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IN PURSUIT OF PERSISTENCE

**A Qualitative Study of Community College Stopouts'
Attempts to Obtain a College Degree**

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Doris Jean Ivie
December, 1994

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this manuscript to my immediate family, each of whom has contributed to my arrival at this educational milestone:

To the memory of my mother
Juanita Fletcher Ivie
1919-1980

who dropped out of school in the seventh grade to care for her dying mother, was one of the pioneers of 1930's country music radio, educated herself through extensive reading, and who reinforced in me the drive to pursue educational opportunities;

To the memory of my father
Richard Ivie
1918-1994

who graduated from high school in 1938, having begun supporting himself financially at age five, whose genius was recognized by his employers based on results of standardized intelligence tests, but who never felt he could afford to attend college -- and who departed this life twenty-three hours before I defended this dissertation;

To my sister
Beckie Ivie
B.A., M.A., Phi Beta Kappa

whose vocabulary, knowledge base, perspicacity, and wit continually astonish me.

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ABSTRACT

Twelve community college stopouts (current students who had stopped attending college for at least one semester in the past and who had since re-enrolled) who fit the "success" criterion of having achieved sophomore status and of maintaining at least a 3.00 grade-point average were interviewed using nonstructured reflective interview techniques. The participants were encouraged to reflect on their disparate experiences of college, on themselves within each of those experiences, and on sources of social support that had contributed to their decisions to leave, to return to, and to remain in college. The participants discussed their various college experiences in terms of their reactions to the college environment as a new culture into which they were being assimilated or in terms of their perception of the practical value of a college education. Those who adopted the former stance tended to report having felt intimidated by the college environment, alienated from the college environment, or having reacted unwisely to the freedom of choice available to them, having developed a love for learning, or having learned to treat college attendance and assignments as if they were one's current career. Participants' self-descriptions fell into the categories of intrinsic motivational factors (which included progression from self-doubt to a sense of mastery, exercise of a sense of autonomy, or the application of inherent tenacity), extrinsic motivators (job market demands and time pressure to graduate as a result of age), and the development and use of such academic skills as effective time management, learning about and working within the academic system, exercising classroom skills (sitting near the front, participating in discussions, taking notes, and assessing instructors' grading patterns), and employing cognitive reappraisal when one feels overwhelmed or discouraged. Nonconstructive social influences on the

participants' academic decisions included nonsupportive spouses, parents, and friends, as well as a few college students and faculty members. Constructive social influences included college faculty (the most prevalent theme by far that emerged from the interviews), spouses and family members, friends and co-workers, and even models whom the participants hoped to avoid emulating. Serving as a positive model of academic behaviors for one's own children or grandchildren also proved to be important to the participants. The interview data partially confirmed the theoretical model and subsequent opinions advanced by Vincent Tinto, but suggested that another factor, personal integration, may greatly influence academic motivation.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Having taught in a two-year college for over twenty years, I have become acutely aware that students in these colleges represent a unique population of college students; on average they are older than traditional four-year college students, they frequently are married and have children, and they almost universally struggle financially for the opportunity to attend college. Community college populations are also known for their sporadic enrollment patterns and for their reported lack of completion of degree programs. As a result of these latter two characteristics, as well as the fact that community college faculty are not encouraged to engage in research, comparatively few studies address the unique characteristics and learning experiences of community college students.

All colleges are concerned with the problem of attrition and attempt to ameliorate it via retention programs which are usually designed in-house and which seek to meet the academic and social needs of the perceived average student attending the given college. These programs generally include, at minimum, orientation sessions for first-time students, tutoring services, and a plethora of extracurricular activities. Community college students, however, often attend a series of institutions and may never go to an orientation program -- or they may attend orientation at the traditional age of eighteen, drop out of college, and never again attend orientation when they re-enter college or transfer to other colleges. Though they do frequently make use of tutoring services when those services are prominently advertised, community college students often juggle family and occupational demands that do not permit them to partake of campus extracurricular offerings.

In short, so little research is available on community college students that the colleges' administrators and faculty often have little idea what experiences their students bring with them to the classroom or how they may best serve these students.

This study was designed to obtain in-depth interview information from a group of community college "stopouts" who were interested enough in the purposes of the study to volunteer their time to "tell their stories" about their multiple attempts to obtain a college degree.

Statement of the Problem

Though extensive institutional research has been conducted using statistical models to study and thus predict student attrition and academic persistence patterns, primarily in four-year colleges, little qualitative investigation into students' own perceptions of their academic experiences has been undertaken. Even less qualitative research has been done on community college students.

Purpose of the Investigation

The purpose of this study is to explore in depth a few community college sophomores' experiences of entering college, stopping out of college, returning to college, and persisting toward earning a college degree so that readers may develop an understanding of the conflicting demands that delay college stopouts as they intermittently pursue college degrees.

In this investigation I sought to elicit detailed descriptions, using qualitative interview techniques, of prior and current academic experiences from students currently demonstrating academic proficiency after having left college at least once in the past without completing a degree program. My intent was to share my findings with interested college faculty and administrators to help them understand some of the

factors that lead to community college students' academic persistence and withdrawal behaviors.

Rationale for the Study

As will be demonstrated in the next chapter, review of available literature reveals a flourishing body of research centering around path analyses of student characteristics, grade-point averages, and responses to questionnaires about campus climate. This quantitative data, though useful to administrators of large universities especially, cannot by its nature amplify why or how individuals drop out of and later return to college, nor does it distinguish "dropouts" from "stopouts." As a consequence of the limitations of existing quantitative research models, numerous current investigators publishing in the field of college persistence and withdrawal cite a need for qualitative interview follow-ups to elucidate the information gleaned from questionnaires and student records via students' stated perceptions of their academic experiences. Clearly, anecdotal information gained from the students themselves should reveal intrapersonal and interpersonal influences on the students' decisions about attending, leaving, and returning to college which would not be discernible from responses to questionnaires.

Research Questions

In this study I sought answers to the primary research question, "How do now-successful 'stopout' community college students contrast their current experience of college with the earlier experience which led to voluntary withdrawal or dismissal from college?" The secondary research question that I explored was, "How do these students retrospectively view themselves in each of their attempts to obtain a college degree?"

My third research question was, "How have sources of social support in the students' lives contributed to their decisions to leave or to remain in college?"

Significance of the Study

As will be demonstrated in the literature review, little in-depth research involving community college students' perceptions of their attempts to obtain college degrees exists. It is my intent to share the results of this study with as many educators as I possibly can in order to fill this knowledge gap.

Definitions of Terms

Terminology in the literature on academic persistence (labeled from the administrative viewpoint as "student retention") and withdrawal behaviors (including the traditional phenomenon of "dropping out" and the more recently distinguished category of "stopping out," both of which are conventionally classified as "attrition") is by no means consistent, as this sentence demonstrates. Thus I am defining at the outset certain ambiguous terms used in this study.

"Stopouts" refers to students who have stopped attending college for at least one semester either as a result of voluntary withdrawal or dismissal and who have since resumed their academic pursuits.

"Academic success" is defined, for the purposes of this study, as a student's having completed at least 30 semester hours of college-level classes and currently demonstrating at least a 3.00 cumulative grade-point average.

"Sources of social support" include friends, family members, co-workers, and people the stopout knows or has known primarily as a result of attending college, whether students, faculty, or staff. "Social support" may either facilitate one's college progress or hinder it, such as when the social relationship distracts the student from

studying or attending class, or in other ways impinges upon the student's time, regardless of the professed or implied intentions of the person who is serving as a source of social support.

Limitations of the Study

Inability to generalize research findings to a larger population is an inherent and accepted characteristic of qualitative inquiry. Qualitative researchers undertake their investigations with the intention of adding breadth of understanding to their readers' perceptions of individual members of a given population rather than studying perfectly representative members of that population. Furthermore, the participants who volunteered to participate in this study were all students at a community college in East Tennessee. It would be unrealistic to assume even that these participants are representative of the college population from which they were drawn since they chose to volunteer to participate in the study and around 1000 other students who could have qualified as participants either did not notice the briefly posted requests for volunteers or chose not to respond to them by volunteering to participate.

Organization of the Study

The balance of this report is organized as follows: Chapter 2, "Review of Literature"; Chapter 3, Methodology"; Chapter 4, "Profiles of Participants"; Chapter 5, "Analysis of Participants' Responses"; and Chapter 6, "Discussion."

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Attrition and Persistence: Increasing College Concerns

In the opening line of his 1987 book Leaving College, Vincent Tinto noted, "More students leave their college or university prior to degree completion than stay (p. 1)." The costs of college non-completion to society at large, to colleges, and to the individual college leaver are immense.

Costs of Attrition to Society

After over thirty years of study of college students, Astin detachedly observed in his most recent book What Matters in College? Four Critical Years Revisited (1993), "During the 1950s and early 1960s a substantial national investment in higher education was regarded as an insurance policy in the Cold War and as a way to enhance our technological and scientific position in world trade. Now, however, many public officials are asking whether the soaring costs of higher education are draining off resources that could be better used for other public purposes" (p. 2). The need to justify the value to the public of institutions of higher learning has resulted in increasing attention to the quantification of educational outcomes and to sundry other forms of accountability. As Levitz and Noel (1985) pragmatically noted, "The new generation of research will measure and confirm outcomes that are deemed desirable by those most interested in assessing outcomes: our students, the clients who buy our product, and those who pay for it -- students, parents, legislators, taxpayers, and graduates, as well as those responsible for corporate and private giving (p. 347)."

Costs of Attrition to Colleges

Funding for higher education today is frequently tied both to measures of educational outcomes and to graduation rates, even in private colleges and universities. As Bers (1989) noted, "Constituents of higher education -- legislators, state governing boards, governors, trustees, employers, and parents -- are demanding evidence that the programs they fund are producing the expected results" (p. 7). Meanwhile, numbers of entering students are declining (Mutter, 1992). Accordingly, colleges are seeking means of encouraging student academic persistence to retain the students they have already attracted.

Costs of Attrition to Nonpersisters

Those who do not earn college degrees can expect, on the average, to earn considerably less in their lifetimes than will college graduates and to experience comparatively diminished quality of life. Conversely, as Jewler, Gardner, and McCarthy (1992) tell incoming college freshmen in their introductory college success book, "According to the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, as a college graduate you will have a more continuous, less erratic job history, will be promoted more often, and are much less likely to become unemployed than your non-college-graduate counterpart. You are also likely to be happier with your work than those who didn't attend college (p. 10)." The reverse is true, of course, of the average college noncompleter.

Factors Which Influence Attrition and Persistence

Given the societal, institutional, and individual benefits of college student academic persistence, it is little wonder that the factors that contribute to persistence and attrition have been studied in minute detail.

Preadmission Information

Since graduation rates are often viewed as important indicators of the effectiveness of a college, admissions officers look at available measures of prior performance in an effort to predict which students will be most likely to successfully complete college and which will need developmental help. Much research has gone into assessing the predictive validity of preadmission data.

"Grades Predict Grades." Not surprisingly, many researchers have determined that those students who achieve high grade point averages in high school and who score high on standardized college admissions tests such as the SAT and the ACT are most likely to continue to succeed academically in college. Fincher (1984), for example, based on a review of the literature, argues that high school grade averages are far better predictors of college academic success than are scores on academic interest scales, attitudinal inventories, academic motivation scales, and even measures of study skills and habits. Durio, Helmick, and Slover (1982), in their comparison of 954 transfer-in engineering students with 2226 non-transfer-in engineering freshmen, found that GPA was the best single predictor of future academic success for students in both groups. Hogrebe, Dwinell, and Ervin (1985) concluded from their study of 192 undergraduates that high school GPA and SAT scores were far better predictors of college success than were most attitudinal variables. The one variable that did correlate well with college GPA in their study was the student's estimation of how well prepared he/she was for college-level courses. In a similar study, Bean, Bradley, and Russell (1986) attempted to learn the effect of students' satisfaction with the academic environment on their GPAs. Although their results indicated that the effect of satisfaction on GPA was nearly twice the size of the effect of GPA on satisfaction, they conceded that high school performance was by far the best predictor of GPA for both genders. In an earlier study, Hogrebe, Cannon, and Ervin (1984), found that high school teachers' ratings of students were much less reliable predictors of college grades

than was high school GPA. Wolf (1983) demonstrated that GED scores can be equally valid predictors of GPA; in addition, the high school nongraduates in his sample performed just as well in college as did high school graduates.

High School GPA Plus Other Factors. Some researchers have conceded that grades predict grades, but at the same time contend that other factors are equally important in determining academic success in college. For example, White, Nylin, and Esser's 1985 study of 400 randomly-selected college freshmen revealed similar but perhaps better-honed results: the number of academic courses taken in high school was the best predictor of college success, with high school rank being the second best predictor, high school GPA the third best, and SAT scores the fourth best. Among the academic course grade predictors, the number of high school units passed in mathematics was the best predictor of college success.

Allen, Woodard, and Jones's 1990 attempt to assess the effect of learning rate on college grades revealed that learning rate added little predictive validity to the two major predictors, GPA and SAT scores. Snyder and Elmore (1983) obtained similar results when they administered the Descriptive Tests of Language Skills (DTLS) to 496 developmental students and followed up on their progress four years later; only the ACT composite and high school rank proved predictive of college GPA. When Leonard and Niebuhr (1986) examined the relative contribution of numerous factors, including science GPA, science credits, scores on the Otis-Lennon Mental Abilities Test and on the Nelson-Denny Reading Test, and type of school attended to the prediction of success of occupational therapy students in an anatomy and physiology course, overall GPA and the type of high school attended proved to be the best predictors of the course grades.

Specific Skills as Predictors of College Success. Berchulc, Wade, and Seidner (1987) identified writing skills as a major indicator of academic success in the students they studied, as did Ho and Spinks (1985). Shaughnessy & Evans (1986) isolated

vocabulary, as measured by the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test - Revised, as the second best predictor of college GPA, with high school GPA ranking first. Ansley and Forsyth (1983) found the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and the Iowa Tests of Educational Development to be valid predictors of first-semester college GPA, final college GPA, and likelihood of graduation from college. Waits and Demana (1988), in their 4-year follow-up study of 20,431 college freshmen, found the students' mathematics skills upon college entry to be a strong predictor of graduation rates. Dillon (1985) demonstrated that high-achieving undergraduate and graduate students process information in large units with fewer eye movements than do those students who are less successful in college.

But to predicate college admissions on the assumption that only those who have achieved academic success so far are worthy of admission would promote a class-based society quite at odds with the American dream of equal opportunity. Thus researchers continually search for additional factors that may help identify those who have the potential to succeed in college.

Intrapersonal Factors

Though incoming students' prior academic performance and measurable skills certainly contribute to their success in college, there are many students whose preadmission information fails to predict actual performance. For these students, the overweening influences often are intrapersonal rather than skill-related. Such factors as locus of control, self-efficacy, achievement motivation, fear of failure, and fear of success have been studied by numerous researchers investigating college students' academic success. Other researchers have contended that the number and quality of students' interpersonal relationships, or "social support," while attending college may serve as a significant catalyst in students' decisions about whether to continue or leave college.

Locus of Control. Rotter's Internal-External (I-E) Locus of Control scale has been investigated widely by educational researchers as a predictor of academic success in college; the most widely tested hypothesis, of course, has been that those with an internal locus of control (i.e., those who are self-motivated) will prove to be more successful academically than those who depend on external validation of their efforts to maintain self-esteem. Generally, results have supported this assumption, with some notable variations. Brandt, Hayden, and Brophy (1975), for example, found that "internal" females assumed more responsibility for their own learning than did "external" females, yet they found no such relationship in the male subjects. Of particular significance was Kanoy, Wester, and Latta's studies of college students for whom low GPA's had been predicted, based on their high school GPA's and college entrance test scores; among these students, internal locus of control and amount of effort put into school work greatly helped those students compensate for inadequate preparation for college. Morris and Messer (1978) discovered that external reinforcement (e.g., praise from teachers and significant others) is especially important for "externals." "Internals," on the other hand, perform equally well, regardless of external reinforcement. Such findings prompted Bar-Tal and Bar-Zohar (1977) to recommend that educators restructure educational settings to help create a realistic perception of internal locus of control among students.

Self-Efficacy. Self-efficacy is similar to the concept of locus of control, except that self-efficacy may be said to focus more strongly on exerting personal efforts to succeed and less on analyzing one's perceptions of how events occur in one's life. Both Wilhite (1990) and Lent, Brown, and Larkin (1986) concluded in their studies that students with a high sense of self-efficacy make better grades in college than those who lack such self-direction. Lent, Brown, and Larkin added that not only grades, but persistence and the range of perceived career options were significantly related to one's sense of self-efficacy.

Achievement Motivation. Motivational scales such as the Classroom Motivation Scale (Rice and Neider, 1979), the Academic Motivation Scale (Baker and Siryk, 1984), the Academic Motivations Inventory (Moen and Doyle, 1977), and the Achievement Motivation Scale (Romine and Quattlebaum, 1976) have been created and validated to give educators means of predicting student success.

Fear of Failure. Researchers generally concur that fear of failure contributes to an approach-avoidance conflict about academic pursuits in students. Goldberg (1973), for example, showed that college males with high fear of failure had low self-esteem and a negative attitude toward college whereas those with less fear of failure tended to score high in need for achievement and compulsivity, as well as rating the attainment of academic degrees more important than did those with greater fear of failure.

Fear of Success. For other students, the problem is not so much fearing failure as fearing success, according to Sherman, Zuckerman, and Sostek (1975). Griffiore's 1977 investigation of this phenomenon in graduate students, however, showed a positive correlation between fear of failure and fear of success, with the former affecting examination performance to a much greater degree than the latter. One could argue, however, that graduate students, by virtue of having earned at least one college degree, would be less likely to sabotage their own efforts through fear of success than might lower-division undergraduate students.

Interpersonal Factors: Social Support

Sundry means have been undertaken to assess social support and its influence on the individual's mental health, self-esteem, self-efficacy, productivity, and life satisfaction. Since college students are adolescent and adult individuals to whom peer relationships are vital, clearly the nature of their social relationships both on campus and off may influence their decisions regarding remaining in or leaving college.

Social Networks as a Social Science Paradigm. In his 1977 book Social Networks: A Developing Paradigm, Leinhardt collected articles by researchers from numerous disciplines in the social sciences who shared the assumption that one can assess the quality and degree of influence of sources of social support an individual is receiving by determining the structures of the different networks of individuals (e.g., family members, friends, co-workers) with whom the "entity" (the person being studied) interacts. The various authors included in the volume, within the parameters of their separate disciplines, set forth methodologies for assessing these social networks, or "spheres of influence," as contributor Joel H. Levine labeled them, for "mapping" the networks to determine where they intersect and overlap, and for applying various mathematical formulae to assess the extent of influence of each individual and each "class" (to use contributor John Paul Boyd's terminology) of supportive persons on the "entity." The volume is rife with summation formulae, specialized graphs and "multiplication tables," and such jargon as "functorial reduction," "sociomatrices," "local and extralocal integration," "force field bias," and "action-set." While one might question the everyday efficacy of such mathematicization of social influences on one's life, such endeavors served to reinforce the tendency of those in the social sciences to study social support systematically.

Gottlieb's 1981 work Social Networks and Social Support was also an anthology of perspectives on social networks by several authors, but overall this book was considerably less abstract than Leinhardt's. Though none of the chapters addressed the question of social support of college students, Eckenrode and Gore's chapter entitled "Stressful Events and Social Supports: The Significance of Context" could be most readily applied to college students. The authors noted, for example, that ". . . the most virulent life events tend to be those that disrupt or threaten to disrupt social ties" (p. 49). Attending college, especially for young adults who already have established a social support network, can readily interfere with one's friendships,

leisure activities, and family ties. As these authors point out, "a support network is an aggregate of potentially helpful affiliates" (p. 51); later on, they maintain that mobilizing one's sources of social support during times of stress comprises "the heart of the coping process . . ." (p. 65). One way to marshal one's sources of support is to "create personal communities," as Hirsh asserts in a later chapter in this book. Though the author details examples involving medical and psychiatric inpatients, workers in the workplace, and those recently experiencing widowhood, one could easily extrapolate that similar processes are employed by students who are new to a given college community.

Effects of Social Support on Mental Health. Many of the chapters included in Gottlieb's 1981 book discussed in the above paragraph spotlighted the beneficial effects of social support on mental health. Four years later, Biegel, McCardle, and Mendelson (1985), in their comprehensive tome entitled Social Networks and Mental Health: An Annotated Bibliography, built a strong case for the importance of social networks to one's very existence. One's social networks, according to the 1340 studies summarized therein, affect one's physical and mental health and comprise important components of intervention programs. A few of the works summarized dealt with college students, an indicator that those who study social networks, though still primarily concentrating on assessment and treatment of physical and mental health problems, were beginning to explore the effects of social support on students' experiences of and decisions about attending schools and colleges.

Social Networks and Social Support of Students. In 1988 another anthology, Salzinger, Artrobus, & Hammer's Social Networks of Children, Adolescents, and College Students, appeared. Though this work centered on children and adolescents, two entire chapters actually dealt with college students. In one article in that compilation, Antrobus, Dobbelaer, and Salzinger advanced the notion that "college friendships provide a student with information that supports college achievement, and

perhaps postcollege success, and that they also provide the reinforcement for many college-based achievement-oriented behaviors" (p. 227). College friends may not only help new students develop a sense of belonging, they may also inform newer students about courses, instructors, college resources, and the specifics of registration, withdrawal, and other mysteries of the college environment. The authors found "a strong relationship between academic performance in the freshman year and the academic standing of one's social network at the college" (p. 242); i.e., those whose friends have high GPA's tend to have high GPA's themselves. Furthermore, the authors determined that during the first semester in college students seek out friends similar to themselves in race, ethnicity, gender, and academic performance; they hasten to add, though, that forming friendships with students from other ethnic and/or racial groups is a vital part of the college experience. This study was limited to first-year students; the authors speculated that during the first semester students are engaged in selecting friends, but they may not yet have close enough ties with them to rely on them for support.

Another study in the same volume, this one by Culbert, Good, and Lachenmeyer, entitled "The Social Networks of the Commuting College Student," noted that the size of a student's social network was not related to academic achievement. The authors did observe, however, a shift from students having more off-campus friends during the freshman year to more on-campus friends the second year; further, their results corroborated earlier studies' conclusions that "students seemed to choose friends whose mean academic performance matched their own" (p. 258). This study also pinpointed significant differences among transfer students, dropouts, and persisters: "Transfer students tended to have the fewest on-campus friends, the most off-campus friends, and the highest grades, and worked the most hours. Dropout students had the greatest number of on-campus friends and the lowest grades, and worked the fewest hours. Persisters had the fewest off-campus friends" (p.

259). The authors speculated that perhaps persisters manage to balance all aspects of their lives better than do dropouts, who may become overly involved in one aspect of campus life; in fact, "many close on-campus friendships may detract from student involvement in other areas, such as studying or academic achievement" (p. 259).

In Giddan's 1988 book Community and Social Support for College Students, Joseph Katz presented a convincing argument in his article entitled "Student Initiative, Self-Help, and Collaborative Learning in the College Classroom" that college teachers should foster collaborative learning among students, given that research has shown that Asian students, who tend to study in groups, make much higher grades than do Black and Hispanic students, who tend to study alone. Such a practice could unite within individual students the "academic integration" and "social integration" delineated by Tinto, concepts which are discussed in detail below.

Student Satisfaction

Of special interest to many college administrators and student development personnel has been the more global issue of student satisfaction. Panos and Astin's 1967 study (as recounted in Cope & Hannah [1975]) of students' self-reported reasons for dropping out of college revealed that whereas female students' main reason for dropping out was marriage, male students' primary reason was "dissatisfaction with the college environment (p. 15)." Student satisfaction has variously been found to be significantly related to one's perception that one's education will help one obtain suitable employment, negatively related to students' perceptions that their chosen program of study is too difficult, of more importance to female students than to male students (as reported in a 1984 study that contradicted the aforementioned 1967 findings), more prominent in freshmen than in upperclassmen (even though the upperclass students had higher GPA's), and of considerable influence on one's academic performance (Johnson, 1987). In the context of college attendance, the term

"satisfaction" may be about as ubiquitously elusive as are "love" and "faith" in common parlance. As numerous researchers have lamented, the most frequently checked response on withdrawal questionnaires has been the "School was not for me" item. But what does that mean? Current researchers have sought to answer that question systematically and rigorously.

Limitations of Single-Factor Studies

The complexities inherent in individuals and in institutions necessitate a more intricate approach to predicting academic persistence and attrition than to isolate single factors or to compare and contrast a few contributors to attendance patterns. Individual factors, even the intricate issue of social support, can only hint at the complex determinants of student behaviors.

Interactive Models of Persistence/Withdrawal

One increasingly popular approach to the study of academic persistence and withdrawal is to create a model which takes into account the dynamic interplay among student characteristics and various components of the college environment that influence students' decisions to drop out or to persist toward a college degree. Researchers then test their models using path analyses, revise the models based on the results, and test the revised models in the same way.

Of the interactive models of academic persistence and withdrawal that have emerged, those most frequently referenced are the models created by Spady and by Tinto, especially the latter, whose model is based on Spady's.

Spady's "Suicide" Model of Dropout Behaviors

Spady (1970, 1971) employed Durkheim's model of suicide in his attempt to explain voluntary college dropout behaviors. Spady introduced his model after

presenting an extensive review of dropout literature up through 1969; this review included some of the following conclusions regarding social support and attrition/persistence: (1) freshmen exposed to "nonacademic group norms" (p. 76) of upperclassmen are likely to lower their own achievement goals and thus not complete college; (2) those who engage in "excessive and largely superficial socializing with casual acquaintances" are likely to drop out, perhaps as a result of "a narcissistic or hedonistic orientation" (p. 76); (3) on the opposite side of the coin, female students who have no friends are likely to drop out, perhaps as a result of "having either less social adequacy or lower social orientations" (p. 76) than other students; and (4) participation in campus activities provides "purposeful contact with other students and the rewards that accrue from group accomplishments" (p. 76). Given these diverse findings about the relationship of social support to college achievement, Spady set out to systematically investigate the aspects of social support that contribute to college achievement and those that contribute to dropout behaviors.

In this analysis Spady drew upon Durkheim's notion of social integration, a construct which includes normative congruence, the extent to which one's "attitudes, interests, and personality dispositions . . . are basically compatible with the attributes and influences of the environment" (p. 77) and friendship support, or the extent to which one forms close bonds with others in one's environment. Durkheim's main thesis was that one severs ties with a social group when one finds oneself lacking the social integration described above. Spady, drawing on Durkheim's logic, hypothesized that students would be more likely to drop out of college if they perceived their own values and interests as incompatible with those of their fellow students and, conversely, more likely to persist academically if they experienced social integration. Spady differentiated his model from Durkheim's by contending that self-esteem and intellectual interests resulting from one's family background can provide a foothold

from which one may explore numerous subcultures within the college environment until one finds a group which shares many of one's own orientations.

Spady (1971) tested his theoretical model by gathering longitudinal data on 683 University of Chicago students; he emerged from his analysis of the data with the conclusion that "full integration into the common life of the college depends on successfully meeting the demands of both its social and academic systems" (p. 39). It should be noted here that the University of Chicago admitted only students who graduated from high school with A averages. Those students who entered college with an intellectual and cultural orientation and who established meaningful contacts with similarly-oriented faculty and students were most likely to report that the college had contributed significantly to their intellectual development. In terms of actual persistence to graduation, however, a difference emerged between male and female students: whereas males were more likely to complete college if they maintained high grades, the females who remained were those who had established satisfactory dating relationships in college. Spady interpreted these findings to mean that college men were "more willing to endure the short-run socioemotional deprivations that the women find so disturbing" (p. 61). Spady seemed surprised to find that social integration was of less importance to his persisters than was academic achievement -- yet the students he was studying were attending one of the nation's most academically rigorous institutions.

Tinto's Persistence/Withdrawal Model

Tinto (1975, 1982) has become well known in academic circles for his model of academic persistence and withdrawal. In this model Tinto built on Spady's ideas and refined his conclusions by distinguishing between academic integration and social integration. Expanding on Spady's logic, Tinto similarly posited that Durkheim's theory of suicide might be applied to dropout behaviors -- specifically, that suicide (or

college dropout) "is more likely to occur when individuals are insufficiently integrated into the fabric of society" (Tinto, 1975, p. 91). Tinto agreed with Spady's hypothesis that dropout from college might result, as Durkheim had said that suicide does, from failure to form satisfying social connections and failure to adopt goals congruent with the prevailing values of the community -- in this case, the academic community as defined by the student's collegiate experience. At this point, Tinto's model begins where Spady's concluded -- with the differentiation between social integration and academic integration.

Academic integration, according to Tinto, incorporates both intellectual development and extrinsic indicators of academic achievement -- i.e., grades. Social integration, Tinto observed, includes "informal peer group associations, semi-formal extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and administrative personnel within the college" (1975, p. 107). Regarding this kind of social support in college Tinto concluded, "Other things being equal, social integration should increase the likelihood that the person will remain in college (1975, p. 107)."

Tinto proposed that an interaction of the student's initial commitment to academic goals and the student's subsequent integration into college social networks determine the student's ongoing commitment to college success. He noted in the original publication of his persistence/withdrawal model in 1975 that prior researchers, as a result of failing to distinguish between those who drop out due to academic failure and those who voluntarily withdraw, had often found such contradictory research results as academic ability being inversely related, directly related, or unrelated to dropout from higher education.

Seven years later, Tinto (1982) emerged with a model of persistence/withdrawal which begins with a profile of the student's family background, prior schooling, and individual attributes; these input factors, he concluded, contribute to the student's goal commitment and institutional commitment. Goal commitment then helps determine the

student's grade performance in the institution s/he is currently attending and perceived personal intellectual development in the current institutional environment. Tinto labeled the product of these two factors (academic achievement and perceived intellectual development) academic integration. Simultaneously, Tinto posited, the student is being affected by his/her interaction with peers and interaction with faculty in the academic environment; Tinto designated the combination of these interactions with peers and faculty as social integration.

Tinto concluded that academic integration determines one's continuing commitment to his/her initial academic goals and that social integration determines one's continuing commitment to the institution itself. The combination of one's resultant goal commitment and institutional commitment then govern whether the student continues his/her academic pursuits or drops out of college.

Flaws in Tinto's Model

In this 1982 follow-up, Tinto acknowledged that his original model had numerous flaws; notably, the model did not address the impact of students' finances on their decisions to remain in or leave college, it did not address students' social networks outside the college environment (thus the model was best suited for students residing on campus and was inappropriate for those attending two-year commuter colleges), and it did not distinguish between permanent withdrawal from higher education and transfer to other institutions. In addition, Tinto acknowledged that further study of two-year-college attrition patterns was needed.

Tinto has remained adamant that the quality of student-faculty interaction is vital to students' persistence and withdrawal decisions. In his 1987 book Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition, though, Tinto adopted a more philosophical perspective about voluntary withdrawal from college: "Educational departure is but one particular manifestation of a range of leaving

behaviors that mark social existence. Our lives are constructed of numerous comings and goings, of varying passages from one form of social participation to another" (p. 188); nevertheless, he still maintained that retention depends on "the daily actions of all members of the institution, not on the sporadic efforts of a few officially designated members of a retention committee" (p. 190).

Tests and Validations of Tinto's Model

Tinto's model has been tested in numerous contexts; so far, results have validated the model and have begun to elucidate important distinctions among populations.

Results of an Early Multi-institutional Study Based on Tinto's Model.

Pascarella and Chapman (1983) conducted a multi-institutional study of 2,326 freshmen attending eleven different colleges to analyze the validity of Tinto's model in three types of institutions: four-year primarily residential institutions, four-year commuter institutions, and two-year commuter institutions. Though the authors' results validated the original model in general, there were notable distinctions among the students attending each of the types of institutions. Specifically, social integration influenced persistence more strongly in students at four-year, primarily residential institutions, whereas academic integration was more important at two-year and four-year, primarily commuter institutions. The authors confirmed Tinto's conclusions that goal commitment and institutional commitment are vitally influenced by students' academic and social integration, to wit: "Holding other factors constant, the greater the individual's level of social and academic integration, the greater will be his or her respective commitment to the institution and commitment to the goal of graduation from college. The higher the level of institutional and goal commitment, the more likely the student is to continue at that particular institution" (pp. 87-88).

Distinctions between Black and White Students. Five years later, Stoecker, Pascarella, and Wolfle (1988) published the results of their 9-year test of Tinto's model; this study was based on CIRP (Cooperative Institutional Research Program) survey results from a sample of 10,326 students attending 487 colleges of various types. Again, they found validation of Tinto's model, but this time they factored out differences among Black and White men and women. Some anomalous results of that study included: (1) attending predominantly Black institutions had a positive effect on academic integration for Black women but not for Black men; (2) majoring in the social sciences enhanced the social and academic integration of White men and White women, thus contributing to their academic persistence, yet a social sciences major negatively affected academic persistence in Black men; and (3) attending a more selective college contributed to the academic persistence of White men, White women, and Black women, but not of Black men.

Tests of Tinto's Model in Community College Contexts. Community college populations are perceived by educational researchers to differ from four-year college populations in a number of ways. Johnson (1987) cited several sources to support her contention that community college transfer students, when compared with "native" students who began their postsecondary education in a university, "tend to be less self-confident socially and academically, to have lower academic ability and motivation, and to be half as likely to aspire to education beyond the baccalaureate degree They have been reported to have a strong vocational purpose for attending college, to have problems coping with academic demands of the university, and to express a need for more faculty-student interaction" (p. 323). In addition, she summarizes, community college students tend to be older than traditional students, to have families of their own, to be less affluent, and to have more extensive work obligations and experience; for these reasons and perhaps others, their attrition rates tend to be higher than those of native students. It is not too surprising, then, that Pascarella and Chapman (1983)

found the distinctions delineated above among students at different types of institutions in their validation of Tinto's model.

In 1986 Pascarella, Smart, and Ethington published results of a nine-year follow-up study of a national sample of 825 students who initially enrolled in 85 two-year institutions, employing Tinto's model. Overall, their findings confirmed Tinto's model, but again with significant differences: female students were most likely to persist academically when they exercised opportunities to demonstrate their leadership skills in school organizations or publications, whereas male students were most likely to persist if they developed personal relationships with faculty or staff members; the latter factor was of secondary importance to the success of female students. These results, of course, confirmed Pascarella & Chapman's earlier discovery that academic integration is of primary importance to commuter two-year college students.

The same year Blustein, et al. (1986) published the results of a single-institution study which confirmed Pascarella & Chapman's 1983 conclusion: ". . . the academic integration variable maintained its prominence as the primary predictor of academic success in a community college setting" (p. 247); furthermore, ". . . academic factors were far more significant than social integration in defining a student's sense of involvement with the institution" (p. 247).

Mutter's 1987 study of students in a large midwestern community college, also based on Tinto's theory of departure, revealed a distinction between Black and White students in the area of academic integration. Specifically, she asked the students to report on the number of career-related conversations they had with college personnel; she found that "Black persisters reported significantly higher numbers of such conversations than did Black nonpersisters. White nonpersisters, however, reported significantly higher numbers of such conversations than did White persisters" (p. 313).

Need for Interview Follow-ups to Path Analysis Models

As the validity of Tinto's model is continuing to be substantiated, authors often qualify their results with statements such as the following by Pascarella and Chapman (1983): "Perhaps a major portion of persistence/withdrawal behavior is so idiosyncratic, in terms of external circumstances and personal propensities, that it is difficult to capture in any rational explanatory model" (p. 99). The following year Pascarella (1984) asserted, "To adequately assess the full institutional influence on students' educational aspirations, it may be necessary to focus on differences among students' actual experiences as well as the intensity and scope of their involvements during college" (p. 769). Similarly, Blustein, et al. (1986) attested, ". . . there has been little data derived from interviews, which may help to confirm and elaborate the relationships that emerge from quantitative data" (p. 243). Mutter (1992) recommended: "Findings concerning roles of supportive people and the forms of encouragement they give should be further explored and considered for further research" (p. 316). Tinto himself noted in Leaving College that "Assessment must . . . be grounded in the common experience of students as they pass through the institution" (1987, p. 7).

In short, though the models which lend themselves to path analysis are helpful in the formulation of institutional policies and strategies designed to increase student academic persistence, they do not take into account the personal factors which students are more likely to reveal when interviewed. For example, though students at less selective institutions report that financial difficulties are their major reason for leaving college (Tinto, 1987), and though studies have demonstrated that the use of alcohol negatively affects academic performance (Astin, 1993), these inhibitors to academic success are seldom included in path analytic studies. These and other personal, idiosyncratic contributors to students' academic pursuits can more readily emerge from reflective interview data than from responses to questionnaires.

Idiosyncratic Characteristics of Community College Students

Adelman (1992) asserted that community college students ". . . engage in learning on their own terms, and in their own time" (p. v). Furthermore, he said, "those who attend community colleges are more typical of young adults in the U. S. than any other population. They are the average" (p. vi).

Drawing on data from the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 (NLS-72), which "followed a single generation for 14 years with detailed surveys, included high school records and test scores, and, most importantly, gathered the college transcripts of those who attended any kind of postsecondary institution between 1972 and 1984" (p. 2), Adelman was able to describe the academic careers and self-reported benefits of subjects' academic efforts in great detail. Still, he lamented, "transcripts tell us little about the environment of community colleges . . ., changing attitudes of community college students . . ., the commitments community college students make to their institutions . . ., or student involvement . . . -- all of which influence student progress and attainment to various degrees" (p. 3). Adelman's survey data revealed that community college students are "more interested in learning, in acquiring new skills, and in completing . . . basic general education than in advanced credentials, even if those credentials yield greater economic rewards" (p. 31) and "Lastly, our youthful aspirations and hopes exceed what actually happens to us, no matter what we do in between" (p. 32).

All the above reasons contributed to my decision to interview community college students who have stopped out and then returned to college. The research was undertaken with the assumption that such interviews might yield anomalous details about students' decisions about remaining in, leaving, and returning to college -- which information might be of use to community college educators and to educational researchers who have concentrated on quantitative analyses of interactions of predetermined variables.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Choosing a Model for Research Methodology

Qualitative research exists in many forms. Ethnography, for example, is associated primarily with anthropological research; the ethnographer observes an intact group as if it were a new species, noting every action and interaction. As one surveys the literature on qualitative research, one encounters such catchphrases as "participant observation," "naturalistic inquiry," and "grounded theory"; each of these approaches offers somewhat distinctive techniques for collecting and analyzing anecdotal information from individuals about themselves and about the groups with which they affiliate. It seemed not only pragmatic but necessary, therefore, to choose from among the numerous qualitative research models one which has been uniquely tailored to investigating the topic of education within an educational setting.

The Case Study Method

After reading and scanning several books on qualitative research methodology, I chose to follow the model outlined in Sharan B. Merriam's book Case Study Research in Education: A Qualitative Approach for collection and analysis of data. This manual calls on the expertise of qualitative research textbook authors such as Bogdan and Biklen, Bromley, Glaser and Strauss, Goetz and LeCompte, Kaplan, Kerlinger, Lincoln and Guba, Spradley, Taylor and Bogdan, and Yin; Merriam quotes liberally from these authors, applying their methodologies to the case study method. The approach presented in Merriam's model is eclectic, comprehensive, practical, and parsimonious. Merriam states in her preface that she intends for the book to "serve as a reference on qualitative methods" (p. xiii) for educational researchers. This

educational researchers. This handbook, of all those I perused, seemed the most appropriate guide for the type of research I was undertaking.

The Case Study. A case study, according to Merriam, is "a research design in its own right" (p. 5). The case study examines in depth a person, a program, an institution, an event, a process, or a social group. Whereas survey research investigates a limited number of variables using numerous subjects, case study research focuses on a small number of subjects with the intention of identifying and exploring as many variables as possible (p. 7).

The Qualitative Case Study. A qualitative case study is "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit" (xiv). "It has the advantage of hindsight yet can be relevant in the present" (p. 14). "Case studies . . . are concerned with understanding and describing process more than behavioral outcomes" (p. 31). The product of a case study is a rich, "thick" description of the phenomenon being studied. ("Thick," a term from anthropology, refers to a vivid, thorough description of an event.) Merriam goes on to clarify that the case study "could be a holistic, intensive, rich description and analysis of an individual student's experience . . . or the whole program itself" (p. 45). In this study, I evoked the hindsight of the participants as they reflected on their successive experiences of attending college.

Above all, Merriam declares, a case study is descriptive. It may illustrate the interaction of complex factors within an individual, an institution, or an event, noting how the interaction of those factors may have changed over time. A good case study presents vivid, concrete detail. In interviewing the participants in this study it was my intent to elicit as many details as possible about their varied experiences of attending college.

Defining the Participants

Given the goals of the study, I decided that students who had left college and then later returned to resume the pursuit of a college degree might have greater perspective on the factors that contribute to leaving college than might someone who has recently dropped out of college or someone who is still enrolled in college but on the verge of academic dismissal or voluntary withdrawal. It seemed logical to assume that someone who had chosen to return to college after a period of absence might have reflected on the original academic attempt and on the practical value of his/her learning strategies and behaviors in the initial college experience. A re-entering college student, I reasoned, might be newly committed to academic goals and might place a higher priority on learning and/or on completing a degree program than might someone who has never relinquished academic pursuits. The experiences and perspectives of such returning students, or "stopouts," I hoped, might be instructive to new students, re-entering students, college administrators, college faculty, and educational researchers alike.

Selection of Participants

Merriam states that ". . . nonprobability sampling is the method of choice in qualitative case studies . . . since generalization in a statistical sense is not a goal of qualitative research" (p. 47). Instead, one engages in "purposive sampling": ". . . a sample from which one can learn the most" (p. 48). In "typical-case selection," "the researcher develops a profile of attributes possessed by an average case and then seeks an instance of this case" (quoted from Goetz and LeCompte on p. 50). In this case study, I recruited participants who had "stopped out" of college, either as a result of academic dismissal or of voluntary withdrawal, who had since attained sophomore status with at least a 3.00 grade-point average, and who chose to contribute to this study by discussing their experiences of college.

Recruitment of Participants

I solicited volunteers from among the community college student body by placing flyers in high-traffic areas on campus; the flyers included the academic criteria for participating in the study, the objectives of the study, and the suggestion that the results of the study might prove beneficial to future students. (See Appendix A for a copy of the flyer I posted.)

Three students volunteered the first day the appeal for volunteers was posted. Within a week, sixteen students had volunteered for the study, twelve of whom met the published academic criteria. At that time I removed all the posted flyers and began scheduling interviews with the qualified participants. Most of the volunteers not only satisfied but far exceeded the published academic criteria.

Incentives

The only incentive provided to participants was the suggestion that they would be contributing to students' and educators' understanding of factors that contribute to academic persistence and withdrawal. It seemed apparent, therefore, that the participants were altruistically motivated to "share their stories" to augment students' and educators' understanding of college students' academic persistence and withdrawal behaviors.

Restrictions on Participant Characteristics

No restrictions were placed on the age, gender, marital status, parental status, ethnic background, or residency status of the participants; as it turned out, those who elected to take part in the study represented a broad age range (though mean age was around forty) and diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

Screening of Participants for Verbal and Reflective Skills

Merriam states that the best participants are those who can articulate their experiences and opinions well and who are "interested in doing so" (p. 120). Prior to issuing a pre-interview letter to potential participants, I discussed the goals of the study and matters of confidentiality with each volunteer in a 10- to 30-minute telephone interview. I commented on the participant's transcript and then allowed the volunteer to elaborate briefly on his/her academic experiences to date. Invariably, the volunteers eagerly plunged into "telling their stories" about where they had earned college credit, about their decisions concerning academic majors, and about the factors that led to their having left college. Most proved to be articulate and not only capable of reflecting on personal experiences, but eager to do so.

Description of Participants

The participants in this qualitative study of volunteer interviewees were twelve self-selected, comparatively fluent community college sophomores who had earned an overall GPA of 3.00 or above in 30 hours of college-level classes and who had stopped out of college at least once in the past, either as a result of voluntary withdrawal or dismissal. All participants were currently enrolled at the East Tennessee community college selected as the site for the study.

Determination of Number of Participants

Merriam explains that "in this type of research the crucial factor is not the number of participants but rather the potential of each person to contribute to the development of insight and understanding of the phenomenon" (p. 77). I set out with the intention of conducting ongoing thematic analysis of the interviews and concluding when thematic consistency began to emerge. In reality, I chose to

interview all who met the criteria and who volunteered during the week that the flyers were posted. Though certain themes emerged early on, the participants provided a rich variety of anecdotal perspectives which I felt would be instructive to readers and to future students. I had estimated that consistencies would become apparent once I had elicited the reflections of five to twelve carefully-selected participants. The final number of interviewees included in the study was twelve; the degree of consistency in their testimonies will be demonstrated in Chapter 5.

Interviewing the Participants

I strove to ensure that participants not only understood the focus of the study but also knew in advance how the interview would be conducted. I briefed them about interview procedures in the abbreviated telephone screening mentioned above and in the pre-interview letter discussed below.

Selecting the Interview Setting

Merriam says that the interview should be conducted in "a place designated for that purpose versus the natural field setting of participant observation" (p. 87). The interviews for this study were conducted in a quiet setting on the community college campus -- a "viewing room" in the college library. The viewing rooms are relatively soundproof rooms which have one partially glassed-in wall; the rooms, designed for small-group study and for the viewing of videotapes, proved to be an ideal setting for conducting nonthreatening, private interviews.

The Bracketing Interview

Prior to conducting even the pilot interview, I engaged in a "bracketing interview" conducted by Sharon Anderson, a Ph.D. student in Experimental Psychology at the University of Tennessee who is experienced in phenomenological

interview and analysis techniques. A major theme that emerged from that interview was that my own experience of intermittent enrollment in the Ph.D. program was a direct function of the demands of my professional responsibilities as an educator. The bracketing interview experience proved valuable both because it helped me develop empathy for interviewees and because it served as a viable model for conducting nonstructured interviews in which students reflected on their prior educational experiences.

The Pilot Interview

To test and enhance my interviewing skills, I conducted a pilot interview with a single participant prior to collection of data from participants to be included in the final study. I submitted an audiotape of the interview to my committee chair, Dr. William Poppen, for review and critique before beginning the actual interview process. He provided helpful feedback which affirmed that I was using satisfactory interview techniques.

The Pre-Interview Letter

To ensure that participants had adequate time to reflect on their educational experiences to date, I hand-delivered a pre-interview letter (included as Appendix B) to each participant in which I thanked the participant for having agreed to participate in the interview, discussed matters of confidentiality, and explained that I would be asking the following interview questions of each participant:

"Tell me about your prior experience of attending college."

"What were you like then?"

"How does your current experience of college differ from your experience of college when you dropped out/were dismissed?"

"How are you different now from the person you were when you last attended college?"

"Have there been any significant people in your life who have influenced your performance in college and/or your intentions to leave or to remain in college?"

Most participants brought the letter with them to the interview and referred to these questions as they relayed their stories about college attendance and stopping out. Thus it was not always necessary to even ask all the questions of a given interviewee.

The Interviews

Qualitative data include direct quotations from people regarding their experiences, their beliefs, their thoughts, and their attitudes, as well as descriptions of individuals and their actions and interactions. One interviews participants with the intent of discovering feelings, thoughts, and intentions which cannot be directly observed. The researcher, according to Merriam, is seeking "meanings they [the participants] attach to what goes on in the world" in order to "enter into the other person's perspective" (p. 72). One may choose to either conduct a structured or a nonstructured interview; each technique has unique settings in which it is most applicable.

Structured vs. Nonstructured Interviews. One uses a structured interview when interviewing a large sample and when one wants to quantify results. One uses a less structured approach to discover how "individual participants define the world" (p. 73). One begins the interview by asking participants to describe themselves and the phenomenon being studied. I chose to employ a nonstructured approach.

Interview Questions. Since it was my intention to learn and to convey to readers how these self-selected college sophomores view their disparate experiences of college, the interview questions were phrased as broadly as possible. (See "Pre-

Interview Letter" section above for the questions I asked each participant.) I waited until the participant seemed to have reached an intellectual impasse before moving from a given question to the next on the list. All other questions were either posed in direct response to what the participants had just said or were a reiteration of the questions of which the participants had been apprised beforehand in order to evoke further detail.

Rapport. It was my intent in contacts with each participant prior to and during the interview to establish rapport with the participant while maintaining an objective stance toward the content of the interview. I endeavored to establish and maintain this rapport through the use of body language, vocal tone, and word choice which conveyed interest and concern, and which sometimes mirrored the participant's own affective states. Throughout the interviews I attempted to use reflective listening techniques to encourage participants to keep talking about themselves, their experiences of college, and the role of significant others in their decisions regarding college attendance.

Questions of Validity and Reliability

Critics of qualitative studies often question the validity and reliability of information gathered from a limited number of subjects. Merriam answers these criticisms systematically and convincingly.

Internal Validity. Merriam explains that "What is being observed are people's constructions of reality, how they understand the world" (p. 167); thus in a case study "what seems true is more important than what is true" (p. 167). One is seeking to learn how the participants perceive themselves and their experiences.

One way to ensure internal validity is to conduct "Member checks -- taking data and interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived and asking them if the results were plausible" (p. 169). One may also choose to clarify one's

own assumptions prior to the first interview by having a peer interview oneself. I both engaged in a "bracketing interview" conducted by a colleague experienced in gathering and analyzing qualitative interview data and validated my findings via "member checks" with the participants before publishing the results.

Reliability. Since qualitative research seeks to describe and interpret the world, one cannot expect to replicate the results of a given study. Thus Merriam draws on Guba and Lincoln's argument that one's demonstration of internal validity may serve as a check for reliability (Merriam, p. 171).

Audiotaping of Interviews

The most common method for recording interview data is audiotaping the interview; though videotapes may reveal nuances of body language that amplify participants' feelings and degree of anxiety or comfort, Merriam (p. 81) cautions that videotaping may be perceived as too threatening for the participant to give a candid account of experiences and feelings. Merriam states that the interviewer may also take notes during the interview so long as the participant does not seem to be distracted by the note-taking. Thus I audiotaped the interviews for this research project, having selected participants who agreed to be audiotaped. I took notes during interviews only when I heard a statement for which I felt I might want clarification or elaboration prior to concluding the interview.

Protecting Participants' Identities

To ensure that participants felt safe to discuss their foibles and lifestyles, I assured them from the very beginning that their identities and the identities of others they mentioned would be kept in strictest confidence.

Pseudonyms

I informed each participant in the pre-interview letter that his/her identity would be protected via the use of a pseudonym and that names of schools or colleges attended, specific organizations where the participants work or have worked, names used in the interviews, etc., would all be changed in the published document. I asked each participant to choose a pseudonym prior to the interview; we then used the pseudonym throughout the interview so that the participant's real name would not be associated with the data in any way. The same participant-selected pseudonyms are used in this dissertation and will be used should any presentations or publications result from this research project.

Confidentiality Agreements and Audiotape Storage

Participants each signed a confidentiality agreement (Appendix C) at the time of the interview. The signed confidentiality agreements are stored in a locked file cabinet in my major professor's office in Claxton Education Building at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The audiotapes are stored in a locked file cabinet in my office at Pellissippi State Technical Community College in Knoxville, Tennessee. I also informed the participants that should anyone be employed to type interview data, the person would be thoroughly apprised of issues of confidentiality and would be required to sign a pledge to maintain complete confidentiality of all data, as is addressed below.

Typist's Confidentiality Agreement

Having audiotaped the interviews, I listened to each tape in its entirety, then typed a transcript of the tape. I typed at least eighty percent of what was said in each interview, closing and reopening quotation marks to indicate the places where I chose not to type redundant material. I adhered to all measures of confidentiality

listed below. In anticipation that I might have transcripts typed, I composed a typist's confidentiality agreement (see Appendix D); however, I typed all the interviews discussed herein myself.

Adhering to Published Human Subjects Guidelines

My faculty advisor and I adhered to accepted ethical standards and to all requirements for confidentiality prescribed by the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Committee on Research Participation (CRP). I wrote a "Form B" proposal which was scrutinized and approved by the CRP prior to conducting even the pilot interview. After the CRP approved the proposal, I followed the procedures listed in the above section to ensure confidentiality and submitted a status report to the CRP at the conclusion of the project. I apprised the CRP of exactly where the confidentiality agreements and audiotapes would be stored, as detailed above.

I further apprised the CRP that should a participant demonstrate potentially injurious emotion while recalling a given experience (e.g., conflicts with parents or spouse, economic difficulties, etc.), I would inquire whether the participant wanted to continue or discontinue telling the story and would refer the participant for counseling should intervention seem necessary. In fact, participants frequently reported that they found the interview process beneficial because they gained personal insights as they reflected on their experiences of attending college.

Analyzing the Case Study Data

Merriam states that "Analysis begins with the first interview, the first observation, the first document read" (p. 119). She further elucidates that "Data collection and analysis is a simultaneous activity in qualitative research. The researcher may thus expect to refine his/her questions and responses to the participants as the interview process continues. Yet "analysis becomes more

intensive once all the data are in, even though analysis has been an ongoing activity" (p. 123). Merriam asserts that the researcher should stop interviewing and begin intensive data analysis when s/he experiences "emergence of regularities" (p. 126); i.e., when consistent themes show up in data from different interviews.

Ongoing Preliminary Data Analysis

I engaged in some preliminary analysis of data (thematizing of interview content) throughout the interview process, as Merriam advises. I had originally intended to stop interviewing and begin intensive data analysis upon the "emergence of regularities." In point of fact, although some themes materialized immediately (both constructive and obstructive "social support" from family members, interference of job demands with the desire to attend college, etc.), each story was so unique and vivid that I decided to interview all qualified volunteers who responded to my flyers the first week they were posted, as has been noted above.

The Interview Log vs. Transcripts

Merriam notes that "An alternative to verbatim transcription [of audiotapes] is the interview log" (p. 84). The researcher plays the tape and takes notes on key statements, quoting phrases and entire sentences and coding those quotations to the tape counter. The log captures the main points while sparing the researcher the time and expense of transcribing entire tapes.

Although I originally intended to record pertinent quotes in interview logs, I quickly learned that so much of what the participants said sounded potentially "quotable" to me that I was having difficulty deciding what to quote and what to leave out. Also, as I reflected on my own learning style, I realized that since I am primarily a visual, not an auditory, learner, it would be best to type the transcripts so I could see what the participants had said as well as having heard it. I did

sometimes summarize long statements that I did not consider to be potentially quotable, and I occasionally did not type redundant sections. In the latter case I simply inserted ending and beginning quotation marks to signal to myself that I had omitted some of the narrative. It took me over two months to type the transcripts.

Intensive Data Analysis

Merriam notes that "Devising categories is largely an intuitive process, but it is also systematic and informed by the study's purpose, the investigator's orientation and knowledge, and 'the constructs made explicit by the participants of the study' (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984, p. 191)" (Merriam, p. 133). Following Merriam's advice, I attempted to derive mutually exclusive categories of data systematically and intuitively during this process.

During the intensive data analysis phase, I read the transcripts several times from beginning to end, then began developing themes. I recorded each theme on a separate index card; I emerged with 222 themes after the "first pass," as is further discussed below. Once I had thematized all twelve interviews, I arranged the cards into categories which "looked" and "felt" alike (Merriam, p. 134); two of the original themes, Learning Strategies and Maturation Issues, emerged as subcategories of the three emergent categories discussed below.

Regarding categorization, Merriam observes that "The fewer the categories, the greater the level of abstraction. A large number of categories is likely to reflect an analysis based on concrete description" (p. 135). Since I had encouraged the participants to provide concrete description of their experiences and then to reflect on those experiences and since my intent was to inform educators and future incoming community college students of what my participants said they had learned about effective studenting behaviors, I chose to present a descriptive analysis of the data.

My intention in "thematizing" the interview data was to glean themes from the information that surfaced during the interviews. I allowed the participants to tell their stories, then derived descriptive keywords and themes based on my understanding of intrapsychic processes (e.g., "intrinsic motivation") and of life events (e.g., I recorded the theme "conflict, military" to indicate that the participant dropped out of college when called to military active duty). Two hundred twenty-two keywords emerged from the "first pass" through the interviews. My next step was to arrange these keywords under thematic categories. Three major categories emerged: Intrapsychic Factors, Environmental Factors, and Advice (i.e., advice the participants wanted to offer to college instructors, administrators, and incoming students). After much reflection I sorted out seven subcategories under Intrapsychic Factors (Emotion, Learning Difficulties, Learning Strategies/Study Skills, Maturation Issues, Motivation (Intrinsic), Perspective Transformation, and Self-Concept) and five subcategories under Environmental Factors (College-Related, External Conflicts, Job/Career, Miscellaneous Extrinsic Motivators); each of the first two major categories encompassed around one hundred themes. (See Appendix E for the list of categories, subcategories, and themes that emerged from the data analysis process.) In all, the process of thematizing the interviews and sorting the emergent themes into categories took about ten weeks. I then presented these groupings to the chair of my doctoral committee for comment and verification.

Next I derived a profile for each participant, listing key events and influences that s/he had mentioned as having contributed to his/her academic decisions, which I read to the participant during the "member check" described below. When I analyzed the data for this dissertation, I elected, with the approval of the chair of my doctoral committee, to organize the data in the context of answers to the three research questions listed in Chapter 1.

Validation of Conclusions via "Member Checks"

Once I had thematized each interview, I validated my thematic analyses of individual interviews via "member checks" with the participants before publishing the results. Specifically, I listed dominant themes for each interviewee and validated those themes in a telephone follow-up interview with each participant. The telephone follow-up proved to be an efficient means of authenticating the thematic analysis of the interviews and provided me with an opportunity to thank the participants once again for their contribution to this research effort.

CHAPTER 4

PROFILES OF PARTICIPANTS

"Stories" of Some Representative Participants

When I first engaged in this investigation, I determined that the research would "tell the stories" of some community college students to acquaint educators and other readers with these adult human beings who sacrifice their personal lives to engage in recurrent, determined efforts to earn college degrees. In accordance with the intent to "tell their stories," I am presenting the "personal stories" of the participants as the data for this study. I trust that these accounts will amplify the trials encountered by community college stopouts as they intermittently work toward college degrees, the steadfastness with which they pursue their degrees, the circumstances which lead to their sporadic college attendance, and the contributions of significant others who bolster or hinder their academic progress.

The following five relatively detailed narratives are presented in alphabetical order according to the pseudonym chosen by each participant.

Ann

Ann is a 62-year-old, widowed mother of two adult daughters who first enrolled in evening courses at a community college in Florida thirty-four years ago to improve her job skills. At that time she viewed the evening courses as an "enjoyable diversion" and had no intention of pursuing a college degree. Ann derived so much satisfaction from completing the courses, however, that she enrolled in noncredit courses several times thereafter. About ten years ago, after Ann's husband died and her daughters achieved relative self-sufficiency, she took some non-credit evening courses in psychology at the nearest university "for enjoyment."

students, much less form friendships in those classes, but some people at work were supportive of her attending college. Ann dropped out of college a couple of years later because there was "too much going on." She experienced a crumbling of her social support network when her husband died, and as a result she had become depressed and suicidal; the subsequent psychotherapeutic relationship with a grief counselor heightened her interest in psychology.

Three years ago, at age 59, Ann took early retirement from her job. She searched for another position, but in her view her lack of success in obtaining new employment was the result of age discrimination in the job market. That was when she decided to re-enroll in college -- especially since "That's what I'd always wanted to do." Ann had enjoyed reading and learning since childhood, so she decided to become a full-time college student. When Ann reflects on her youth she remembers with some resentment that her parents sent her brother to college, but they would not send her because she was a girl. Her brother dropped out of college in the freshman year, yet the family still would not send her even though she expressed great desire to attend college. Ann reports that when she learned the word progenitor in anthropology, she finally understood the societal impetus for her family's decisions years earlier. Today she enjoys flaunting her grades to her brother, yet the emotion with which she recounts the story of her family's depriving her of a college education in early life makes it clear that she has never fully recovered from her four-decades-old disappointment and resulting rancor.

Ann chose to attend a community college because of its relatively low tuition costs, the comparatively small classes, and the prospect of receiving individualized attention from instructors. Though she found the process of entering college intimidating, she did manage to complete the entrance examinations and to enroll in a developmental math course "to get that algebra behind me" while getting acclimated to college. Ann's successful completion of that class, augmented by enthusiastic and

encouraging comments on her papers from her English composition instructor the subsequent semester ("I was just amazed! And it thrilled me!"), enhanced Ann's self-esteem and escalated her determination to actually pursue a college degree. She attributed her success in math and English to the instructors' teaching abilities and to their interest in her as a person. After those successes and a few others, Ann came to realize that academic achievement is largely a matter of effort: "And I thought gee, I can really do this! And I found out that just about anything I set my mind to do, I can do."

Ann has settled into a regular study routine and says she doesn't "run around" much -- though she does go to movies and the theatre from time to time. Although Ann often gets discouraged by about mid-semester, it is around that same time that she learns her instructors' teaching and grading styles; her continuing good grades convince her to continue to persist academically. "And it's hard. I'm not sayin' that I'm smart or brighter; it just takes a lot more work. So I guess feeling better about myself maybe and knowing that I can do it is the main difference between now and twenty-five to thirty years ago."

Ann serves as a sounding board for younger students and speaks of how much she admires their efforts and their resilience. She enjoys listening to the younger students and empathizing with their struggles, and she acknowledges that her role as a mature friend enhances her own self-esteem and gives her a sense of purpose: "They've had terminal diseases, they've had problems with family, they've even got family members in prison. It just amazes me! Just to be around all of them, I think it keeps you young." Still, Ann says many of her peers tell her she's wasting her time by being in college at her age ("It seems to me an awful lot of people think it's silly").

Ann's 83-year-old mother finds it difficult to this day to encourage Ann's academic endeavors. "Instead of saying, you know, 'Well, you're doing good' or 'This is really great,' she always winds up the conversation by saying 'Well, lock your

doors.' . . . She doesn't mean that she isn't proud of me, but she doesn't know how to express it." Fortunately, Ann's daughters, who both have attended college, encourage her educational efforts and assure her they are proud of her. Ann also feels she is serving as a good role model for her grandson: "My daughters are just thrilled that I'm in school. And I devote a lot of time to studying that I really could spend with them or with my grandson. I don't think I'll regret that later on, though, because I think I'm a good influence on him. And I think uh, when he grows up and realizes that Nana was studying and Nana was trying to do this, it will help him to make his decisions and maybe go on to college." Ultimately, Ann says she no longer cares what other people think; learning has become its own reward. She plans to earn both an associate's and a bachelor's degree, and "I'm just thoroughly enjoying it -- every bit of it!" She hastens to add that she does not need the degree; rather, she wants it: "I don't have to go to college in order to gain a degree to go out and get a job -- you know, that's not my aim anymore. . . . I feel like as long as we're here, we need to be learning. And that's what I'm trying to do. And if I can learn a little bit about art, a little bit about biology, a little bit about psychology -- you know, I'm better off! My mind just races anymore with all the things that, you know, I think and I wonder about, and how does this happen, and why does this happen, and the biology inside our body -- and I didn't know all that, and it's fascinating to me!"

Charles

Charles, a thirty-nine-year-old married father of a six-year-old daughter, began his interview by explaining how he maintained a 4.0 grade-point average in college courses for several years, whereas his current GPA is 3.76: "Well, the reason was I was just taking one class at a time, you know, and it was in my career field. I'm a computer science engineer. And I just took courses in order to further my career

goals, trying to become most proficient in my field. Taking one course evenings in your career field that you're already fairly literate in was significantly easy. So gettin' a 4.0 for several years in a row was fairly easy."

At that time Charles was living in Massachusetts and attending classes at a college in a nearby New Hampshire border town; he chose that college and another he attended later in Florida on the basis of location: "In all cases I had the learning facility in close proximity with easy access and lack of traffic getting to. I dislike intensely traffic. I like the learning facilities to be on the outskirts of the major metropolitan areas, just like [this college] is. Easy access." Charles' occasionally idiosyncratic word choice, unorthodox syntax, and his dislike of traffic may be related to a disability that he mentioned in passing: "I know I stand out because I'm older and I always sit up front; I have a slight hearing discrepancy problem."

Charles' first impression of college was "how big the facilities were. . . . It made me apprehensive. It was intimidating"; but Charles said this impression "quickly passed" as he became absorbed in the logistics of juggling college, home life, and career.

A few years later Charles took some college classes in Florida: "I started taking other courses towards, sorta wiggling towards getting a degree, but not what you would call really intensive towards it, when I was living in Florida. . . . And that was just because I realized that eventually, you should have a degree. However, my career was, you know, going along just fine."

Charles would have attended college more often, but frequently his work took him to areas where no college was available. "I always enjoyed going to school. It's just that often some of the facilities where I was located, at military facilities, there was no educational resource nearby." During those times when Charles did attend college, he looked for an engaging intellectual experience ". . . because I didn't have to go to college, don't forget. There was no requirement that I take courses. I was paying my own way to go to school, you know, and I was juggling my personal life to go to school, so I'm not going to go through that if it's not a quasi-enjoyable experience. And it can be the most rigorous course in the world; if you have a good instructor, they can make it enjoyable. They can make it a personal conquest when you get through it, when you achieve it. That was the biggest motivating factor on the adult scale."

Charles emphasized the need for quality instruction throughout the interview, and he occasionally defined quality in some unconventional ways. For example, since Charles values intellectual exchange above the "regurgitation" model of learning, he opined, "Often, the best instructors didn't ~~know~~ know the material as well as they should have, and we got into discussions having to do with the subject. And we both had to back off and say, 'I'm going to investigate a little bit more and come back the next class session and we're gonna resolve this.'" Charles also stated that in his experience adjunct instructors had been better than full-time instructors because ". . . they come from the career field of computer science. And they literally loved their job, so it was motivation for me to continue." Charles was equally adamant about an instructor

whose instructional style and values he did not like: "I've had a couple of cases which I can definitely attribute . . . that it was an instructor problem. I've had one instructor who uh, even at this facility here, who blew my drawers off by giving me a B. And I knew I deserved an A -- a flat-out, hard A. . . . He would make comments and uh projections that had to do with quasi-politics . . . and they were so ambiguous that you could take either side and argue a good point . But only his side was correct when it came down to the test." The courses that instructor taught were required in Charles' degree program, but Charles said that had he encountered such a problem while he was taking courses at leisure, ". . . it would probably have bummed me out for a year or so because I found it distasteful. I didn't have to do that."

Charles was gainfully employed from the time he was eight years old straight into adulthood. "My family were concessionaires. We had rides in the boardwalk, we had shooting galleries, we ran the fairs. Uh, I was a mechanic, auto mechanic. I worked in an electric motor repair place . . . while I went to school. It was a technical school. And immediately upon or prior to finishing technical school I was hired on by [a major computer manufacturing corporation]. And that was where I had a seventeen-year tenure of employment. And I just ceased last year, and now I'm a full-time student."

For that corporation Charles worked "installing, maintaining, and repairing large computer systems -- mainframes. However, they're quite dinosaurs these days." Charles beams as he talks about his "beasts": "The last systems I had were approximately seven feet tall, two and a half feet deep, and nine feet long -- and we

had nine of them. And one hundred fifty-three disk drives. It was seven million dollars of equipment each time. The reason I came to Oak Ridge was I put it in, from the slab of concrete up -- sold them the air, heat -- I was doing very, very good. There was no problem with the career; I was moving along just fine." His face darkens as he continues: "However, technology has basically made the mainframe obsolete: too much maintenance, too much cost, overhead. And the pc's and minis can do a very good job in the network environment now."

When there was no longer a market for mainframe computers, Charles's company no longer needed his services. "All my training within the seventeen years had been internal to [that company]; it was not what you would call evident on the outside world. It was basically hardware-oriented. And I discovered that after being laid off last year I was not marketable. Not only wasn't I marketable, but I had no provable skills, even though I had been making over half a million dollars a year per person. . . . Even though I could get the job done, I found out people would not hire you. They want an education; they want a piece of paper." Charles' bitterness about being displaced by less experienced college graduates was apparent throughout the interview, as illustrated by this statement: "I have an anger toward society because I know my capabilities. I worked nine years without taking a sick day. I've never in seventeen years showed up late. I've always been successful and conscientious. I've been a good employee, got good raises, got good reviews, and I also went and got independent education that pertained to my career field -- I mean, without the employer requesting it. So I think I was an exceptional employee, okay? But,

however, due to technological change, now I find myself thrown out of the street and unemployable. And that's incredible! I mean, that's stupid! Here ya got somebody who can downright cut mustard -- has flown all over the United States on an emergency basis and done jobs that people with degrees couldn't do -- and I'm unemployable! And that's a slap in the face. I'm insulted. But, you know, it's their misfortune. The people whom I've interviewed with will say, 'Well, I can't consider you unless you have a degree.'"

Charles' anger toward employers spills over into distaste for fellow students who lack dedication: ". . . I hear them say, 'I'm gonna go home; I'm having a bad hair day.' I mean, I actually heard somebody say that! . . . Daddy's bought her a nice pretty car, probably a year or two old, if that; uh, they get all the clothes on their back free, they get a free roof over their head; they get money to spend, and their tuition's paid, and uh, . . . it's a ride! . . . They don't participate; it's like they want somebody to open up their brain and pour the material in. It doesn't work like that." For Charles, in contrast, "School comes first. That's my career now. My career now is school." Charles even takes offense when instructors grade homework: "the homework is for me to do. . . . The proof of whether I do it or not is in the exams. . . . No one's gonna hold your hand when you leave here!"

While working at his current career as student, Charles is continually weighing his career options in the "real" world; he has considered becoming a computer programmer, but he says he has read a statistic that "programmers are right above

doctors in divorce rates. I mean, it's a very stressful job. You have to love it to do it -- and if you love it, you're going to take it home with you." Charles and his wife have discussed this option and he has concluded, "My life with my wife and my home life, and having a personal life, is more important than having a career of that nature - - that might drive me into the ground. You know, you're no good if you're dead! Even though I could do it and do a good job, I would rather not." Instead, Charles has chosen an unusual mix of majors: "I've got a dual major; I'm goin' in computer science (I want to continue that because I had so many credit hours built up) and I'm also going into chemical engineering; I'm attempting to get into the environmental mediation field." He is adamant that he has had a career and he wants one again: "I'm trying to get a second career. I don't want to get a job; I want a career."

When questioned about social support for his academic efforts, Charles cites his wife and child as his primary motivators. Above all, he wants to serve as a role model for his daughter. "I will probably continue my education all the way up, past bachelor's to, you know, a master's. Probably get a couple of master's [degrees] in whatever fields I feel comfortable in. I enjoy going to school, and I think it makes a good model for my daughter. . . . Our children will do what they see; they don't do what they're told. . . . If you read, they're going to read." And, "Basically right now my core motivation besides my child is my wife; she's very supportive." His wife has what he calls a "good job -- she's in the about twelve dollar an hour category, and we're gonna make it," but they have known much better days. "I had a financial plan going, and I was going to be very, very secure -- if this interruptus didn't happen --

and I was going to retire at age fifty-five. My wife was, too, and we were going to have enough money to live for the rest of our life." Charles says he is angry that his job loss has interrupted their retirement plans, ". . . but I'm not going to go out and shoot anybody over it!"

During his current stint as a student Charles has contributed to society by volunteering: "I've taught BASIC several times, I've taught a Fortran course, [and] I started up a computer club." Although he is "intensely job-seeking" at present, Charles says, ". . . even if I do obtain full-time employment, . . . I will continue my education, and I will attempt to take more than one course a semester. I am going to get that degree, because 'fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me!'"

Goat

Goat, an African-American single parent of a nineteen-year-old daughter, has reached a point in her life at the age of forty-seven that she has two immediate goals: to obtain an education that will lead to a "professional career" and to improve her own health.

Goat graduated from high school in Washington, D. C., in 1964; as a product of that transitional period in United States history, Goat was apparently discriminated against in high school, yet had no difficulty obtaining a good job with the U. S. Government upon graduation from high school. When she entered high school, Goat reports, "they should have put me in the college prep course but they didn't -- and my mother never really monitored my education. So what happened was, when I got

ready to go to college, I had no college preparatory courses. . . . They put me in the business track. And they shouldn't have put me in the business track because I was an honor roll student at junior high school. . . . But by my mother not monitoring my education, they could put me in whatever track they wanted to put me in. If it had been my child, I'd have said, 'You take her out of that track and you put her in the college prep track!'"

Goat's mother worked for a major university in the Capitol area; as a consequence, Goat would have been eligible to attend that university for free, had she completed college preparatory courses in high school. "But that was in 1964. And you were in that track and if your parents weren't monitoring, then you were just lost."

Goat's resentment toward her mother is apparent as she continues: "Then my mother had the nerve to ask me, after she hadn't been monitoring my education, 'Well, what are you gonna do?' So I said, 'Well, I guess I'll just get a job. I guess I'll go with what I have, business skills, going on for me.' So I took the Civil Service Test, passed it, got my rating, and got started with the Government -- and that was in 1964." About six years later, while working in a clerical position for the U. S. Government, Goat took college preparatory courses at night for two semesters with the intention of eventually gaining college admission and earning a degree. But meanwhile, "I continued with my career in the Government, and what happened was we were able to get the professional jobs if we had enough experience in personnel. After seven years of experience they moved us from the clerical series to the professional series." Goat was a success -- but then an old love distracted her.

"But after I got the job -- I was there six months -- . . . I just happened to say I always wanted to be a stewardess. And at the time that I said that, I said it in front of someone that had worked for [a major airline] in personnel. . . . I felt like I had accomplished my goal with the Government. I knew what it was going to be like just coming in every day shuffling papers and doing the paper work being a career ladder employee. . . . So I was thinking what other dream can I fulfill now? And when I said it, he just happened to be standing there. And he was the only person who heard me say it." Her mentor arranged for an interview, and two hours after the interview Goat was hired as a flight attendant, a job she held from 1972 to 1981.

Throughout her career as a flight attendant, Goat continued to think about going to college. "I thought that I could maybe leisurely take some courses because a lot of those flight attendants were. . . . But my daughter was born in '75 and in '81 she was diagnosed with diabetes, at the age of six. So it just began to be an overwhelming situation with being a single parent and having a job that took me away from home for two to three nights a week. And child care began to be a fantasy -- to find someone that was going to give her the shot, take care of her, get her meals, get her off to school So I had to stop flying."

It was then that the need for a college education became even more apparent to Goat. "And during that time period from '81 to '88, I was never able to get a professional career. As a flight attendant, I had a professional career. You get to travel, the benefits are great, the money's great; it's a professional career. So I wasn't

able to get a professional career from '81 to '88 because I didn't have a college degree."

During the time that she had been flying, Goat's knowledge of office operations and equipment had become obsolete. She took one temporary job after another, remaining on leave of absence from the airline for seven years with the intention of returning some day. But "I just never got myself into a position or situation where I could leave my child. Because when they get older -- people think that they need you while they're young and they do -- but when they get older, they really need you!" Now Goat's dilemma escalated. "I had grown accustomed to being a professional worker; I had also grown older. I wasn't a young Government employee anymore. I was an older woman with a child."

During this same period Goat's mother retired to Knoxville, where she suffered a stroke. Goat moved to Knoxville to assist her mother, and ". . . the only job I could get was as a waitress. The only job I could get!" After working two years as a waitress and contemplating her future ("I don't want to be fifty years old and waitin' on people"), Goat decided, "I had no choice but to come back to college." For a while she continued to work as a waitress, but then she further decided ". . . my primary priority right now is to be a student." Goat obtained a job on campus as a tutor, and she is currently working part-time on campus, as well as working weekends as a department store fashion consultant ("I think after a certain age you should get paid for your hobbies").

"But it seems like there's always something there for me that sets me back when I attempt to go to college." This time it turned out to be her own health. "I went five semesters in a row without a break. And I think I burned myself out. . . . now I'm down to only one class." Her reason for not attending college full-time is "I am getting older, and I have to kinda pamper myself a little bit more. I have to watch what I eat, I have to exercise, I have to really take care of myself a little bit more now." Goat is looking forward to a time when she can resume full-time studies, but "right now I'm a little burned out. And I'm only taking one course. But I work two jobs."

Goat and her daughter both enjoy the irony that her daughter, just out of high school, has obtained certification as a nursing assistant while her mother is still a student. As Goat said to her daughter, "What's wrong with this picture? I've been going to a two-year college for three years, not certified to do anything, and you've only been out of high school not even a year, and you're already certified to do something!" But Goat is using her time wisely, considering various career options.

Goat loves children and wants to contribute to their education. She is especially interested in creating computer programs that would reward students for learning and help them with their reading skills. Goat became aware in college that she reads differently than others but chose not to be tested for a learning disability even though being certified as learning disabled could possibly result in her college expenses being paid by the Government; her reason for not being tested was "I never wanted to label myself." She is convinced that she has difficulty reading because

"nobody ever read to me." Goat explains, "It takes me longer. I can read, but it takes me longer to understand. Nobody ever knew that. And I didn't know until I got to college."

Goat expressed her educational goal in these words: "I think I'm going to focus my education on early childhood development -- with the computer -- and then design programs for children who have a short attention span -- for children who no one reads to them at home." Goat has considered operating a day care center, but has decided instead to learn how to design learning software for young children. Her eyes dance as she envisions the computerized learning environment: "You can even design the game and they'll be learning and they won't even know it. You'll know what skill you're testing; you'll know what skill that's being enhanced, but they won't know it."

When Goat reflects on the social support she has received for her educational efforts, she summarizes, "And the only way I can say that my family influenced me was I know I don't want to be like them. I know I don't want to act like them, I know I don't want to treat my children like that, I know that I don't want to be like that."

In fact, social influences have deterred Goat's educational progress at times. She took a summer off from school to help her mother organize her house, organize her schedule, and enroll in some programs for senior citizens. But her mother was unable to make the transition when Goat returned to school; she would call Goat with requests on short notice, seemingly oblivious to Goat's need to study. "And a lot of times I can say that I have been totally distracted by my mother and my daughter --

totally distracted -- like at times when I'm preparing for a major test or something like that, here they come!"

Goat's daughter provides some motivation in the sense that Goat wants to serve as a role model for her; "How can I tell my daughter to go to college if I've never been? I've always tried to set an example for my child. I've never tried to dictate to her what to do without trying it out or knowing something about it myself." It is that very lack of having attended college, Goat believes, that makes her family members so oblivious to her need for time to concentrate on her studies. "People will look at you and tell you they understand, but they really don't understand how much of a burden it is being a student. They really don't understand. My mother never went to college, so she doesn't understand. My daughter's never been to college, so she doesn't understand. And after a certain point I just have to tell them, 'I cannot do that for you; I have to study.'"

As Goat continues to contemplate her primary motivation for attending college, she articulates a typical midlife stance: "I'm at the point in my life where I don't have to impress anyone. I don't owe you anything -- not even an apology. This is my thing, going to college; it's about me and it's for me. I love doing it, I love going, and that's all that matters." In fact, she says, she will most likely continue her education once she earns a degree: "I will be here until I die. I'll be taking some kind of course . . . because that is what I'm good at. That has worked for me." Still, Goat concludes on a wistful note: "But I wish that I had a college education -- that I'd gotten it sooner."

Jane Doe

Jane Doe barely graduated from high school. She relates that "I didn't have near enough math. They just hurried up and graduated me. I got in a lot of trouble in high school and stuff." Both Jane and her sister were sexually abused throughout childhood and adolescence by their father and by their brother; as a result of the turbulence at home, Jane often found it impossible to concentrate during classes: "I think that had somethin' to do with me not learnin' well in school when I was younger -- because I was busy focused on that. So I missed out on a lot of things. They call it somethin' like 'gap learning.'" Jane especially felt resentment when her mother "looked the other way" while her father was molesting her, and not too surprisingly, Jane frequently got into fights at school. Her masculine gait and androgynous appearance prompted her classmates to call her "faggot," to which epithet she retaliated by hitting her youthful tormentors. Once she was in high school she began to play hooky, for which offense she was disciplined in a manner that she considered absurd: ". . . when you lay out of school, they suspend you! That doesn't make any sense. 'Well, you didn't come to school for three days, so we'll suspend you for three days.' 'Oh! That makes a lot of sense. Thanks!'" Though she did not elaborate, Jane indicated that she had some encounters with the Juvenile Court system during high school as well.

In addition to enduring a loathsome home life and repeated conflicts with classmates, Jane exhibited what might have been diagnosed as attention deficit disorder, had anyone recommended that she be tested: "Basically, I just can't pay

attention to stuff very long, so I have trouble reading." When I asked her how she was managing to read her college textbooks, she replied, ". . . books kinda cheat in a way. They give you like bold words and little ideas on the side and diagrams and stuff. And you just look at those and listen to what the teacher says. That's usually what I did: I just listened in class and participated in class. . . . I could do that, you know, all day long. But you know, you give me a test, and . . . that's entertaining!"

When faced with an entire chapter to read, Jane says "I can't stand it! It takes forever -- just drives me crazy!"

Not only did Jane Doe have problems with reading, but she did not learn mathematics conventionally, either. "I didn't learn how to divide until I was in algebra. I had my own way of coming up with answers, but as far as really knowing how to do something, I didn't know how to do it. I just multiplied -- backwards. I was raised around a lot of agricultural stuff back in the boonies and you just have to come up with your own way of doing things -- or I did. I would just break it up into parts, and if each part was right, then the whole would be right. I don't know; it's hard to explain. . . . Or I would take something and get a number that rounded off that was really close, I mean something that you can do in your head, you know, like if five goes into twenty four times, then it will go into this, this many times. You just kinda break 'em up and get kinda close, and you can get answers on tests and stuff that way because you pick one that makes sense, one that's reasonable, and you get the answer that way. It's hard to explain. I've just got my own way of doin' math."

Having barely survived high school, Jane had no intention of going on to college. Nevertheless, she did attempt to enroll in a community college about two years after graduation as she came to realize that a college education is necessary to qualify one for most jobs. Jane recounts her first experience of college thusly: "My first experience, I never did end up in college. Couldn't figure out the admissions process. And uh, everybody was just kinda runnin' around in a clump and so I never did get in. You get in a line and then you go up to the front of the line and then you're in the wrong line" (Such difficulty in dealing with confusing situations is further indication that Jane may be dyslexic or learning disabled.)

About a year later, Jane tried to enroll in another community college, the one she is currently attending, and this time she was successful -- up to a point: "My grades were pretty good until I just didn't go back to class." She quit attending classes because she found herself "feelin' kinda trapped" while sitting in classes ("You just feel like you're gonna drop over dead or somethin'."). "I later learned that it was an anxiety disorder. And I didn't know that you could get like an incomplete, so I ended up getting, you know, F's. I should have read the handbook a little better." During the year before she again attempted college work, Jane determined that she wanted to re- enter college even though sitting in classrooms had triggered panic attacks; "I realized that if I was going to do anything other than just grunt labor that I was going to have to get a degree because I didn't have any vocational training or anything. And I didn't like my job." So during that intervening period, since Jane could not afford health care, "I just kinda fixed it [the anxiety disorder] myself." She developed a

technique which she still uses: "I talk to myself and say there's nothing goin' to happen to me. It's just anxiety, you know, and I try to think about why I'm freakin' out. And if I can figure out why I'm freakin' out, then I don't have to do it. I don't have to freak out."

Jane also acknowledged to herself during the time out of college that one of the triggers of her panic attacks was math anxiety: ". . . I had to take a lot more math than I felt I was able to do, and that kind of discouraged me as well. Because I didn't want to take any math. I didn't know that with all the degrees you have to take it. So that kind of discouraged me because I had a lot of trouble in math. I took developmental algebra twice." Jane coped with her math anxiety as she had learned to manage the anxiety disorder in general -- cognitively: "One way or the other, I mean, every degree, I was going to have to take it. I just had to stop whinin' and do it." In addition, a woman she worked with helped her with the required math courses she was taking. "It helped me to pass it. I still hate math. It just doesn't make sense to me . . . I can't hunt for it; it's just not there." Statistics, though, provided a quite different scenario, "I think because I wasn't expected to know anything prior to the class. My lack of previous knowledge didn't get in the way. Everything I needed was right there, and I did it. It was easy."

While back in college Jane has seen a social worker and a psychiatrist on a few occasions, resulting in her having received a diagnosis of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, for which she is currently being treated with a serotonin reuptake inhibitor: "I'm taking Paxil right now. I've taken a number of different antidepressants. Not

'cause I'm depressed or anything, they just have the serotonin effect that's desired. They interfere with the reuptake of serotonin. I think what happens is I don't have enough serotonin." She also confides that ". . . during that period when I was out of school, I was trying to get a little bit agoraphobic."

Currently, Jane holds down four jobs; she works in a psychiatric unit, does private duty sitting with a woman who has Parkinson's disease, mows lawns, and paints cars. In addition, to gain "bona fide experience" in her chosen career, she does volunteer work in the occupational therapy department in a hospital. With her work totaling about fifty hours a week, Jane is nevertheless enrolled in 15 semester hours in college, including a chemistry class which she perceives to be her most difficult subject currently. Fortunately, the chemistry instructor explains concepts thoroughly and willingly demonstrates algebraic operations that her students may not yet have understood or retained: ". . . if you ask her something she doesn't say, 'Well, you're supposed to already know that!'" Here also, Jane employs cognitive restructuring techniques: "I can laugh at chemistry, you know, because I've had physics! I've already been to Hell. I've already been to Math Hell!"

Today Jane remains motivated to complete courses on time because she has decided upon a career which combines her interests in helping others and in remaining physically active -- occupational therapy: "I'm trying to hurry up and get done because all the occupational therapy schools, they start at certain times and you have to be finished at a certain time. Fall and summer, depending on which school accepts you. They're real hard to get into." In fact, Jane Doe is so anxious to graduate that

she sometimes takes courses at both the community college and the local university simultaneously, including courses for which she has not yet had the prerequisites -- whatever it takes to complete the coursework required to get into an occupational therapy degree program. Furthermore, Jane is feeling a time crunch to graduate and get on with her life: "And I'm twenty-four. I don't have that kind of time, you know? You miss one semester and that can mess you up by two years. Because some of the schools only start a class every two years. So if you miss it, you missed it!"

The abuse Jane suffered at home, the alienation from peers that she experienced in high school, her homosexual orientation, and the large number of hours she spends working and attending college have resulted in relative social isolation for Jane. Thus my repeated proddings did not produce very many sources of social support for Jane's academic efforts. The math tutor at work and the chemistry instructor have been helpful, and Jane also mentioned that a man with whom she paints cars occasionally asks her how school is going. Her friends offer a cynical sort of support: "Yeah, I know it sucks, man, but you'll be done with it. You'll be done, you'll have your degree, and then you'll be rich, you know. Don't forget about me!" Various family members who do not have college educations have also provided a sort of inverse social support; Jane has concluded "I don't want to be like that!" Still, Jane wishes she had encountered a mentor in college, and she offers this advice to incoming college students: ". . . find somebody that you trust that you know knows somethin' about school and ask them . . . what steps do I need to take? What are my options?"

Sarge

Sarge went from high school to summer Marine Corps boot camp to college the following fall -- and discovered "freedom" for the first time in his life. "I was so used to the structure of life in the Marine Corps boot camp, going to the freedom of a college campus was really unique . . . and typical of most freshmen I partied just as hard as I should have been studying." Sarge attended a church-sponsored junior college in an Idaho town populated almost exclusively by church members, so he avoided the typical college pitfalls of alcohol and drugs, but he did discover dancing. "And so on Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturday nights I went dancing -- on nights that I should have been studying. . . . I got my first D in my life." In addition to keeping his dance card filled, Sarge worked three hours a day in the college cafeteria, attended monthly Marine Corps drill weekends, and represented the college one weekend a month on its debate team. "So I was real lucky to . . . I ended up with a 3.0. . . . I just didn't buckle down and work at all!"

The next semester Sarge cut out Wednesday night dancing because of a night class, but he still danced three nights a week and maintained his weekend military and debate team obligations -- until he affiliated with a girlfriend who, fortunately for both their grade-point averages, chose to study rather than dance. They studied together and Sarge pulled his GPA up to a 3.4. The following summer Sarge attended Marine Corps Reserve tank school, and the following two years he went on a mission for his church.

During the church mission Sarge learned about adult life. "And so I went to college that spring semester in '88 prepared to study, prepared to buckle down and get to work." Since all the young men in the college went on two-year missions, the instructors were accustomed to re-encountering the freshman class as sophomores two full years later. Sarge and the rest of the freshman male cohort returned very much matured, "And so that semester I pulled a 3.89 because I just decided . . . I just buckled down and studied."

Then Sarge met a young lady whose parents moved to Tennessee, "and she persuaded me to come here to Tennessee. And then I got the big shock that if you move to Tennessee you can't enroll in a state university because they think you're coming here to go to school -- and that means out-of-state tuition . . . and instead of going back to school I took two jobs. I was working eighty to ninety hours a week on two jobs. Meanwhile, Sarge's fiancée got an opportunity to attend x-ray school; "I said, 'Fine, you go to school and I will work.'" They married, and when Sarge's wife was a year and a half into her two-year x-ray technology program, Sarge was called to represent his country in the Persian Gulf. While her husband was in the Persian Gulf, Sarge's wife "had to make some plans for herself, practically," and she accepted an offer to attend nuclear medicine school. Sarge offered to continue putting her through school, which he did until she graduated.

"And when I got back from the Persian Gulf I started taking night classes to kind of get myself back up to speed because now it had been two years, almost three years since I had been to school. And a lot of things had changed, and I needed to

bring myself back up to speed in some areas. And I also was getting frustrated because I was wanting to get back to school." Sarge was taking a few courses at a time while continuing to work full-time, and he was making A's in the classes. But then he received "what I thought was a really great job offer."

Sarge waited for the great promises his new employer had offered to be fulfilled, but none of them were. "I waited a year and a half and things weren't happening, so I decided, 'Well, I just need to go back to school.' And so that's when I started up again full-time: fall semester this year." Though he had not been in school full-time for almost four years, Sarge felt prepared for full-time schooling this time as a result of his part-time classes the preceding spring and summer. "So last semester I ended up with a 3.89, too." When interviewed during the spring semester of 1994, Sarge was not so optimistic about the grades he might earn that semester ". . . because I am in calculus and calculus does not forebode well with anybody, especially me."

Meanwhile, Sarge and his wife have engaged in considerable discussion about what his career direction should be. He considered medicine but they rejected that option as a result of ". . . the hours they have to put in and the time away from their families." They then considered his earning a degree in public administration followed by a medical degree so that he could "deal with all the bureaucrats and everything that's going to be happening in the medicine field." Now they're considering his getting a strong background in computing as well as public administration so that he might become a "government spokesperson . . . or deal with city planning"

But what disturbs Sarge most, he reports, is his age: "I think the hardest thing for me to deal with is being twenty-eight and still being a sophomore. . . . Often I get frustrated, thinking, 'Look at these guys; they're twenty-eight and look at what they're doing. And here I am and I'm still a sophomore in school!'" Fortunately, Sarge's father helped Sarge make light of the issue of age: "He goes, 'How old are you, again?' And I go, 'twenty-eight,' and he goes, 'Are you really that old? I'm fifty-two.' And I go, 'Well, I guess I'm not that old,' and he goes, 'No. Just have a little patience. Just have a little patience!'" Sarge went on to note that ". . . my dad did basically the same thing. Okay? He went to school for a time, he went active duty in the military, then he got married. It took him awhile because he had a couple of kids and then he went back to school. He got his bachelor's degree at thirty-two. So that's . . . I don't know if that's maybe a trend or whatever, but that's what happened. The identical same thing is happening to me."

In spite of Sarge's father's philosophical position, age clearly remains a motivator for Sarge, as he revealed later in the interview. He remarked that he is a baker by trade and that two of his co-workers are in their forties and fifties, yet they barely make more money than he does; ". . . and my boss is twenty-eight and he's got a finance degree, and he's making much more money than I am. And you know, that's a real-life practical vision of my future without a degree and my future with a degree." Later, Sarge mused, "The older I got, the more knowledge I gained of what the real world is like -- not the ideological ideas of an eighteen-year-old. A lot of kids think, 'Well, I won't go to school. I'll just get a job being a mechanic.' And at

eighteen, making sixteen dollars an hour as a mechanic is ideal; but when you're forty-four and still making sixteen dollars an hour, it isn't." He also noted that when he was around twenty-five, ". . . it really started grating on me, not being in school. I started getting jealous of my wife being in school and me not."

Most of all, the time in the Persian Gulf gave Sarge time to reflect on his life and to reassess his goals. He could not help noticing that "I had been in the Marine Corps for six and a half years, and I had people that had been in for two years telling me what to do -- all because they had a college education. That was the only difference. I was technically more knowledgeable, . . . but they had that degree, so they could tell me what to do." And, as Sarge expressed it, ". . . surviving war gives you a futuristic different outlook. Because I know three-fourths of the guys that I was there with came home with the desire to go back to school. . . . When you have that much time on your hands, you sit down and you retrospect about what your life is like and what you've done with your life for the last twenty-odd years. And then you think, 'What's my life going to be like for the next twenty-odd years? If I make it through this.' And you make a lot of promises to yourself: 'If I make it through this, things are going to change.'" Sarge further mused, "And for the majority of us, the only way to change what we had before is by going back to school. that's the only avenue of change that we had available to us, was going back to school. And I think if you look at the predominant history of the nation, after World War I, people went back to school; World War II, people went back to school; Vietnam, back to school. And that's why: because you have to think about what's happening to your life!"

Not only do soldiers contemplate their existence because they have time available, Sarge said, but because they are exposed to people from different strata of life -- people they would not ordinarily meet. "A lot of us sat around and complained about what we did and how we lived and what kinds of jobs and bosses we had, and . . . everyone categorically had the same thing, the same complaints, and we were all in the same boat. . . . And then you talked to the guys that were in school, and you talked to the officers that had been through school, and you [could] see the difference and you [could] see the future. And you see their future. In real life you don't deal that much with upper-level and lower-level people; you just deal with who you are, and people around you are usually in the same boat. But in that mixture of time, you got to get more associated with different levels. And so you saw, 'Well, I can do that; I can achieve that. And the only difference between me and him is he's got a degree.' And that degree is important. So that's one of the things that really hit home. And I think even before that, twenty-five marks off a quarter of a century!" Having reflected yet again on the fact that he had passed the quarter-century mark, Sarge concluded the interview.

Condensed Profiles of Remaining Participants

Having resisted the temptation to tell all twelve participants' stories in full, I have attempted to summarize the remaining seven stories below.

Kay

Kay went to college straight out of high school because her parents expected her to. She spent quite a bit of time socializing in the student center, especially playing pool, but when she nevertheless felt isolated, Kay attempted suicide for the second time. (Having been sexually, physically, and psychologically abused as a child, Kay first attempted suicide at age seven.) Both the hospital stay after the suicide attempt and the medications she was administered resulted in Kay's withdrawing from college, a pattern which "continued off and on for three years." Her family medical history includes numerous cases of mental retardation, autism, and alcoholism, though she thinks she has "cornered the market on depression." Today she says that "nothing was as beneficial as not taking any medication at all," and that she now talks herself out of depressive tendencies.

With the help of Vocational Rehabilitation funding, Kay has studied to be an x-ray technician and a draftsman; she worked in the latter capacity for her father's business until the market for drafting declined. Next she completed a medical assisting program at a nonaccredited college and worked in that field for two years until the birth of her daughter. Today Kay is studying for a nursing career and nourishing a desire to become a writer.

Kay attributes much of her recovery to the support of her psychologist and she reports that she is now learning about empathy, motivation, and self-discipline. She loves learning and says she "couldn't hand-pick better instructors" than those she has had at the community college, whose contributions to her intellectual growth have

intensified her academic motivation. Her husband provides financial support but conveys ambivalent messages about her career choice and her educational aspirations. He manages a restaurant and she hopes to support him to return to college so that he may pursue his dream of a teaching career -- though he has refused offers from others to pay for the remainder of his education. Kay also is motivated to excel in college to set an example for her daughter: "I think it's good for her to see Mama going to school and learning that now I can't play and play. I have to do my work." Today at age thirty-six Kay feels that her adolescent suicide attempts reflected self-centeredness, whereas "Now I want to be a contributor."

Kelly

Kelly married her childhood sweetheart upon graduation from high school. When that marriage ended eight years later, she took a secretarial position with a major corporation in Texas where she rose through the ranks to the position of Director of Human Resources for the 1600-employee company. She completed one college class a semester for a while, but as her duties increased, so did the number of work hours required of her per week, including evenings. Kelly's second husband worked for the same corporation until he was informed that his entire unit was to be transferred to California. Since there would not be a place in the organization for Kelly in California, and since the move was to be a lateral move for her husband, they both resigned in August, 1990, from the company for which she had by then been working for sixteen years.

Kelly became a full-time junior college student for two consecutive semesters, after which she moved to another Texas town where her husband had found employment. The junior college in that town had a reciprocity agreement with a major Texas university; Kelly enrolled in a program which included extensive opportunities for earning credit for life experience, an opportunity which resulted in Kelly's receiving twenty-one college credit hours for her sixteen years' work experience.

When she and her husband separated, Kelly once again had to drop out of school. She found employment in another town as manager of employee relations at the corporate level of a financial institution, but quit that job when she and her husband reunited in January of 1993. Kelly returned to college too late to register, but fortunately, a couple of professors arranged with her to sit in on classes and complete the assignments without being officially enrolled; they offered to record her grades when she could actually enroll in the classes later. But in the meantime, Kelly's husband became unemployed during the summer of 1993, resulting in her returning to full-time work.

In September of 1993 Kelly and her husband moved to Knoxville, where he had found work. Two Texas professors allowed her to enroll in two independent study courses that semester; Kelly did her research in Knoxville, mailed the resulting papers to Texas, and received credit from the Texas university for two upper-division courses.

Before leaving Texas, Kelly worked out a degree plan with her professors. Together they pored through the catalogs from the community college and a local university and agreed upon courses which she could take in Tennessee and transfer

back in order to earn her baccalaureate from the Texas university. Spring Semester 1994, the semester in which I interviewed Kelly, she was enrolled in eleven semester hours at the community college. Her plan was to complete six more hours at the community college the following summer, and then enroll in a Tennessee university to complete eighteen hours of agreed-upon upper division courses so that she could earn her baccalaureate in Texas at the end of the spring semester 1995.

When Kelly enrolled at the community college, she brought with her a 3.64 grade-point average on her transcript from the Texas university. Kelly remarked to me, "It's surprising I've kept my GPA up as high as I have because it seems like, you know, there's always been something going on with my personal life." She further commented, "I've been going to school so long now, so many years, that there is a light at the tunnel if I am able to stay here long enough [nervous laughter] -- or somewhere long enough to get these classes in. Then I can see that I will get the degree."

The transition from bearing major supervisory responsibilities in a large corporation to becoming "one of the kids in school" has challenged Kelly's self-esteem, in addition to the fact that she left her entire social support network when she stopped working and moved away from Texas. But even more damaging to her self-esteem is her perception that ". . . basically, I'm getting this paper to show 'em I can do what . . . I know how to do." Kelly concedes, though, that "It's nice to be able to go to class and accomplish making good grades. You know, it's work . . . basically." That thought triggered a few tears.

Kelly's husband, who earned a double major in college and who lacks only one course completing a master's degree, understands her need for time to study. He respects the fact that "What I try to do is treat going to school just like a job." Kelly, now forty-eight, is also enjoying competing with her eldest son, who is now twenty-five, to see which of them graduates college soonest. She has also found social support from several instructors at the community college who have been impressed by her conscientiousness and who have shown respect for her managerial experience.

Kelly's goal is clearly employment, and her education is a means to that goal. When she completed the two independent study courses during her first season in Tennessee, Kelly scrupulously chose two emerging areas in business to research to help prepare her for her next job. Recently she interviewed for a position in Human Resources, and once the slot had been filled, she telephoned the interviewer and asked for feedback on her interview performance. He candidly informed her, "I didn't have any problem with the interview. You've got good experience and everything. I just hired somebody with a Master's degree in Human Resources." Kelly replied resignedly, "that's what I wanted to know." To me she added, "So I guess, you know, uh . . . once again, you've got to have that degree."

Michael

Michael began the story of his college career this way: "My first college experience was when I was just out of high school. I entered [a Texas] University as a freshman, and actually, I continued to enter [that] university as a freshman for five

or six, seven years, or ten years, occasionally, during that period. . . . It was not a productive period in my life. It was the late 'sixties and there were quite a number of things on my mind besides college and my attitude was such that I just wasn't able to progress in my studies."

Like many of his generation, in addition to spending his time protesting the Vietnam War, Michael explored the "vogue to experiment with mind-altering drugs" to the point that his usage "eventually became substance abuse behavior." At one point Michael even volunteered to serve as a medic for the Marine Corps with the understanding that he would not have to train with a weapon. When he learned that he had been misled by the recruiter, Michael engaged in a "long, fairly complicated series of dealings with the Federal court system." In reflecting on that decade Michael observes that his "attitude of disenchantment . . . did not inspire in me a desire to be educated by the system that I was essentially rejecting."

Michael continued, "So uh, it wasn't until the early 1980's, actually, when I finally did go back to [that] university and actually complete some courses that I took at night. But these were not academic courses. These were photography courses." Michael's intent was to gain enough technical skills to support himself as a photographer. "Of course, without a college education I had found myself working in industry. And the industry in which I was working was in fact dying; I was working in marine construction and when the oil business went flat in 1982, there was very little work."

Though Michael enjoyed the photography courses tremendously and did some professional photography, he did not in fact become a professional photographer. Instead, he followed the marine construction business to a major eastern seaport city until the industry "did, in fact, continue to die." After being laid off from one job after another, Michael began taking night courses in the extension school of one of the country's most prestigious universities, where he began to "experience the joy of literature for the first time." The extension school was open to anyone, even those without high school diplomas, "as a means of offsetting the fact that it [the university] is an elitist institution." Students who were successful could be admitted to degree programs in the university proper, an opportunity which Michael eagerly embraced.

Attendance at that distinguished center of learning proved pivotal for Michael: "I had read avidly as a young person, but I didn't really begin to experience the joy of literature and reading and writing as an adult in any mature sense until I began coursework at [that university]." Michael recalls the exact moment when his epiphany occurred; he was sitting in a class entitled "The English Bible: A Nontheological Survey," and as the instructor was reading some Biblical passages, ". . . her eyes teared as she was moved by the emotion and beauty of the literature . . . and I remember at that moment coming to the personal understanding that it was really okay for me to be moved by literature. Because this person was clearly, and it was appropriate. So at that point I began to recognize my own commitment to literature, to writing." Michael took "one course at a time at night" at that university for six years, except for two summers; "so I completed ten undergraduate courses in six years." He would

gladly have earned a degree from that institution, but instead his personal code of ethics once again clashed with "the system."

Michael gained employment with the university managing over two hundred university-owned housing units; subsequently, he became aware of the involvement of organized crime in the management of university housing, of kickbacks, and of what to him was even worse -- violations of safety codes that could result in the loss of many lives. What ultimately rendered Michael a persona non grata in this academic haven was his revelation of violations of fire safety codes in housing owned by the institution with whose "dark underbelly" he had become all too familiar. Determined to protect the lives of faculty, graduate students, and their children, Michael dropped a detailed sixteen-page list of building and fire code violations on the desk of a Vice President of the university just before, in morbid synchronicity, a child died in a fire that broke out in one the housing units. Not only did the university engage in an elaborate attempt to save face, but they saw to it that Michael left the university "under a cloud . . . of smoke -- literally!" Shortly thereafter, Michael and his wife left the country.

Michael's wife obtained a teaching position in Germany and Michael secured work with a German contractor; they remained in that country about a year, then moved to Texas. Unfortunately, the university in the town where they lived did not offer night programs, and Michael was neither willing nor ready at that time to attend a community college, having attended one of the country's most prestigious universities. Both he and his wife scoured university catalogs for programs they might

want to enter; the outcome of that search was that they moved to Knoxville. While his wife's doctoral program more than met her expectations, Michael again ran up against "the system." Financial aid regulations at the local university were not designed to accommodate the needs of part-time, out-of-state students with child support obligations; as a result, Michael enrolled in the community college. Michael reports that he was happy to find that the "interaction with faculty is very rewarding and enriching, moreso than I might have expected, given my rather perhaps cynical attitude," and that "I very much enjoy my interactions with older students here on campus." Though the intellectual atmosphere of the community college of course in no way rivals that of a world-class university, Michael says "Here, I'm getting the minimum amount of credentials that will allow me to be more employable."

As soon as he arrived in Knoxville Michael began carving a niche for his creative skills; he now serves as "managing editor of a privately published, monthly student magazine-type newspaper," he founded a thriving writer's guild, and he has recorded an entire book on tape for a visually impaired student as practice for the radio career to which he aspires. (Michael has already acquired a bit of an international reputation as a writer since a number of his pieces have been broadcast over international broadcasting networks similar to the BBC.)

Michael anticipates finishing his General Studies associate's degree at about the same time his wife completes her doctorate, at which time he will enroll in "whichever university offers her a teaching position."

Michelle

Michelle was awarded two conditional college scholarships when she graduated from high school in Wisconsin-- one for being the best business student in her school and the other for being the best business student in the city; the condition was that the scholarships would be awarded only after she had successfully completed her freshman year of college. She never collected.

Michelle had "bounced from school to school" throughout elementary school. Her parents were in business for themselves and frequently oscillated between feast and famine. There was a certain "feast or famine" motif in Michelle's schooling as well: in one school district she was so far ahead of the other students that the teachers put her out in the hall to read alone while they taught material she already knew; then in the next school district she would find herself hopelessly behind. Michelle slid through school until she learned that a tenth-grade friend was going to be inducted into the National Honor Society. As a result of their friendly rivalry, Michelle "really buckled down" during her junior and senior years of high school and increased her grade-point average dramatically, resulting in her being awarded the aforementioned scholarships.

During the summer after high school Michelle landed a comparatively lucrative position as a photographer's assistant in which she "got to photograph all the babies" and "loved it." Only when her parents queried her in August about whether she was planning to attend college did Michelle even consider that question; she hurriedly gave notice at work and packed off to college, where she was placed with a roommate who was a "real partier."

Michelle's parents had been "really, really strict" with her, and suddenly at college she was presented with more freedom than she had ever dreamed possible; she could even determine how much time to spend with her boyfriend! "I made all those decisions for the first time in my life . . . and I didn't make them very well -- obviously!" Michelle says she "barely hung on" with B's and C's that first semester - - and the next semester she did even worse.

Out of desperation Michelle approached the resident assistant on her dormitory floor, explaining that she was "flunking out of some classes" and that she didn't know what to do. "I had no idea that you could audit classes or you could withdraw or anything else. I had no knowledge of the workings of college." Acting on the sage advice of the upperclasswoman, Michelle dropped several classes; by the end of the year she "ended up with like 17 [credit hours] for the two semesters -- simply because the second semester, I just lost it completely!"

Michelle recounts that she had no idea there were tutors or labs available, no concept of how to use a library, and no knowledge of the availability of freshman orientation. "In fact, I never went to college orientation until fifteen years later Then all of a sudden I'm learning things about a library and things about the workings of college that were just new to me!"

During those intervening fifteen years Michelle managed a photography studio, worked as a restaurant hostess, and ultimately followed up on her parents' suggestion to get into real estate sales. Michelle "went to a two-week cram course" in Wisconsin which covered material that was "normally covered in six or eight months"; the

intensive study suited her innate tendencies because "I could see that. . . . I couldn't relate to four years of college!" She spent every waking hour studying; ". . . and this was the first time that I really did anything where I was disciplined." Her instructor was "wonderful" because "he taught me how to study, he taught me the subject matter, and he taught me how to take a test. All the things I thought I couldn't do after failing in college." Later Michelle passed her real estate broker's exam "with flying colors"; "I guess that was the first time I really had pride in myself and felt accomplishment." When she entered real estate in 1979, there were more buyers than sellers; then the interest rates soared to nearly twenty percent the following year.

Michelle's parents moved to Florida at about the same time she was breaking up with her fiancé; she joined them and promptly became "miserable." Not too long after, she and her fiancé reunited, married, and produced a family of three children within five years. Michelle says, "This was my dream, finally." Michelle's mother urged her to return to college, but she protested, "I don't want to go back to school! . . . I want my kids to know me!" Just before the birth of her second child Michelle got interested in school again, and this time she started taking insurance classes, which she describes as "something I could relate to -- a beginning and an end -- in sight! She passed both an insurance and a securities exam during the eighth month of pregnancy, gave birth, worked some in the evenings, then found herself pregnant again when her second child was three months old; "so insurance and securities was put on hold again." Now she had three small children, and "With these little ones and going 'goo-goo ga-ga' and just going crazy, I realized that my goal in life, to have kids,

which was what I always wanted, was no longer satisfying me. I realized I needed more."

She began attending a community college in Florida, where at registration she ran into an old high school friend from Wisconsin. "It was really neat because I had somebody that I could go with and that I could discuss my problems with." Michelle's earlier "failure" at college had damaged her self-concept, resulting in her being apprehensive this time in college. To overcome the fear she determined, "I'm not gonna be a quitter. I'm gonna prove I can do this."

But then her husband's work brought them to Knoxville. At first Michelle worked to help them get on their feet; then her husband sustained a serious injury and she worked to keep the family alive. When he regained some of his ability to work, Michelle helped her husband with his business until it became clear that she needed a full-time, stable job. A few months prior to our interview, Michelle's company had undergone a series of changes of ownership. The most recent company seemed to have arrived with a policy to demoralize and then fire all the long-term and most dedicated employees, including Michelle.

Though she had not yet had a chance to prove that she could graduate from college, Michelle had proved herself to be a highly competent and reliable employee. Suddenly she found her ego being battered by a new supervisor who questioned her decisions, systematically stripped her of authority, and then replaced her with a new, lower-paid employee. Though she found some solace in the resulting declining profits of her former company, Michelle clearly was still feeling traumatized when we talked.

Having taken a course a semester while working, Michelle had just returned to school full-time in the spring of 1994. "Nobody in my family has ever graduated from college," she said, and she clinched her jaws as she declared, "I'm not going to let them [the former employers] take away my self-worth. I'm going to get this degree!"

Rebecca

Rebecca took advantage of an early admission program that her high school in Virginia had arranged with the local community college; as a result, she spent her last year of high school in college. The transition to college life proved too much for her. "I went from an atmosphere of total, rigid, structured control wherein if you were in the hallway in the middle of classes without your pass, you have just committed the ultimate sin . . . [to an environment in which I was told] 'You are an adult now' and 'You are to take responsibility for being in class, responsibility for being on time, responsibility for turning in your assignments on the dates that we have noted on the syllabus and maybe I will remind you and maybe I won't' and 'We're not gonna tell you when you have to be in class' and 'We're not gonna say anything to you.'" Rebecca interpreted this laissez faire approach as license for her to attend classes only when she wanted to, including deciding whether to take the final exam in calculus class, a class in which she had been making A's but for which she earned an F because she "just didn't bother to take the final." Rebecca also failed the history class that was to have equated with her high school history class; though she made up the grade the following fall, she neglected to transfer the class back to her high school because she

did not see any reason to do so; "So I actually graduated high school four years past the time I was supposed to."

Instead of continuing in college, Rebecca married and bore a child. Being a mother instilled a sense of responsibility in Rebecca which expressed itself at least partially in her decision to earn a degree in data processing, the only computing degree available at that time in community colleges. She completed all degree requirements except eighteen quarter hours of accounting, a subject with which she "never got along." Instead of finishing her degree, Rebecca had another child. Divorced from her husband a few years later and with two children to care for, Rebecca "realized how stupid I had been! . . . I had been going to school for about six years and hadn't finished that two-year degree. . . . And I kept thinking, 'I need to go back. I need to go back.'"

Rebecca remarried, but her second husband was not at all supportive of her attending college: "If it wasn't important to him, it probably wasn't all that important!" Rebecca found work in the computing field along the way as a result of her knowledge of numerous software packages and her ability to teach others how to use computer resources, and the part-time work met her needs until her husband died two years ago. Since then, Rebecca has had numerous temporary assignments in which her immediate supervisor expressed an interest in hiring her full-time, but her perception is that "the higher ups . . . just want to keep people on temporary." Rebecca is trusting that once she has earned a degree in Computer Science, the college placement office will help her secure a full-time job. She is also considering

Cooperative Education with the hope that she can make herself known to potential employers that way.

Today Rebecca's main source of social support for continuing her education comes from her mother, who has been a teacher and who values education greatly. Rebecca's father, who "never went past the sixth grade" but who earned a GED many years later, seems to remain convinced that Rebecca will never graduate from college, and Rebecca has accepted his challenge: "I'm really working hard for these A's that I'm getting to prove to him that I can do it." Rebecca also wants "to prove to my own children that it's important to graduate. I want them to see Mama walk across the stage so they can say, 'Well, she had to fight so many battles, but she finally did it!'" And besides, thirty-four-year-old Rebecca concludes, "I need that degree. And I'm getting too old!"

Sue

Sue launched our interview by revealing, ". . . the very first time I went to college, I went to [this college] when it was State Tech down at Lakeshore. That was in 1983; and . . . I didn't make it until November. I started in the fall and I withdrew before Thanksgiving." The reason she withdrew, Sue says, was "I wasn't feeling real confident and everything was real overwhelming to me at the time. . . . I didn't feel like I had the brains or the background to be there." In addition, Sue stated, "I was just starting on new medication and I felt real self-conscious being on this medication"; moreover, the medication interfered with Sue's ability to comprehend and retain what

she was reading. Even though she had a high school diploma, Sue enrolled in GED classes for a year, primarily to enhance her mathematics skills.

The following year Sue enrolled in a community college associate degree program in Criminal Justice, which she completed two and a half years later. Unfortunately, Sue could not obtain work as a security guard because she was certified as mentally ill. Sue was taking lithium to avoid the severe mood swings and erratic behavior symptomatic of bipolar disorder; as a result, she was not eligible for a security clearance. After three months of intense job-seeking, Sue "just pretty much fell apart." She says that the death of her grandmother just after her graduation and the dissolution of a long-term relationship also contributed significantly to her emotional distress.

Sue remained hospitalized approximately four weeks, during which time she was "put on tranquilizers and Haldol and all these kinds of drugs" in addition to the lithium. She was kept on the multiple medications for "about a year and a half altogether," after which time she rented an apartment and continued receiving treatment at an outpatient mental health center. After living for some time in a residential vocational training program sponsored by the mental health center, she determined that she wanted to go back to college. Since Vocational Rehabilitation had paid for a degree in a field in which she could not obtain employment, the case workers decided to "help me do something else. So that's what I'm doing here now."

Sue is now registered in her second year at the community college. So far she has had to drop out one semester as a result of lithium toxicity; she had been on the

medication for ten years without encountering any toxic reactions when she noticed that she was "having real bad leg cramps and my vision was getting blurry and I couldn't hold food down"; she telephoned her physician, who told her to go to the emergency room -- "right now!" It took about a month after that near-fatal incident to stabilize her body chemistry.

Sue has endured suicidal episodes since the age of sixteen, the age at which she also first experienced the manic highs conjointly indicative of bipolar disorder. There was the day, for example, when a teacher discovered her "picking icicles off the roof, which I was hanging onto with no coat on in the middle of winter." Sue was not diagnosed at that time, though; instead, she attended five different high schools, where she "did awful" and remained a senior until she finally graduated at age nineteen. Though she wanted to attend college after graduation, Sue was unaware of the availability of financial aid. Since Sue's mother was on welfare and college seemed out of reach, Sue began working in factories, where she held down various jobs, including those of welder and steelworker.

Sue moved to Knoxville at age twenty-two shortly after her mother's death to assist in caring for Sue's two teenaged brothers. Not too long thereafter, Sue was hospitalized for depression after another manic episode; "two months prior I had taken off in my car by myself and just toured the East coast -- you know, with no job or no money, and I had no idea what I was doing. And when I came back, I was severely depressed. And uh, they hospitalized me for, oh, I guess two months and decided that they would try lithium."

Sue reflects that she has "spent the last fifteen years of my life in therapy trying to get my life back together." She feels she is now "getting there," though "I still have my moments," including the fact that "I get tired real easy and I can't concentrate for long lengths of time."

Sue's sources of social support for her college efforts are minimal aside from the encouragement she receives from a couple of mental health professionals and a few long-term friends. Though she reports she has had "really good teachers" at both community colleges she has attended, she adds that "I can't think of anybody I've really talked to." Having been rejected as a result of her homosexual orientation has contributed to Sue's caution about making friends; she has felt different from others since childhood, beginning with her embarrassment that her mother was "a hillbilly" who "had an accent."

After several changes of major, Sue has finally decided she wants to become a social worker. She says she will be quite happy with herself if she can earn a bachelor's degree. She concludes that "the one thing that remained stable, I think, is my stubbornness to not give up," and the one thing that has changed is that now "I look at things more positively than negatively." She offers this parting advice to incoming college students: "Don't freak" and "take it one day at a time."

Sydney

During the summer of 1967, Sydney attended a state-supported university in Tennessee immediately after high school graduation. He lived in a dormitory and

attended classes most of the day during the accelerated summer session; as a result, he first perceived college as "just sort of an extension from high school."

The following fall, the college enrollment mushroomed tenfold in comparison with summer session, and so did class size. Now Sydney felt intimidated by the large lecture halls and by the hundreds of students in each of his classes; he did not feel free to ask questions in class, and he felt that the instructors were "simply not available to talk to after class." Furthermore, Sydney had no interest in fraternities, football, or excessive drinking. The dormitory to which he was now assigned was "a zoo" in comparison to the first one; "There was always a party." Sydney reflects that "I really just didn't like a lot of people that I ran into. I thought they were very shallow and they weren't there for school; they were just there to have a good time."

In his confusion and unhappiness, Sydney retreated. "And the more I stayed there [at college] the more I felt just very isolated and alone. And I just sorta withdrew from the whole situation. I didn't go to classes. If I did, I just went rarely. And I attempted to keep up with the homework, but really didn't. I guess I felt very bewildered by the whole situation. I didn't know what I was doing after a while, why I was there." Sydney's performance that term resulted in academic probation for a semester. In retrospect, Sydney notes, "Actually, I probably should have been seeing a therapist -- because I came out of high school with good grades and looking forward to doing college and graduating and doing the whole thing, and it just fell apart." When Sydney returned the following term, he made B's and C's; he had moved back

in with his parents, and he didn't feel quite so alienated. He was going through the motions of being a college student.

Then in 1968 Sydney discovered the counterculture. ". . . I sort of hooked into this counterculture thinking and behavior and music and long hair and all that. That seemed to channel my confusions and defiances to where I was somebody! I was just different before that." Sydney became involved in campus antiwar demonstrations and helped produce a free underground newspaper. Sydney recounts that "1969 was the high point of my political involvement"; he joined a number of people who protested Richard Nixon's talk at a Billy Graham rally and was arrested, along with twenty-one others. Sydney had emerged into the limelight! "I was real proud of that because it really gave me some status. If you were willing to get arrested or you just happened to be there . . . it was great! There were support rallies and they even started a legal defense fund. It was worthwhile; I really enjoyed it!"

But his having achieved a sense of identity did not support Sydney's academic progress. Instead, he dropped out of college, even though he fully expected to be sent to Vietnam and killed as a repercussion of leaving academe; to his surprise, ". . . they gave me a 4-F -- for my allergies that I had had when I was a child!"

As soon as he learned he did not have to go to war, Sydney moved to Berkeley, California, right after the U.S. had invaded Cambodia; ". . . the first sign I saw when I entered Berkeley was 'You are now entering a war zone.' And that was a real culture shock, leaving Knoxville -- and I just ate it up!" From 1970 to 1974 Sydney remained politically involved and held assorted odd jobs in California. About 1975,

he "decided to get serious about life and went to employment agencies and finally got into a career, which was selling wines and spirits. And I stuck with that from about '75 through '88. Nine years of those were in California, and I moved back here in '84." After nearly fifteen years in California, Sydney "got very tired of the lifestyle in California. I think I just sorta outgrew the hippiness, the hippie stage. . . . I couldn't live that lifestyle for the rest of my life."

Having remained employed in retail sales and management for fifteen years, Sydney entered the community college in the spring semester of 1990 with a double major in marketing and management. Even though he had not been in college in twenty years, Sydney had always read a great deal, and he felt that he "had an intellectual bent." But more importantly, Sydney felt that he had been "a miserable failure the first time," and he just "could not believe that I could not handle school!"

Since entering the community college, Sydney has garnered considerable social support from faculty members who have shown appreciation for his mature perspectives; he has had less success sustaining friendships with students because "[this college] being a two-year school, it's very transient." His friends are people he has known since he was in retailing, and he has come to realize that their communication lacks meaning and depth. Whereas his friends seem absorbed in their families and material acquisitions, Sydney is continually marveling at new schools of thought he is encountering; "they're not thinking about Merleau-Ponty or Immanuel Kant or this person of history or anything like that -- or doing calculus. . . . Things that are important to them are not important to me, and vice versa."

Sydney plans to earn a Master's degree within five year, then begin working on a doctorate so that he can teach in a college or university. Sydney feels that returning to college has been tremendously enriching; he volunteered, "this has been a real renaissance for me. And that's the word I would use. It has just opened up so many doors that have been closed or were partially open that I didn't perceive. I've learned more about myself, who I am and who I'm not in the last four years than I've done in the previous forty!"

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES

As illustrated by the previous chapter's accounts of the educational evolution of participants in this study, the narrative material provided by the participants was rich and salient. Numerous studies could emerge from this data, given the enormous variety of perspectives and personal information that the participants contributed. In this chapter, in consonance with the proposed goals of the study, I will discuss the interview findings in light of the research questions posed at the inception of this study.

The Participants' Contrasting Experiences of College

The first research question explored in this investigation was, "How do now-successful stop-out community college students contrast their current experience of college with the earlier experience which led to voluntary withdrawal or dismissal from college?"

Responses to the College Environment

A number of participants, especially those who entered college immediately after high school, remarked that they were "intimidated" by the college environment when they first arrived, an experience which seems to have led to a sense of alienation as the college experience progressed. In some instances, those who were more serious about earning degrees when they re-entered college than they had been when they first enrolled were more frightened by college upon re-entry than they had been initially. Whether they had felt intimidated upon initial entry or upon re-entry, all participants demonstrated that they now feel comfortable in the role of student, largely as a result

of their current level of academic mastery. Several of the participants, including some who had originally felt intimidated, indicated that they were currently enjoying their college experience. Conversely, those who "enjoyed" college too much the first time (i.e., those who maintained that they had "partied" too much) tended to view their original "enjoyment" of college as failure in retrospect.

The participants who first enrolled in college courses to enhance their job skills, in contrast to feeling intimidated, tended to view college in terms of its utility. Charles was the only participant who both enrolled in college classes to enhance his job skills and described his first experience of college in terms of his emotional response to the physical environment of the college -- a reaction which he hastened to add had quickly diminished as he managed the logistics of balancing career, home life, and his role as a student.

The Experience of Intimidation. Once Ann, who initially enrolled in college in her late twenties to take a few courses to improve her job skills, decided at age 59 to become a full-time student, she was apprehensive because she "dreaded algebra." She said "The process of entering college was very intimidating to me because I had very few people in my family who had gone to college. I didn't have any way to find out about all of this" Her experience of earning good grades and her assumption of the role of counselor for the younger students helped Ann overcome her original feelings of intimidation. Similarly, Michelle reported that "when I started back I was so scared. I decided I wanted to go back to school 'cause this was what I wanted to do, not because Mom and Dad told me I should do it." Michelle was relieved to run into an old friend from her home state in the registration line, and the rekindling of that former acquaintance led to mutual support for academic endeavors. In retrospect, Michelle recounts, ". . . once I finally got over that fright, everything was okay. And uh, I really proved I could do it. And to me that was just the most wonderful step in

my life." Today, Michelle says she has "a sense of self-confidence that I think I had lacked so much throughout my whole life."

Charles, though he was taking courses in his career field while working and reported little difficulty in earning A's in the classes, related that his first experience of college centered around ". . . how big the facilities were. The physical size and dimensions of the buildings was uh, inspiring -- I won't say inspiring -- it was, actually, it put a little bit of fear in me. It made me apprehensive. It was intimidating." Charles hastened to add, "However, that quickly passed because after the first couple of classes I became so busy with just getting to the facility and getting home to do the work and getting back to work for a normal work day, you lost focus of, you know, all the extrinsic buildings and everything." Charles' current experience of college, as extrapolated from the topics he chose to discuss in his interview, seems to consist of a tension between appreciation for instructors who bring "real-world" applications to the classroom, feelings of resentment toward younger students who are enjoying parental support and yet who appear not to be taking college seriously, and an urgency to complete the degree to obtain re-employment in the computing field in which he had worked for a number of years.

Jane Doe, as was recounted in the preceding chapter, was so intimidated by the registration process the first time she entered college that she left in frustration and waited a few semesters before enrolling in a different community college; Jane's prior ordeals of having been harassed by other students in high school and having been expelled from high school perhaps contributed to her bewilderment when she first attempted to negotiate the college registration process. Today Jane's experience of college is strictly pragmatic: "Just do it. I'd like to be pretty much settled and working by the time I'm thirty." Jane reflected on her increase in self-confidence and goal orientation in these words: "I think a lot of it is just getting some success makes you feel like you can succeed more."

Similarly, Sue says when she first enrolled in college, ". . . the first semester I was scared to death"; she withdrew before the end of the term because "I didn't feel I had the brains or the background to be there." Since that time Sue has earned an associate degree in criminal justice and is now anticipating earning at least a bachelor's degree in social work; when she speaks of her current experience of college she focuses on her academic goals, her increased self-confidence, and the study techniques she has learned.

Sydney entered college in the summer term, and as a result experienced little difference between high school and college initially; but when the enrollment increased to around 25,000 in the fall and Sydney found himself attending classes in lecture halls with several hundred other students, he quickly "felt like a very insignificant person." Sydney said, "I didn't know the classes were going to be that big or that impersonal" and "I didn't realize that this was going to be such a big change from high school." Today Sydney experiences college as a place where he has honed the skills of writing, listening, learning, and test-taking.

In sum, those participants who began their college experiences by feeling overwhelmed and intimidated have now developed self-confidence and academic mastery.

The Experience of Alienation. Feeling intimidated can easily lead to one's feeling alienated. Several participants spoke directly to the sense of alienation that they felt in college.

Kay, for example, spent much of her first year at college playing pool and talking with other students in the student center; even so, she says, "I didn't develop any real friendships during that point with any of the other students or anything. There was a lot going on with me personally at that time that I needed to get straightened out before I could really get any benefit from school." Ultimately, her feelings of alienation and personal failure led to several suicide attempts. Today, Kay says, "I

have good friends that I've met at school I think about 'em every day. . . . I have several that I've made here at school."

Michael recounted his progressive alienation this way: "I think a lot of the difficulties that I had were attitudinal. I just was rejecting a lot of what I saw going on around me, and that attitude of disenchantment, disillusionment with the social and political attitudes of the culture and society at the time -- that, too, did not inspire in me a desire to be educated by the system that I was essentially rejecting. And a system that I felt at the time was trying to use me as cannon fodder in a war that was not winnable and that might very well have been unjust." Michael's lack of education resulted in his seeking employment in industry, and when he first returned to college it was to take photography courses so that he might learn a new trade. Ironically, when Michael entered a major university in his third foray at playing the role of college student, he again found himself in a "political situation" which culminated in his feeling pressured to leave not only the university but the country as well. Michael is currently taking courses in the community college that will gain him "entry as a junior into an undergraduate program at a four-year institution" and enjoying a certain remove from his fellow students as he initiates artistic ventures in the community at large. He concedes, though, that "I'm finding that I very much enjoy my interactions with older students here on campus. I'm able to be of some help to them, and perhaps some of them are able to be of some help to me!"

Sydney became progressively more alienated from the dominant college culture as he came to realize he was not like the other students; he was not interested in fraternities, football, or fashion, and as a result, "I felt different because I didn't have the same lifestyle. I wasn't a clothes horse and I wasn't interested in going along with everybody else." At that point, Sydney says, "Life was random. That was really awful for me." When Sydney returned to college twenty-three years later, he had gained enough experience in the merchandising field that he caught the attention of several

of his marketing and management instructors; the ensuing conversations led to some mentoring relationships which have resulted in Sydney's feeling not only accepted but valued by several members of the community college faculty. Sydney's academic goal now is to earn a doctorate and teach in college.

Kelly said that the first time she attended college classes, "I didn't even really feel like I was at school. Because I just blew in once a week and there were some times I didn't get to go at all. It was real hard to get to know . . . the adults in the class." Though Kelly has not been living in Knoxville very long and did not mention having any student friends yet, she did mention several instructors she has come to respect and with whom she has feels she can communicate.

The experiences of alienation recounted above represent the socialization struggles of people in different developmental stages. Kelly's experience of alienation seems to have been an outcome of her failure to create time to make friends and acquaintances in her classes, largely because her primary focus was on her profession, not her schooling. Kay, Michael, and Sydney, on the other hand, experienced progressive disaffection that apparently sprang from egocentric phases of their youthful individuation processes.

The Experience of "Freedom". Several participants indicated that they were overwhelmed by the "freedom" available to them in the college environment; invariably, these participants were adolescents devoid of adult responsibilities when they first entered college. Their current experience, in contrast, reflects the attitudes and values of adults who are focused on contributing to the next generation and sustaining a self-image of responsibility.

Kay said that attending college "wasn't really of my choice; it was something that my parents expected me to do. . . . I was more interested in socializing than getting an education, so I think I had the wrong attitude from the onset, my first experience in college. I was doing it more to appease my parents than, you know, to

improve myself or develop any kind of ability other than having fun." Retrospectively, Kay pronounces, "I probably should have spent more time in the library and less at the pool table." Today Kay eagerly models the role of serious student for her young daughter; "I think it's good for her to see Mama going to school and learning I think that's good for her to see her old Mommy doing something that she needs to do rather than what she wants to all the time."

Similarly, Michelle moved into a dormitory where her assigned roommate was "a real partier," and she reports, ". . . all of a sudden, I have a freedom that I have never had before"; for the first time in her life Michelle was enjoying "not having somebody tell me what to do or when to do it or how to do it." Michelle currently experiences college as a means to enhancing her self-esteem and employability, including working toward her long-term goal of helping children gain legal rights.

Rebecca, too, as quoted in the preceding chapter, perceived the college environment as a taste of freedom for which she was "totally unprepared"; she described college classes in terms of what instructors did and did not say to students: "'You are an adult now' and 'You are to take responsibility for being in class, responsibility for being on time, responsibility for turning in your assignments on the dates that we have noted on the syllabus and maybe I will remind you and maybe I won't' and 'We're not gonna tell you when you have to be in class' and 'We're not gonna say anything to you'; 'You're not to interrupt our classes by coming in the middle, but other than that, you're pretty much free.'" Rebecca enjoyed that freedom fully; today she says, "Hopefully, my children will learn from my mistake."

Sarge reports that when he entered a church-affiliated school, ". . . probably typical of most freshmen I partied just as hard as I should have been studying"; for him, "partying" meant that he went out dancing several nights a week. At the end of his first year he went on a two-year church mission; he returned from the mission "prepared to study, prepared to buckle down and get to work." Today, in addition to

working for high grades, Sarge says he uses his advisors and the placement office to gain information about career options because he has experienced ". . . a real-life practical vision of my future without a degree and my future with a degree."

Although Michael did not refer to "freedom" per se (whereas most participants did), his testimony seems to point to a similar phenomenon: ". . . it was the late 'sixties and there was a lot of civil and social unrest having to do with the Vietnam War and uh, it was in vogue to experiment with mind-altering drugs, and uh, I was opposed to the war and -- shall we say, I did inhale? And of course that kind of social experience and what eventually became substance abuse behavior is not conducive to college life. It's not conducive to studying and for those reasons, primarily, I was unable to progress in my studies." Sydney, another "child of the 'sixties," acknowledged that by the end of the spring term of his first year in college that he was using marijuana, hashish, LSD, and amphetamines, but he insisted that "they were recreationally used" and that it was his "big identity crisis" before he ever started using drugs that ultimately resulted in his leaving college at the end of one year. Today Michael is pursuing a general associate's degree so that he may transfer into a university, most likely in a radio broadcasting degree program; Sydney is engrossed in enjoying the learning process and envisioning himself someday teaching in college.

The Experience of Enjoyment of Learning. Most of the participants expressed a current enjoyment of college, though they seldom described their early college experiences in terms of enjoyment.

Ann, once she had mastered developmental math, arrived at her current assessment of college: "It just fascinates me." At last Ann is doing what she has always enjoyed: "I love to read; I had read all my life. Even when I was a kid, when they told me it was time to turn out the lights, I'd sneak the book under the bedcovers and get some way to read it if I could." Later in the interview, Ann said that she could choose to spend her tuition money on travel, but instead, "this is my thing and

I enjoy it!" Similarly, Goat said in her interview, "This is my thing, going to college; it's about me and it's for me. I love doing it, I love going, and that's all that matters." Jane Doe, who dropped out of college the first time around after several suicide attempts, now says "I love to study. I love to read. . . . I find myself at three o'clock in the morning reading past the assignment. I just really enjoy it. I think I'd be here whether I was here to get a degree or not. it's really been one of the more positive experiences in my life." Sydney described his current experience of college as "a real renaissance" for himself in which he has learned a great deal about himself.

Michael was the only participant who spoke of having enjoyed an earlier experience of college more than the one he is now engaging in, and as such, he provides a tidy transition to the next topic. Of his attendance at the world-class university, Michael said, "The academic experience was wonderful. I think it was one of the most important experiences of life because I did learn that it was entirely appropriate for me to love literature and to enjoy writing. And it gave me some very significant skills that I did not possess before I had that academic experience." Michael's current experience in the community college, in contrast, is a simple matter of earning the college credits he will need to gain admission to the next university he attends, wherever it may be.

The Experience of College as Career. Those participants who have come to view college as their current career were much less likely than other participants to discuss enjoying the process of learning; instead, they emphasized time management, setting a good example for younger generations, and implementing in the college environment the skills they have used in prior careers or anticipate using once they earn degrees and gain employment.

Charles spoke of having enjoyed classes when he did not have to attend school, but now his focus is on gaining "provable skills"; as a result, "School comes first.

That's my career now." Specifically, Charles said he is in college now because "I'm trying to get a second career. I don't want to get a job; I want a career."

In a similar vein, although Goat said "I had no choice but to come back to college" and "right now I'm a little burned out," she also pointed out that when she attended college the first time, she was more focused on her career than on college, whereas "Now I am more interested in going to school and working part-time."

Kelly stated, "what I try to do is treat going to school just like a job. I go to school and then I go home and study." Similarly, Rebecca lamented that the first time she went to college "college should have been my job. That's what you have to look at it as: this is what I have to do." Today, she says, she is "really working hard for these A's," with a major reason being that she wants "to prove to my own children that it's important to graduate."

Sarge volunteered that whereas he enjoyed the debate team the first time he attended college and was dazzled by the other college's radio station, athletics, and other co-curricular activities, "my reason for coming here is to be in class and studying. That's the only reason why I come to this campus is to go to class or to do homework."

The Perception of Utility

For several participants, attending college has provided them with skills needed on the job in which they were formerly employed or is providing them with the opportunity to earn certification which will lead to employment. In their interviews these participants tended to perceive college as an opportunity for personal advancement rather than as an environment with which their identities and life experiences were inextricably interwoven; thus their perceptions of college have changed little since they began their tenure as students.

Kelly began working as a secretary for a major corporation when she and her childhood sweetheart divorced eight years after she graduated from high school; ". . . there was so much overtime involved in the job that I was only able to take one class a semester. So, as long as I could, I took one class a semester." Kelly reported most of her story in terms of the imposition of work and love relationships on any college goals she might have had along the way. From the beginning she took college classes with the goal of attaining promotions at work, and she did not mention any reactions to the college environment per se. She took classes that she "thought would be fun," such as psychology, sociology, and management -- and which would also enhance her job skills in human resources management. Today Kelly is following a degree plan that will lead to her earning a baccalaureate by the end of the calendar year while simultaneously interviewing for jobs.

Goat also first took classes while employed full time; "I was trying to get my degree so I could get from the clerical mode to the professional mode." As detailed in the preceding chapter, when Goat attained professional status without earning a degree, her primary focus became her work for a number of years, even though the desire to obtain a degree remained in the back of her mind. Today Goat is clear about how academic achievement will advance her toward her professional goals: "I know one day I will be part of the management team that makes the decisions -- because I'm pursuing my education!"

Charles reported that he began taking "one class at a time . . . in my career field"; though he was taking the classes for professional development, his primary criterion for continuing to enroll in college at that time was enjoyment: "Because I didn't have to go to college, don't forget. There was no requirement that I take courses." Today Charles is assiduously pursuing a college degree because "I'm in competition with 100% of the people out there in the work force" and "I'm

overqualified because I've got too much experience -- I can do too much; but I'm underqualified because I haven't got that piece of paper."

Jane Doe, after exploring several career options, has decided she is best suited to be an occupational therapist. With that goal fixed, she, too, now sees college as a means to an end: "I'm trying to hurry up and get done because all the occupational therapy schools, they start at certain times and you have to be finished at a certain time."

Reprise

All participants in this study display one commonality: they are now pursuing clearly defined academic goals -- some contentedly, some assiduously, some feverishly. With few exceptions, those who were overwhelmed by either the magnitude or the perceived freedom of the academic environment when they first entered college did not have academic goals at that time, whether or not they selected an academic major. Along the way, whether as the result of maturation, mentoring, or confronting the ruthlessness of the workaday world, each has cultivated practical study skills, has gained self-confidence, and has come to relish the educational process either in its own right or as a complement to one's career goals. In addition, several interviewees articulated a strong intention to model academic success for their own or for others' children. Whether functioning as crucible or sanctuary, today the academic environment serves as a source of hope and meaning for all participants who volunteered for this study.

The Participants' Descriptions of Themselves

As is abundantly clear in the preceding section, it is difficult to separate the participants' descriptions of themselves in their various periods of college enrollment

from their perceptions of and reactions to the college environment, for they were, after all, interactive with their environments. Especially for adolescents, self-perception is frequently contingent upon interaction with one's peers, as numerous developmental psychologists have observed; such was the case of those participants who entered college immediately after leaving home for the first time.

It could easily be argued, for example, that such categories as the experience of alienation and the experience of enjoyment of learning describe the individuals rather than their responses to the college environment. In analyzing the parts of the participants' narratives that dealt with both self and environment, I have attempted to distinguish between feelings and self-perceptions that appear to have arisen from responses to one's environment (which were discussed in the previous section) and behaviors indicative of one's acting on the environment (which are discussed in this section).

The second research question that I explored in this investigation was, "How do these students retrospectively view themselves in each of their attempts to obtain a college degree?" When responding to the second research question, some participants discussed themselves in terms of emotional development and assorted maturational factors, whereas other participants alluded only briefly to themselves and focused almost entirely on the situations in which they found themselves and how those situations influenced their academic behaviors. In some cases I have included their descriptions of their academic behaviors as indicators of self-perception. This section, therefore, summarizes the participants' descriptions of themselves in their various attempts at college, as well as measures the participants reported that they have taken to reach personal and academic maturity.

Intrinsic Factors that Have Affected Academic Behaviors

Some participants seemed to welcome the opportunity to discuss themselves, whereas others offered sparse self-descriptions. The most common category of self-description by far was the participants' accounts of having conquered depression, anxiety, and/or low self-esteem in the process of achieving academic mastery.

Self Concept: from Depression to Mastery. Several participants reported that they suffered from acute, sometimes debilitating depression and/or anxiety when they first entered college. Once they had achieved a sense of academic mastery, they came to feel better about themselves. A couple of participants reported that they still develop self-doubts during the first half of the semester, then start to feel better once they demonstrate anew to themselves that they are adept at academic performance.

When Ann discussed her first attempt at college, she said, "I had a lot of personal problems. I guess I couldn't get over the grieving process, and there were just numerous things that I could not handle. . . . I was depressed and suicidal -- went through the whole bit." Then, she said, "I went into that algebra class and had an excellent teacher -- and I made an A. . . . And then I went into other classes and I worked and I made A's. And I thought, 'Gee, I can really do this!' And I found out that just about anything I set my mind to do, I can do." She concluded her description of this emotional metamorphosis by saying, "So I guess feeling better about myself maybe and knowing that I can do it is the main difference between now and twenty-five to thirty years ago." Even now, Ann often goes through a similar process of getting discouraged about half-way through each semester; then "it seems to all fall into place and I think, 'Okay, well, then I can make it.' And I go on with my semester."

Jane Doe recounted her first college enrollment period by saying, "My grades were pretty good until I just kinda didn't go back to class." Jane related that after she stopped attending classes, "I later learned that it was an anxiety disorder. . . . It's

just kinda like a panic attack. You just feel like you're gonna drop over dead or somethin'." Jane interpreted her current academic achievement in this way: "I think a lot of it is just getting some success makes you feel like you can succeed more." As she reflected on herself in her disparate experiences of college Jane concluded, "I'm the same person but I'm probably more . . . refined. When I came here I was confused, and now I'm confident."

Kay reported that the first time she attended college straight out of high school "I was very depressed and my attitude in school plus my resulting bad grades did nothing to, you know, alleviate the depression. A couple of semesters I dropped out because I'd attempted suicide." But now, Kay said, "I really get a lot of self-esteem feeling that I've learned something new or have acquired some kind of new knowledge, and that reinforces my opinion of myself that I'm not this awful person that needs to get off the earth and all this." Kay went on to observe that "Now I want to be a contributor. Before, I think I was very selfish and I was looking for 'What is this going to do for me. What will I get out of this.' . . . I'm a lot less egocentric than I was then." Like Ann, Kay still encounters doubts about her academic abilities: ". . . many days I'll come in here and I'll have the attitude, 'I'm not doing very well in this class; I think I'll drop it,' and by the time the day is over, I'm so glad that I didn't." Kay reflected that ". . . right now my energy is directed toward personal growth and intellectual growth and there [i.e., then] all my energy was directed at confining myself."

When Kelly finally enrolled in college full-time after years of having put her job ahead of academic aspirations, she felt a considerable drop in self-esteem because she had come to identify with her former role as Director of Human Resources for a 1600-person workforce. Kelly related with obvious sadness that "I left a job of a lot of authority and went to being a college student. That was quite dramatic. That was really an abrupt awakening because there I was one of the kids in school, you know.

I wasn't like . . . the teacher!" Even so, Kelly conceded that, in the long run, ". . . college has been an asset. It's made me feel more confident in myself." She explained that "It's nice to be able to go to class and accomplish making good grades."

Sue also recounted that the first time she attended college "I wasn't feeling real confident and everything was real overwhelming to me at that time." Sue spoke with lingering hesitation about her level of functioning since she is continuing to take medication for bipolar disorder, but she acknowledged that, "Uh, I think now I am much more confident about my abilities." Sue's discomfort has also lessened somewhat because ". . . I'm more comfortable as a person in my sexuality . . . uh, and I know what I want to do [for a living] now."

Though Sydney did not interpret his progressive detachment from the college environment as a sign of depression, his incremental withdrawal from the college culture could easily have been viewed as indicative of despair. Sydney did acknowledge that when he decided to return to college, part of his motivation arose from his belief that ". . . I was a miserable failure the first time; and I just could not believe that I could not handle school." The summer that he returned to college Sydney discovered ". . . that I was a lot smarter than I thought I would be, that I had a lot of good experiences, I had good intellect, and I could think clearly and talk clearly and write clearly."

Autonomy. Having developed a sense of autonomy or independence emerged as another frequently mentioned theme in the stop-outs' narratives. At this point in their lives, several female participants affirmed, they are doing what they want to do and they are not particularly concerned about what others think about their life decisions. An outcome of this sense of autonomy is that they are attending college for personal satisfaction rather than to meet others' expectations. This theme emerged even though most of the women were also attending college to prepare for new careers

or, in the case of Rebecca, to meet workforce demands for educational certification of previously demonstrated skills.

Ann, for example, expressed her feeling of autonomy as follows: "I'm at the point now -- I guess age has something to do with it -- [that] I don't care what people think of me . . . this is my thing and I enjoy it." In a similar vein, Goat avowed, "I've always been on my own"; as far as college goes, she declared, "I'm doing it for myself!" Goat adamantly pointed out that "I'm at the point in my life where I don't have to impress anyone. I don't owe you anything -- not even an apology. This is my thing, going to college; it's about me and it's for me." Goat concluded, "It is worth it. Believe me, it is worth it!" Kay echoed, "At this point in my life, I'm not looking outward for approval as much as I was at that point." Kay explained that she puts pressure on herself to make good grades because ". . . I don't want to let myself down." Kay concluded that "I feel like finally I have something down on paper in black and white that shows me, if no one else, that I can do as well as anyone if I apply myself." Rebecca, too, remarked that "I'm proving pretty much to myself that yes, I can finish this job that I've done [enrolling in an associate degree program in computer science] and I can finish it well."

Tenacity. Several participants described themselves as having developed tenacity -- a quality they sometimes referred to as "focus." Ann, who is sixty-two and not planning to return to the workforce, was as determined to earn a degree as any participant hoping for immediate employment upon graduation: "I'm compelled to do this; it's something I want to do" Goat matter-of-factly asserted, "It's just a matter of hanging in there. Just having to hang in there. And that's very important to me." Michelle asserted, "I'm not going to be a quitter. I'm gonna prove I can do this." Sarge revealed that as he scales the academic ladder he is applying a lesson he learned from his Marine Corps experience: ". . . you gotta stick it out, no matter how

tough it gets." Sydney demonstrated obvious pride as he pronounced that ". . . I've really stuck with it this time. I've persevered"

Sue reflected that as she has overcome the stigma and pain of mental illness while pursuing a degree, ". . . the one thing that remained stable, I think, is my stubbornness to not give up." Both Jane Doe and Rebecca spoke of the quality of tenacity in terms of focus. Jane Doe said, "I'm more focused; I'm not as all over the place as I was," while Rebecca maintained, "Well, now I'm focused. My intention . . . is not only to get the degree but to make good grades in the courses I take."

Extrinsic Motivators

By far the most dominant source of extrinsic motivation presented by the participants was their need to return to the job market with credentials that would ensure their marketability. Age also proved to be spurring the participants on to complete their degrees; curiously, the only participants who expressed concern about being "old" were the two who are in their twenties and the youngest of the three participants in their thirties. Participants in their forties who were retraining for the job market emphasized earning legitimate credentials but did not mention age as a possible deterrent to employability.

Career Focus. Several participants began their college careers with the goal of earning credits which would enhance the skills they were currently employing in their jobs. Most of these participants are now intent on earning diplomas that will make them employable in today's job market. Others are seeking training in totally new fields. In both cases, returning to the job market seemed to be their primary source of extrinsic motivation.

When Charles first began taking college classes, he strictly enrolled in courses in his career field; though he knew it would be wise to earn a degree, advancing his own career was more important at the time. Now Charles finds that he is "not

marketable"; as a result, he is pursuing a dual major -- computer science and chemical engineering -- because "I'm attempting to get into the environmental mediation field." Charles resolutely clarified his intentions: "I'm trying to get a second career. I don't want to get a job; I want a career." There was no doubt in Charles' mind that he must earn a college degree because "I'm overqualified in computer science," yet "they don't want to pay me practically anything because I don't have a degree."

Goat was absolutely clear about how an education will contribute to her career goals as well; no matter what field Goat ultimately decides to pursue, "I know one day I will be on the management team that makes the decisions because I'm pursuing my education." Goat reached professional status in her twenties without having attended college; as a result, "The first time I went to college I was young. And I never understood the impact of not having a college degree -- because I had a job. I had a career. . . . I didn't understand the impact of not having a college education until I didn't have a career." Today Goat is carefully weighing her options and considering a career that will encompass both computer programming and education.

Jane Doe was delighted to announce that "I've actually found what I really want to do: it's occupational therapy." Since Jane finds it difficult to focus on a task for very long, she explored several career possibilities, including psychology and physical education, before deciding "I found something I want to do and I have to get a college education to do that." Jane's options are clear to her: "I have to get a degree to do that or I'm going to be stuck working on the psych unit for my whole life."

Kay is still juggling her career options; "I want to be a writer. That's why I want to go into nursing: so I can feed myself while I'm writing." As a result of her dual ambitions Kay explained that ". . . I've taken courses that apply to my nursing prerequisites but also courses that I think will help me become a better writer." Later on she said that she doesn't really want to go into nursing because "I don't want a job where a mistake I could make could affect someone else's life." If it were not for her

obligation to her daughter, Kay said, "I'd be at home eating one meal a day with my typewriter."

Having earned a degree in criminal justice which she cannot use because she is certified mentally ill, Sue next decided to major in computer programming -- "but I don't like math." Then Sue entered a paralegal program for a semester but found that she was not suited for that field either. Now Sue is fairly sure that she wants to become a social worker; "I think that's the thing because I haven't changed my mind in two years." Sue realizes that she will need a Master's degree to progress in the social work field, but for now, she says, "if I can get a bachelor's degree, I'll be quite happy with myself!" In all cases, obviously, Sue's primary goal has been and is to obtain employment.

Time Pressure to Graduate. The three youngest participants expressed an urgency to graduate as soon as possible because of their advancing age. Ironically, none of the older participants mentioned this concern.

Jane Doe, the youngest volunteer in this study, proclaimed anxiously, "I'm 24. I don't have that kind of time, you know? You miss one semester and that can mess you up by two years. Because some of the [occupational therapy] schools only start a class every two years." Sarge, also in his twenties, acknowledged, "I think the hardest thing for me to deal with is being 28 and still being a sophomore." Sarge lamented, "Often, I get frustrated, thinking, 'Look at these guys; they're 28 and look what they're doing. And here I am, and I'm still a sophomore in school. And you know, I got at least two more years of schooling ahead of me, then if I go for an MBA another two. And then, you know, I get to thinking, 'Well, golly, I'm going to be old!' Rebecca was equally urgent about the need to graduate: "I need that degree. And I'm getting too old! . . . I'm thirty-four!" Rebecca expressed certainty that ". . . if I get too much older, people'll be saying 'Well, but if we hire her, she's so close to retirement'"

too much older, people'll be saying 'Well, but if we hire her, she's so close to retirement'"

The Development of Academic Skills

The third emergent theme in the participants' descriptions of themselves in the academic environment was their delineation of the academic skills they have developed. The participants explained that they did not have these skills when they first entered college and that using the skills has contributed greatly to their current academic success.

Goal Commitment. Several participants confirmed Tinto's conclusion that goal commitment is essential to academic persistence. All participants who addressed this topic indicated that they had progressed from lack of direction to fervent commitment to academic goals.

As Ann, who intends to earn a bachelor's degree for personal satisfaction rather than employment, said, "My commitment back then was, 'I need accounting and I enjoy the English comp -- and that would help me [in my job], too.'" Today, Ann affirms, "I'm aiming a little bit higher now." Ann ties her academic goals to her belief that ". . . as long as we're here, we need to be learning. And that's what I'm trying to do." Goat related a similar progression of academic goals: "Then I was more focused on my job, on my career. . . . Now I am more interested in going to school and working part-time." Even though gaining re-employment is extremely important to Goat, she was adamant that she would finish her degree program before seeking full-time work again.

Charles doggedly declared, "I am going to get that degree because fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me!" Charles felt relatively sure that "I probably will continue my education all the way up, past bachelor's to, you know, a master's. Probably get a couple of master's [degrees] in whatever fields I feel

comfortable in." Though Charles' primary academic motivator is ensuring employability in the field in which he has already developed expertise, it was apparent from the tone of his interview that he would not leave college without a degree, even if he should obtain immediate employment in his field.

Jane Doe was ambivalent about earning a degree when she first entered college: "I didn't really want to go to college, but I didn't want to make minimum wage all my life, either. So I didn't want to be here, but yet I had to be here." What has made the change for her is "Time. Time and realizing what is important." These days, Jane says, ". . . if I want something, I'm gonna get it." She proffered advice to any incoming student who may be uncertain about the value of earning a college degree: "I say just sit down, see what you want, why you want it, what you don't want, and why not."

Kelly was still dealing with the depression of having lost a job that had been important to her and having moved to a new state a few months before I interviewed her, as was apparent in her earnest statement, "I've always wanted to get a college degree, and I've always felt like circumstances prevented me from doing that; however, one of these days I'm going to get it."

Michael spoke with the wisdom of a forty-five year-old seasoned traveler of life when he said, "Just out of high school I would describe myself as a young man with an average amount of responsibility -- or irresponsibility." Having matured considerably since he was eighteen, Michael reflected, "I think a lot of the difficulties that I had were attitudinal." Today Michael is certain that he intends to earn at least a baccalaureate while also continuing to develop his writing skills, as well as the skills to "read feature pieces for international radio," something he has already done on a couple of occasions.

Rebecca avowed commitment to explicit academic goals when she said, ". . . this is gonna be the primary thing. I'm not gonna let anything else come in front of

it." Rebecca described her goal commitment as a process of awakening and contended that she was not alone in the process of waking up: "I find a lot of people my age are back in college with the same goals. They've woke up."

Sarge, too, expressed certitude that he will complete his college degree: ". . . my reason for coming here is to be in class and studying. That's the only reason why I come to this campus, is to go to class or to do homework."

"Working the System." A number of participants remarked that they had evolved from initial ignorance of the workings of academic institutions to a functional understanding of how to "work the system" -- to employ the services that the college offers. For some, that knowledge of the system involved easing into full-time study upon re-entry, choosing not to enroll in classes full-time when under stress, and withdrawing from or auditing classes in which they were having difficulty; for others it involved learning how to reap maximal benefits from the services of advisors and from the college placement office.

Ann learned at the beginning of her most recent period of college re-entry that it would be best to ". . . get that algebra behind me rather than to take that and additional courses when I was trying to get acclimated to the college." Although Ann described the process of re-entering college as "very intimidating to me," she said "I was determined three years ago that I'd go in there, find out how you do it, and get in." Not only did Ann succeed in gaining college admission, but she now feels confident about the process of transferring her community college credits to a university so that she can earn a baccalaureate. Although Rebecca did not realize that the option of decreasing her credit hour load was available to her at the time, she says that if she could repeat her first attempt at college, "I wouldn't try to take a full class load"

Goat determined that it was necessary for her to slacken her academic pace in order to survive: ". . . I had to stop taking full loads. When I first started coming

here, I went five semesters in a row without a break. And I think I burned myself out." Now that Goat is approaching age fifty, she relates that "I have to really take care of myself a little bit more now." Goat was enrolled in only one course the semester I interviewed her so that she could concentrate on improving her health while continuing to progress toward a degree.

When Michelle first entered college twenty years ago, she said, "I had no idea that you could audit classes or you could withdraw or anything else. I had no knowledge of the workings of college." She learned from a dormitory resident assistant about the process of withdrawal, and she subsequently dropped several classes her second semester. Michelle explained, "We didn't have college orientation, per se, back then -- or if there was, I wasn't made aware of it and it wasn't required like it is now. In fact, I never went to college orientation until 15 years later. . . . Then all of a sudden I'm learning things about a library and things about the workings of college that were just new to me!"

Sarge admitted, ". . . my first year, I had no clue who my advisor was. And I didn't know what one was for . . . but now, I know what they're for. And I know how much they can help you and how much they can guide you. That's a big difference also now. Because the advisor knows how to work the system." Today Sarge feels comfortable using the college's services: ". . . now coming back, I also know how to work the system of school . . . going in and using the Placement Center . . . and using the books and all that kind of stuff -- actually using those tools at hand." Sarge changed his major field of study several times the first time in college, not realizing that the courses one must take for different majors vary greatly. Today, in contrast, Sarge makes sure that his academic efforts will result in his earning a degree: "So that's a difference here: I use my advisors more. That has really helped me."

Jane Doe, too, in her own cautious and remote way, said she had employed a strategy of "just finding out different things along the way, just kinda being

Jane Doe, too, in her own cautious and remote way, said she had employed a strategy of "just finding out different things along the way, just kinda being independent and stubborn and stuff." One of the strategies that Jane employs is attending the community college and the local university simultaneously to ensure that she completes all the coursework she needs to be admitted to occupational therapy school on time.

Time Management and Study Skills. Most participants referred to time management skills as essential to their academic success as well as to their efficiency in managing home responsibilities. At the time of our interview in the spring, Kay was debating whether to take a class during the summer since "I kind of become obsessive in the summer because of the way the courses are laid out; they're really intense." Kay said that she was thinking of taking the summer off because ". . . last summer I would go home and study for six or eight hours" and she was concerned that she would not devote enough time to her daughter if she were taking classes in the summer. Ann, too, indicated that she devotes a great deal of time to class preparation: "I study more than most of these younger kids. . . . But uh, I enjoy the studying; it's not something I dislike."

Rebecca, too, volunteered that now that she is an adult student "I have a tendency to try to plan my time . . . for instance, I never do a paper the night before it's due because you never know; a child might be sick." Later in the interview Rebecca reiterated, "So I have learned to, I guess, maybe manage my time better."

Sarge pragmatically declared, ". . . I've learned there's a time to have the fun and then there's a time to do the work. You know, and the work has to take place of the fun." This perspective contrasts sharply with Sarge's attitude during his first college experience, when he was likely to say to himself, "Well, that report's not due until Wednesday, so I'll write it Tuesday night." Now that he is an adult, Sarge said, "I realize now that if I don't study and if I don't do my calculus homework every day,

I'm gonna get that D. Sarge began to view homework as an adult responsibility after he got back from his religious mission; from then on, "I just buckled down and studied." Charles, too, makes studying his main priority; he decreed that "The homework is for me to do." Charles went on to explain that he gets offended if instructors grade homework because "No one's gonna hold your hand when you leave here."

Kelly, also, has learned the adult lesson that procrastination does not pay: "I have to say my study habits are different now than they were when I first started. Because I've learned how to study and I know what I have to do and uh, I do it! And then it was just kinda, 'I gotta study for this test -- tonight; it's tomorrow!'" Similarly, Rebecca, who spent much of her time socializing the first time she attended college, reviewed the maturation of her study habits in these words: "I tend to go to the computer lab in between classes if I have time between classes. And I study. I don't just socialize anymore. Whereas before I might have sat around and socialized with everybody, [now] I make sure that my work is completed."

Sydney assessed his academic tool kit during our interview and proclaimed that "I can read and comprehend and I can write. . . . I know how to take tests. I know how to listen. Uh, personally, I feel I have developed a skill, as far as learning -- and how to learn in this atmosphere."

Jane Doe summarized her view of the value of studying for college classes colorfully and directly: ". . . I can choose to excel in it or I can choose to screw up in it."

Classroom Skills. The stop-out volunteers have learned not only how to prepare for classes, but they have acquired behaviors that work for them while in class as well. Charles has learned to make contact with the instructor to derive maximum benefit from his classes; he said, ". . . I know I stand out because I'm older and I always sit up front . . . and I normally approach the instructor, so I sorta stand out .

... there's normally one to three other students that are [also] participating heavily, and undoubtedly those are the ones getting the better grades." Rebecca reported similar behaviors of making contact with her instructors: "I kind of aggravate my teachers somewhat, I think, because I have a tendency to look ahead to the next assignment and say, 'By the way, when is this due?'" Along the same lines, Ann makes a point of "... getting situated in the class -- finding out how they grade, or how they teach, and you know, it's different every semester." Ann is vigilant about engaging in these behaviors because "... it takes me a long time, I think, to fit into that situation." For Sue, a major skills that she had to learn when she first attended college was note-taking; Sue revealed, "I think one of the things that really helped me was this one friend of mine helped me learn how to take notes. I was trying to write down every word that was said and I would leave the class with a bunch of information that didn't matter. So she taught me how to take notes -- how to pick out the most important things."

Cognitive Reappraisal. For several of the participants, a primary success skills has been that of learning to "reframe" experiences that could easily be interpreted as overwhelming. Jane Doe, having gotten too overwhelmed to even enroll in college the first time she attempted it, developed an anxiety disorder her first term in college: "It's just kinda like a panic attack. You just feel like you're gonna drop over dead or somethin.'" Jane has learned that she can keep the mental wolf at bay by talking back to it; now, she says, "I talk to myself and say there's nothing going to happen to me. . . . And if I can figure out why I'm freakin' out, then I don't have to do it. I don't have to freak out." As an example of her reframing, Jane at first tried to avoid taking mathematics at all costs, but when she learned that every degree program required math, she adopted a more acquiescent approach: "I just had to stop whinin' and do it." Sue also volunteered that today "I look at things more positively than negatively." Part of her success lies in her having learned to "take it one day at a time."

Social Influences on the Participants

The third research question addressed by the community college stop-outs who volunteered for this study was, "How have sources of social support in the students' lives contributed to their decisions to leave or to remain in college?" As was noted in the first chapter, "social support" may refer both to those social interactions that would be conventionally interpreted as supportive and to relationships that may hinder one's achieving one's goals.

Social Influences Contributing to College Withdrawal

The volunteers for this study tended to have withdrawn from college either because they did not display emotionally mature behaviors the first time they entered college or because their primary obligation was to job or family. The participants sometimes referred to relationships or interactions in the college environment which have hindered the quality of their academic experience but which have not resulted in their withdrawing from college. I have included these nonsupportive relationships in this discussion as well as those which directly contributed to academic withdrawal.

Spouse. Four of the female participants recounted that their marriages had served as deterrents to their entering college or completing college. When Ann married at age eighteen in 1950, "there was no chance for college after that"; she is now working toward her first college degree at age sixty-two. Rebecca's marriage also followed a conventional pattern in the sense that she "had a husband and then later a child, so I spent my time meeting their needs as opposed to trying to book time for me to do my . . . my job [of studying]." Rebecca added that "my husband never went to college. He never supported my college efforts . . . if it wasn't important to him, it probably wasn't all that important."

Michelle acknowledged that when she first attended college she "really wasn't ready for it" and that she used her husband (who was her boyfriend at the time) as her

"escape from college." Once she had left her parents' strict home environment and moved into the dormitory, her boyfriend could "come up whenever he wanted." Michelle revealed that she "relied so heavily" on that relationship her first year in college that she did not even tell him she was not doing well academically. Michelle withdrew from college and moved to another state after that first year, but her boyfriend soon joined her; they were married and she had three children before she re-enrolled in college.

Kay was the only participant who mentioned having a spouse who is currently nonsupportive of her academic efforts. Kay said that although her husband is "not gonna lock me up in the house to keep me from going," he told her during the last semester break that "it costs me [him] \$60,000 a year" for Kay to be in school." Kay's husband contended that that figure represented the "loss of income that I [Kay] would be making if I wasn't in school" even though Kay does not have a marketable college degree. Kay offered to drop out of school and work at a fast food restaurant, but her husband declined her offer. Kay has noticed that her "attitude changed since that conversation" and that the material she is studying is "not coming as easy this semester" because she is feeling guilty for not "bringing home a paycheck." Kay observed that since she has re-entered college she has found herself "talking with him [her husband] as opposed to him [sic] talking to me"; she surmised that "maybe he feels threatened." Later in our interview Kay added, "I think he's envious, too, because he always wanted to be a teacher," (Her husband manages a restaurant.) Even though Kay's parents and psychologist offered to pay his tuition if her husband would go back to school and finish the one year of practice teaching he needs for a teaching certificate, he claims that "it would be impossible for him to do that." In addition, Kay's husband has been instructing her that she does not have "the emotional make-up to work as a nurse." Kay agrees with that assessment because "I can't go home and not be concerned with 'em or wonder if they're taking their blood pressure medicine";

Kay is therefore in a quandary about whether to choose a new college major. Kay's husband's complaints have not yet prompted her to drop out of college, but her confidence and determination to complete a degree program do seem to be in jeopardy.

Parents. Parental nonsupport, like lack of spousal support, proved to be a debatable category of influence; specifically, if parents undermine a child's self-confidence and contribute to the child's developing an anxiety disorder or suicidal depression in adolescence, can one say that the parents were at least partially responsible for their offspring's subsequent college withdrawal or nonattendance patterns? I am adopting the position that one can reasonably draw that conclusion because the participants presented this information as relevant. I have also included parents' refusal to send a child to college and failure to see that a child was enrolled in high school college preparatory classes in this section because the participants in question discussed these issues at length and explicitly believed that these details were relevant to our discussion.

Ann still suffers from her parents' refusal to send her to college when she graduated from high school over forty years ago. Today she proudly informs her mother of her academic successes, but her mother responds only with an admonition that if Ann must go out in the evening, she should be sure to keep her car doors locked. Ann says "I think she's proud of me" but "she doesn't know how to express it."

Goat feels that she did not get the opportunity to attend college immediately after high school because "my mother never really monitored my education." She especially resented this lack of direction because her mother worked for a major university which Goat could have attended free, had she taken college preparatory classes in high school. Goat also feels that when she did attempt (unsuccessfully) to enroll in college, her mother should have suggested that she try a community college. Though lack of support from her mother did not exactly contribute to Goat's dropping

out of college, she did report that she was convinced that lack of support prevented her from being eligible to follow a traditional college attendance pattern. More recently, though, Goat reports that her mother has hindered Goat's college attendance in that Goat has had to care for her and run errands for her at times when Goat needed to study.

Though Jane Doe attributes her withdrawal from college during the first term to her having developed an anxiety disorder, she did discuss during the interview the physical and sexual abuse to which her parents subjected her when she was a child; those earlier traumas may well have contributed to her feeling overwhelmed by the college environment, as they had to her truancy and belligerent behaviors during high school.

Kay, too, was sexually abused in childhood (though she did not reveal in the interview who abused her); in addition, Kay felt that her parents' having forced her to have an abortion when she was fifteen and their having told her she was ugly and stupid when she was a child contributed to her suicide attempts during her first college enrollment period. The fact that Kay wanted to major in agriculture but her parents said "We're not going to pay for a degree in agriculture" because they "both came from farms" added to her freshman-year depression as well.

Faculty. In this category as well as the two preceding, participants mentioned people who diminished the value of their college experience, whether or not that diminution resulted in the participants leaving college.

Charles reported that he has encountered one college instructor during his current period of enrollment who "purposely phrased his questions ambiguously" and who demanded that students regurgitate his opinions on exams. Charles said that if he had had such an instructor when he was attending college part-time while employed, he might have elected to drop out of school for a couple of years.

When Kay attended a university the year following high school, she ascertained that most of her instructors were graduate students who "seemed like they were just putting in their hours." It appeared to Kay that "sometimes the research assistants saw the class more as competition or something" and that they "didn't really seem to have a genuine interest in educating as much as they were [interested] in their [personal research] topic." Kay referred specifically to a philosophy instructor who was "working on some Ph.D. thing, and all of our assignments were geared to help him with whatever his thesis was." Kay said "it became so apparent I guess I became resentful."

Sydney also felt that the quality of instruction he received while attending a university immediately after high school was lacking because the classes were held in "large lecture halls" and in most cases "the instructor was simply not available to talk to after class."

Students. Peer influences are of primary importance to adolescents; not surprisingly, then, when several participants in this study spoke of factors that contributed to their having left college during or at the end of the freshman year they mentioned roommates, dates, "partying," and other forms of socializing.

Though Sarge finished his first year in college with relatively respectable grades, his perception was that his downfall that year was his going out dancing several nights a week. Kay felt that her grades would have been better if she had not spent so much of her time playing pool and meeting other students in the college cafeteria; in spite of the time she spent socializing, Kay "didn't develop any real friendships during that point with any other students." Along the same lines, the first time Rebecca attended college, she "would spend time in the cafeteria" and "carry on conversations with friends" instead of studying. Rebecca said that if she had it to do over, she "wouldn't have had my friends around" and she "wouldn't have had my boyfriend around." Most of her friends never finished college, Rebecca added. Michelle had a

college roommate who was a "real partier" who helped Michelle discover "a freedom that I have never had before." Sydney said that the second dormitory he lived in was "a zoo" and that "I could never study quietly in my room at all. There was always a party." All of these examples may be said to represent a form of "social integration," to use Tinto's terminology, that does not necessarily contribute to college success.

Another aspect of Sydney's experience, though, does fit Tinto's thesis that lack of social integration contributes to withdrawal from college. Sydney said that he "really just didn't like" most of the students he encountered at the university because "I thought they were very shallow and they weren't there for school; they were just there to have a good time." The following year Sydney "strongly identified with the counterculture that was developing," but degree completion was not a primary value espoused by the counterculture. Today Sydney mostly relies on faculty members for social support; he noted that he has formed few intellectual friendships among students in the community college because its population is "very transient," making it difficult to maintain contact with friends. Sydney added that "Lots of people I started going to school with are gone somewhere else or were not in a four-year program at all and are now working."

Charles is openly critical of his community college classmates when he complains that "I hate taking day courses" because he must share the classroom with egocentric, immature students who leave class because they're "having a bad hair day." Charles dislikes attending classes with students who "don't participate in the classroom discussions" and who act as if "they want somebody to open up their brain and pour the material in."

Friends and Co-Workers. Though her friends outside college have not dissuaded her from persisting in college, Ann mentioned several times during her interview that "an awful lot of people" had suggested that she was "wasting her time" by attending college, or that it was "silly" for her to be attending college in her sixties.

Sydney, too, is very much committed to remaining in college and earning degrees, even though all his friends are "in restaurant management or in retail management or they're CPA's" and as a result "they're not thinking about Merleau-Ponty or Immanuel Kant or this person of history or anything like that -- or doing calculus." Now that Sydney no longer works in sales, "our lifestyles are very different," Sydney remarked; "we don't think about the same things."

Social Influences Contributing to College Persistence

All participants identified sources of social support which have contributed to their academic achievement, as will become apparent in the following pages. The final category demonstrates that one may bolster another person's efforts without even realizing it.

Spouse. Three participants mentioned that their spouses are supporting them financially while they attend college. Now that Charles is unemployed, his wife is supporting both of them while he pursues a college degree; she has "a good job . . . in the about twelve dollar an hour category." He reported that they have a "good relationship" and that she is "very supportive" of his academic endeavors. Kelly's husband has been especially helpful, she said, because he majored in math and physics in college and "he basically studied all the time"; thus in addition to providing financial support for Kelly, her husband understands her need to engross herself in homework. Kay's husband also is supporting her financially, but as was mentioned above, his questioning the value of her remaining in college is counteracting that support.

Parents. Three female participants mentioned that their parents are helping them pursue college degrees.

Jane Doe is currently living in her parents' basement so she can save money to attend occupational therapy school; accepting this assistance creates some

ambivalence in Jane, though, because her parents deny that they abused her when she was a child and she feels obligated while living in their home to act as if nothing ever happened. Kay, who also lives with the memory of having been abused in childhood, reported that her parents have been "completely supportive since I started back this time." Rebecca's parents, who live next door to her, keep her children while she attends classes. Rebecca said that her mother was "a good influence on staying in and continuing to finish" college, and that even after Rebecca was married, "if I wanted to take college courses she would pay for them." Rebecca's mother apparently empathized with her plight because she "was a college graduate herself, and she had to take a year or two off in order to get the finances to finish"

Ironically, Rebecca seems more highly motivated by her father's lack of belief that she will ever graduate from college than by the positive support she is receiving. Her father, who "never went past the sixth grade" but later completed his GED, gave her money to return to college on the condition that she would finish, and Rebecca is determined to show him that she can and will. Rebecca says "I'm really working hard for these A's that I'm getting to prove to him that I can do it." Another participant who expressed a desire to please his father was Sarge, who said that his father was "really disappointed when I decided for my wife to go to school first and not get my degree"; Sarge indicated that the need to meet his father's expectations is a principal reason he returned to school.

Offspring. Three female participants reported that their own children are serving as sources of social support for their academic endeavors. Ann, who at sixty-two still cannot earn her mother's approval to this day, cheerfully related that her daughters are "just thrilled that I'm in school." Kelly and her oldest son are "competing as to who can get a degree first." The younger son plans to enroll in college soon as well. Kelly said she and her elder son have been "encouraging each other to stay in school" by engaging in their friendly game of competition. Rebecca

and her son and daughter all do their homework at the same time. She commented that her son has gotten "real industrious" and that "he will come home and immediately start on his homework" now that they study together.

Serving as a Role Model for Children and Grandchildren. Four of the female participants and one male participant contributed that serving as a model of academic behavior for their own children (or grandchild in Ann's case) has helped them remain determined to complete their academic goals. Ann said that she sometimes regrets that she may not be spending enough time with her grandson, but she thoroughly believes that "when he grows up and realizes that Nana was studying . . . , it will help him to make his decisions and maybe go on to college." Goat stated that one reason she is working toward a degree is "because how can I tell my daughter to go to college if I've never been? I've always tried to set an example for my child." One of the reasons Charles plans to earn a couple of master's degrees is so that he can provide "a good model for my daughter." He added, "Our children do what they see." Kay echoed Charles' beliefs when she opined that her daughter provides tremendous reinforcement for Kay to persist academically because "I think it's good for her to see Mama going to school and learning that now I can't play and play."

Rebecca and her children study together, and she is hoping her daughter will realize the importance of an education as a result of their sometimes not having had very much money. Regarding her children's attending and completing college, Rebecca says of her own erratic attendance patterns, "Hopefully, my children will learn from my mistake." Rebecca later said that she intends to graduate "to prove to my . . . children that it's important to graduate . . . and to present a good example for them."

Siblings. Sue was the only participant who mentioned receiving support for academic endeavors from siblings; her mother is deceased and she has never known

her father, so that source of family support is very important to her. Sue said "most of my brothers and sisters, I can't say all of them, but most of 'em" have been very supportive of her college endeavors. She said her brother gives her a ride to school when her car will not start and he "tells me I'm doing a good job." Sue's sister in California also telephones her and encourages her to earn a degree.

Faculty. Of all the areas that the volunteers addressed in their interviews, the most commonly discussed topic by far was that of the support for their academic efforts that the participants had received from college faculty. Eleven of the twelve participants volunteered information in this area, and in many cases the participants indicated that interactions with faculty had transformed their life goals, their interests, their self-concepts, and/or their opportunities for success.

Ann reported that she experienced a liberating metamorphosis in self-concept when her first college English composition instructor wrote "Excellent" on her final class paper during Ann's first semester as a full-time student; Ann said she had "never received any praise" before in her life; thus for the first time she felt competent and significant. Michael, too, experienced a "sea change" at the hands of an English professor; he credits his mentor at the ivy league university with having precipitated his realization that it was "really okay for me to be moved by literature" when he observed her eyes tear as she was "moved by the emotion and beauty of the literature" while reading a Biblical passage to the class. That same professor later functioned as a mentor who facilitated Michael's development of his identity as a writer.

Kelly, too, experienced faculty mentoring that enhanced her self-concept and opportunities for academic achievement. Had she not encountered some cooperative and compassionate professors, Kelly would still need to complete over thirty hours of upper-division coursework to earn her bachelor's degree instead of eighteen semester hours. Professors at a university she attended in Texas allowed her to take independent study courses when she moved to Tennessee so that she could complete the university's

residency requirements, and they worked with her to select a combination of classes at the community college and local university in Tennessee which she could transfer back to Texas in order to earn her degree there. Earlier, two of her professors in Texas had permitted her to attend and complete the requirements for a couple of classes for which she could not officially register because she had moved back to the area after the registration deadline. They recorded the grades for her the following semester when she registered for the classes officially. In addition to her university mentors, Kelly says she has had several "really good instructors" at the community college, and a couple of them have assisted her in her attempts to re-enter the business world; Kelly said she perceives these instructors as "willing to do anything that they can to help."

When Charles first began taking classes while working full-time, "the greatest motivator was the instructor." Charles prefers instructors whom he perceives to be "dynamic," who "know something" about the subject, and who motivate the classes to think about the material being studied. In his interview Charles declared, "it can be the most rigorous course in the world; if you have a good instructor, they can make it enjoyable." He especially admires instructors who are employed in "the career field of computer science" who are teaching in an adjunct capacity to share their enthusiasm for the field. Charles makes a point of interacting with his instructors so they will know he is a serious student, and he says he greatly appreciates instructors who realize that "people are humans."

Kay said of her instructors, "all of them have been most encouraging," including those whose courses she considered dropping because she thought she might not do well in them. Kay volunteered that her instructors have "all been very supportive" and that "they seem to have a genuine interest in conveying . . . knowledge." Kay welcomed the fact that her community college philosophy instructor "gave us not just his view that he agreed with, but the whole spectrum." Kay

summarized her perception of community college faculty as follows: "I like the instructors here. I feel like we're on the same team here."

Sarge's grade-point average would have been much worse his first semester in college had he not encountered an astronomy professor who noticed that he had been less than diligent and who told him that he was going to fail him if Sarge did not earn an A on the final examination. Sarge admitted, "So I read the book in a week and a half and I pulled an A on the final." Sarge encountered another motivator when he and his male classmates returned to the college after having gone on a two-year religious mission; the faculty exerted extra efforts to tutor the returning students because "the college there was geared to bringing these people back up to speed." As a returning student at the community college, Sarge says he currently feels comfortable asking faculty for help, especially since "the professors here are older." Sarge also spoke extensively of the benefits he has gained from utilizing the expertise and services of his academic advisor.

Sydney has met several faculty members at the community college whom he has admired; one faculty member in particular became Sydney's mentor, "and we would spend literally an hour and a half to two hours a week at one sitting just talking about everything -- from the Supreme Court Justices to aspects of management to his experiences in life." The professor had abandoned the business world in his forties to complete an advanced degree and to begin a new career in teaching, and Sydney decided as a result of those discussions that he, too, wants to become a college teacher. Sydney has learned that he "needs the direction" that he gains from attending classes and admitted that he does not know what to do with his time between semesters.

Though they told less elaborate stories, other participants also applauded the efforts of faculty members they had encountered. Michelle reported that she benefitted greatly from the tutelage of an instructor who "taught me how to study" and "taught me in the class how to take tests." Jane Doe said she currently has a "really

wonderful" chemistry teacher who "explains stuff" and who willingly re-teaches skills that the students are expected to have learned in other classes. Sue said she has had "really good teachers" at both the community colleges she has attended, but "I can't think of anybody I've really talked to" since she is just not one who approaches others to discuss her problems. Michael finds the community college faculty "very capable" and says that "the interaction with faculty is very rewarding and enriching."

Students. Six participants cited the influence of fellow students as motivators for their continuing their college educations. Ann said she derives a sense of social purpose from listening to the "stories" of younger students because they "just need somebody to listen to them." Jane Doe is shy about making new acquaintances, but she did say "just bein' in college gave me . . . different people" and that she met other students who also became her friends through those people. Some of her friends, Jane says, have already graduated from college and some are enrolled in graduate studies; she wryly reports that their support takes the ironic form of "I know it sucks, man, but you'll be done with it." Kay said that she has several "good friends that I've met at school" and that she "thinks about them every day." Kay also said "the faculty and the students are as high a caliber" at the community college as any she encountered when she was a university student. Sue "made several friends like the first week of school" who "really helped me get adjusted"; she especially learned from the students who had been in college awhile. One friend "helped me learn how to take notes" and "just having somebody to talk to really helped." Four friends decided to car-pool, and that helped Sue with expenses, as did "just having people to study with."

Michelle was delighted when "a girlfriend from Wisconsin showed up at registration" when she attended a community college in Florida prior to moving here; the friend was upset that she had to go through orientation, but Michelle welcomed learning about college. Michelle seized the opportunity to study with her old friend, and that bond eased Michelle's transition back into college. In a somewhat similar

experience, Sarge said that when he met his wife-to-be at college, they were taking the same communications classes and "that competition helped get it done." Michael says he enjoys his "interactions with older students" at the community college and that he has set up a math study group that has resulted in "pleasant interactions." Sarge danced less and studied more his second semester in college because he had a girlfriend who spent her time studying. Today Sarge explains that he is glad he can find his "similar age group" at the community college; he said that the diversity of the community college student body ensures that "you can relate and associate with people that have similar backgrounds and similar experiences," and that association "makes college life easier." Sarge participates in a number of study groups, and he said he has observed that students segregate themselves by age range when forming study groups.

Acquaintances and Co-Workers. Some participants mentioned that people they know outside the college environment have provided them with support for their academic efforts. Ann mentioned that "quite a few people at work" knew she was taking college classes and "they were all supportive of that." Jane Doe reported that a woman with whom she worked last year helped her with her math and that a current "guy I work with" in an auto body shop asks her how her grades are going occasionally. "I think he wants me to do well and not be stuck working in a garage all my life," Jane commented; then she added, "I don't need any encouragement now. I got it on my own."

During her first two semesters in college while working full-time, Kelly enrolled in classes with a friend with whom she had worked for several years. Kelly was disappointed when the friend decided she did not want to take any more classes. Kelly regrets that her friend is "not interested in a degree at all." Kelly also said that a woman who holds the job she formerly held in the major corporation in Texas "keeps encouraging me to go and get the degree."

For Sarge, external influences on college decisions included the tenets of his church and the way he spent his time while serving his country in the Persian Gulf. Sarge's church emphasizes getting an education, and as a result, he said, "it's always in the back of your mind that 'I really need to get an education.'" In addition, the time Sarge spent in the Persian Gulf during the Gulf War provided a period of reflection and introspection that resulted in his returning to the country determined to finish his education. Sarge estimated that "three-fourths of the guys that I was there with came home with the desire to go back to school . . . because we spent so much time sitting around with nothing to do . . . and you retrospect about what your life is like." He summarized his argument by pointing out that after each major war the U.S. has been involved in, the survivors have flooded the colleges and universities upon their return.

Psychologist. Three female participants, all of whom have suffered serious bouts of depression, mentioned that their psychologists have been instrumental in their academic persistence. Ann re-entered college in the mid-1980's shortly after her husband died, but had to withdraw from college as a result of severe depression; she said that "I was depressed and suicidal . . . but with my doctor's help I finally got over most of that." Once she felt better about life, Ann returned to college with her psychologist's approval. When I asked Kay about people who had contributed to her decisions to stay in college, she said "My psychologist is at the top of that list." Though the psychologist was not in favor of her earlier enrollment in a private business college because he did not think she was "developmentally capable to have a successful experience" at that time, when she expressed interest in enrolling in college last year, "he wouldn't let up" from encouraging her to enroll until she had actually taken the necessary steps for readmission. Sue said that "my therapist and my doctor" helped her make the decision to return to college and that she feels so close to her therapist that she can call him for help "at three in the morning" if she needs to.

"Inverse" Family Support. The final category that emerged was one which I have chosen to label "inverse social support"; specifically, a few participants volunteered that they were pursuing college educations so that they would turn out differently than members of their family or other people they have known who have not graduated from college. These "inverse models" have demonstrated behaviors and lifestyles that the participants do not want to emulate. Sarge's example in this category centered around the economic circumstances of a couple of his co-workers: ". . . one is in his forties and one is in his fifties; and they're making just a little bit more money than I am. and they're that much older than me and have that much more experience than me. And my boss is twenty-eight and he's got a finance degree, and he's making much more money than I am. And you know, that's a real-life practical vision of my future without a degree and my future with a degree." In the same light, when I asked Jane Doe whether anyone had influenced her decisions about college, she replied, "I guess watching some people in my family not have college educations -- not necessarily what they told me or what they said, but seeing how people live, just people in general, and seeing how that is and seeing I don't want to be that." Goat's example of this category was emphatic: ". . . the only way I can say that my family influenced me was I know I don't want to be like them. I know I don't want to act like them, I know I don't want to treat my children like that, I know that I don't want to be like that."

Social Support in Summary

Social support may contribute to or detract from one's achievement of academic goals. The participants in this study have demonstrated that they can persist in spite of adverse influences and that they know how to build and use meaningful social support networks. Initial decisions to leave college seem to have been more closely related to developmental issues of adolescent egocentrism and establishment of one's

social role as a young adult than to academic issues that could be ameliorated by intervention efforts offered by colleges. Non-family, non-college-related sources of social support (e.g., co-workers, friends, etc.), based on the participants' narratives, exerted considerably less influence on the participants' academic decisions in adulthood than did college faculty, other college students, and the students' family members. Most participants reported they could rely on at least one family member to appreciate their academic achievement. The social influence that has proved most universally beneficial to the participants' academic achievement, according to the stories they told, has been college faculty members.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

In this chapter I will summarize the study's purpose, methodology, and results; review the results of the study in light of the literature; and discuss implications of this research for researchers and for college administrators.

Summary of the Study

Twelve volunteer community college stopouts (referred to throughout this discussion as "participants") who now have sophomore status and who are maintaining at least a 3.00 grade-point average were interviewed using nonstructured, reflective interview techniques. In those interviews the now-successful college stopouts, who were assured that their anonymity would be preserved in the published results, reflected upon their disparate experiences of college, themselves in the context of those experiences, and perceived sources of social support for their decisions to leave, to return to, and to remain in college. The participants in the study were apprised of the three research questions that formed the foundation for the study in a pre-interview letter that encouraged them to ponder these questions before and during the interviews. The purpose of the study was to elicit successful students' perceptions of the factors that have contributed to their decisions to leave, to return to, and to remain in college so that readers might gain perspective on the conflicting demands that precipitate college stopouts' postponing their academic goals in favor of more immediate, personal goals.

Literature in the area of academic persistence and withdrawal has focused on quantitative path analyses of "variable sets" (such as background characteristics, goal commitment, and measures of academic integration and social integration); these statistical studies have resulted in theories of college persistence and departure such

as that proffered by Tinto in 1975. An underlying question motivating this study was whether these models accurately reflect the dominant factors that returning students perceive as having determined their decisions to remain in or leave college. The information gleaned from this study suggests that those who have conducted follow-ups to Tinto's model (including Tinto himself) have accurately identified subtleties that Tinto did not consider in his original model, such as financial considerations and maturational factors integral to the process of the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. It might even be posited that maturational factors play such an important role in students' academic decisions that Tinto's model should be modified to include "personal integration" as a major contributing factor to persistence and withdrawal alongside "academic integration" and "social integration," the two major factors that Tinto identified.

Summary of Results

The transcripts from the twelve interviews were analyzed in light of the three research questions posed at the inception of this study.

The Experiences of College

The first research question explored in this study was, "How do now-successful 'stopout' community college students contrast their current experience of college with the earlier experience which led to voluntary withdrawal or dismissal from college?"

Most participants discussed their college experiences in terms of their reactions to the college environment (such as feeling intimidated at first, enjoying the experience of learning, succumbing to their first experience of "freedom," etc.), whereas a few participants reported that they had been mainly interested in how they could use a college degree from the first time they entered college; these latter

participants, for the most part, did not discuss emotional responses to the college environment, but focused instead on the practical benefits of obtaining a college degree and how other practical considerations (such as remaining employed in a job they already had) had delayed or interfered with their protracted intentions to complete a college degree program.

Half the participants discussed vividly their having felt intimidated by the college environment; some felt frightened as soon as they arrived on campus whereas others became progressively overwhelmed by large classes or by specific subjects (e.g., mathematics). Subsequent experiences of academic success offset these participants' initial fears, but in some cases that success came much later in life, once they had been away from college for a number of years. (Sydney, for example, re-entered college after a twenty-year absence.) For a few participants the initial feelings of intimidation progressed to a sense of personal alienation. For other participants, living on a college or university campus presented a freedom they had never before encountered, and they reveled in making their own choices about how they would spend their time -- until their sagging grades compelled them to drop out of college. Another experience of college frequently reported was that of enjoying learning; this ardor for knowledge was acquired over time and was not mentioned in the context of the first, unsuccessful attempt at college. Other participants reported that rather than having developed a love for learning, they had come to treat college as a career -- i.e., a job that must be done. Finally, several participants discussed college attendance primarily in the context of acquisition of job skills or validation of career experience they had already acquired outside the context of college; these participants, for the most part, seemed especially intent on re-entering the workforce as soon as possible.

The Participants' Descriptions of Themselves

The second research question investigated in this study was, "How do these students retrospectively view themselves in each of their attempts to obtain a college degree?" The participants responded by discussing themselves in terms of intrinsic motivational factors, extrinsic sources of motivation, and the skills they have developed to ensure success in the college environment.

Intrinsic motivational factors reported by the participants included their progression from experiencing despair to focusing on academic mastery, the development of autonomy, and the exercise of tenacity. Half the participants (five females and one male) spoke of having elevated their self-concepts from sloughs of severe depression, self-doubt, and/or anxiety to heights of accomplishment; some cited a single turning point when they realized as a result of an examination grade or a grade on a paper they had written for a class that "I can do this!" while others indicated that they repeat this process every academic term. Several female participants emphasized that they have progressed from seeking approval outside themselves to exhibiting autonomy by pursuing college degrees no matter what others think. Numerous participants mentioned that they had developed "focus" or that they are determined to "hang in there" until they earn a degree.

The two sources of extrinsic motivation cited by the participants were the demands for college degrees in the job market to validate acquisition of career skills and feeling an urgency to graduate and seek employment before they became "too old"; ironically, the three participants who stressed feeling old were the three youngest volunteers in the study (ages 24, 28, and 34).

The final category under this research question encompassed the participants' descriptions of themselves in terms of academic skills they have developed and are now using. These skills and areas of emphasis included developing goal commitment, "working the system," applying time management and study skills,

exercising classroom skills, and employing cognitive reappraisal. Over half the participants chose to mention their intense commitment to earning a degree; several indicated that they had "always wanted a college degree" and that now was their time to acquire that degree. Half the participants directly addressed the understanding of the workings of academic institutions that they have acquired over the years. Some implied that they might not have dropped out of college initially if they had received adequate orientation to college, if they had understood the process of dropping classes, or if they had known how to utilize the expertise of an academic advisor; others acknowledged that knowing these things probably would not have changed how they behaved at the age of eighteen. Most interviewees emphasized how they manage and plan their time to ensure that they meet assignment deadlines and leave adequate time to review for examinations; several discussed time management in the context of garnering the cooperation of family members, including studying alongside their children. The participants also frequently mentioned that they sit near the front of the classroom, that they have learned how to take notes, that they participate in classroom discussions, and that they have learned how to assess instructors' grading behaviors -- a grouping of competencies which I have labeled "classroom skills." Finally, for several participants the key to their academic success has been the development of cognitive reappraisal, or converting "catastrophizing" into positive affirmations of their abilities and focusing on their accumulated successes.

Social Influences on the Participants' Academic Decisions

The third research question in this study was, "How have sources of social support in the students' lives contributed to their decisions to leave or to remain in college?" I have arranged their responses to this question into categories of social

influences that have contributed to their withdrawing from college and those which have contributed to their persisting toward a college degree.

Negative social influences on college attendance decisions included spouses, parents, college faculty, other college students, and friends or co-workers. Four female participants acknowledged that having gotten married had curtailed their academic aspirations or that their spouse was currently undermining their academic goals. Four female participants spoke of lack of maternal support for their academic efforts, with three of those discussions focusing on childhood issues; specifically, two of the participants discussed how physical, sexual, and psychological abuse at the hands of their parents had impaired their learning abilities and social skills; one expressed anger at her mother for not having monitored her high school education to ensure that she enrolled in college preparatory classes; another lamented that her parents would not support her attending college forty years ago and that her mother still will not acknowledge her academic successes. Though no one said that college faculty had directly influenced their decisions to leave college, three complained about graduate student instructors who seem uninterested in teaching, about instructors who expect students to agree with the instructors' opinions, and about large university classes. The participants who said that they had spent too much time socializing in college had entered college straight out of high school; those who complained about lack of seriousness in other students did so from the vantage of adult focus on obtaining a marketable education. Though two participants mentioned that their friends or acquaintances could not appreciate their interest in academics, no one indicated that lack of support from friends external to the college environment had influenced their academic decisions.

The participants spoke extensively of positive social support for their academic efforts, with the greatest emphasis being on the mentoring roles played by community college faculty members. In addition to college faculty, the participants

lauded spouses, parents, offspring, siblings, friends, co-workers, other students, psychologists and doctors as having exerted positive influences on the participants' academic decisions and behaviors.

Spouses and parents were mentioned in the context of providing financial support and empathizing with the participants' need for study time; two participants explained that they intended to earn degrees to prove to their fathers that they can persevere and accomplish their academic goals. Two mothers of adult offspring mentioned that their children are proud of them, while a mother of two elementary school children said that she and her children study together. Participants reported that study groups and classroom discussions are helpful to them and that having attended classes with friends has bolstered their confidence and motivation levels. Three female participants who had survived severe depressive episodes mentioned that their psychologists and/or doctors had encouraged them to work toward college degrees once they were well enough to handle academic pressure.

College faculty, as noted above, seem to have exercised the most positive influence on the participants, judging by the volume of comments the participants provided in this area. Nearly all the participants spoke glowingly of intellectual exchanges with professors, mentoring, and faculty members' acknowledgement and encouragement of their academic abilities. Some faculty members even bent college rules to help transient students meet residency and degree requirements. Participants expressed admiration for faculty members who had tutored them, who had taught them how to study and take tests, and who had cultivated in them a love for learning; those in the latter category, more than one participant said, had helped them transform their self-concepts and had assisted them in clarifying their academic and career goals.

The participants also spoke of social support in terms of modeling; on the one hand several felt extra motivation to succeed in order to provide constructive

examples for their own children or grandchildren, whereas other participants cited undesirable models among family or co-workers as having motivated them to complete their degree programs because "I don't want to be like them." The latter category I labeled "inverse social support" -- a label I am trusting is of my own coinage.

Links to Academic Persistence/Withdrawal Literature

Much of the literature on academic persistence and withdrawal points to Tinto's model as the most comprehensive paradigm for explaining contemporary college attendance patterns. As was outlined in Chapter 2, Tinto (1975) concluded that family, prior schooling, and individual attributes all contribute to college students' degree of goal commitment, and that goal commitment leads to good grades and personal intellectual development, the combination of which Tinto designated as "academic integration." All the participants in this study displayed high levels of goal commitment and to some extent academic integration, except that most of the participants indicated that they were committed to making high grades in order to achieve suitable employment rather than to developing their personal intellectual abilities. The participants who did emphasize the importance of intellectual development seemed more committed to enjoying the process of learning than to securing a diploma -- the predominant goal of those whose primary ambition was employment or re-employment.

Tinto's model goes on to say that academic integration is one half the equation of academic persistence, with social integration being the other half of the equation. The degree of one's social integration determines one's commitment to an individual institution, Tinto said, and this institutional commitment determines whether one drops out of college. The participants in this study who entered college immediately after high school demonstrated that they are currently autonomous in

their academic pursuits and that, in fact, social integration hindered their academic progress when they were younger. Sarge, for example, affirmed that he still feels allegiance to the first institution he attended, whereas he views the current institution from a utilitarian perspective -- yet says the reason he did not persist toward a degree the first time was "the reason why I have the allegiance to it [the institution]. . . . I was free . . . and I think also because there was so much stuff to do on campus." The college he first attended, Sarge said, "was a society in itself . . . but also you got the dangers of the society where you can get caught up in the fun and you miss the real reason why you're there. And that's what I think happens even on big college campuses is a lot of freshmen get so caught up in this new society and the new rules of the society that they get lost in the shuffle, And I don't think you get as lost here at [this college]."

In a sense Tinto's hypothesis is borne out by the data gleaned from this study, but one must consider whether the study of factors leading to degree completion at any institution should be the goal of retention research or whether finding ways to ensure degree completion at a given institution is the proper aim of persistence/withdrawal research. Obviously, those whose college funding bases are grounded in enrollment figures and graduation rates must be concerned with institutional commitment; the larger question remains, however, of whether degree completion anywhere "counts" in studies of academic persistence. Tinto seems to have pondered this same question after having spent a lifetime researching the persistence/withdrawal phenomenon. As was noted in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, Tinto (1987) now views academic departure as ". . . but one particular manifestation of a range of leaving behaviors that mark social existence."

Limitations of Tinto's Model Revisited

In his 1982 follow-up to his original model, Tinto noted that the impact of student's finances on their academic decisions had not been included in the model, a concern which he reiterated in the 1987 book Leaving College. One may infer from the "stories" of over half the participants in this study that personal finances have played primary roles in their academic decisions to date. Tinto also noted in his 1982 follow-up that his original model did not address personal social networks outside the college environment (clearly important determiners of academic decisions for the participants in this study), transfer among institutions before earning a degree (every participant in this study had attended at least one other institution, most of them in other parts of the country), or two-year-college attrition patterns (the focus of this study). The one absolute consistency in all of Tinto's work has been his insistence that college faculty and administrators must bear strong responsibility for students' academic behaviors and that institutional commitment to students is a primary factor in students' decisions about whether, when, and where they will continue their education. The results of this study corroborate that conclusion as well; the factor most often addressed by participants in this study was the beneficial role that faculty mentoring and modeling have played in their development of academic self-concept and in their revisions of personal, academic, and career goals.

A Proposed Revision of Tinto's Model

As one reads the "stories" of the participants of this study in Chapter 4, it becomes apparent that many of them simply were not in a position to devote the greater part of their time to studying for classes during their earlier enrollment periods in college. Most were facing maturational issues -- for some, the adolescent issue of exploring "freedom" after leaving home for the first time and for others, the young adulthood issue of establishing a lifestyle for oneself and one's newly formed

nuclear family -- and some were learning to cope with life-threatening biochemical imbalances and emotional issues which are commonly termed "mental illness." For these participants "academic integration" and "social integration" did not influence their academic decisions as much as did the need for personal integration.

I propose, therefore, that Tinto's model would benefit from a third category, personal integration, which must be factored in alongside academic and social integration. As it stands, Tinto's model does not attend to the overweening motivational factors driving those individuals who are battling the storms and stresses of adolescence, whose financial needs outweigh their academic goals, or whose emotional make-up needs fine-tuning. All these individuals must first attend to the task of developing personal integration before they are ready to focus their attention on the academic environment and its unique demands.

Suggestions for Further Study

It is my sincere hope that readers of this dissertation will find the participants' stories so engaging and the findings so intriguing that they will be inspired to design similar qualitative investigations. A few ideas come to mind. Since personal developmental issues emerged as such strong determiners of the participants' academic decisions, it would be nice to see similar retrospective studies conducted at a variety of institutions. The question remains, as is clear from some of the literature cited herein, as to whether community college students are a special breed who are more focused on the utilitarian benefits of college degrees than on learning for its own sake than are university students or whether, in fact, career focus is a developmental issue that would emerge equally from unstructured interviews with returning students in universities, whether they were undergraduate or graduate students. Qualitative inquiries into the similarities and differences between returning

community college students in the forty-year age range and graduate students in the same age range might yield interesting comparisons, for example.

Should one prefer to study interventions, institution of and systematic follow-up of peer mentoring programs in which the student mentor is approximately ten years older than the mentee might revolutionize the way "at risk" students respond to the college environment. Faculty telephone follow-ups of students demonstrating erratic attendance patterns might also serve as effective, benign interventions for capable students who may be moved to action by the perception that "someone cares"; one could design a study which would compare these students' degree of goal commitment to that of students who have enjoyed little contact with faculty. (This study would probably be most telling if conducted among evening students, who, as demonstrated by the experiences of Ann and Kelly in this study, may totally lack social integration.) Another interesting and useful study might result from conducting interview follow-ups with students whose grades have dropped sharply during the previous semester; such a study would provide immediate, rather than retrospective, student perceptions of the factors that are affecting their academic progress.

Were I to re-design the investigation reported herein, I doubt that I would do very many things differently. Had I recruited from a given age range, I would not have learned that students around the age of forty are more likely than others to volunteer for such a study. It certainly would have been easier to organize the data had I conducted a more structured interview, but then I might not have experienced the joy of discovering that more participants mentioned faculty mentoring than any single other positive influence on their academic decisions and behaviors, I might not have learned that so many students are driven by their job situations, and I might not have realized how many students are persisting toward college degrees because they want to set positive examples for their own children.

Post Scriptum

In closing I would like to salute the participants who volunteered for this study, all of whom I found to be extraordinarily intelligent, thoughtful, and resilient; they are the solid material of which our country is made and theirs is the spirit that imbues all survivors of personal setbacks with hope and fortitude.

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APPENDIX A

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

Please call Doris Ivie at 694-6441 if you are willing to share your insights into college success with other students and educators.

Volunteers must meet the following criteria:

Sophomore (completed 30+ hours of college-level classes)

GPA 3.00 or higher

Stopped attending college for at least one semester (other than summer) in the past and then re-enrolled in college

What will be asked of you:

You will be asked to reflect on your experiences as a college student in a one-hour interview. Your observations will be combined with those of other "stop-outs" to help educators and students learn about the behaviors, experiences and attitudes that contribute to academic success in college.

Just leave your phone number with Doris Ivie's voice mail

694-6441

to be contacted for an interview

APPENDIX B

Pre-Interview Letter

Dear Participant:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study entitled "In Pursuit of Academic Persistence: A Qualitative Study of Community College Stopouts' Attempts to Obtain a College Degree." As we have discussed, your part in the study will consist of a one- to one-and-a-half hour interview in which you will talk about your prior and current experiences of being a college student. The interview will be audiotaped so that I may listen to your statements later to search for themes that appear consistently in your responses and in the responses of other participants.

You will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement prior to the actual interview; this agreement will inform you of your rights as a participant and of my responsibilities to you. The confidentiality agreement will be stored separately from the audiotape of your interview; during the interview, you and I will refer to you by a pseudonym (a made-up name) which I am asking you to select prior to the interview.

I have validated through the Pellissippi State computerized Student Information System that you meet the criteria required to be a participant in this project. You are a Pellissippi State sophomore who has earned at least a 3.00 GPA and who has returned to college after stopping out for at least one semester.

The research questions to which I hope to find answers as a result of your interview and interviews of the other participants are: (1) "How do now-successful 'stop-out' community college students contrast their current experience of college with the earlier experience which led to voluntary withdrawal or dismissal from college?" and (2) "How have sources of social support in the students' lives contributed to their decisions to leave or to remain in college?". Before we meet for the interview, please read and reflect on the following questions which I will be asking you:

"Tell me about your prior experience of attending college."

"What were you like then?"

"How does your current experience of college differ from your experience of college when you dropped out/were dismissed?"

"How are you different now from the person you were when you last attended college?"

"Have there been any significant people in your life who have influenced your performance in college and/or your intentions to leave or to remain in college?"

If you wish to ask me any questions about the study prior to the interview, I encourage you to telephone me at 694-6441. I am looking forward to our interview.

Sincerely,

Doris Ivie

APPENDIX C

Informed Consent Form

I have agreed to participate in Doris Ivie's study, "In Pursuit of Academic Persistence: A Qualitative Study of Community College Stopouts' Attempts to Obtain a College Degree," in which I will discuss my experiences as a college student who has either voluntarily withdrawn from or was dismissed from college and who now has attained sophomore status with at least a 3.00 grade-point average.

My contribution to the study will consist of talking about my various experiences of college, how I perceive myself as a person, and how others have influenced my academic decisions. I will provide this information in a confidential interview which will last approximately one to one-and-a-half hours. The researcher will audiotape the interview so that she may thematically analyze its content. The audiotape will be erased at the conclusion of the study.

Since my contribution to the research project will consist of a confidential session in which I will discuss my experiences of college, I do not anticipate encountering any risks or discomfort. I understand that I may terminate the interview at any time if I experience discomfort and that the researcher will refer me to a counselor if I or the researcher deem that I need counseling. My participation is entirely voluntary and I may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

I understand that my identity will be kept completely confidential and that the researcher may combine my comments with those made by other participants in the study to illustrate the central themes that emerge from the interviews. I am aware that the researcher hopes to use my narrative to contribute to educators' understanding of the factors that contribute to college students' academic persistence and withdrawal behaviors, and that I may benefit from personal insights gained as I reflect on my experiences. The researcher will discuss the findings with me at the conclusion of the study.

This consent form will remain in a locked filing cabinet in the Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology, Room 108, Claxton Education Building. I understand that if I have questions about the study I may contact the researcher, Doris Ivie, at office B350, Pellissippi State Technical Community College, telephone 694-6441, or her dissertation advisor, Dr. William A. Poppen, UTK Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology, 108 Claxton Education Building, 974-5131, UTK Main Campus.

I have read and understood this explanation of the research project and have had my questions regarding my participation in the study answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate.

Name (signed)

Date

APPENDIX D

Transcriber's Pledge of Confidentiality

I understand that while transcribing tapes of the interviews conducted for Doris Ivie's study "In Pursuit of Academic Persistence: A Qualitative Study of Community College Stopouts' Attempts to Obtain a College Degree" that I will be listening to confidential information. Participants have been assured that the information they reveal in their interviews will remain strictly confidential, that they will be referred to in the study by pseudonyms, and that their informed consent statements will be stored separately from the audiotapes.

I understand my responsibility to honor this confidentiality agreement. I agree not to share any of the information on these tapes with anyone except Doris Ivie, the principal investigator, and Dr. Willam A. Poppen, her dissertation chair. Any violation of this agreement would constitute a serious breach of ethical standards, and I pledge not to do so.

Transcribing Typist

Date

APPENDIX E

Emergent Themes

INTRAPSYCHIC FACTORS

Emotions and Attitudes

Alienation
Anger
Boredom
Dependency
Depression
Fear
Guilt
Immaturity_Impatience_with
Loneliness
Suicidal Feelings

Obstacles to Learning

Attention_Deficit
College_Burnout
College_Major_None
College_Nonattendance
Commitment_Lack_of
Deficiencies_High_School
Deficiency_Math
Deficiency_Reading
Focus_Lack_of
Goals_Lack_of
Grades_Probation
Procrastination
Stopped_Out

Learning Strategies/Study Skills

Academic_Persistence
Change_of_Major
College_Attendance
College_Attendance_Multi
College_as_Career
College_Course_Load
College_Enjoy
College_Full_Time
College_Major

College_Meaningful_Experience
College_Resources
Courses_Interesting
Courses_Night_School
Courses_Noncredit
Courses_One_at_a_Time
Courses_Withdrawal
Easing_in
Effort
Focus
Job_at_College
Learning_Focus
Learning_Strategies
Organizational_Skills
Structure
Study_Skills
Study_Skills_Note_Taking
Time_Management

Maturational Issues

Age
Freedom
Identity
Identity_Crisis
Immaturity
Independence
Maturity
Responsibility
Self_Consciousness

Motivation (Intrinsic)

College_as_Goal
Commitment
Generativity
Goals_Academic
Goals_Career
Goals_Personal
High_School_Achievement
Lifestyle_Decisions
Love_Learning
Motivation_Intrinsic

Personal_Satisfaction
Self_Discipline

Perspective Transformation

Cognitive_Reappraisal
PT_Love_Learning
PT_Ability

Self-Concept

Homosexuality
Optimism
Self_Confidence
Self_Defeating
Self_Efficacy
Self_Esteem
Shyness

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

College-Related

Campus_Atmosphere
Campus_Population
Campus_Size
College_Admissions_Policies
College_Admissions_Process
College_Allegiance
College_Class_Size
College_Costs
College_Degree_Earned
College_Degree_Requirements
College_Degree_Value_of
College_Dormitory
College_Early_Admissions
College_Entry_Intimidating
College_Financial_Aid
College_Immed_After_HS
College_Job_Placement
College_Location
College_Orientation

College_Policies
College_Policies_Ignorance_of
College_Registration_Process
College_Reputation
College_Transfer_Agreements
College_Transfer_Policies
Courses_Difficult
Courses_Unavailable
Extracurricular_Activities
Technical_College
Technical_School

External Conflicts/Demands

Child_Abuse
Child_Abuse_Psychological
Child_Abuse_Sexual
Children
Conflict_Church
Conflict_Extracurricular_Activities
Conflict_Family
Conflict_Finances
Conflict_Health
Conflict_Health_Mental
Conflict_Job
Conflict_Marital_Separation
Conflict_Marriage
Conflict_Military
Conflict_Motherhood
Conflict_Moved_Residence
Conflict_Personal_Life
Conflict_Political_Views
Conflict_Socializing
Conflict_Substance_Abuse
Finances_Personal
Hospitalized
Medication
Partying
Personal_Trauma

Job/Career Issues

Job
Job_Age_Discrimination
Job_Better
Job_Bottom
Job_Change
Job_Co-Op
Job_Degree_Requirements
Job_Degree_Requirements(None)
Job_Dissatisfaction
Job_Hobby
Job_Overqualified
Job_Permanent
Job_Persistence
Job_Skills
Job_Skills_Obsolete
Job_Skills_Upgrade
Job_Success
Job_Teaching
Job_Temporary
Job_Unemployed
Job_Volunteer_Work
Technical_Training
Vocational_Training

Misc. Extrinsic Motivators

Children
Family_Patterns
Finances_Personal
Grades
Motivation_Extrinsic
Parental_Expectations
Scholarships
Social_Roles
SS(pos)_Children_Role_Model (duplicate)
SS(pos)_Spouse_Role_Model (duplicate)
Time
Time_Pressure_to_Graduate

Social Support

SS(inverse)_Family (E.g., "I don't want to be like them.")

SS(neg)_Boyfriend

SS(neg)_Brother

SS(neg)_Children

SS(neg)_Family

SS(neg)_Friend(s)

SS(neg)_Parent(s)

SS(neg)_Roommate

SS(neg)_Spouse

SS(neg)_Students

SS(none)

SS(none)_Advisor

SS(none)_Faculty

SS(none)_Family

SS(none)_Friends

SS(none)_Parent(s)

SS(none)_Students

SS(pos)_Advisor

SS(pos)_Boyfriend

SS(pos)_Brother

SS(pos)_Children

SS(pos)_Children_Role_Model

SS(pos)_Church

SS(pos)_College_Graduates

SS(pos)_Competition

SS(pos)_Counselor

SS(pos)_Faculty

SS(pos)_Family

SS(pos)_Family_Needs

SS(pos)_Girlfriend

SS(pos)_Giving

SS(pos)_Husband_Role_Model

SS(pos)_Mentor

SS(pos)_Military

SS(pos)_Parent(s)

SS(pos)_Psychologist

SS(pos)_Self

SS(pos)_Spouse

SS(pos)_Spouse_Role_Model

SS(pos)_Students

SS(pos)_Study_Group

SS(pos)_Various

SS(pos)_Work

ADVICE

Advice_to_Administrators

Advice_to_Faculty

Advice_to_Students

Need_for_Mentor

Regrets

VITA

Doris Jean Ivie was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, on May 22, 1944. She attended public schools in Knoxville and graduated from Young High School in June 1961 as a recipient of a four-year ALCOA Foundation college scholarship. She majored in nuclear engineering at the University of Tennessee for two years, then changed her academic major to English; she earned both a Bachelor of Arts degree (1965) and a Master of Arts degree (1968) in English from the University of Tennessee.

While still an undergraduate she worked for two summers as a technical writer with the Isotopes Information Center of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission; as a result of this work, she was first published in an international journal at the age of twenty. In her first full-time job, as a Research Associate with the University of Tennessee Office of Institutional Research, she wrote, among numerous in-house publications, the Role and Scope Statement which set the tone for the University of Tennessee system that was formed in 1968. After two years as an institutional researcher, she longed for the intellectual challenges of the classroom and took a position as a full-time Instructor in the University of Tennessee English Department.

Spending her time grading themes that were locked in a vault at the end of the term and then burned after two years of storage spurred her to fulfill her creative urges through jewelry-making, an area in which she could see tangible results of her efforts. She spent the Fall of 1972 making jewelry in a Southeastern Ohio hand-made house which had neither electricity, telephone service, nor running water; she then returned to Knoxville where she made and sold jewelry until she realized that she longed to resume intellectual endeavors.

Ms. Ivie returned to teaching as the first female, non-engineer faculty member at the newly formed State Technical Institute at Knoxville (hereinafter State Tech) in May 1973. She served as the first female department head at State Tech until she decided to change her teaching area from English to psychology. She began taking graduate classes in psychology, educational psychology, and adult education -- a course of studies that culminated in the Ph.D. program for which she wrote this dissertation.

In August 1988 Ms. Ivie completed the coursework for the Ph.D. -- the same month that State Tech became Pellissippi State Technical Community College. The resultant changes at the new community college so consumed her time that she stopped out of the doctoral program from 1988 to 1992.

Her own radical career changes and experience as a college stopout culminated in this study of the forces that influence students to stop out of college.

She was convinced when she began this study, and she is even more convinced now, that stopping out of college constitutes neither personal nor academic failure but is in fact a product of the multitudinous intrapersonal and environmental forces that influence all adult decisions.