what was most important to Ann, she left BGSU and began working full-time.

**Henry.** Henry was an out-of-state student from the Northeast. He chose BGSU because he wanted to experience a new part of the country and a new culture. He described himself as a “big sports fan” and was originally attracted to BGSU’s sports management program. While
visiting campus during his senior year of high school, he experienced the campus culture as very personable and responsive to his questions. During his time at BGSU, he made many friends and was involved in clubs and organizations, but his best social and academic experience was in the Honors Living Learning Community (HLLC). Henry decided to transfer to a public institution in the Northeast that was “well regarded for political science” which he described as a better fit. As a student from a working-class family, he wasn’t satisfied with the amount of loans he would need to take out to pay for his education at BGSU. He also reported that after talking with friends and reading reviews online, “Bowling Green wasn’t as, for undergraduate wise, highly regarded as some of the schools I could have transferred to.” Likewise, he changed his major from sports management to political science and, because he intended to go to law school and didn’t want to “saddle [him]self with a ton of loans,” this move allowed him to “save money.” He may have remained enrolled at BGSU if it were not for his change of major, discontent with his academic general education experience, and lack of financial aid.

**John.** John was from a small, suburban town in Ohio and had high hopes for his time socially and academically at BGSU. As someone who struggled to find his social niche in high school, he anticipated college being “much like the movies” where there would be plenty of spirited activities and opportunities for involvement. His story reflected a new student who struggled to find an appropriate club or organization to which he belonged. As a result, he dabbled in residence hall government, a language club, and a vocal music and theatre group. He worked hard socially to find a group of friends to invest in, but did not have much luck on his floor, in his classes, or in the clubs with which he became involved.

His academic interests ranged from language, supply chain management, and business, to education. While he felt challenged and supported by his faculty member in his language class,
he did not necessarily feel challenged by the curriculum in his writing or sociology courses. His lack of career clarity created difficulties for him in navigating university structures like advising and new student orientation, and where to focus his co-curricular involvement. In fact, he reported his advising experience was a major obstacle for his academic progress. Socially, he experienced ongoing conflict with both his roommate and female floor mates, which he was not able to successfully resolve, and later became a reason he left BGSU.

Perhaps the most difficult part of his first year was learning that his grandma was terminally ill and was moving into his mother’s house. After a rocky first year socially and not fully clear on a major, John moved home to be closer to his grandmother and take classes at his local community college. While his decision was not motivated by money, he reported not wanting to waste his parents’ money if he didn’t know what he wanted to do vocationally. At his new community college, John feels lost socially and earnestly misses all of the social opportunities at BGSU.

Kristen. Kristen was drawn to BGSU originally because of the long distance from home and the expectation and hope for building a new community at BGSU. She looked forward to meeting new friends at BGSU, and anticipated being involved in the spirited campus traditions. However, through her first semester she desired more interaction with her peers, and felt “invisible” to them. She struggled to make friends, despite valiant attempts in classes, in her residence hall, and through religious student organizations. She discussed her experience with emotion and feelings of defeat and rejection. When I asked Kristen about the academic culture on campus, she discussed the “party culture” at BGSU.

Academically, Kristen felt her classes were too easy and, as a result, she did not try as hard as she could have. She described her experience as academically underwhelming, where
she wanted “more interaction” with her faculty and peers, and stated her classes “didn’t make me think.” She attributed taking a difficult calculus class that gave her a lot of consternation her first semester to ineffective advising. She later realized she could have benefited from taking it her second semester, but took the class solely because it was a “popular class for new students.”

At the conclusion of her first semester, Kristen decided to move home and take classes online from BGSU. Today, Kristen is enrolled full-time as a commuter student at a public institution in a neighboring state. She reported having taken a lot of good lessons from her first year at BGSU and has built a more supportive social system mainly through pre-existing social networks. While Kristen lives at home and commutes to campus, she wishes she had a more traditional college experience. Overall, Kristen reported being more engaged academically and felt her new educational context was a better fit.

Peter. Peter chose BGSU because of the close proximity to home, the financial aid package he received, and the fact he originally wanted to major in criminal justice. He was also attracted to BGSU originally because it was a “fun place to be” but admits his priorities changed the summer before he enrolled. As a result, Peter spent most weekends commuting home because he had a hard time identifying with the party culture on campus. While living on campus was very convenient, Peter described his residence hall as both conducive to his studies (because he could study with his roommate), but also distracting due to the larger residence hall community. Peter was involved and greatly benefited from the community in the Cru religious organization on campus. He shared that the relationships he had developed in this community were so meaningful it almost influenced his decision to stay at BGSU.

Peter enjoyed his classes for the most part and did not mind the large lecture style format. Because he described learning as an individual experience as opposed to a “communal
experience,” he simply regurgitated the information required on exams in his classes. He found his faculty to be knowledgeable and supportive, but noticed a “sharp divide” between students who were focused on their studies and those students who were focused on partying. That said, Peter spoke with appreciation for the diversity of views expressed on campus. He found the experience of being at BGSU valuable as it informed and expanded his worldview.

Peter spoke with appreciation of his time on campus and reports still being in communication with friends from his residence hall. Peter lived at home and commuted to his new, religious institution where he is majoring in youth ministry and minoring in business administration. To save money, Peter was dually enrolled at a community college where he is taking an additional general education requirement.

**Sarah.** Despite leaving BGSU after her first year, Sarah described her experience overall as a “pretty positive experience.” She was involved on campus and made friends, but continually felt homesick; she leaned almost exclusively on her mother and roommate for emotional support throughout the first year. While she reported her living learning community helped her to meet others and adjust to BGSU, she realized living close to her family was most important to her. In an attempt to create more depth in her social relationships, she moved to another residence hall with her best friend the second semester. In retrospect, Sarah felt that by moving out of her living learning community—which was an asset to her adjustment—she unintentionally isolated herself from this support system.

Sarah felt supported by her faculty and shared a poignant example of a time when a faculty member showed grace and flexibility when her computer crashed the night before a paper was due. While she felt the support of her faculty, she did not think her courses were very
challenging. Additionally, she reported that her peers were at a similar level in terms of academic capabilities, but they lacked academic motivation.

Sarah reported coming from an upper middle class family, and that finances did not play a role in her decision. In fact, she was one of the few participants who felt BGSU was a good value overall. Today, Sarah is attending a regional, public institution near her hometown and enjoys being much closer to her family.

Serena. Serena grew up near Bowling Green, Ohio where her father was a BGSU alumnus. She was drawn to BGSU because it was familiar, it had a reputation for “strong community spirit,” and she had friends who loved their experience. She admitted she was not drawn to BGSU because of the academics, but, in the end, departed from BGSU primarily because of the academics. She described her classes as “fairly easy” and “boring,” but appreciated the supplemental instructional opportunities in her logic class for more challenging dialogue with her peers and faculty. Due to the large lecture style for many of Serena’s classes, she found the lack of engagement incompatible with her learning style.

Serena lived in a residence hall, and joined a sorority her second semester. She described her social life as “pretty active,” which was evidenced by her leadership as the philanthropy chairperson in her sorority and involvement in the homecoming committee on campus. She experienced a lot of conflict in her sorority that created an unstable living situation for her, and attributed the “drama” to part of her desire to transfer.

Serena is pre-law student studying English and philosophy at a more selective private institution in Ohio. She appreciates the small class sizes at her new institution and the opportunities for discussion. While Serena enjoyed the school spirit at BGSU, she felt the tuition paid was too high for what she was getting academically. She did report wishing she could
Stephen. Despite transferring to another regional, public institution in Ohio, Stephen felt torn between the positive, social opportunities he had in the men’s choir (which originally drew him to BGSU) and desiring a more rigorous academic experience. He described a close-knit community of friends in the men’s choir combined with disappointments in his residence hall and classroom environments. Throughout the interview, Stephen shared examples of powerful connections he had with campus traditions like football games, Freddie and Frieda Falcon, and Ah Ziggy Zoomba. Stephen reported not partying on the weekends, and described an inability to identify with peers in his residence hall regarding social norms and academic standards. To that end, he described his social experiences in the beginning as “rough,” evidenced by watching a lot of hours in Netflix movies alone.

While he found his faculty members and residence hall staff to be supportive, he found the learning environment to be unsatisfactory. In the classroom, he was not inspired by the academic rigor of the curriculum or the academic culture, in general. He described his experience in the residence halls as “stressful,” due to having clearer goals and higher motivation levels compared to his peers. Stephen wanted to identify with a group, which was acknowledged both explicitly and implicitly and, while a sense of belonging and identification with the men’s choir was achieved, his substandard social experience in the residence hall and academic experience in the classroom ultimately caused him to leave the institution. He reported wanting to be at an institution where he was surrounded by peers who were equally proud of, and invested in, their education, and where he felt more challenged by the academic expectations. In terms of value, Stephen described the institution as “inexpensive” and generalized that students...
“got what they paid for.” Another important factor in Stephen’s decision to leave was that he received a tuition waiver at his new institution, because his mother works there. When asked if he would have stayed at BGSU if BGSU matched the tuition waiver with a scholarship, he responded that his new academic context is much closer to his college ideal, in terms of academic culture and being able to identify with a social group.

**Themes**

Through participant interviews and reflections of the transcripts, the process of analysis was iterative and cyclical where patterns and themes naturally emerged from the data. In this multiple case study design, I analyzed cases individually and then compared and analyzed across cases where I checked for commonalities, differences, and general patterns from the within-case and the across-case processes.

As I aimed to answer the research questions in this study, there were four significant themes that emerged from the participant stories: (1) High-achieving students sought but did not establish a sense of belonging psychosocially in the residence halls, which negatively affected their social integration; (2) high-achieving students were underwhelmed by the rigor of academic life, which poorly reflected institutional integrity; (3) high-achieving students’ lack of clarity around major or career identity reduced their institutional commitment; and (4) high-achieving students expected highly engaging academic and social experiences which poorly reflected institutional integrity. These participant stories, organized as themes, answer the research questions outlined above.

**Sense of Belonging**

Participants in this study reported feeling different or “out of place” socially. This experience caused many participants to retreat from taking risks and pursuing relationships with
students in the residence halls and the classroom. Students invested various levels of psychological energy, but most, if not all, did not integrate socially in the BGSU community. This phenomenon raises questions about the students’ experience, which will be described below with the following subthemes.

**Differing Goal Orientations.** A prominent theme emerging from the students’ experience in the residence halls was the perception of a goal orientation dichotomy between “focused and non-focused” or “those who cared and those who did not care.” Peter described his peers and this dynamic in the following way:

I feel like there was kind of divisions: people who were really focused on getting their work done and then there were people that just cared about getting through and like partying and having fun and enjoying their college life was their main focus.

Peter went on to say that:

I feel like I was pretty focused, and I didn't always feel that from everyone else in the hall. We always had that kid who did not go to class. Some of the people who didn't give their effort were a distraction to school work. And, living in the dorm room, you can't really get away from that distraction as easily.

Amelia described her experience with this phenomenon inside the classroom.

I think you have a little bit of everything. You have those people who always sat at the front of class, asking questions, and getting really involved. And, then you have people who only showed up on test days. As a result, I just did my own thing in class. [With] group projects, I experienced more of the negative people than the positive people. They didn’t contribute. They just let other people do all the work.
Sarah reflected on the gap between faculty and their “high expectations” and the expectations of her peers. She described some of her peers as lacking the motivation, not necessarily the skills, to be successful. She asserted, “that was the main thing I noticed about people I worked with was not that they weren't capable, but they chose not to push themselves.” For Henry, the division was between his honors college peers and his general education peers. Stephen highlighted the division between those who partied and those who did not when I asked him if he experienced any stressful situations on campus. He responded:

Living. Not in like a suicidal way but yeah, living in the dorm rooms and everything. Sleeping could be stressful sometimes. I wore earplugs, for a time anyway. Kind of stressful in that, I don't know, it seemed like everybody was really going out and everything. And, I'm not against drinking or going out and having a good time but it just seemed like a lot. The social expectations were stressful.

Peter also described the party culture, but escaped it to go home on the weekends.

Most of my friends in the residence halls had different values than I did on the weekends. So, that kind of encouraged me to go back home. Because Monday through Friday, usually wasn't too bad, they didn't do anything that was against my values, what I believed in, so it didn't really matter.

Serena, who enjoyed going out with her friends, admitted that her perception on campus was that academics were not the priority. “At least, I know most of the people I interacted with were much more concerned with the extra-curriculars and the social life.”

Toward the end of my interview with Stephen, I asked him if any of the factors related to the classroom, residence hall, or the culture on campus contributed to his departure. He replied:
Maybe my residence hall experience. Not so much because my residence hall experience wasn't fantastic but because the people I was living with . . . that kind of opened my eyes to a part of the student population who only got into Bowling Green.

Because students spend so much time outside the classroom in community in the residence halls, creating a sense of belonging is critical for social and academic integration. As described by the participants, the environments within the residence halls prevented high-achieving students from achieving social and academic integration. Likewise, high-achieving students found it difficult to study and learn in the residence halls.

**Academically conducive environments.** Most of my participants discussed either studying in their rooms or wanting to study in their rooms. A few participants had roommates they were able to study with due to having a similar goal orientation, being in the same classes, or were just “study buddy” compatible. High-achieving students in this study mostly described the residence hall environments as either neutral or negative in terms of academically conducive spaces. With some relief in her voice, Serena said:

I was lucky; I was in a pretty quiet residence hall. My hallway wasn't loud or obnoxious. . . . But I know other [residence halls], when I would stay with my friends, [were] really loud and you couldn't do homework at all in the dorms, if you tried. So I guess it would make it hard if you had early morning classes.

In addition to commenting on the environmental conditions of his residence hall, such as the size of his room and lack of air conditioning, Stephen appreciated the friendliness of the RA staff. Despite their affability, Stephen still reported his residence hall “did not enhance my educational experience in any way.” He expanded on his thoughts:
There were a lot of people who really didn't care about school, and I noticed it far more in the dorms than I did in the classroom or anywhere else on campus. I could usually get by with headphones and stuff. If I just had headphones with some kind of white noise music in the background, I could get my homework done; it definitely didn't enhance my experience. I thought it was unfair that I lived in [my hall] and I thought it was unfair that anyone had to live [there].

Kristen also reported that her experience “generally didn’t add to her academic success much.”

All of the drinking, I was just not okay with. Like, when my entire floor goes out and parties together, that's kind of not a good thing. And, then they came back super drunk and were loud for a while. I feel like that wasn't enforced at all. . . . I didn't like that at all; it was much more of a party school than I perceived it to be. And, that was a big, big part of why I struggled. No one took school as seriously as I did. And, I just didn’t fit in there. So, I needed to find somewhere that took everything more seriously.

Kristen told me a story about “finally” getting a roommate, which she was excited about only to find out the cultural norms invaded her space. “[My roommate] went out and partied all the time and I was like I can't do this. Don't bring drunk boys into my room at night. I'm not okay with this.” Amelia reported a similar sentiment when she said, “Living in the dorm was kind of difficult. It was all freshman and they were kind of crazy so it was hard to find quiet time to study.” I clarified by asking if Amelia wished she had a more studious living environment, to which she replied “yes.”

Ann and John both described their experiences in the halls as more neutral. Ann reported the first semester “my dorm didn't really impact my academic success.” Then, she expanded regarding her second semester, and having a new roommate who was in her Presidential Honors
Learning Community (PHLC). “We helped each other with papers and just general assignments that we would work on. But other than that, there really wasn’t anything in dorm life supporting my academic life.” John reported, “I don't think that [living in the residence halls] was too detrimental to my studies. But, I also had a friend there in the room, my roommate, and we were both in calculus. We could talk about it. He could help me if I needed it. It didn't really have too big of an impact on my studies, I'd have to say.”

Likewise, Peter liked doing homework in his residence hall room. “Me and my roommate both liked to study in the quiet so he said he wanted a room together so I knew we'd have study time for like two hours every afternoon which we did.” While Peter found his room to be a place where he could study, he reported struggling to find a support system due to his differing personal values, which directly impacted his sociological experience.

**Lack of social support.** Many of the participants in this study commented on the friendliness of the BGSU campus community, and in fact, this attribute was a draw for some students in their college choice. That said, as students shared their experiences with floor and hall mates with differing goals, values, or social activities, it became clear to me many of the high-achieving students felt isolated. None of the 10 participants in the study developed adequate social support systems in their new environment. Many participants attempted to develop a social support system with no, little, or varied success, while others leaned heavily on familial or existing support networks, hindering their ability to develop new friends.

Kristen recalled her experience as “it was a lot of no one wanted to talk to me, which was weird because generally I don't have problems making friends.” Further, Kristen shared, “I did homework all the time. It was like ‘oh well,’ no one is here to see that I'm actually in my room all the time. So, I was in my room studying a lot.” Stephen also described devoting time to his
studies in the evenings since he didn’t have a social group in which to invest. He described his experience in the following way:

Even though I couldn't rely on my social life . . . I still had learning and I still had education so I could still focus on that when I needed to. If I was home alone at night and I was bored and I didn't have friends or anything, if I had homework to do, I could just do homework.

Amanda also lacked a social support system, and contrasted her social experience at BGSU to another context. She was surprised she didn’t make more friends. She shared:

In high school, I had a lot of friends. Every weekend, we would go out. I was involved in everything imaginable in high school. It was ridiculous. I was always busy. And, then at Bowling Green, I just spent all this time not hanging out with people. I didn't make friends. It was just really weird. It's not my personality.

Amanda described her experience as having social acquaintances rather than developing strong friendships.

Socially, I had friends. Not a lot of them. I spent a lot of time alone. But that didn't really bother me. I really focused on my academics my freshman year. Looking back, I wouldn't contact anybody I went to Bowling Green with. I met people but I wouldn't say I really formed any long-term friendships. I was in the marching band for two days. But, it conflicted with one of my classes so I had to change it, and then I ended up not doing it. So, I made friends within two days. I mean, they were friendly people, but I didn't really form any bonds.
Sarah struggled her first year with being homesick and admitted, “it was hard for me to adjust to being away.” She described her desire for more depth in relationships and needing to be understood which ultimately she didn’t find on campus, but from home.

I think I had an okay social life. I made quite a few friends while I was there but it was on the ‘hang out’ level. We would hang out in a dorm room or we would grab a bite to eat together. But, not really on a super [deep] level. I wouldn't say it was a very strong relationship but it was a relationship, nonetheless, that I still valued.

Sarah went on to say:

If you have those good relationships, [that person] will know you better as an individual and know how to help you. Everyone responds to stress and sadness in a different manner. If you have somebody who knows you when you are down, they know what to do to help you. But, if you don't have those strong relationships then they don't know what to do to help you out. And, that doesn't feel good because there isn’t anyone there to help you.

I asked Sarah to clarify what was missing in her social experience and she replied, “I wanted . . . somebody to talk to or a shoulder to cry on type of thing. I got a lot of support from home. If I had that homesick feeling, I would call my mom.”

Peter also received a lot of support from his more familiar community. “I went home probably every other weekend because of my girlfriend at the time. I would come home on Saturday or Sunday and come back on Monday.” Peter had made some good friends in the residence hall who encouraged him to stay. Given the culture in the residence halls and the clash between his values and the perceived values of the community, he chose to invest elsewhere. He did report, “If I didn't have the friends I had there I probably would have come home every
weekend. But they always gave me heck if I went home every weekend. They were like ‘come on man,’ you got to stay for the weekend.”

John shared that he made few friends on campus and, in fact, experienced tension with members of his community:

Besides the professor I discussed and the one friend from [my class], making friends was a little bit of a challenge at times. I didn’t have a whole lot of friends, actually. My roommate and [a] girl down the hall were two very, very big issues. My roommate wasn't exactly the most caring individual which was part of why I left. Other than that, I didn't really get a whole lot of support in my [social] endeavors there.

A challenging yet important part of the social experience on a college campus can involve the unwritten curriculum. John had a romantic interest in his female floor mate that didn’t materialize with him, but with his roommate. With tenderness and regret, John elaborated on his experience at BGSU when he said:

I feel like I have a lot to offer people in terms of a good friendship, and a relationship as well. But, you know, you have to find the right people. It will only work if it's going to work. I only had two-and-a-half friends having been there; I might have lost more than I gained but, you know, at least I tried.

Henry had the most developed social support system in his residential living environment of the 10 participants. He lived in the HLLC and reported, “the majority of [my friends] came from my experiences in my living community, living in the dorms, and being in the Honors Program.”

Many of the participants described explicitly or implicitly that they were looking for friends who shared the same interests personally or academically or had similar goal orientations
in terms of academic success. With appreciation and sincerity, Henry explained finding those friendships in his living learning community was “a con to leaving.”

**Mattering.** Stephen had a powerful testimony of feeling more connected to his new college community. He first discussed his experience at BGSU and then compared it to his new institutional context.

I did great in school and I got like a 3.7 my second semester which was cool. Then my social life built. It took time to kind of build up a foundation but you know, it got better and I started knowing people [at BGSU]. That being said, [my social life] was not what it is here. At [my new institution], my social life is stronger. Especially now that I am in a fraternity. It is really great that I can walk through the [student union] and just get lunch or whatever and I can see people that I know. Its like ‘Hey what's up?’ Here, people call me by name.

When Stephen said “here, people call me by name,” I saw a sense of pride and relief that he had found an academic home where he mattered.

With some sadness and a lot of resiliency, Amanda often ate by herself in the dining center. She reflected:

‘Oh, this is fun.’ I didn't really see an issue [with eating by myself]. Other people saw an issue though. They were like, ‘are you okay?’ I was like, ‘yeah, I'm fine.’ Social life? I didn't really seek out one.

Towards the end of my interview with Amanda, I asked her if she thought her experience would have been different had she connected with more friends at BGSU. She replied, “I think it would have been. Would I have stayed? I don't know. Because of my major, I don't know which I would have chosen. It's hard to say.” Clearly, her psychological and sociological experience
played a role in her departure or her commitment to BGSU, but, as in most student departure stories, the reasons are multifaceted.

Stephen also reported a challenge with feeling like he “fit.” He said:

At least in [my residence hall], I didn't feel that I fit. But then, in the classroom, I felt I did fit in. And, I'm sure if I had done the Honors Program or if I had lived in a living learning community, I might have felt completely different about it.

He expanded on his experience in the residence hall by adding:

I felt really just kind of cut off from everything, which is kind of why I watched a lot of Netflix in my free time. . . . . coming to a place where nobody knew me and I had to prove myself, I had to reestablish my identity as a person. I went to a school of 25,000 from a school of 1,200. That was really hard to do, but music really helped with that. It really helped me establish that identity.

When I asked Stephen what his ideal college experience would be he said, without hesitation: “Being involved on campus and being in a place where I can establish an identity for myself, both socially and academically.” To Stephen’s surprise, he was not able to find that at BGSU.

Kristen also explained how she felt isolated socially when she shared:

I found it kind of difficult because everyone already seemed to have their clique and their friends, and then they only let in people who they knew were coming to Bowling Green.

I don't know how they met them but I just felt like I was an outcast.

With tearful eyes, Kristen added:

I felt invisible, and I wish that I didn't. I felt like the social aspect was more of a reason that I left Bowling Green. . . . Socially, I thought there was something wrong with me.

Why does no one want to be friends with me? But, I came home and it was fixed again.
In all the organizations I'm in here, I'm the person who makes friends and I don't know, people generally come to me and are like, ‘Oh, hi! Everyone knows you’ and says ‘oh, you are really nice. You'll talk to me.’ And, so making friends has never really been an issue so I was like, ‘oh, okay. New for me. I don't know how to fix this problem. I'm not used to this.’

Kristen lamented:

I was just tired of being alone all the time. I felt like I was by myself a lot. . . . I was either in class or trying to figure out calculus. There were a few nights I went on walks downtown with friends and just hung out and had fun. Those were probably the best experiences I had while I was there. You know it's pretty bad when your friend and you buy a paint rock set and that's what you do the night before your calculus exam is sitting in your room painting rocks.

Kristen tried attending religious organizations as well. She explained:

They all already had their friend groups and, generally, people who came and knew someone else who was already in it and so they would just join that group and so I was always sitting there like, ‘okay cool. By myself here too.’

Clearly, Kristen attempted to invest the psychosocial energy to create a support system, and her experiences illuminate her psychological and sociological experiences on campus. Many of the participants made comments about not fitting in or finding a social group. Amelia said, “there were people I went out with, and hung out with. They weren't good friends though, but it was just kind of like people to be around.” Serena reported, “my living environment [in] the sorority had a lot of drama. I guess I probably would have stayed at BG another year if it wasn't for joining the sorority and having all the social drama.”
The social experiences of students in this study varied, but a consistent theme was they did not find a sense of belonging in their living environments. For students who had plenty of friends in high school, they began to question if there was something “wrong” with them; for others, they gave up and focused on their academic experience. This phenomenon was described by many of my participants with disappointment in their voices and with some surprise.

**Academic Rigor**

High-achieving students in this study were underwhelmed by the rigor of academic life. Despite having some constructive insights about their experiences, students in this study were complimentary of their faculty members. Amelia commented that “[my faculty members] were pretty committed. All of our teachers loved what they did and were supportive of students and available for help. They offered a lot of opportunity.” Similarly, Sarah reported:

I really liked the faculty at BG. I think that might be one of the main things I miss there. They seemed not only very educated but they were very open to connecting with students. I feel like they were pretty supportive. Like I said, if ever I needed help with anything, they were always able to get right back to me and help me out in the best way they could.

In addition to speaking to the differing goal orientations of their peers, participants almost unanimously reported they could have been more challenged in their courses, except for the two students in the Honors Programs. Henry reported the following experience:

I enjoyed my classes in the Honors Program because I was surrounded by students who went to college to be challenged. But then, aside from that, there was a very, very small population, at least that I found my general education classes, not honors program ones, felt that way. A lot of them just skated by and were able to do well because the classes
were more geared to the students who weren't the highest of achievers. A lot of students would skip classes and kind of not work hard. It didn't seem like there was a lot of motivation. That was kind of was one of the big turn-offs to the school.

The lack of challenge in the general education courses and curriculum was a prominent subtheme in the data, and describes, in part, the level to which students were able to academically integrate.

**Challenge of courses and curriculum.** Ann also spoke about the gap between the challenge of the Presidential Honors Program and her general education courses.

I didn't love my experience in all my classes. When it came to my non-presidential honors classes, I didn't really interact with a lot of other people. It was just kind of everyone doing the bare minimum to get by. My presidential honors class was definitely the most challenging class I had. Just the way the program was taught. It was so different from anything anyone had ever experienced in their educational careers. So, that was definitely more challenging. [Regarding] my other classes, nothing was super challenging but I still was learning, it wasn't like I wasn't learning, I was just bored with my classes.

Henry described a similar sentiment when he said:

I didn't really enjoy my general education courses because they seemed much easier than I expected a college class to be. I felt more like I was in high school. At the level, I didn't feel like I was being challenged.

Non-honors students also reported feeling their courses were not rigorous enough.

Stephen said “[While] I had to put effort into pretty much everything, overall, they weren't overly challenging.” Sarah thought: “for the most part, the curriculum wasn't too challenging for me. I would say I definitely have been taking stuff that is more challenging to me now.” John
said, “I would say [my classes] were mildly challenging. Amelia reported, “some classes were really challenging [while] other classes, not so much academically.”

Serena shared:

I guess I felt like some of my classes were really similar ones I had taken in high school, and I didn't feel challenged. There were a lot of large lecture classes for like my introductory courses. And, I do better in smaller discussion-based [courses].

Kristen struggled with the relevance of the curriculum at BGSU, compared to her new institution.

I don't know if I actually learned much while I was at Bowling Green. After I leave classes [at my new institution], I'm like, ‘oh look, I'm seeing this and I learned something in class today.’ I'm actually noticing things out in the world. But, then with Bowling Green, I kind of felt like okay, yeah, I'm taking this class now. What am I going to do with this information?

Kristen also shared she wasn’t sure she had learned much in her classes at BGSU, compared to her new institution.

Because academically, I was like ‘oh yeah, this is great. I'm getting through all the classes easily.’ Generally, this doesn't cause students to leave. ‘The classes are too easy; I should stay here. I am going graduate on time.’ But, then there's me: ‘I think I learned that in class once. Huh. What did we actually say? I knew it for the test. Now I don't.’

Serena shared the large-lecture environments and pace were not motivating to her. “In the large lecture [courses], they would go a lot slower than what I would have needed to go.” I asked Serena to expand on what that was like for her and she said, “I guess just kind of bored. I felt like it wasn't necessary for me to go to all my classes.”
Amelia wasn't satisfied with her social work courses, which had made her question the value of paying for credits at BGSU. “I was taking mainly general education classes which you can take the same classes at community college for a very small fraction of the cost.” Amanda was more complimentary of her general education courses, but also commented on the rigor of the courses.

I took a lot of general education courses. So, I didn't really take anything specific [to my major]. And, I felt that they challenged me a little bit but I was able to do well in them. Enough to the point where I could have been more challenged, I believe. But, I think they did a good job of giving you the information you needed, so you actually learned something.

The economic perspective was evident in Amanda’s reflection as she processed her academic experience, specifically evaluating whether the tuition paid was worth the value of courses taken.

Another interesting pattern for high-achieving students in this study was approximately half of the students struggled in calculus.

In most of my classes, I felt like I was too smart to be in and then there was calculus where I was like ‘why do I feel so dumb in this class?’ I've never struggled in a math class ever. I usually really, really excelled in math so I never had to figure out how to study math. I didn't know that was really possible.

Kristen was frustrated with how the calculus course was taught. She reported:

My teacher was not a graduate student, not a professor; I don't know what he was. But, there was no other instructor in the room. Basically, he had the book and he wrote what was in the book on the board. And, so I sat there, I was like ‘okay, I can read the
book. I still don't get it. Please help me.’ So I actually failed, like failed, failed, like badly, 40% on my actual exam twice in a row.

Kristen went on to say: “I thought most of the classes were too easy except for calculus, and so I didn't try as hard as I could have.” This course was considered a roadblock for high-achieving students that caused them to question their abilities or become disenchanted with the structure of their experience. While academic struggle is a natural part of any college experience, it illuminates the psychological and sociological experiences related to the research questions for roughly half of the participants.

During my conversation with Serena, she acknowledged that while she transferred from BGSU, she was glad she attended BGSU her first year.

I think I'm really happy I went to BGSU my first year cause I think it did help me see what my priorities needed to be, and I think it was a good stepping stone because I do think if I would have came to [my new institution] right away, I would have had a really hard time adjusting. So, I think it was good for me to see what college is like and how to handle college without all the academic stress right away.

Culture. Campus culture is an important aspect of retention because, as students experience the academic and social domains of college, they are forming their perceptions of the environment and assessing institutional fit. Henry wrestled with the campus culture at Bowling Green State University. In my interview with him, he spoke fondly of the traditions of BGSU; however, he also acknowledged a division among the student body.

I felt there was a large population [of students] at Bowling Green that went to classes because they had to, but were mostly there just to party, to socialize, to do that. [Partying] really wasn't my thing, and so I felt academically there was a very big divide.
In contrast to the Honors College, with the average college student, there wasn't as much of an academic culture because I felt a lot of people just didn't care as much. They might care about their grades, but I felt they didn't care as much as what I expected a college student might care for in education.

Many of the participants mentioned they felt the academic and social environments were not given the same priority by the average student. Peter discussed the culture in the context of his ability to connect with it.

I don't think [the campus culture] was my social environment. It wasn't my culture, where I connected to the culture greatly. But I enjoyed, like I said before, the challenge of the culture. I did enjoy it. And, I enjoyed stepping out of my comfort zone and connecting to people I think are part of a different culture.

Then Peter chose to compare the culture at BGSU with the culture of his new institution and a community college in which he is co-enrolled.

I think the students here, at [my new institution], are more focused at some level. But, then at my [local community college], they are even less focused. They are just trying to get through. I thought [BGSU] was a good happy-medium, if that makes sense.

Ann explained she was expecting a more rigorous academic environment:

I didn’t think most students were very driven on campus. I think a lot students were doing the bare minimum to get by. The Honors Program was more intense than general education classes but there wasn't that competitiveness I guess you hear about in other universities. It didn't seem like many people were passionate about actual classes.

Stephen talked about the campus culture in the context of his peers.
I guess based on what we have discussed, maybe I wasn't being challenged enough. Or, you know, I'm very prideful in myself which means I have to be kind of prideful of my peers for me to be happy and you know, I wasn't totally happy with the people in my classes and the people I had to call my peers at Bowling Green.

Stephen had a revolutionary experience at another public, four-year institution in Ohio.

I hadn't been to Ohio State as a student or anything. So, it was cool to see that aspect and kind of compare to Bowling Green, and I realized there were some things I wasn't totally happy with. At Ohio State everyone was really proud to be at Ohio State. . . . I mean, they were ‘We are Buckeyes and everything!’ and the bar was set a little higher. They didn't admit just anyone.

After comparing the selectivity of Ohio State to BGSU, Stephen went on to discuss the academic culture at BGSU in the classroom. He explained:

There were a lot of people who were really just content with the ‘I don't get this. I don't know. I don't get this.’ And, so they just kind of stopped at ‘I don't get this.’ So, I just stopped going to class. I just went to the learning commons in the library, and I just taught myself. I did better in a lot of my classes than a lot of my other peers. . . . We would have to proofread each other's papers and everything. And, I felt that some of their writing was, I don't know, lacking, I guess. I'm not trying to sound uppity or anything. I had a guy in some history lecture who would like fall asleep in the middle of lecture and snore and everything.

Stephen admitted that the culture had some advantages.

I think [the culture] was good and bad. Bad, because I obviously wanted to feel like I had peers who were up to par with me. But, it was also good because I could stand out, and I
was set out from the crowd. You know, I liked that.

After going through a couple of roommates and waiting a semester for a new roommate, Kristen described her frustration with the BGSU party culture when she said:

- Sometimes, I really felt like people [at BGSU] were mainly there for the social aspect and really didn’t care about the academics. And, that was a big, big, big problem I had with Bowling Green. I felt like everyone was mainly there to party and not for school. Whenever everyone went out Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday nights, I'm like, ‘Uh, okay. Don't you have class in the morning?’ Whenever I finally did get a roommate, she would skip half of her classes and would still be passing them. And I was like, ‘Uh, how serious is the academics at Bowling Green?’ I don't know. I might be a little too serious, but it's treating me well so far.

Amanda also expressed feelings of isolation from the party culture.

- I felt Bowling Green was kind of a party school, and I didn't do a lot of partying. I mean, I would go out, I went out in high school. I didn't go out at Bowling Green much. I don't know why. I just never did. And, like academics came second, I feel, to most students. It was like, have a good time, hang out with friends and then study. And since I really didn't have anybody to hang out with, I felt like I kind of went against that social norm.

Then, Amanda even described succumbing to the cultural norms:

- Some of them you could tell didn't really care. I mean, some of them just sat there in class. Some of them didn't even come to class. I had a record of not coming to class too. So, some aspects, I saw myself with them. And, at other times, I felt really isolated.

John recounted a time when he was in class: “I remember several people that sat down to take an exam or something and their jaw was dropping and they were chewing on their erasers because
they had no idea what they were doing.” Henry summarized his experience with the culture in the residence halls by stating:

A lot of people just came to the school looking to party, looking to be a part of that scene and I didn't like it because it annoyed me, how many people, even during the week, even Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, would be going out and coming back all hours of the night because my dorm wasn't all just honors kids. I had some kids who would come in at three-in-the-morning and be loud and obnoxious while everyone was trying to sleep, and it just really annoyed me. And, it was just constant, every week. And on the weekends, it just got to be too much.

Henry became frustrated with his peers and especially the extra work he was required to do in group assignments:

One of the other big stressors for me was dealing and having to work with people that weren't in the same frame of mind academically, and just of what I wanted to get out of college. Sometimes, I would have to work on group projects and I would be stuck doing most of the work because they didn't care. If they got a C, they would be happy because they, as long as they passed, would be able to get that degree in three or four years.

While I was trying to get straight A’s because I planned on law school so I had to make sure that I kept my grades up.

Henry explicitly stated, “the academic culture played one of the biggest roles in me leaving. . . . But like I said, I think the culture and the curriculum overall, were a major reason why I ended up not staying.” Henry, in comparing his new institution to BGSU, offered the following:

I feel like now I'm getting what I want out of education because it's a challenging school. . . at my new school, I feel like I’m around more competitive people. They have the same
sort of state-of-mind I do. Especially with regards to graduate school or law school.

There is a large percentage of students that go to my school preparing for the next level of academics.

Dissatisfaction with the academic culture was a significant finding in this research study, which affected high-achieving students’ perceptions of the institutional quality, degree value, and academic reputation.

**Academic reputation.** The academic and social integration experiences of students described previously affected the perception of academic quality and, thus, perceptions of academic reputation and value. Because students were assessing the value of their BGSU experience, the economic experiences of students were illuminated within this subtheme. When I asked Henry if he would share why he left BGSU, he told me the following:

It's much more expensive out-of-state coming to BG than it is to go to my current school. And, so I was looking to [transfer] and save money for law school and also because through looking on the internet and talking to people, Bowling Green wasn't, as for undergraduate wise, regarded as high as some of the schools I could have transferred to. So, I decided I wanted to go to a school that was much more well regarded and also had a program that was well regarded for political science and so that's how I ended up at [my current institution].

For Henry, the reputation of BGSU did not justify the expense of staying there.

Stephen shared his opinion that institutional access impacted his perceptions of quality when he stated:

When I was in high school and everyone was applying for schools and when someone would say ‘Oh, well, you'll get into Bowling Green’ or ‘oh you can get in here.’ Like
‘you'll get in here.’ It didn't have such a bad connotation as I kind of realized once I got to college. It was like ‘oh yeah, it's easy to get in here, which means it's easy for other people to get in here.’

Stephen’s experience in the residence hall, as stated previously, was stressful and did not support his academic growth. In processing that specific experience, Stephen highlighted his perception of BGSU in comparison to his residence hall peers:

My residence hall experience . . . . kind of opened my eyes to a part of the student population who only got into Bowling Green. I only got into Bowling Green because I only applied to Bowling Green. There were people who didn't get into Kent State, people who didn't get into whatever. . . . so that was just really surprising. There were a lot of people who barely got into college. And I wasn't really proud that I chose to go to the university that these people barely got into and were really happy that they got into. They were like "Oh, I can go to college now." And I was like, I wasn't sure if I wanted to be—I don't want to say—I don't know if I wanted to be affiliated with them. But the fact is that we thought about Bowling Green in very different ways and we thought about university as a whole in very different ways.

Stephen summarized his decision to transfer in the following way:

I feel like I'm in a really great strategic place, even if it's not the heart throb that Bowling Green was. And, in some cases, I think this was the best way for it to have happened. Because I didn't have to get sick of Bowling Green to leave . . . Bowling Green will kind of be the one that got away. It was a much better academic move to come here.

In discussing his ideal college experience and whether or not Stephen was experiencing something closer to his ideal, he said:
I think academically, yes, I am. I don’t notice the gap in people who don't really care about school. They are probably here. In fact, I know they are here but I don't know who they are. I’m not forced to live with them like I was at BGSU. And, I just don't live on campus so maybe that's it. But, academically, I'm prouder to be here.

Serena grew up hearing about her father’s college experiences as her dad was a BGSU alumnus. Growing up about an hour from Bowling Green, she reported the perception of the BGSU academic culture in the region was “as an easy school.” She shared with me her father was surprised to hear about her academic experiences, having graduated from BGSU decades prior. When I asked her if anything academically drew her to BGSU, she replied “No. I guess academics was the main reason I left so academically I guess I wasn't necessarily drawn there.”

The stories shared by Henry, Stephen, and Serena illuminate negative perceptions of the academic reputation from high-achieving students who departed early at BGSU.

**Clear Pathway**

High-achieving students lacked clarity regarding their course of study and career. Participants in this study reported changing their major or having uncertainty regarding their course of study. Additionally, students reported changing career paths or lacking clear career or vocational goals. Because academic advising is an important support system for students navigating academic structures and processes, advising was an important organizational pattern within this theme.

**Advising.** John changed his major a couple of times and arguably had the least career and major clarity of all the participants. That said, he experienced a lot of organizational challenges such as lost paperwork, triangulated communication, and ineffective processing between academic advisors and programs. As he explained, John was looking for more intrusive
advising from an advisor within his major; instead, he didn’t have the organizational support to make the transition to his new course of study. He discussed the impact in the following way:

The advising was a bit of a problem with not being in the right program. That was a little frustrating. I don’t really know if that would have affected me leaving or not. But, I know things would have been better if I had actually been assigned a pre-major advisor. I might not have had to leave to think about stuff.

Kristen was “annoyed with the advising” she received at BGSU. She felt it could have been enhanced by a more strategic approach. Specifically, Kristen said:

It’s nice to have to go to your advisor to plan out classes. But . . . I feel like they just said ‘oh yeah, you are going to have to do these classes at some point so just do them now,’ but there's no strategic plan; [for instance], if you take this now, it will make your life a lot easier later and help you actually get out of school on time. In fact, I felt like the goal of the school was to find ways to get us to [attend] another year so that would be more tuition from another student for another year.

Kristen went on to talk about her realization about business calculus:

I took business calculus, which was probably the hardest class I’ve ever taken. I later found out I should have taken some other business classes before I took business calculus. . . . but, at orientation they were like take this class, this class, and this class, because you are going to need them. But, they didn't exactly strategically guide me, like ‘oh yeah, you should take this before you jump into business calculus to make sure you are going to understand all these terms and stuff beforehand.’

John described another organizational glitch that happened with his advisor after he had departed from BGSU:
Around late spring, I got a phone call from [an academic advisor at BGSU]. She said, ‘are you not doing fall courses this year?’ I said, ‘Oh my gosh, you don't know. I'm not even at BGSU anymore.’ An entire semester had gone by and I'm not there. After all the hoops and stuff you have to jump through to get out of that place, you think somehow your advisor would have been informed that you didn’t return. Why does it take a semester for my advisor to figure out I'm not there anymore? That didn't resonate very well with me. Not on [the advisor’s] part; just the fact the system didn't really work in a way she would know the moment I wasn’t there anymore.

When John described that experience, he shared it with some disappointment that BGSU had not really valued him enough to notice he was gone. He felt really disregarded by that oversight. Ann reported feeling unsupported in figuring out her academic pathway when she said: I wouldn't say there was anyone really looking out or making sure we were doing our best or things were going okay. The advising program could have been better. It was like you had to go out of your way to see an advisor and figure things out, rather than someone kind of telling you this is how we can help you.

Ann reported that while she didn’t feel support from the academic advising office, she did feel support by the counseling advisors in the Presidential Honors Program.

The Presidential Honors Program was really great about supporting [me]. Our counselors were always looking to talk to us, along with our professors. We would always have meetings, you know, like how do you think you are doing? Where do you think you can improve? It was a lot of feedback. We didn't get grades in this class. It was all just this is where you did great. This is where you can improve. So, that helped me so much in learning my weaknesses and where I could get better.
Serena, conversely, had a positive experience with her faculty advisor. While this relationship didn’t prevent her from leaving BGSU, it had positive effect on her overall experience. In fact, when I did my member checking with participants to ensure trustworthiness of my findings, Serena challenged this subtheme as she wanted to make sure I expressed how much she gained from her advisor. I acknowledge this faculty-advisee relationship because of the overall impact it had on Serena and the potential impact faculty and advisors can have on supporting career and academic integration. She shared:

My advisor was my professor, and I'd say she probably knew me the best on campus and she was very helpful. She helped me a lot with my classes and everything. It was very easy. And she always had a list of courses ready for me and stuff. So, that was really good.

While Serena had a supportive advisor, her experience was an anomaly among these participants, and she was the only student in the study who had a faculty advisor. As stated, the other participants had non-faculty advisors and felt let down by the advising support on campus.

**Course of study clarity.** The vast majority of participants in this study discussed changing their course of study. Without course of study clarity and with the cost of higher education, some participants acknowledged they felt pressure not to spend money at a four-year university. This sentiment also highlights the economic element of the student experience.

Amelia shared:

I left, mainly, because I wasn't sure social work was what I wanted to do anymore. And, it's kind of expensive. I didn't want to pay so much to not be sure what I wanted to do . . . I ended up not doing social work at all and just going to community college and staying at home to figure out what I wanted to do.
Henry started at BGSU as a sports management major, but within the first few months of his prerequisites for sports management, he decided this major wasn't something he wanted to pursue. When I asked him to explain his decision-making process, he said, “it seemed too easy. The major. It didn't feel like it was challenging enough.”

Of my ten participants, Ann was the only student who did not transfer to another institution of higher education. As such, we talked about career and vocation, and her struggle to define her goals academically. When I asked Ann if her lack of career clarity played a significant role in her decision to leave, she said:

Yes, it really did. This past summer, it was a big struggle in figuring out what I wanted to do. I felt a lot of pressure from everyone around me. I heard ‘you just need to go to school and pick a major and you'll figure it out,’ but I was just really unsure about what I wanted to do. So, it definitely deterred me from going back to school . . . I didn’t want to go to school and be taking classes that I don't care about or that don't pertain to what I wanted to do.

Perhaps, Amelia, summed it up best when she said, “I think I would have stayed [at BGSU] if I knew what I wanted to do.”

**Career clarity.** Participants in this study reported changing their career based upon experiences in the classroom, summer jobs, or continued goal uncertainty. Most of the participants in this study changed their career goals and, subsequently their course of study, during their time at BGSU. Peter changed his major and reported it was “the main reason I left BGSU.” Clearly, an important developmental task for Peter, and other the participants in this study, was to develop career or vocational confidence.
Ann’s interview may have focused on career clarity the most because she didn’t see the point of going to college until she had clearer goals. She said:

I would say I learned a lot about myself being at Bowling Green. And knowing how to express myself better. . . . I thought a lot more about what I want in life. Before, I was just planning on going to college, get a degree, do this. But it just kind of made me realize there might be other things I want to do in life before I go to school and decide what career I'm going to have for the rest of my life. That's probably the biggest thing I got out of my experience was learning that I didn't really want to go to college, I guess, right now.

She expanded on the reasons why she decided to pursue a job without a college degree.

I was really unsure what I wanted to do career wise and, with the program being cancelled and the financial aspect and everything, I just decided to stay home and I was going to figure out another school to go to but then just ended up working full time this year.

Amelia spoke about the emotional impact of changing her career and the ambiguity she felt with such a daunting reality. When she spoke about this unexpected change in her first year, I could see it was a stressful experience for her. She asserted:

After going through a couple social work classes, it made me realize it's not what I'm supposed to be doing. So, it was a little discouraging because that's what I wanted to do. Now I had to find something else. But, I would rather do something that I'm good at.

John had the most eclectic career dreams and aspirations. He started at BGSU with the desire to teach music then, based upon a summer job, thought supply management or business
might be interesting to him, and he also explored the possibility of majoring in a foreign language. He seemed lost in both his career direction and how to get there.

Serena spoke explicitly about how the curriculum and classroom experience at her new institution emphasized interacting with professionals in the field. When she described her experience, her face lit up with interest and she was excited about her future career aspirations.

In the law class I took [at my new institution], you got to actually talk to lawyers and they had different attorneys and different law organizations come and speak to us; that very first-hand experience helped me.

Amanda changed her major and was excited about her new institution as well, due to the opportunities she had for internships in a bigger city.

I really wanted to do music for film. [After enrolling,] I found that [BGSU] didn’t do a lot of music supervision which is what I wanted to do. They have a good film productions program for like directing and stuff, but that’s not really what I was looking for. And, I felt that [my new institution] just had more opportunity. It's surrounded by other opportunities in film. I felt like electronic media really set you up with internships and other things.

When I asked Ann what her ideal college experience was she replied:

I would say its being able to take classes that actually interest you and associate more directly with your major rather than taking a bunch of general classes that you are going to find hard to relate to your career.

Clearly, the participants in this study had career and vocation on their minds as they were sorting out whether to persist at BGSU, transfer to another institution for a better fit, or in one case, drop out to begin working.
Highly Engaging Experiences

High-achieving students in this study expected highly engaging academic and social experiences. Participants in this study described their most engaging experiences in the classroom, in their living communities, and around campus with fondness and gratitude. Participants who were part of a learning community or living learning community had compelling academic and social experiences that were especially evident in the data. Braxton et al. (2014) defined a learning community as “small communities form[ed] around specific course[s]” whereby the curricular arrangement “contributes to the formation of community within the classroom” (p. 121). A living learning community combines the characteristics of a learning community within a residential context whereby student live and learn in community. Those who were not a part of a formal learning community or living-learning community had respect for those communities and considered joining them.

Learning communities. Ann commented on the deep conversations she had with peers in her presidential learning community, which she found to be interesting and rich. She said:

I found the people in the Presidential Honors Program easy to discuss things with. I wouldn't say we were all like-minded. I think what kind of drew me to the main group of people I was friends with was that I learned a lot about other religions or social ideas. That [experience] was really interesting to me. We were able to bounce things off of each other and I really enjoyed our conversations.

She went on to say:

My presidential honors class was definitely the best experience I've ever had in my life.

We all really challenged each other and helped each other grow. Because the 15-students
in the class spent the whole year together, we really challenged each other and made each other think.

Ann described an experience where she was examining her religious beliefs and shared the support she felt by her peers in her learning community. In our conversation, it was clear she was referring to not only the emotional support to re-examine her religious convictions and beliefs, but the intellectual ability to discuss, explore, and evaluate belief structures.

Being in the Presidential Honors Program made me rethink my values a lot and my beliefs. I was raised Catholic, strong Catholic my whole life and when I got to Bowling Green, I decided to be agnostic. So, that was a big challenge. Especially at home, dealing with that and trying to explain that to my family. It was nice to have the support from my friends in the PHLC, going through that and kind of figuring out what my beliefs were and how things had changed.

Sarah also described the support she felt by being a member of her living learning community that was focused on service learning.

My learning community . . . was great. My next door neighbor was in every class I was in. So, I could always go and knock on her door and be like ‘Hey, did you figure out this problem?’ So, I felt that was really helpful too. Spring semester, I moved in with one of my best friends because she went to BG. That's [probably] one of the main things I regret was moving out of [my learning community].

While Sarah enjoyed and benefitted from the level of engagement with members of her learning community, she moved in with one of her best friends because she was looking for more depth in her personal relationships.
Henry noted how much he appreciated the high level of expectations in both the Honors Program as well as the HLLC.

The academic culture was very high and intense in the Honors Program and the HLLC because you have a lot of people who were striving for academic success, wanted to learn, wanted to engage, [and] wanted to talk things through. I would be able to, with people that I lived near in the living community, have very deep conversations about different things about philosophy, religion, politics, all these different things that I expected out of going to college and being able to do.

In that environment, he found support for the transition from living in New England to residing in Ohio and he enjoyed being around peers with similar academic expectations. He explained:

It was interesting moving to a completely different area of the country, and I wasn't sure exactly how I would adjust to a new area, a new culture. I was in the Honors Program at BG and I stayed in the HLLC, which made it easier to kind of adjust and meet people. The one thing I really liked about the Honors Program was they made it easier to meet other people that were like-minded and had the same expectations while attending their undergraduate [institution].

Likewise, Henry discussed the value of his living learning community.

One thing I really liked about the living learning community was there was a lot of learning, like hands on learning. [For instance], they would take us, if we wanted to go, to shows, to museums, to different things, to lectures, bring in authors that would talk about a book that we read and lead a discussion on this book. We travelled. I went to Washington D.C. with my friends from the learning community. It was all part of a fee for being in the learning community so it was really free other than the fee that we
originally paid. It was fun to be able to go. They also had trips to Chicago, the Shakespeare festival in Canada. And then, they had some alternative spring breaks where you could go to different places and help. Last year, they went to the Appalachian mountains and helped people that were part of the natural disasters. And so, that was one of my most favorite things about being at BG and I would love to see more of [those experiences] throughout the school. Because I think that really helped to build friendships, build bonds, and also help people academically.

Henry also talked about the level of academic engagement in his learning community when he stated:

I got lucky that I was placed in an environment—and I chose to be in an environment—that really helped me thrive. Being in the HLLC, I was surrounded by people who either were in the Honors Program with me or who weren't in the Honors Program but wanted to live in a more intellectual environment. I think it really helped me work through problems I had in all of my classes, even classes that I didn't take with other honors students because they were taking them as well or they had some knowledge of it and so I could get help from basically any [resident] on my floor if I needed it in a specific topic. And, being around those sort of [peers] helped me want to be better and challenge myself because I would see some of these [students] who were doing great things, doing research in their freshman year, doing all these different things that I wasn't seeing in many other areas of the school. It really helped me to adjust and became successful academically.

As a high-achieving student who ended up transferring to a more selective institution, Henry researched different types of institutions and learning environments. In my interview with him, Henry gave BGSU the following words of affirmation regarding learning communities: “There
Faculty engagement. As has been stated, high-achieving students in this study wanted deep academic and social engagement. Specifically, participants described appreciating faculty engagement and wanting more depth to their interactions with faculty members. This theme was evident throughout the data and was present in participants’ social and academic experiences alike.

Henry, a student in the Honors College, reported having meaningful engagement with his faculty members when he stated:

Our professor would email us sometimes on a daily basis, talking to us. If we said something in class he wanted to discuss more, he would email us personally, talk to us, try to get ideas, have us come to office hours and discuss it with him more. And, if we had any issues, he would have us come to his office hours. He would work it through to make sure that we understood it.

In the Honors College, Henry also enjoyed smaller class sizes, which afforded greater engagement with his faculty members, he reported.

Ann, who was in the Presidential Honors Program, had the privilege of sharing dinner with President Mazey four times throughout the academic year. This kind of faculty engagement with such a prominent institutional figure, she explained, made her feel special and was very empowering:

[Dr. Mazey] would give us projects or something to work on over the [subsequent] months, before our next meeting with her. So, that was definitely an interesting
experience. I think it made us feel special that we were meeting with the president and
got to have these dinners with her in her house. Everyone was like ‘You are doing
what?’ So, that was great.

While not in the Honors College, Peter liked having his worldview challenged in class.

He said the following:

My experience with college is that most of the professors had a more liberal twang to
their thinking. But, I liked the challenge of challenging back. I enjoy that personally. So
I mean, my opinion might have been different but they were always open to my thoughts.
And I thought BG was really good at representing both sides of the issue. I think it's
important and it gives me a better worldview and a better view on how to take on issues
and problems and I think that's important to know where other people are coming from. I
think you have unfair judgment if you don't.

Not all high-achieving students enjoyed higher levels of faculty engagement. Kristen
shared that she desired more interaction with her faculty members:

I never really developed any relationships with any of my professors at Bowling Green.
Except, I did online because I had the same teacher for two of my classes, and we Skyped
a few times since I couldn't actually go to any office hours or anything. But then [at my
new institution], I feel like my professors know my name and I don't even have to talk in
class. But, I feel like if I didn't even go to class, no one would know at Bowling Green. I
feel like I'm actually learning and taking things out of classes here that I didn't [at
BGSU].
In describing what she liked about her new educational context, Serena shared how the academic environment is more suited for personal attention by the faculty. She described it as the following:

It's just that academics are the number one focus here. So, my classes are much harder and teachers are aware of that. Everyone is here for the academics. So, it's very fostered to which classes you need to take, especially since I'm in the humanities division, which isn't the majority of the school. Then, you get very personal attention. I would say all my professors know me. They know my majors. They know that I'm a transfer student. So, it's just much more fostered for your personal academic goals. . . . like the dean knows me by name, just because. It's so personally driven, and I definitely wouldn't say the same about BG.

Faculty interaction was valued by high-achieving students in this study, and deepened students’ academic integration whether that was at BGSU or in their new educational context.

**Pedagogical methods.** Pedagogical methods in the classroom came up in many interviews and became an important finding in this research study, partially answering the research question about academic integration. A majority of the students reported feeling their courses could have been enhanced by integrating more creative teaching methods, peer interaction, or incorporating more relevant content. Henry and Ann appreciated those faculty members who facilitated conversations as co-learners in the classroom. Henry recollected:

I enjoyed going to class [with my peers] because it wasn't just the professor teaching in the class. They were bringing in their own ideas, thoughts, and making everyone around them smarter because they were bringing new ideas.

Ann also enjoyed the high level of engagement with her peers and appreciated the
discussion-based learning environment. She described the experience in the following way:

In my Presidential Honors Program, we would get a topic and then it was more of a discussion-based class. We would bounce ideas off of each other. So, that made it a lot more interesting. When you actually get people involved and let the students run it more.

Serena talked extensively about engaging with others on ideas, and commented on the engagement level with regards to the coursework. She said:

I guess I had a lot more exams at BG. [At my new university] almost every single one of my classes is writing papers. My classes are very small because it's an engineering school so I'm not in all the large lecture classes. The largest class I think I've been in had about 20 people. So, all of my classes are discussion-based.

Ann shared, “the Presidential Honors Program was really the greatest experience I had there. The program exceeded the expectations I had, by far.” Even though she reported lacking career clarity, which eventually led her to leave higher education, Ann reported she would have taken out loans to remain in the program if the program would have continued as it was originally conceptualized. Her comments reflect the economic value Ann placed on her experience within the Presidential Honors Program.

While a majority of the participants in this study valued engaging learning environments, students in the Honors Programs experienced them more frequently. Not all high-achieving students, as Henry said, were as “lucky.” The following experiences described below highlight occurrences where students desired more academic and social engagement in the classroom. Kristen shared the following example of a lack of social engagement in the classroom:
I would go to class. I generally had a spot I sat in so there was always the same people around me. And, we would talk in class but we would never do anything outside or ask about each other's lives. It would always be like small talk about the class, the homework or the teacher. And that's generally it. And, we would go, carrying on our own lives outside of the class.

Kristen described some of her classes in the following way: “I felt like it was me going to class, me getting talked at, and then me leaving and not actually making sure I comprehended anything that the professor said.” John described his calculus class as “quiet” where “not many questions were ever really asked. . . . We would just go in there, wait for [the instructor] to show up, take the course, and just sit there, taking the notes as [the instructor] reviewed.” Amanda talked about being “in a lot of lecture halls.” She understood the efficiency of large lecture halls, but also acknowledged that “you’re foregoing interaction.” Stephen also mentioned “sitting there,” listening, and getting tested over the content. Ann asserted, “I didn't really enjoy lectures that much. PowerPoint presentations is what a lot of classes tended to be and just teachers reading off of the board, which obviously, isn't fun for anyone.” Serena shared:

Most of [my classes] were fairly easy and you had homework each night, and you went and turned it into the teacher or the teaching assistant the next day. And, then you got a lecture. And, then you would get homework assigned. So, it was set up pretty much exactly how my high school classes were.

Similarly, Kristen shared:

I wasn't very happy with my calculus class. [The professor] seriously took the book and wrote the exact problems from the book on the board. And, I had read the book in advance since I knew I was struggling with that class. It didn't help me at all. He did
explain [the math concepts] better outside of class than he did inside. . . . I understand [instructors] are under time constraints but just plowing through and giving examples that are in the book doesn't help. If he came up with his own examples, that might be better.

Henry also shared his experience in his non-honors courses when he said:

In my [non-honors] classes, it was more of you think of college, it's the norm, it's what I think of, it's the typical college. Large lecture hall, teacher, or professor lecturing us for an hour, or an hour and fifteen minutes on a tough subject. Not much [interactive] communication. And then, basically, doing that and then saying study this, study this, study this. And, take the midterm, and take the final. And, so that's what I felt was in the non-honors program class. Theses classes were much larger and had less discussion.

Kristen shared some of her distaste for the lack of engagement in the classroom:

Some of my instructors would give us PowerPoints and stuff on line so we could print it out and bring it to class and take notes on the side. While it was helpful they provided the stuff ahead, I wished there was more interaction, making us think and get involved but it really wasn't ever like that.

When I asked Serena why she left BGSU, she replied,

I guess it was primarily the academics. It just felt a lot like I was sitting in a high school desk hearing from my high school teachers. I guess another comparison is [at my new university], we have a lot of guest speakers and we take trips, like we are going to the museum because there is so much around here. So, we have the access to go and do more of the real-world types of things, whereas it's less high school lecture based.
As a result of having large lecture halls, students in this study desired more interactive
instruction and engagement with the faculty member and their peers. Amanda reported, “I really
didn't know anybody in my classes. So, I didn't get close with my peers. I didn't really go to
class with anybody. I didn't sit by someone the same time. I never really talked in class.” When
I asked Kristen what she wished the classroom environment was like, she said:

   I wish [my classes] were smaller, but I know that's hard with universities. That would
   mean more interaction between students and the teacher, which I understand is also hard.
   But, whenever there is interaction, that's when you know if the students are actually
   learning or not.

Participants did share examples of positive learning environments in specific courses at
BGSU. Ann shared an experience she had in a large lecture hall:

   I had one political science class that was a large lecture I really did enjoy. It was an
   international relations class. So, we got to talk about current world issues a lot. People
   were actually interested more in that class. And, we got to learn about what we wanted to
   learn and so that made it a lot more interesting.

John shared about his foreign language instructor who, on the first day of class, posed a
challenge to the class, which motivated him:

   I guarantee I've played more video games and watched more animes than all of you. It
   was a challenge right away, right off the bat. She would incorporate that into the class.
   She knew we were all nerds there. She knew we had all seen Pokémon. So one day, half
   of the session was spent watching like a Japanese version of the Pokémon anime. So,
   that was by far, my most enjoyable class while at BGSU.

Ann reported that in her presidential honors course, “the personalization of the class” by the
professor is what enhanced her experience as a student. She posited “having that in all classes would make the educational experience so much better.” Henry was impressed with the Socratic method employed by his honors faculty member. He said:

In my honors classes, it was a smaller class of about 20 or 30 [students] and it was more discussion based. It was more professor prompting us, asking us questions [as] he didn't want to be a lecturer. He didn't want to be someone that, for the hour and a half, two hours we were in class, would just talk. And, so we'd talk about ideas. He'd ask us to think through them ourselves. He'd make us talk through our problems to make sure we try to understand them.

Upon reflection on what she learned from her time at BGSU, Serena also noted, “I never was really aware that I needed discussion-based courses where your voice is heard and you are learning from talking to your [peers] more than a professor lecturing you.”

Based upon participant interviews and the reflections in my field log, it became clear throughout the analysis process that students who departed desired more meaningful engagement with faculty and peers in the classroom. The lack of engagement in the teaching methods of the courses negatively impacted students’ experience psychologically and sociologically, and didn’t encourage deeper academic and social integration.

**Campus life.** The co-curricular experiences of students in this study were important to their overall institutional experience. For many participants, the Falcon spirit traditions on campus were a draw for them in their college choice. They entered BGSU with the hope their experience would be enhanced by such activities, involvement, and traditions. Students in this study desired and expected highly engaging social and academic experiences, but yet had varied levels of social integration as a result of campus life experiences.
Stephen never intended to major in music, but admitted choosing BGSU because of the reputation for a quality men’s choir program. This extracurricular experience fulfilled a significant social need Stephen had. He said:

The men's chorus and the music program as a whole were a huge relationship builder for me. I, inadvertently, joined a fraternity my freshman year with the men's chorus, and it wasn't artificial; it was just a really natural thing. We would get together and sing all the time and we would travel together. We went on tour twice and you made friends. And, then they would start having parties at one of the guy's apartments and that really did it. That was a really natural cohesive way for [relationships] to form.

Not only did Stephen form relationships that was analogous to a fraternal organization, but he created music and 'something bigger’ to share with others which he enjoyed.

It was absolutely incredible to sing in the men’s chorus, and see and feel peoples’ reactions—I would get goose bumps. I have a recording of it from our spring tour; it still gives me goose bumps and it really takes me back. That was a really tremendous outlet being part of something bigger that could do so much.

Stephen’s experience in the men’s choir was so powerful it caused him to seriously question his decision to depart from BGSU, despite the other reasons acknowledged previously.

Peter was involved in Cru, a religiously-affiliated campus organization. His association with and involvement in this organization played an important role in his growth because it became a supportive community for him. He explained:

I almost stayed at BG because of Cru. The Cru organization helped me grow all around, as a student. And the connections I made through some of those organizations were able to kind of connect me to BG.
Serena and Stephen spoke with much appreciation of the campus traditions that helped them connect to BGSU. Serena shared:

I think, generally, the community aspect of BGSU as well as the school spirit made it a very lively school. It wasn't like one you describe as a dead beat school where people kind of walked around and didn't talk to each other. It was always very friendly.

Stephen asserted:

The spirit of Bowling Green was different than other places. [My new institution] doesn't have nearly as much school spirit about [our mascot] as there was about the Falcon. Even though the football team wasn't fantastic, everyone was really involved in and really proud of being a Falcon. And that was really cool. . . . There were huge turnouts at football games and things like that and it was really fun to be a Falcon. . . . It was definitely a very appealing place. I was really looking forward to going there and I was really happy I went there.

Both Serena and Stephen found their new institutions to be lacking the kind of involvement and school spirit they experienced in the BGSU environment. Similarly, Serena enjoyed the campus culture at BGSU. She shared:

If I could have the ideal college experience, I would take the community life of Bowling Green and the academic life [at my new institution] and combine that. Because, I guess its the social atmosphere—the ‘college experience,’ like football games, and homecoming and all this stuff that makes it really hard to get people involved [at my new institution] because academics are their number one priority. At BG, because academics are not as strenuous and they are set up more to support, you can still have a social life. People are more [socially] active and more outgoing.
Not all of the participants in the study enjoyed the football games or sporting events. Amanda was looking for friends who shared her interests for music production for film. She shared:

I didn't go to any sporting events. I didn't really join any extra curricular activities so I didn't really have a lot of social activity. . . . I just feel like I didn't connect with people. I was looking for [people with] the same interests. I had this expectation in my head that I was going to go to college and [would] find people that really liked what I liked. And, I didn't.

John started college with a romantic idea of what campus life would be like. While he invested the necessary psychosocial energy, he didn’t form lasting relationships which made his involvement meaningful. He shared:

I'm going to finally get to go to this happy place everyone talks about. And, I tried at BGSU. I really did. I was involved in the things I mentioned before. I tried making friends in the dorm, in the classes. Some not as much as others.

While John invested the energy for involvement, Amanda lacked the motivation. She described her ideal campus environment as “fast-paced environment” which she reported would help her stay more engaged and focused academically.

I need to be constantly doing something for me to be successful. My spring semester at Bowling Green, I wasn't involved in anything and that led me not to go to class because I was like I'm just not going to. And, then that just led to a lot more things that I just didn't want to do. But like, once I got to [my new institution] and I got involved it was like one thing after another. And, I really like to stay busy and so when I got a job I would have class from 10-3 and then I would work from 4-10. Go to bed, wake up, and do the
same thing. It kept me busy and it kept me focused on my schoolwork. So, I think being busy is something that has kept me focused and you know, academically successful.

Henry, despite leaving BGSU, saw the value of student involvement, and it impressed upon him the importance of shaping his college experience. He shared that he took this value with him to his new educational context. “I learned how to position myself through clubs, organizations, and things like that to get what I want out of college, to try to be as successful as I can.” In reflecting on his experience at BGSU, Stephen shared a personal insight. “I've learned that I'm really prideful of my achievements. Now that I have some achievements that aren't necessarily involved with music, I take a lot of pride in the things I do.” As Stephen shared about being involved in his fraternity and being known across campus, he beamed with pride. It was apparent to me he was highly engaged in his new educational context, and his fraternity was playing an active role in helping facilitate such social integration.

Summary

In summarizing high-achieving students’ expectations, perhaps, Henry stated it best:

I learned that I have very high expectations academically for what I expect to get out of an education. I have found I really want to get the best education I can for the amount of money I'm having to pay. So, I [realized] I have very high expectations of what I think a college education should be.

He also summarized his desire and need for meaningful engagement best when he asserted: “In high school, I knew I wanted to go to a college and be surrounded by people who wanted to be the best they could be academically and everything and in every shape and form.” He expanded on his desire when he shared his ideal college experience.

My ideal college experience is getting a great education, being challenged, being
challenged academically, and being forced to think new ways and see things differently; and, going to a school that was competitive to set me up for the real world, which is super competitive. Basically, to be able talk about ideas with people. . . . I was getting that at BG but I didn't feel like I was getting it enough.

While Henry had a meaningful experience in the Honors College, he expressed dissatisfaction with the academic culture on campus that prevented him from integrating academically. This story illuminates not only the feelings and attitudes of many participants in this study, but it answers the research question regarding participants’ level of social and academic integration on campus.

Henry and Amelia both highlighted their needs and expectations which captured the psychological, sociological, and economic elements of their experiences. Amelia also described her ideal college experience in the following way: “Being supported, being successful and in classes that you like. Being around people who support you and can be your friend. Something affordable. Getting [a degree] that will get you where you want to be in life.”

In this chapter, I provided a description of the experiences of high-achieving students as they navigated the academic and social environments during their first year at BGSU. My description of high-achieving students’ experiences involved four broad themes, which were: sense of belonging, academic rigor, clear pathways, and engaging experiences. These themes directly answer the research question: why did students leave BGSU before graduation?

More specifically, participants experienced their peers as having lower academic standards with differing social goals and, as a result, they did not find the environment in the residence halls conducive to their academic success. As such, students in this study reported not
connecting in a deep way with peers, which prevented them from developing a social support system and a sense of belonging important to persistence.

High-achieving students in this study also reported feeling underwhelmed by the rigor of academic life. The experiences in the classroom and in the curriculum reflected feelings of dissatisfaction regarding challenge, relevance, and teaching methods. Similarly, participants felt the social life of many students negatively impacted and competed with the academic priorities, which affected the academic culture on campus. Consequently, high-achieving students began to question the academic reputation of BGSU.

Students lacked a clear pathway academically and vocationally, which was an important theme in this study. Many participants changed their major and did not have high levels of career confidence. Career clarity was a daunting task for many participants and they reported it being a consideration for stopping out, transferring to a community college, or transferring to another institution. In navigating the organizational structures and processes, high-achieving students generally reported feeling unsupported by the academic advising and desiring more intrusive advising in course selection and reassurance for degree completion.

Finally, high-achieving students desired higher levels of engagement with faculty and peers in their academic and social environments on campus. The Honors College, Presidential Honors Program, and learning communities were respected programs by participants because they provided, to some degree, meaningful engagement pedagogically expected by the participants. While some participants reported having meaningful social engagement in campus programs, clubs, and organizations, this level of interaction generally did not meet the level of engagement desired by participants in the study. In the next chapter, the findings in this study will be discussed and implications for practice and research will be presented.
CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this research study was to understand the experiences of high-achieving students who departed from BGSU in their first year. In this chapter, a summary of the findings will be presented and examined in light of the literature on college student retention and high-achieving students. Additionally, implications for future research and practice will be considered. Finally, the limitations of the research study and conclusion will be presented.

Summary of Findings

Ten former BGSU students participated in this research study. Three interviews were conducted via Skype while seven interviews were conducted in-person. Each interview lasted between 28 and 84 minutes, and was recorded and later transcribed. First, I coded the data, created categories, and wrote summary charts for each case. In this step, I noted significant experiences related to the research questions and cross-referenced notes I made in my field log. Second, I began to analyze the data across cases where I looked for naturally emerging patterns and themes among the participants. Third, I reviewed my interpretations with my peer reviewer which helped me examine my themes in relationship to the transcripts and analysis. As a result, four main themes emerged: sense of belonging, academic rigor, clear pathway, and engaging experiences. Fourth, I provided a copy of the interpretations with salient quotes to my participants. This step, known as member checking, gave my participants an opportunity to reflect and comment on my interpretations. Because of the natural overlap of many of these themes, the reader should consider the themes presented as part of a larger story as opposed to four distinct experiences. In the section that follows, a summary of these themes is presented.
Sense of Belonging

As explained in the previous chapter, high-achieving students did not establish a sense of belonging psychosocially in the residence halls, which negatively affected their social integration. This finding is consistent with Braxton et al. (2004) who posited “the greater the level of psychological energy a student invests in various social interactions at his or her college or university, the greater the student’s degree of social integration” (p. 26). Adjusting to college and, more specifically, to the residence hall environment, requires students to invest psychological energy in relationships and activities which provides a social footing for the important transition to college.

The high-achieving students in this study invested psychological energy to various degrees but none of them integrated socially, evidenced in part by their decision to ultimately depart from BGSU. Specifically, students reported having different goal orientations or motivations, expectations for learning, and standards for success, and also described themselves as more focused, when comparing themselves to peers at BGSU. Many high-achieving students also described feeling “isolated” from or “invisible” socially to their peers. Likewise, the party culture was described as “excessive” or “distracting” from their residential and academic experiences. For these reasons, participants struggled to develop adequate social support systems. Many participants reported looking for peers with similar goal orientations and similar interests personally or academically. Instead, participants described finding study buddies or social acquaintances but did not develop relationships with sufficient depth. That said, adjusting to college and successfully transitioning to a new environment is a shared responsibility by both the student and the institution. Some participants may have not connected with a peer group because they lacked the skill to do so or did not make adequate efforts. Institutions of higher
education should support students in making connections with others, but this effort must be shared. It is interesting to note that when students described their new educational context, there was a sense of relief that they were known “by name” on their new campus, as they had established a sense of community.

Simply put, the BGSU culture did not meet the expectations socially or academically for high-achieving students. The participant experiences reflect an appreciation for many aspects of the campus life experience, but their residence hall experience was not conducive to an environment where high-achieving students could thrive socially and academically. The cultural norms and expectations for success varied from those of the high-achieving students in this study. For these reasons, the participants did not feel a sense of belonging at BGSU, and were not able to develop subsequently the “institutional commitment” necessary to persist to graduation from BGSU (Braxton et al., 2014, p. 92).

**Academic Rigor**

Participants, almost unanimously, felt “underchallenged” or “bored” by the curriculum in the general education courses. They reported not enjoying courses, the pedagogical methods employed, and the lack of engagement with their peers and faculty member. Some of the participants likened their BGSU course experience to their high school courses while others reported the courses lacked relevance to current day issues or career application. Many participants also shared their disappointment in the academic culture on campus and, more specifically, the level of commitment of their peers. Participants questioned the average students’ commitment to academic success in contrast to the focus on social success, noting that there was culturally a strong emphasis placed on partying and they wished they saw the same kind of energy committed to higher academic standards.
The experiences on campus led many participants to question the institutional integrity of BGSU. Institutional integrity, according to Braxton et al. (2014), is demonstrated by an institution living up to its stated mission and the extent to which students’ “expectations for college get fulfilled” (pp. 88-89). The BGSU vision statement espouses creating a “premier learning community” and “shaping the future of learning,” (BGSU, 2014a) which is true, but high-achieving students’ expectations in this area were not fulfilled. Further, the BGSU mission statement espouses “provid[ing] educational experiences inside and outside of the classroom that enhance the lives of all of our students” (BGSU, 2014a). As a result, many participants began to question the academic reputation of BGSU and wondered if they made a good institutional choice. The academic rigor of the courses and curriculum as well as the academic culture eventually affected the way participants viewed the quality of education at BGSU.

Due to the additional tuition costs, out-of-state students reported the educational experience was not worth the money invested. Other students wondered if their BGSU degree would help them achieve their professional goals. Participants in this study demonstrated an ability to pay, evidenced by the scholarship and familial support discussed in the interviews. However, as students wrestled with institutional fit, participants began to evaluate the cost and benefit of their education, which led many participants, especially those from out-of-state, to question their willingness to pay. Finally, participants questioned whether or not they were proud to be associated with the academic traditions of BGSU, given the academic culture and the lack of challenge in curriculum.

Clear Pathway

The high-achieving students in this study were driven academically, and were aware of the cost of attending college. While each participant described the value of their BGSU
education differently, every participant was focused on career and vocation, and subconsciously assessed cost versus benefit in terms of their degree benefiting them in the way they envisioned. Most students were unclear about career and vocational directions and reported changing their course of study at least one time. When these forces—academic drive, career uncertainty, value consciousness, and course of study ambiguity—were combined, it caused participants to question their purpose at BGSU. They needed more guidance and relational support to navigate these big questions.

Students in this study valued and generally desired more guidance from an advisor. Students in the Honors Program or students who had a faculty advisor seemed to have a better advising experience than students with graduate or staff advisors in pre-major advising. Some participants expressed needing a strategic course plan and felt the advising was not adequate given their course choices.

It was clear high-achieving students had their career goals in mind and did not separate those aspirations when it came to the classroom. A few participants described a career focus either in their new educational context or in their ideal college experience. The lack of organizational support combined with career and course of study ambiguity turned out to be a hindrance to “fit” and, thus, academic integration for participants in this study.

**Highly Engaging Experiences**

Consistent with the literature on gifted and talented students (Clark & Rowley, 2008; Gross et al., 2001; LeSueur, 2002), participants in this study wanted highly engaging experiences throughout their college experience, evidenced by those experiences described as satisfying as well as descriptions of experiences that led to participants leaving BGSU. This theme was
prominent in the ways participants spoke favorably of experiences that encouraged interaction with peers and faculty members.

There was a deep desire for intellectually-stimulating conversations and meaningful engagement in the classroom and in campus life experiences. The Honors College, the Presidential Honors Program, and learning communities facilitated the kind of engagement high-achieving students desired and expected at BGSU. This finding is consistent with the literature that describes the attributes of a gifted and talented student: increased levels of curiosity (Gross et al., 2001), ability to transfer and apply knowledge to new contexts (Le Sueur, 2002), ability to exercise abstract thinking (Gross et al., 2001) and desire to create well-formed and convincing opinions (Gross et al., 2001). Because the classroom was a natural place for high-achieving students to engage with peers with similar academic standards, motivation (Clark & Rowley, 2008; Le Sueur, 2002), and passion, the lack of engagement and academic rigor became a question of “institutional integrity” (Braxton et al., 2014) for participants.

High-achieving students in this study earnestly desired engagement with not only important, philosophical ideas and ways of thinking with their peers, but participants also desired such depth with their faculty members. Those participants who had the privilege of such interaction spoke about their experience with deep appreciation. For those participants in the Honors College, Presidential Honors Program, or a learning community, the level of engagement with faculty was significantly better. Tinto (2012) wrote extensively about the influence faculty have on involving students in learning which shapes student persistence inside and outside the classroom. This subtheme of desiring highly engaging experiences with faculty is consistent with the literature on faculty involvement in student persistence (Braxton et al., 2014).
Students living on campus attending residential colleges generally do not compartmentalize their experiences with various campus environments; rather, these formidable experiences in the classroom and residence hall are experienced in a more integrated way. When students engage psychosocially and develop social capital in the classroom and in the residence halls, the student is more likely to integrate socially (Braxton et al., 2004). The participants in this study did not develop social capital, which became one of the biggest liabilities in the student persisting at BGSU. In addition to not connecting with the academic culture and party scene, these participants did not get ample opportunity to engage in meaningful discourse. According to Gross et al. (2001), meaningful engagement with others promotes deeper psychosocial engagement and a sense of belonging, necessary for this population of students. It is also possible that these participants did not take full advantage of the opportunity for deeper psychosocial engagement to establish a sense of belonging. The challenges or obstacles presented in other themes are not mutually exclusive, meaning various factors prevented students from socially integrating, but need and expectation for highly engaging environments was a prominent theme.

Discussion

In this section, the significant findings that emerged in the study are discussed in light of the research questions. As noted previously, this study had one overarching research question and three supporting. Those questions were:

What are the experiences of high-achieving, undergraduate students who departed from BGSU in their first year? (a) What was the students’ level of social and academic integration? (b) What organizational, psychological, sociological, or financial
experiences positively or negatively affected students’ decisions to depart? (c) Why did
the students leave BGSU before graduation?

As noted in the literature review, the relationship between social integration and
subsequent institutional commitment has strong empirical support while academic integration
and subsequent institutional commitment has modest empirical support, at residential colleges
and universities (Braxton et al., 2004). In this study, both academic integration and social
integration were explored.

**Academic Integration**

Academic integration has been defined as the student’s assessment of “fit” with
prevailing attitudes and values of an academic community and, just as important, the perception
that the student is not “intellectually isolated” (Braxton et al., 2014, p. 118). Academic
integration was a central focus of high-achieving students’ experience in this study, due to its
affect on student retention (Braxton & Lien, 2000; Braxton et al., 1997; Tinto, 1975, 1986, 1993,
2012). While participants in the HLLC, the PHLC, and other learning communities integrated
academically at greater levels than students not in these programs, high-achieving students
generally did not integrate well academically. This finding was consistent with Demaris and
Kritsonis’ (2008) assertion that “students who feel they do not fit academically in the
environment of the institution possess lower levels of satisfaction than those who feel they
belong” (p. 4). This finding is also supported by the conclusions of the Documenting Effective
Educational Practices (DEEP) project which found students had higher-than-predicted levels of
engagement and graduation rates when the curriculum was challenging and creative, there were
active and collaborative learning environments, meaningful engagement with faculty, and
enriching educational experiences (Kuh et al., 2005). Similarly, faculty relationships,
pedagogical methods, peers, and reputation emerged as important sub-themes which contributed to a lack of “fit academically” (Demaris & Kritsonis, 2008, p. 4).

**Faculty relationships.** Many participants were complimentary of their faculty, and described their instructors at BGSU as accessible, “open to connecting with students,” “supportive,” and well-educated. Students commented on specific faculty members who had influenced their new course of study and two students, in particular, remained in touch with their faculty members from BGSU. For students in the Honors College or the Presidential Honors Program, they described their faculty as more engaging than the faculty members teaching their general education courses. While faculty contact inside and outside the classroom plays an important role in shaping student persistence (Tinto, 2000), faculty contact alone was not an effective retention influencer in this study. Tinto (2000) highlighted the importance of faculty in the classroom when he asserted that the classroom could become the opportunity for subsequent student involvement in the academic and social environments of the college. Tinto concluded that most classrooms were not engaging. This research study revealed that the classroom experience did not meet the expectations of the high-achieving students, which affected participants’ assessment of “fit” concerning the attitudes and values of the academic culture. This assessment left many of the participants feeling academically isolated.

**Pedagogical methods.** Students in this study reported their courses could have been enhanced by greater peer interaction, more engaging teaching methods, and incorporating more career- or vocationally-relevant course content. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) have documented well that student involvement in the classroom enhances student learning. Juillerat (1995) reported students who were actively engaged in their learning communities had higher rates of satisfaction than those who were not involved. While student learning in the classroom
was outside the scope of this study, the benefits of engaging classrooms on learning and student satisfaction were well supported in the literature.

**Peers.** Participants in this study reported having differing academic standards, goals, and expectations than most of their peers on campus. More specifically, the high-achieving students felt students at BGSU, generally, prioritized social interests over academic goals. This contrast was most prevalent for students in the Honors College or Presidential Honors Program who also had general education courses. The findings of this study are consistent with Endo and Harper’s (1982) study, which found students’ expectations of their peers within the academy also contributed to overall satisfaction and persistence.

**Reputation.** As students experienced the culture on campus and became dissatisfied with the academic rigor of their peers, instruction, curriculum, and the learning environments in the residence halls, students’ perceptions of “institutional integrity” changed (Braxton et al., 2004, p. 93). While few of the participants acknowledged coming to BGSU because of certain faculty members or academic programs, almost all of the participants departed due to the lack of academic rigor. The lack of academic rigor slowly eroded the reputation that high-achieving students (and their families) had of BGSU. Overall, high-achieving students did not integrate academically into the university and became dissatisfied with their experience, a finding consistent with by Bean and Bradley (1986) who found student satisfaction was positively affected by deeper academic integration.

**Social Integration**

Due to the social interaction furthered in residence hall and classroom environments, in addition to other contexts across a residential college campus, it is difficult to isolate interaction among social and academic environments. Three empirically tested antecedents to social
integration emerged as important sub-themes in the findings: commitment to student welfare, institutional integrity, and psychosocial engagement, as captured in Figure 1. As such, I will discuss social integration of high-achieving students through these perspectives.

**Student welfare.** Institutional commitment to student welfare has been defined by Braxton et al. (2014) as an “abiding concern” for the growth and development of the student (p. 86). This value is demonstrated through tangible, administrative decisions and actions including institutional communication and governance or student support programs and services, or more indirectly by faculty teaching practices or through the campus culture or learning environments. Students in this study reported the residence halls were not conducive to academic success, and they felt the party scene was overemphasized culturally on campus. Students also reported the general education courses were not engaging or relevant, and they did not have adequate support to navigate course of study and career confidence issues. Based upon these findings supported by the data, high-achieving students in this study questioned the institution’s commitment to their welfare. Braxton et al. (2004, 2014) posited that possible sources of influence on institution’s commitment to the welfare of students include: academic advising, faculty interest in students, good teaching, active learning environments, first-year orientation, and institutional fairness. That said, it is important to acknowledge students have a responsibility to expend the necessary amount of psychosocial energy to develop a support system, navigate the college systems, and effectively transition from the first year to the second year. It was outside the scope of this study to determine the level of investment, skill, or motivation each student exhibited during their first year at BGSU.

**Institutional integrity.** Participants in this study expressed dissatisfaction with the academic rigor, the engagement with and academic standards of their peers as well as the
educational environments and culture. This dissatisfaction took many of the participants by surprise since they anticipated an easier adjustment, and intended to graduate from BGSU. As such, the findings in this study are supported by Braxton et al. (2004, 2014) who concluded institutional integrity is an essential antecedent to social integration. Institutional integrity was described as the “congruency between the espoused mission and goals of a college or university and the actions of its administrators, faculty, and staff” (Braxton et al., 2014, p. 88). Further, institutional integrity manifests itself to the extent a student feels his or her expectations for college are fulfilled (Braxton et al., 2004, 2014).

**Psychosocial engagement.** The participants in this study were initially attracted to BGSU because of the friendliness of the campus and the traditional campus life experience that the residential campus offers. Based upon the social-anticipation behaviors, the attitudes reflected in the interviews, as well as the fact participants reported their intent to graduate from BGSU, students in this study were anticipating expending the necessary psychological energy to invest in relationships at BGSU. Psychosocial engagement, according to Braxton et al. (2014) is preceded by social integration, meaning students must invest considerable time and psychological energy into the process of developing relationships. As such, a students’ degree of social integration is predicated on the level of psychological energy invested in social interactions at the college or university. That said, the social and academic environments did not meet high-achieving students’ expectations, and they were not able to develop a sense of belonging. These findings are also supported by the conclusions of the Documenting Effective Educational Practices (DEEP) project, which found students had higher-than-predicted levels of engagement and graduation rates when there was a supportive campus environment (Kuh et al., 2005). More specifically, students were more engaged and graduated at higher rates when they
perceived the college or university to be committed to their success and promoted positive, social relationships among students on campus (Kuh et al., 2005). The inability to develop deep relationships and meaningful involvement on campus, referred to by Braxton et al. (2014) as communal potential, may have been a result of a lack of skills or self-confidence. Student abilities in developing relationships and adjusting to college may have affected this outcome, but was not explored in this study.

In summary, students did not reach a level of social integration adequate for persistence at BGSU, evidenced by the data and the literature. Braxton et al. (2014) posited that “social integration reflects the student’s perception of their degree of social affiliation with others and their degree of congruency with the attitudes, beliefs, norms, and values of the social communities of a college or university” (p. 84). The participants felt isolated, invisible, or out of place, and revealed incongruences between their expectations for college in terms of academic standards, level of engagement, and goal orientation of their peers.

To answer the research questions in this study, it is necessary to look at the findings within the following conceptual framework: organizational, psychological, sociological, and financial.

**Organizational Experiences**

As noted in previous chapters, an organizational perspective focuses on the organizational structures and behaviors that influence student departure (Braxton et al., 2014). Because actions of administrators, faculty, and staff are included in this domain, the organizational experiences tie directly to the institutional commitment to welfare of students and institutional integrity noted in the previous section. The main findings within the organizational orientation are the organizational structures and behaviors in the residence halls; the behaviors,
standards, and expectations academically on campus; and the support structure of career and academic advising that influenced student departure. Students generally did not find the residence halls to be a place that was conducive to academic success and, as a result, struggled to establish a sense of belonging. Their housing experience did not contribute positively to students’ academic and social integration, and students perceived this experience as not demonstrating an “abiding concern” (Braxton et al., 2014, p. 86) for their welfare. The academic culture on campus did not meet the expectations or needs of high-achieving students, which poorly reflected on the institutional integrity of BGSU. Finally, the lack of support for career and course of study clarity both in advising and the curriculum reflected poorly on the welfare of students and, thus, student retention was negatively impacted by organizational influences.

**Psychological Experiences**

Of the four conceptual orientations, the psychological experiences of high-achieving students was the most difficult to discern from the data. According to the research by Braxton et al. (2004, 2014), the following two psychological entities affect the psychological experiences of students at a residential campus: proactive social adjustment and psychosocial engagement (mentioned above). Proactive social adjustment is concerned with how students adjust and meet the social demands and pressures of their college environment. According to the interviews, participants in this study were not able to proactively adjust to their new social context. Based upon the interviews, I had insufficient data to fully understand why this was the case. What skills, abilities, behaviors, and attitudes were the responsibility of the student and what cultural, structural, or systematic issues institutionally contributed to this phenomenon? These dynamics were beyond the scope of this study and, based upon the data collected, were unexplainable.

Similarly, it was difficult to pinpoint which behaviors or attitudes were the responsibility
of the student or the institution when it came to psychosocial engagement. But, as noted above, most participants started as a new student with the anticipation of developing new friends and investing in the BGSU campus life. Additionally, high-achieving students described having successful social and academic experiences in high school. That said, this proactive psychosocial posture was influenced by students’ experiences socially and academically, which prevented them from fully investing the psychological energy to make the adjustment and commit to a second year at BGSU.

**Sociological Experiences**

A sociological orientation is concerned with the “social structures and social forces” related to the student’s decision to persist or depart (Braxton et al., 2004, p. 29). This was a significant theme that ran throughout the data. Participants in this study were not able to establish a sense of belonging and, for a number of reasons stated previously, had difficulty relating academically and socially to their peers on campus. This theme was apparent in the residence hall and classroom environments, and prevented students from integrating socially, which according to the literature on retention of students at a residential campus is essential (Braxton et al., 2004, 2014). The findings for the sociological experiences of students are consistent with the research.

**Financial Experiences**

The economic perspective on student departure is concerned with ability to pay and the cost versus benefit—or value—of remaining enrolled at BGSU. Of the four conceptual orientations in this research question, economic experiences varied the most among participants, which is why it did not emerge as a major theme within the research findings. Most notable was out-of-state students seemed to question the value of their BGSU experience the most, which
may be the result of having to pay a higher tuition rate than in-state students. For in-state students who attended BGSU and departed, most of them attended another institution with similar or higher tuition. Likewise, students came from various socioeconomic backgrounds with varied levels of familial support, financial aid, and scholarships.

Most of the participants in this study were not first-generation students and their responses reflected the means to pay for tuition. That said, this population of students carefully weighed the benefit versus the cost of attending college, and were value-conscious in terms of desiring to reap the greatest short-term and long-term return on investment. One interesting observation was for participants who were paying out-of-state tuition; they all reported BGSU was not a good value based upon the cost of tuition paid versus perceived benefit. Another important observation was some students felt the financial aid to lure them to the university to enroll their first year of college was not adequate to sustain them for four years which also caused them to question their commitment to the institution as well as the institution’s commitment to them. This finding is consistent with prior research studies of the influence financial aid has on the initial commitment to institutions (St. John et al., 1996).

**Departure**

In summary, high-achieving students departed from BGSU for four main reasons. First, and most prevalent in the data and consistent with the literature (Braxton et al., 2004, 2014), is participants did not adequately achieve a level of social integration necessary for persistence. More specifically, students did not establish a sense of belonging psychosocially due to the differing academic and social goal orientations of their peers and the academic culture on campus. Second, students were not able to socially integrate due to being underwhelmed by the rigor of academic life, evidenced by the classroom, the curriculum, pedagogical methods, and
environments in the residence halls. Third, the participants in this study reported changing their course of study and/or their career path, and needing more support from an advisor or faculty member. The lack of a clear pathway academically and vocationally confounded the process of persisting or leaving the institution, but poorly reflected on the institutional integrity of BGSU. Fourth, according to the literature, high-achieving students came to BGSU with increased levels of curiosity (Gross et al., 2001), abilities to transfer and apply knowledge to new contexts (Le Sueur, 2002), ability to exercise abstract thinking (Gross et al., 2001), and having exceptional motivation (Clark & Rowley, 2008). They expected and desired to utilize their intellectual and social skills in their educational context, and became disheartened by the academic and social environments at BGSU. One exception to this was the powerful opportunities for higher levels of academic and social integration in the learning communities on campus. These learning communities afforded high-achieving students the ability to engage with their peers and faculty members in a way that fulfilled their expectations for college.

Summary

The findings suggest participants generally did not establish a sense of belonging, were underwhelmed by the academic rigor at BGSU, felt unsupported with important course of study and career clarity decisions, and generally expected more engaging experiences. These psychological, sociological, organizational, and economic experiences were not described in isolation, but rather overlapped across themes. Because of these experiences, participants, generally, did not feel the institution was committed to their welfare, questioned the integrity of the institution, and were not able to invest the required psychosocial energy to remain enrolled. Further, some participants were not able to proactively respond to social stresses with a satisfactory level of psychosocial engagement required to build a support system. Proactive
social adjustment and communal potential are two important antecedents to social integration (Braxton et al., 2014) and were reflected in the data, but to a lesser degree by the student experiences. Because these antecedents to social integration were not met, students were not able to develop social and academic integration required for persistence. The literature on college student retention describes these themes as critical to persistence.

**Implications for Practice**

The purpose of this research study was to understand the experiences of high-achieving students and to understand why this population of students departed from BGSU. Related to the findings, a number of implications for administrators in student and academic affairs working to improve the experiences of high-achieving students will be presented below. While the scope of this study was focused on high-achieving students, the implications advanced will serve to improve the campus environments and benefit all students.

**Campus Culture**

Due to high-achieving students’ dissatisfaction with the academic and social environments at BGSU, difference of academic standards and goals among peers, inability to develop a sense of belonging, and need for more engaging learning environments, it is evident the culture on campus must improve. Braxton et al. (2004, 2014) posited that commitment to student welfare and institutional integrity are reflected in the culture of an institution. Because the stories of participants in this study do not positively reflect these two propositions and antecedents to social integration, BGSU must work to improve the culture on campus. As a result, I have four recommendations to improve the culture on campus for high-achieving students.
First, work with residential education professionals to raise academic standards and to create more academically nurturing environments in the residence halls. This may be realized by making academic and student success a central theme in the residence hall programming model, investing in a faculty-in-residence program, creating tutor-in-residence programs, and enforcing community standards more consistently to ensure a more academically conducive environment for studying. Wilson and Rygg (2014) asserted, “creating environments [in the residence halls] that respond to the needs of all students sends a message that each person matters, thereby increasing the likelihood of academic success and personal growth” (p. 19). A focus on creating an environment that is more suitable for high-achieving students will not only support this population’s needs, but much like a universal design concept, such environmental improvements stand to benefit all students.

Second, the university must create healthier social alternatives to drinking. Some examples may include increased investment and emphasis on late-night programming, and increased emphasis on peer health advocate education on the affects of alcohol, and improved collaboration from student health and recreation to promote wellness concepts.

Third, scale up learning communities on campus, due to the empirical support for the positive affects of learning communities on academic and social integration (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Tinto, 2000). While this has been a focus of BGSU, a more intentional partnership between residence life and academic affairs may create stronger academic ties to these essential curricular and co-curricular programs.

Fourth, because participants were drawn to, and spoke highly of, the campus traditions, continue to invest in and promote engagement with campus spirit programs and events. Related
to improving the campus culture and creating environments that create a sense of belonging for high-achieving students, the findings suggest the classroom must also be a focus.

**Faculty Development**

As stated previously, the classroom serves as an important gateway for social integration, and faculty contact play an important role in student persistence (Tinto, 2000). The data were very clear that high-achieving students did not feel challenged in their general education courses and desired more engaging learning environments. As such, I am advancing a few recommendations for practice. First, BGSU must invest in faculty development programs to raise awareness among instructors of the motivations, abilities, expectations, and values of high-achieving students (Clark & Rowley, 2008). Second, promote more active learning environments that foster improved levels of peer and faculty engagement (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008; Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000). Third, develop more challenging curriculum by catering to high-achieving students’ needs for intellectual substance, capacity, pace, and desire for real-world application (Gross, 1999; Le Sueur, 2002). Fourth, aggressively invest in the expansion of learning communities that promote intentional linking of courses to learning communities (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Tinto, 2000). Fifth, continue to encourage faculty to be accessible to students and to promote the importance of meaningful faculty-student interactions (Ehreng & Zhang, 2005). While the workload of faculty continues to expand as they have increased teaching loads and are recruited for co-curricular partnerships across campus, faculty and academic affairs should thoughtfully and strategically prioritize faculty involvement for meaningful student engagement opportunities. Of course, such high-impact practices require faculty to provide high time, high touch with students, which can be
very costly in terms of resources. To increase faculty-student interactions, institutions should consider changing the faculty reward structures to incentivize student engagement.

**Fist-year Experience**

The first year of college is a substantial adjustment for new students and can be a time of unprecedented change. In addition to adapting to new academic standards, making new friends, and learning how to be more independent, students in the first year are wrestling with career and vocational clarity. A majority of participants changed their major or career goals at least once during the first year. This process was described as a stressful experience due to the high cost of education and the approaching career pathway it would create for the student. Many of the participants also described this experience as difficult or lonely, and they were not satisfied with the support provided by BGSU. As a result, I have the following implications for practice.

First, create clearer pathways for undecided or major-changing students to explore and decide majors and careers. Second, intentionally integrate career exploration and career identity development into new student orientation and the first-year experience, including the first-year curriculum. Third, create synergies between advising and career services to embed career and vocational advising into the academic advising experience. Fourth, improve the academic advising experience of high-achieving students in the first year by tagging these students and encouraging a different level of engagement between advisor and student. Fifth, develop a first-year experience course that caters to the academic and social, career, and college transition needs of high-achieving students.

**Implications for Future Research**

The purpose of this research study was to understand the experiences of high-achieving students who departed from BGSU during their first year. There is a fair amount of research
focusing on the retention of at-risk students, the retention of historically marginalized populations, or gifted and talented students in the primary and secondary school system, but very little research exists on the retention of high-achieving students in higher education. While most of the research in this study affirmed the revised theory of student persistence in residential colleges and universities, advanced by Braxton et al. (2014), the findings of this study also raise additional areas on which future research might focus to contribute to the persistence of high-achieving college students.

As has been stated, deconstructing the complexities of student retention is particularly a difficult process because of the number of organizational, psychological, sociological, and financial variables involved. That said, a comparison study across multiple types of institutions might illuminate the environmental influences affecting the retention of high-achieving students. Additionally, employing a quantitative methodology may provide more descriptive data and predictable inputs while allowing for a larger breadth of participants and institutions to provide insights to reducing the departure among high-achieving students.

As with any case study methodology, the findings are inextricably tied to a context and transferability must be carefully considered. To that end, I would posit that the experiences of high-achieving students at a more prestigious college or university would likely differ than those experiences of high-achieving students at a regional state university, like BGSU.

Consistent with current thinking around more localized retention research (given the complexities and variability of campus environments, culture, and programs), this study may also be replicated with specific populations of students (Reason, 2003; Tinto, 1993), such as historically marginalized students, first-generation students, or students from low or high socio-economic backgrounds to see how their experiences differ.
It was unclear based on the interviews what happened psychosocially when students had difficult developing social support systems. For instance, how much psychosocial energy did they expend? How did the students’ social skills and abilities affect their psychosocial engagement? These questions emerged during this study and deserve to be explored further.

Finally, if I were conducting this study again, I may select one of the four conceptual orientations and ask more specific questions related to organizational, psychological, sociological, and financial experiences related to high-achieving student retention. For the purposes of understanding student departure among high-achieving students at BGSU, this conceptual orientation allowed me to cover the spectrum of experiences, but having reviewed and analyzed the data, I can see that specifically drilling down into one or more orientations could have tremendous value for practitioners working with this population.

Limitations of this Study

It is important to acknowledge any influences or conditions that could not be controlled by the researcher, which naturally influenced the results of the research. The limitations in this study were particular to my methodological decisions, and specific to participant selection and data collection.

Participant Selection

Participants were selected based upon six predetermined criterion: The student must have (a) been at least 18 years or older, (b) enrolled at BGSU in the fall of 2011, spring 2012, fall 2012, or spring 2013 as a new, undergraduate student, (c) enrolled at BGSU with the intent of graduating from BGSU, (d) lived on campus at least one semester, (e) departed from BGSU with a term GPA of 3.5 or higher, and (f) departed after one-semester or one academic year. A brief survey (Appendix B) was sent with the recruitment letter to collect grade point average,
race/ethnicity, and gender to help me in selecting a diverse group of participants. Despite efforts to select a diverse group of participants, self-selection was a limitation because the researcher had no control over which participants kept their same personal email address or would be interested in participating in the study, and was dependent upon participants returning the brief survey. For instance, the participants in this study were fairly homogenous in terms of age and race. If I had more time and unlimited resources, I may have waited longer to see how many participants were interested in the study to have a more diverse participant group. In addition, in-person interviews were scheduled with those participants who were willing and available during a ten-day period in the northeast and southwest corners of Ohio, due to time and budget constraints.

**Data Collection**

Another limitation in this research study was the data collection method. Ideally, all ten interviews would have been conducted in-person, but due to time and budget constraints, three interviews were conducted via Skype. As it turned out, all three out-of-state participant interviews were all conducted via Skype. While this method was approved by the BGSU Human Subjects Review Board, important interpersonal observations and contextual information was naturally lost. The extent to which the experiences of out-of-state students were not fully captured may have represented a limitation in this study.

**Conclusions**

Just as colleges and universities are working to tailor teaching and learning environments to better support special populations, colleges and universities can and should intentionally develop teaching and learning environments that meet the specific needs of high-achieving students. This population of students has high expectations for their curricular and co-curricular
experiences, and has so much to offer the campus in terms of scholarship, role-modeling, potential service, and leadership capacity.

The retention of high-achieving students cannot be assumed or taken for granted. If students do not find congruence between their values and expectations—regardless of their pre-college profile or academic standing—they will feel “out of place” in their academic home, and not be able to establish the sense of belonging important for persistence on a residential college campus. As such, it is important for campus administrators in enrollment management, student affairs, and academic affairs to work collaboratively to optimize social and academic environments to ensure students can successfully adjust and find a good institutional fit.

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of high-achieving students who departed from BGSU in their first year. Better understanding the organizational, psychological, economic, and sociological experiences of high-achieving students has the potential to influence the experiences of this student population at BGSU. Most notable in this study was that high-achieving students were not able to integrate socially as a result of not creating a sense of belonging. The academic rigor also negatively affected students’ experience due to the challenge of the curriculum and the academic culture on campus, which affected their perceptions of the institution. High-achieving students faced important course of study and career clarity decisions and did not have the support to make those decisions. Finally, high-achieving students in this context expected more engaging experiences socially and academically to support their growth and development.

While the findings in this study affirm the theoretical framework advanced by Braxton et al. (2014), the findings highlight the experiences of high-achieving students at a regional, state
university in Ohio. The findings in this study add to the important retention research in higher education and also add to the body of knowledge in the high-achieving student literature.

As the economic and political landscape of higher education continues to change and institutions, as a result, experience increased pressure and accountability to retain more students, the retention of high-achieving students will continue to be important. The findings from this study suggest both the academic and social environments play a critical role in the retention of high-achieving students. If the implications for practice advanced by this study are implemented, such enhancements stand to improve the academic and social environments for not only high-achieving students, but for all students throughout the institution as they persist toward degree completion.
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Dear Former BGSU Dean’s List Student,

I am writing to invite your participation in a research effort being undertaken by a BGSU doctoral candidate, Mr. Matthew J. Rygg, on the experiences of high achieving students at BGSU who left the university prior to graduation.

The doctoral candidate is providing a financial incentive for those who complete the study. If you are interested in participating, please read the letter of invitation below and return the attached participant questionnaire via email directly to Mr. Rygg.

Thank you, in advance, for your consideration of this research effort.

Best Regards,

Conrad McRoberts
Interim Director
Institutional Research
Bowling Green State University
Bowling Green, OH 43403

December 12, 2013

Dear Former BGSU Dean’s List Student,

I am conducting a qualitative research study about the experiences of high-achieving students who departed from BGSU after the first semester or the first year, to fulfill the dissertation requirement of the Higher Education Administration doctoral program at Bowling Green State University (BGSU). Your experiences as an undergraduate, dean’s list-student at BGSU are important to future policies, programs, and budget priorities, and can fill an important gap in the literature on high-achieving college students. As such, I am writing to invite you to participate in the study.

Should you decide to participate, a $75 cash award will be given to you at the conclusion of the study. There are a few expectations for this study, which are: return the brief completed participant questionnaire (attached), participate in a one-on-one interview with me, provide feedback about my interpretations of the data collected during the interview, and return some email correspondences with me throughout the study. The total time expected on your part for your participation in this study will be approximately 3-4 hours. This includes the brief participant questionnaire, the interview, your feedback of my initial findings, and any email exchanges. The timeframe of the study will be between January 2014 and March 2014.

There are a few eligibility criteria required for this study; you must:
1. be 18 years or older, AND
2. have enrolled at BGSU in the fall of 2011, spring 2012, fall 2012, or spring 2013 as a new, undergraduate student, AND
3. have departed after one-semester or one academic year, AND
4. have enrolled at BGSU with the intent of graduating from BGSU, AND
5. have lived on campus at least one semester, AND
6. have departed from BGSU with a GPA of 3.5 or higher.

If you have any questions or comments about this study, you may contact me, Matthew Rygg, at 360-989-6915 or mrygg@bgsu.edu or Dr. Maureen E. Wilson, my dissertation advisor, at 419-372-7321 or mewilso@bgsu.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board, Bowling Green State University, (419) 372-7716 (hsrcb@bgsu.edu), if any problems or concerns arise during the course of the study.

I hope you will consider participating in this important research study as it stands to provide insights into student attrition that can serve BGSU, and practitioners and academicians working in higher education. If you meet the criteria above and are willing to participate in this study, please complete and return the brief participant questionnaire (attached) and email it to me at mrygg@bgsu.edu.

Thank you for your consideration,

Matthew J. Rygg, M.Ed.
Doctoral Candidate, Higher Education Administration
Bowling Green State University
Phone: 360-989-6915
Email: mrygg@bgsu.edu
APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

To be considered for this research study, please complete and return this brief form by emailing it to mrygg@bgsu.edu by January 15, 2014. If you have any questions about the form or this study, please contact Matthew Rygg at mrygg@bgsu.edu or [phone number].

Please be assured that your information is confidential and accessible only to me and the chair of my dissertation committee, Dr. Maureen Wilson, Associate Professor, Department of Higher Education and Student Affairs.

Contact Information

Name: _______________________________ Email: _______________________________

Cell Phone: ___________________________

Participant Information

What is your gender?

What is your race/ethnicity?

What was your overall GPA at BGSU?

___ 3.75-4.00
___ 3.50-3.74
___ 3.25-3.49
___ 3.00-3.24
___ 2.75-2.99
___ 2.50-2.74
___ 2.25-2.49
___ 2.00-2.24
___ Less than 2.00

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this important research study. Please return this form to Matthew Rygg at mrygg@bgsu.edu by January 15, 2014.

Matthew J. Rygg
Doctoral Candidate
Higher Education Administration
Bowling Green State University
330 Education Building
Bowling Green, OH 43403
APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

THE EXPERIENCES OF HIGH ACHIEVING STUDENTS WHO DEPARTED FROM BGSU AFTER ONE SEMESTER OR ONE YEAR

You are invited to participate in a research study on the experiences of dean’s list students who departed from BGSU. As part of my work on a doctorate in Higher Education Administration in the Department of Higher Education and Student Affairs at Bowling Green State University (BGSU), I am conducting research on dean’s list students who departed from BGSU after one semester or one year.

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of high achieving students who left BGSU after one semester or one year who intended to graduate from BGSU. It is expected that a better understanding of high achieving students might lead to greater insights about student and faculty cultures, expectations, and institutional fit of high achieving students at BGSU. This study will specifically focus on the social and academic experiences of high achieving students.

Procedure
Participants must be at least 18 years or older, have enrolled at BGSU in the fall of 2011, spring 2012, fall 2012, or spring 2013 as a new, undergraduate student, departed after one-semester or one academic year, enrolled at BGSU with the intent of graduating from BGSU, lived on campus at least one semester, and departed from BGSU with a term GPA of 3.5 or higher. As a participant in this study, your involvement will consist of completing and returning the brief participant questionnaire and participation in a recorded interview lasting approximately two hours. Every attempt will be made by the researcher to conduct the interview in person, depending on your location, but if that is not possible the interview will take place through an online video format (e.g., Skype, Google chat). After the interview, you will be asked to review my interpretations of the data collected as well as respond to any email correspondences related to the study. The total time expected on your part for your participation in this study will be approximately 3-4 hours. This includes the participant questionnaire, interview, your feedback about my interpretations, and any email exchanges.

Voluntary Nature of Study
Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. During any interview, you may decide to skip a question, or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or explanation. Deciding to participate or not will not affect any relationship you may have with BGSU.

Confidentiality Protection
Information you provide will remain confidential, and your identity will not be revealed. Each participant will create a pseudonym and personal identifiers will be removed from all transcripts. Quotations from the interviews using a pseudonym will be used when reporting the results. A list of pseudonyms and real names will be kept separate in a password-protected computer and will only be accessible by the primary investigator. Each interview will be recorded digitally and transcribed. The audio files and transcription
files of the actual interviews will be kept in a password protected computer until the completion of the study at which point these files will be destroyed. All associated hard-copy documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. Only the dissertation chair may review redacted transcripts.

**Risks/Benefits:**
The anticipated risks to you are no greater than those normally encountered in daily life. Individual participants may benefit from participation in this study because they will have the opportunity to reflect on past experiences as well as educational needs and goals. Additionally, participating in this research study stands to provide insights into student attrition that can serve BGSU and practitioners and academicians working in higher education.

**Contact Information**
If you have any questions or comments about this study, you may contact me, Matthew Rygg, at 360-989-6915 or mrygg@bgsu.edu or Dr. Maureen E. Wilson, my dissertation advisor, at 419-372-7321 or mewilso@bgsu.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board, Bowling Green State University, (419) 372-7716 (hsrb@bgsu.edu), if any problems or concerns arise during the course of the study. Thank you for your time.

Signing this consent form indicates that you have read the form and consent to participate in the study. You will be given a copy of the signed consent form for your records. For those participants where an online video format is being used, responding to the interview questions indicates your consent to participate in this research study.

____________________     _______________________
Participant Signature                                                               Date

_____________________________________
Participant Name – Print
APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction
1. Tell me about your experience at BGSU.
2. What drew you originally to BGSU? Why did you come to BGSU?
3. Was BGSU the first institution of higher education you attended? What institutions have you attended since departing from BGSU?
4. Why did you leave BGSU?
5. What are you doing now?

Academic Engagement
6. Tell me about your experience in the classroom with regards to:
   a. the level of challenge by the curriculum
   b. the academic capabilities of your peers
   c. the teaching methods of your faculty members
   d. the level of support by your faculty members
7. Tell me about your perceptions of the academic culture on campus.
8. How did your living environment support your academic pursuits?
9. Were you a member of any living/learning community? If so, what was your experience?
10. Did any of these factors contribute to you leaving BGSU?

Organizational
11. How did you feel about BGSU’s commitment to your growth and development as a student?
12. What values or claims initially attracted you to BGSU? Did BGSU live up to those values or claims?
13. How did you feel in terms of the institution valuing you, respecting you, and treating you fairly?
14. How would you describe the organizational processes or services at BGSU?
Sociological

15. How did you perceive opportunities for relationship-building at BGSU?

16. What kind of social life did you have at BGSU?

17. How did you invest in extracurricular activities?

(How are you doing? Do you need to take a break? We are about ½ way through the questions)

Psychological

18. Most of us face some obstacles when we enter into new seasons of our lives. Can you think back about your entry into the BGSU environment, and share with me any obstacles or challenges you experienced, if any? How did you experience support?

19. Were any experiences at BGSU stressful? How did you cope with that stress? Can you share with me any stories?

20. How did you feel about your academic and social abilities before attending BGSU?

21. How did you feel about your academic and social abilities while attending BGSU?

Economic

22. How would you describe the value (cost vs. perceived benefit) of tuition paid at Bowling Green State University?

23. How did your financial aid package or financial situation impact your decision to depart?

Closing

24. What is your ideal college experience? Are you experiencing something closer to your ideal now? What is different about this new educational environment that you particularly like?

25. How have you made sense of your experience at BGSU? What have you learned about yourself and your needs?

26. How, if at all, did the academic, social, or physical environments at BGSU contribute to your departure?

27. How, if at all, has this interview—and opportunity to process your experience—been of value to you?

28. Are there additional thoughts, feelings, attitudes, or stories you would like to add that we have not discussed?
APPENDIX E

HSRB APPROVAL

DATE: December 20, 2013

TO: Matthew Rygg
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [526045-3] THE EXPERIENCES OF HIGH ACHIEVING, UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS WHO DEPARTED FROM BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY AFTER ONE SEMESTER OR ONE YEAR: A CASE STUDY

SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: December 20, 2013
EXPIRATION DATE: November 3, 2014
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Modifications Approved:

BGSU Institutional Research will be sending out PI’s recruitment letter instead of providing personal email addresses of participants to PI. BGSU IR was approved to give PI the BGSU email addresses, but because these students have departed PI needs to contact them through their personal email address. Participants will return the brief questionnaire to PI by email.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on November 3, 2014. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.