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Pivotal Moments in Undergraduate Education: Retention and Student Connection to Campus

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Pivotal Moments in Undergraduate Education: Retention and Student

Connection to Campus

(TITLE)

BY

Katie Sikora

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Using qualitative methodology the researcher studied what pivotal moments keep students connected to their institution. The researcher conducted five one-on-one interviews with students of varying backgrounds and involvements and found that participants experienced pivotal moments while attending their mid-sized, mid-western, public university. Participants described pivotal moments through helping others, working towards their future goals, and experiencing leadership opportunities that caused them to grow as a student. Family pressure, people on campus, and having more opportunities in college contributed to the pivotal moments that students experienced. Specifically, this mid-sized, mid-western institution's mentors, faculty members, and the close-knit feeling of campus contributed to the connection participants felt to their university. Recommendations for future research and for Student Affairs Professionals are discussed to continue educating campus members on pivotal moments and their influence on students.

Keywords: Campus involvement, sense of belonging, narrative storytelling, pivotal or defining moment, retention, student success, traditional-aged student

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all to all the individuals who have contributed to the pivotal moments students experience, without your guidance student success would not be possible. Be your best each day, you may not recognize the impact you will have, but your students do.

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I would like to thank my thesis committee members Dr. Yodor and Kelly Miller for providing not only edits but all of the emotional support needed to complete this thesis. Your kind words throughout the process and in my defense presentation made the entire process worthwhile. I would especially like to thank Dr. Kniess for being my thesis advisor, but more so for being my mentor. Dr. Kniess you are one of the most outstanding women I have ever met. Your compassion and understanding for each student you work with makes you truly outstanding. I will forever be grateful for knowing and learning from you and I hope we remain close for years to come.

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Chapter I

Introduction

During the four short years of undergraduate education, college students are constantly pushed to think about their future, the next step, adding experiences to their resumes, and making contacts for their first job after college. All of the challenges mentioned above are what can be considered “external factors”. Students in college balance external factors like what’s happening in the environment around them, with internal factors such as their goals, values, and self-conceptions (Pizzolato, 2005). Baxter Magolda (2001) defines the melding of these two factors as “the crossroads”. Magolda’s theory of self-authorship has four phases, one of the phases being becoming the author of one’s own life. If a student is in this phase they should be able to choose what they believe in and fight for those beliefs when challenged (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). However sometimes external factors get in the way of a student’s progress causing them to go into “crisis mode” or to become unhappy (Evans et al., 2010).

According to the National Center for Statistics [NCES] (n.d.), 20.2 million college students are attending American colleges and universities, an increase of 4.9 million undergraduates in the last fifteen years. CollegeStats.org (2015) has developed a list of “50 Creative Ways Colleges Are Recruiting Students Today” encouraging colleges and universities to highlight everything from unique student organizations to recycling initiatives on their campuses. One website suggests offering students a chance to win a free iPad when applying as a recruitment tool (Milone, 2015). Colleges and universities spend time and money recruiting students to come to their campuses, but research on what happens after students arrive is sparse. Institutions run retention statistics to see how

many students leave per year but do not often ask the individual student why they stay or what experiences will influence their ability to flourish at the institution.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2013) reports that only 59% of college students attempting to complete a four year degree are actually successful at completing their courses, meaning 41% of students who enter college do not finish. With such a high dropout rate one must consider researching retention among the college students of today. There are numerous articles on retention rates and specific retention initiatives campuses are implementing. Specifically, millennial students during their freshman year need more assistance with the transition from high school to college (Turner & Thompson, 2014). Colleges and universities create opportunities to engage students in their campus community. A positive correlation has been found between campus involvement and persistence in college (Hu, 2014). Many factors can influence student retention such as a student's personal history, academic life, and how the individual handles adjustment.

In addition to studying retention rates, researchers propose that student engagement in activities, spiritual organizations, and contact with advising services improve a student's sense of community (Hu, 2014; Lester, Leonard, & Mathias, 2014; Rennick, Smedley, Fisher, Wallace, & Kim, 2013). For example Tieu, Pancer, Pratt, Wintre, Birnie-Lefcovitch, Polivy, and Adams (2009) reported that outside of the classroom activities can affect how students adjust academically.

Retention and student engagement in their campus community have been studied heavily in recent years, mostly focusing on why students leave (Hunt, Boyd, Gast, Mitchell, & Wilson, 2012). Students leave their college or university for many reasons

including family pressure, mental concerns ranging from stress to depression, lack of social involvement or engagement, and the need for employment outside of the university (Hunt et al, 2012). However, in none of the studies did researchers ask students why they stayed at one institution from the first day of classes to the last day of finals. This study seeks to understand if the students who complete their degree within six years experienced a pivotal moment that kept them connected to their institution.

Purpose of Study

This study determined if undergraduate students experience pivotal moments while at their undergraduate institution that keep them connected to their college or university. In order to explore why students stay at an institution this study used semi-structured interviews of junior and senior students to uncover what the pivotal moments for the student was and why that pivotal moment was so impactful.

Research Questions

This study found that there was a pivotal moment that connected students to their undergraduate career at a mid-sized, Midwestern institution and if that moment was the reason that they stayed at that institution for consecutive years. The following research questions will guide this study.

1. How do students describe pivotal moments at a mid-sized, Midwestern institution.
2. What pivotal moments influence students to remain at a mid-sized, Midwestern institution?
3. What aspects of campus create the most defining moments: other students, faculty, staff, or campus organizations?

Significance of Study

Researchers studied why high school students are motivated to attend universities and have even developed a motivation scale (Corts, & Stoner, 2011). Once students begin attending colleges and universities the research focused specifically on departmental initiatives that may impact student retention rates (Felly, 2014). Institutions have restructured or resurrected Academic Advising departments and have found a positive correlation between advising and student retention. (Bean & Metzner, 2005). Felly explained that focusing on subgroups of students when advising, like first generation college students, increased student use of advising and increased students' semester GPA (2014). Researchers have also examined transfer students and why they left their previous institution. One study suggested that transfer students leave because their colleges and universities did not provide a supportive living environment (Utter & DeAngelo, 2015). There was no research on pivotal moments that solidify a student's relationship with their campus. Lastly, Vianden (2015) studied what mattered to undergraduate students, and provided them time to discuss how the events, instances, and moments have impacted them. Vianden's study asked what made students stay or leave, but did not ask why that pivotal moment had such an impact. Research on pivotal moments and how they affect students added to Vianden's work.

When pivotal moments are uncovered through this research universities will have a better understanding of what makes students stay in college. Developing retention initiatives and reviewing their pilot year data are no longer be necessary because students tell administrators through this study what practitioners and services are making them successful. Colleges and universities can be more fiscally responsible by cutting funds

from centers that do not serve students and more capital can be allocated to the resources that are aiding students in their undergraduate experience but more importantly sustaining students until graduation.

Limitations of Study

A limitation of this study was the lack of research on this topic. Previous research studies examine topics such as how specific organizations affect college adjustment (Tieu et al, 2010). No study that asked why a pivotal moment in college made a student stay at that particular institution. Another limitation of this study was the content the interviewees share in the interviews. Some pivotal moments are not positive, such as the loss of a family member and the student staying in school for them. When a topic is difficult for students to talk about the researcher might not understand the full picture of that student's experience. An additional limitation to this study was researcher bias. The researcher did experience a defining moment in their undergraduate career which sparked interest in the topic of pivotal moments. The researcher took every step to eliminate threats to internal validity including those related to researcher bias.

Definition of Terms

Campus involvement. Participation in a student organization or function that establishes and individual connection with the student and their campus. This involvement often stems from school sports, campus events, organizations, and student leadership positions (University of Michigan, 2015).

Sense of Belonging. The level of connection a student feels mentally and physically to a campus that is fostered through the roles a student holds, their connection to faculty, and their overall engagement to the institution (Strayhorn, 2009).

Narrative storytelling. Students personally defining themselves by recounting experiences and opportunities that developed the person, and how the student's understanding of who they are can change with time (Polkinghorne, 1988; Bruner, 1990; Wang, Koh, & Song, 2015).

“Pivotal” or “defining” moment. A significant event in a student's undergraduate career that develops them and pushes them towards college success (Espinoza, 2012).

Retention. The percentage of students who register for classes their freshman year and complete their degree at the same institution (Ashby, 2004).

Student success. Completing goals a student has set for themselves, types of goals include academic, social, and spiritual

Traditional-aged student. Student who attends college after high school and completes their degree within five years (National Center for Educational Statistics, n.d.).

Summary

More students than ever are attending colleges and universities, and institutions are taking notice when students transfer or leave their university. Through a series of interview questions the researcher understood if students experienced pivotal moments during their undergraduate career that made them stay connected to their campus through graduation. This study was limited because little research had been done on pivotal moments, specifically while at college. Additionally, interviewee content and researcher bias may have affected the conclusions drawn from this study. The findings of this study can help student affairs professionals know their students more deeply, and campuses

will know what resources, advisors, and organizations are contributing to a student's sense of belonging on campus.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

Many articles focus on why students leave, but very few discover why students stay. To understand this question, this study examines what pivotal moments are and how pivotal moments may affect traditional-aged students at mid-sized, Midwestern universities. This study will uncover what the moments are and the impact they may have on students and their college experience. Research is used to understand existing knowledge on pivotal moments, why students attend universities, campus involvement and community engagement, college life at a mid-sized Midwestern university, and why students dropout and transfer, and factors that affect retention rates. After reviewing the literature on why students stay research must take a look at why students leave colleges and universities.

Student Involvement and Engagement

Involvement in on-campus and off-campus activities may create a sense of belonging or develop a social connection between students and their communities (Tieu et al, 2010; Lester, Leonard, & Mathias, 2014; Utter & DeAngelo, 2015). A study conducted by Tieu et al (2010) suggests that out of-class activities yield a more positive high school to college adjustment. Students who were involved in out-of-class activities had a more positive adjustment to college (Tieu et al, 2010). Additionally, research suggests that student engagement in their campus environment is linked to the amount of learning gains students develop during their undergraduate careers (Strayhorn, 2008). The study involved 8,000 participants that were randomly selected from a larger study where students responded to the College Student Experiences Questionnaire that measures

college student involvement at four-year institutions. Strayhorn (2008) found that student engagement such as faculty and peer interactions can positively affect how students report their personal and social gains. These studies are important because they explain how student involvement can help students adjust to college. If student involvement can help students adjust, involvement may also be the pivotal moment that makes students stay connected to their university.

Strayhorn defined sense of belonging as the connection a student feels to campus through relationships, organizations, academics etc. Sense of belonging can contribute to a student's overall sense of engagement in this study. A study by Hu (2011) proposed that a positive relationship between engagement in campus activities and persistence in college exists. To test this hypothesis a survey was distributed 16 Washington schools, with a total of 832 participants. The survey consisted of demographic questions, questions on how they picked a college, experiences they had in college, persistence to complete their degree, and others. Hu (2001) found that the level of academic engagement did not affect student persistence but social engagement did positively affect student persistence. Engagement can also refer to a student's academic performance. Kuh (2006) studied whether student engagement enhances student academic performance. The study surveyed a diverse group of 1,058 students from 14 different universities. Students were assessed based on their RAND score. RAND is an assessment company that administers tests that are a series of problem solving modules that test a student's critical thinking ability. Students were also evaluated based on their GRE score, and college GPA. Kuh (2006) found that student engagement is passively associated with student academic performance.

Underrepresented Student Populations

Minority Students

Research suggests that students in minority groups have a more difficult time adjusting to college (Kemp, 90; Race-Roney, 2011). Research shows that Latino students are faced with challenges, academic and social, but are ill equipped to handle those tests because of lack of support, or unwillingness to seek out resources (Cerezo & McWhirter, 2012). Xiong and Lam (2013) studied the obstacles and successes of Hmong college students. Purposive sampling was used to interview five Hmong students in a graduate program. Specifically, results found three barriers to Hmong student success those being academic, cultural, and financial. Xiong and Lam's (2013) study found that finding resources in higher education was difficult for Hmong students. Although the services offered to underrepresented students may help them adjust to college life that may not be enough to keep them until graduation.

African American students and Latino students are two underrepresented groups that have a more difficult time being successful in college. A 2014 study used focus groups of African American and Latino students who had a cumulative GPA of 2.5 or higher. The study found that relationships with faculty, family support, and campus engagement all contributed to these students' academic success (Sandoval-Lucero, Maes, & Klingsmith, 2014). These findings contribute to this study because the researchers interviewed students who only had positive outcomes. The study asked students what contributed to their success and found that relationships with people and with the campus environment are pivotal. This study will ask what makes students successful and more importantly will ask why students stay enrolled in college.

Transfer Students

Transfer students have been studied in recent years, particularly why they leave one institution for another. Flaga's (2006) study identified five dimensions a student works through when transitioning to a new institution including learning resources, connecting, familiarity, negotiating, and integrating. Additionally, this study evaluated students based on their academic, social, and physical environments (Flaga, 2006). All five stages required students to make the effort at their new institution. Many of the stages can become challenging especially in a new environment. The stages become even more complex when considering the different environments that affect them. Flaga's (2006) model identified the resources and support students need to be successful and in what environments that success can happen. Another study conducted by Lester et al (2014) examines transfer student academic and social engagement and attempts to understand the value these engagements have on the student's willingness to stay. Lester et al (2014) did not formally state a hypothesis but after surveying 1,000 transfer students by email found that engagement and support were important to student's university success. Students also valued academic engagement, especially relationships with faculty members. Additionally, students felt that sense of belonging was important to success in college, but only some students felt connected to their campus. These studies have highlighted when students have the potential to struggle. The next section identifies the reasons students choose to leave an institution.

Why Students Leave

Students can leave an institution for many reasons often affecting college retention rates. One study was able to identify students who were more "at risk" of

withdrawing from an institution. Shaw and Mattern (2013) used data from 78 institutions that provided students' coursework, grades, and retention rates from a students' first year to fourth year. A students' high school GPA and expected first year GPA can be used to predict a students' chance of returning the following year. If at risk students can be identified prior to starting college advisors may be able to prevent student withdrawal by providing aid early. Research has also identified reasons students leave college.

Specifically, a study conducted by Hunt, Boyd, Mitchell, and Wilson (2012) sought to understand why seniors withdraw from their institutions during their last year, and more specifically identifies the difference in withdrawal rates between first-generation college students and traditional-aged college students. First-generation students specifically African American and Hispanic students were a large portion of transfer students. Family support affected non-first generation students more positively than first-generation students. Family obligations interfered with first-generation progress more than non-first generation student progress in school. First-generation students described financial struggle as a reason to withdraw more than non-first generation students. Lack of interest in coursework was another reason for withdraw that affected both student groups equally. Lastly "institutional issues" also played a role in withdrawal. However, social integration was found to be an important factor in student retention and degree completion (Hunt et al, 2012).

Goncalves & Trunk (2014) conducted interviews of non-traditional students seeking to understand the obstacles students faced after returning to college that could lead to withdrawal from a university. Most students returned to campus to obtain a better career but reported many challenges that hindered their academic goals. Participants

reported having a difficult time connecting to other students, having poor interactions with the financial aid office, and most non-traditional students felt that there were not enough clubs and organizations for older students. Almost all participants felt the need to have an academic advisor who specifically worked with non-traditional students (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). This article identifies what factors contribute to student attrition and what student needs have not been met. Research understands why students leave and can work towards reversing or eliminating those processes. What colleges and universities need to know now is what makes students stay to ensure the success of their students already attending the institution and to market the pivotal moments to prospective students. More specific retention initiatives can be found in the next section.

Retention Initiatives

Most universities are equipped with Admissions Offices who work diligently to recruit high school students for their institution. Once students are enrolled, institutions such as the research site work to establish retention plans to keep those students enrolled (Core Retention Plan, 2012). A study by Turner and Thompson (2010) suggests that millennial students face obstacles when transitioning to college. Turner and Thompson conducted 30 face-to-face and phone interviews to collect data. The researchers identified what helps students transition to college and what factors may fail students during their first year on campus. The following impacted a student's experience either positively or negatively: engaging freshman activities, study skill development, no instructor-student relationship and no academic service support (Turner & Thompson, 2010).

One tool universities use to retain students is orientation weeks or classes that incoming students must be a part of. A 2004 study examined if taking an orientation

course increased student retention over a two year period. Derby and Smith (2004) found that students who took the orientation course were more likely to obtain degrees and less likely to withdraw from the institution. Continued support for students post orientation can also contribute to increased retention. One study assigned a group of incoming students with a peer mentor. Together the students completed community service projects for the duration of the year. The students who were mentored had a higher retention rate than students who did not participate in the mentoring program (Mangan, 2015).

Beginning of the semester programs and mentoring have proven to retain students, but where a student lives can also be a deciding factor if a student is choosing to stay or leave an institution. One institution developed a living and learning community that specifically focused around first year students studying psychology. The study found that students who lived in the psychology community achieved higher GPA's than psychology students not living in the community, had higher levels of involvement outside the classroom, and most importantly had a higher retention rate than students who lived outside the psychology living learning community (Buch & Spaulding, 2011). Colleges and universities have attempted many retention initiatives that were successful. The retention initiatives students were a part of could be the pivotal moment that kept students connected to campus until graduation. This next section will define pivotal moments.

Pivotal Moments

In this study the terms pivotal, proactive, and defining moments can be used interchangeably. Dahlvig and Longman (2010) researched defining moments of women in Christian higher education. The purpose of this study was to discover the factors the

sixteen women experienced that made them successful in their profession. Several defining moments were identified including words of encouragement that made them engage in self-reflection. The participants also expressed observing other leaders and standing up for their beliefs that contributed to their professional success (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010)

College student needs are changing. Students are interested in getting degrees but do not stay on campuses for academics alone. Student involvement, sense of belonging, and connections to other sources keep students until graduation. One study suggests that outside involvement actually improves student's academic performance (Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Miller, Allison, Gregg, & Jalomo, 1994). These outside experiences can serve as pivotal moments for students that connect them to their institutions. Vianden's (2015) study suggested that a student's interpersonal relationships heavily impact their college experience (2015). Participants described 139 "critical incidents" which for the purpose of this study can be described as pivotal moments. Fifty-nine students reported that relationships with faculty were pivotal in their development, an additional 56 students suggested that staff were pivotal in their experience. Lastly, 24 students conveyed that relationships with their peers were also pivotal (Vianden, 2015).

Vianden's study is also important because it is one of the first studies that suggest that pivotal moments can be both positive and negative. For example, when reporting on faculty relationships 31 students described satisfactory experiences with their faculty members while 28 students described unsatisfactory experiences. One student who had a positive relationship discussed a professor who attended his awards ceremony in place of his family who could not attend. The student shared how that experience with his

professor instilled institutional pride in him. Another student who had an unsatisfactory experience described a professor who made their class feel unimportant. That student generalized all professors on that campus to be that way (Vianden, 2015). This study is important because it highlights why students stay. Positive pivotal moments, like relationships with campus partners and organization involvement can encourage students to stay on campus until graduation. Negative events, like a poor faculty experience, can contribute to a student's decision to leave, or could also act as a motivator that motivates students to persevere.

Pivotal Moments for College Students

The mentorship of advisors could act as a pivotal moment for students. Since 1972 the relationship between student and academic advisor has been examined. Before 1972 academic advisors acted as an authority figure telling students what classes to take and when. Usually faculty members acted as these advisors and over time the relationship between student and advisor shifted to a more developmental approach. Advisors were hired specifically to aid students, eliminating the need for faculty advisors (Burns, 1972). A 2014 study by Felly identifies how professional advisors when matched with specific student subgroups can improve college student retention. Students who used the advising services were more likely to return to campus their sophomore year, than students who did not utilize the advising staff (Felly, 2014). Another study examined how faculty advising affects student academic success. The institution created a program that required faculty members to meet with students two times per semester outside of regularly scheduled class. The majority of students who participated in the program had higher grades at the end of the semester than students who did not participate (Williamson,

Goosen, & Gonzalez, 2014). Both academic advisors and faculty advisors have proven useful when examining student success. Academics are a large part of why students attend college and outcome in coursework can contribute to how students feel about their college experience. Students may leave an institution if they are performing poorly. Students who excel academically may be more likely to stay engaged in college. Relationships with faculty members and academic advisors may act as the pivotal moment for college students that make them stay connected to their institution.

Now that the concept of pivotal moments has been identified attention turns to why students choose college in the first place. When answering the question, “Why do students attend college” a study by Corts and Stoner (2001) hypothesized that social factors may outweigh financial and intellectual reasons. That study consisted of 406 participants who were asked why they attend college. Results concluded that students most likely attend college because of the social opportunities, their curiosity for knowledge, career and financial stability, for self-discovery, or because attending college is what is expected of them (Corts & Stoner, 2001). This study is important research because it begins to ask the right questions and provides some detail on why students attend college. The next step is to find out why students stay at college once they have arrived on campus.

Jane Pizzolato has been integral in answering the questions of why students stay in college. Pizzolato’s (2005) research identified what leads students to provocative moments and ends with how students make meaning of their lives. Pizzolato defines a provocative moment as, “an experience that resulted from jarring disequilibrium on the student’s part in terms of her or his ways of knowing (2005, p.18). This definition of

provocative moments came from one of Pizzolato's first studies. In that study Pizzolato sought to identify how decision-making leads to experiencing a provocative moment and how provocative moments can be connected to self-authorship. Pizzolato found that a student's decision to attend college left students at a crossroads. The students had to leave loved ones but believed that going to school was the better choice for them (Pizzolato, 2005). The students in Pizzolato's study thought attending college was more important than staying close to their loved ones. Further research is necessary to explore if those students made the right decision. This study will uncover if students experienced pivotal moments while in college or if their pivotal moment ended with the decision to attend college.

Theoretical Framework

The first theory that explains why students react to certain circumstances is Tinto's (1975, 1993) academic and social integration model. This model explains the factors associated with college withdrawal. The factors include family background, individual attributes, and pre-college schooling. When these factors interact with academic and social systems different results can occur. Grade performance and peer-group relationships can affect a student's decision to withdrawal from an institution or not (Tinto, 1975 & 1993). Tinto's academic and social integration model relates to this study because the factors identified by Tinto may also affect the pivotal moment the student is experiencing. Tinto's model will be used in this study first through the development of questions. The researcher will ask questions about the interviewees life before college such as, "How often or not did your parents/guardians discuss college while you were growing up" and ask about the factors that contributed to their decision

making process when choosing what college to go to. By asking these questions the researcher will gain a better understanding of what the participants are experiencing, and if the participant was set up for success or not. For example, the participant could have overheard their parents discussing the financial strain of paying for college while they were growing up. That conversation in the back of their head coupled with a setback they experience during their first semester of college could contribute to college withdrawal. After the transcripts are complete the researcher will identify if factors that occurred in the participants life before entering college influenced the pivotal moment they discussed during the interview.

Alexander Astin's (1985) theory of development is also applicable to this study. Astin's theory has three constructs: student input, student environment, and student outcomes. Additionally, Astin presents five assumptions of involvement. They are that involvement requires energy, is continuous, can be qualitative or quantitative, development and involvement are directly related, and that there is a connection between academic performance and student involvement (Astin, 1985). Astin's theory of development is important to this study because it highlights how academic performance and student involvement affect student retention. The researcher will incorporate Astin's theory of development in this study by asking questions about the student's academic and social life. The researcher will also ask questions connecting the two concepts like, "Describe a time in college where you experienced pressure to choose between studying for an exam and participating in a social event?" By asking these questions the researcher can understand if academics and a student's social life work harmoniously with each other or if the needs to do well in both compete with each other for a student's attention.

The researcher will also ask about the participant's most influential moment during their undergraduate experience. After the transcripts are complete the researcher will be able to pinpoint if that influential moment was academic or related to involvement/engagement.

Summary

Before understanding why students leave, the researcher must understand why students stay. Hunt et al (2012) explain family support, lack of interest in coursework, and social integration can all contribute to student withdrawal. Both studies completed by Kemp (1990) and Race-Rooney (2011) describe how students who are part of minority groups lack support or are unwilling to seek out resources. Turner and Thompson (2010) explain how student involvement can positively impact institutions retention of students. Pivotal moments were defined by Espinoza (2012) as significant life events that impact a student. Dahlvig and Longman (2010) describe examples of how women experience pivotal moments that led them to success in their professional career. Pivotal moments were then narrowed specifically to moments experienced in a student's undergraduate years. Pizzolato (2005) found that students at a crossroad experienced a provocative moment by choosing to attend college. Lastly, Tinto's (1975,1993) academic and social integration model and Astin's (1985) theory of development are described. Both Tinto's model and Astin's theory describe factors that help or hinder student success in college and will be used in the interview questions asked and after the transcription is completed during the analysis.

Chapter III

Methods

Design of Study

This was a qualitative study that used open-ended questions when interviewing participants. Qualitative research better captured the emotions, personality, and reactions to environmental influences that were exposed in interviews (Madrigal & McClain, 2012). The interviews were semi-structured so the researcher could get an in-depth understanding of the pivotal moment and its effect on the student.

Participants

Participants in this study were traditional-age college students ages 18 to 24. Approximately 8,000 undergraduate students attended this mid-sized Midwestern institution. Five students were interviewed for 20-40 minutes. A cross-section of diverse students with various campus involvements were interviewed for this study. Participants were selected using purposive sampling so a range of pivotal moments were identified and understood. Purposive sampling, a type of non-probability sampling based on selecting participants who meet a studies criterion (Bhattacharjee, 2012) was used. Participants had the opportunity to share their pivotal moment with the researcher, and no other incentives were needed to attract participants for a complete study.

Participant 1: Blake was a 21-year-old male majoring in Sociology and minoring in Criminal Justice. Blake described himself as a transfer student. He started his college journey at a community college where he became involved in student government before attending his current institution. At this four-year university Blake became involved in Habitat for Humanity and later became President of the organization, served on the Residence Hall Association as Vice President, became President of his hall council

within his residence hall, and was inducted into the honor society for his major. When asked what the Blake's most significant involvement was he responded with:

Residence Hall Association Vice President because I didn't want to step up but I had some shoulder tapping and some good friends that influenced me to step up and once I did I realized that I could be a better leader and challenge myself in different ways. Once I learned the role I could engage and lead better.

When asked what the students most meaningful involvement was Blake replied:

Habitat for Humanity because it's a great organization that does a lot for poverty and homelessness, it's not just about the house it's about finances and personal commitment. It's so much more than just giving a home, we give the homeowner personal pride and some power back to those who might feel powerless.

Participant 2: Shelby was a 22-year-old senior female majoring in Psychology and minoring in Women's Studies. Shelby described herself as a senior programs specialist for New Student and Family Programs. Shelby also is an executive member of the honors fraternity Delta Alpha Kae and a part of the Wesley Foundation. When asked what the participants most significant involvement was Shelby responded with:

The office of New Student and Family Programs because it has given me many opportunities. I get to see all the students come in and I do their orientation. I get to see more faculty and staff and I know a lot more people on campus and they know me too. It helps me build a lot of connections.

When asked what the students most meaningful involvement was Shelby replied with:

I would say the office of New Student and Family Programs again, they have been my emotional support. The director is someone I look up too and she is there

for me outside the office. She cares about her staff very deeply and knows what it means to actually be there for students.

Participant 3: Erika was a 19-year-old sophomore female student majoring in History.

Erika described herself as a Resident Assistant, Debut Leader for New Student and Family Programs, the President of history club, a member of the ballroom dance society, and volunteers through the office of Civic Engagement and Volunteerism, where I specifically volunteer at nursing homes. When asked what the participants most significant involvement was Erika responded with:

I really like ballroom dance society, they are great people. I love dancing and it's just a fun option we have, I didn't expect a college to have that.

When asked what the participants most meaningful involvement was Erika replied with:

The nursing home. It's really interesting to see how people age and to get to talk to them about their experiences, hear their stories, it's really cool.

Participant 4: Aubrey was a 19-year-old sophomore female student majoring in Family and Consumer Science with a concentration in hospitality management. Aubrey described herself as an employee for the food court, treasurer of Student Event Planner Association, and Secretary of her hall council. When asked what the participants most significant involvement was Aubrey responded with:

I feel like they are all so even but I would choose work because it has the greatest impact and it's where I spend the most time. I pick work over Student Event Planner Association and hall council because I need to make money to pay for college.

When asked what the participants most meaningful involvement was Aubrey replied with:

Student Event Planner Association because event planning is what I want to go into so it's made a good impact on me because we will go to different venues and talk to different event planner. We actually had the CEO of Student Event Planner Association come visit us, she's actually really close to everyone in the organization. They give us such good opportunities with a new website that was just developed. We get scholarship money and the organization helps me out a ton.

Participant 5: Julia was a 21-year-old junior female student majoring in Kinesiology and Sport Studies. Julia described herself as a softball player, a Prowl and Senior Prowl Leader, the secretary of the exercise science portion of Kinesiology and Sport Studies club, a volunteer for One Stop Community Christmas and Girls on the Run, as well as a tutor. When asked what the participants most significant involvement was Julia responded with:

The office of New Student and Family Programs where I was a Prowl leader because that's where you get to help any new student, graduate, freshman, or transfer. I love being able to help students transition and make them comfortable where they are.

When asked what the participants most meaningful involvement is Julia replied with:

I would say the office of New Student and Family Programs and also tutoring. I get to help student athletes who struggle with school, help them pass and help them be able to play. Last semester one of the students I was tutoring was really

struggling in Spanish and I helped that person through it and they ended up passing and it was so nice to see them succeed. It's really cool to see those people succeed and then go to their games and see them succeed there too.

Research Site

The institution where the participants are being drawn from was a public Midwestern University of about 8,000 students located in central Illinois. The institution offered both undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Students at this institution were heavily involved in the 19 athletic teams, nine fraternities and 11 sororities, hold multiple positions within residence life, and could be involved in close to 200 registered student organizations.

Data Collection

This study used a qualitative research approach when conducting and analyzing data. The pivotal moments that students experienced were both positive and negative, both required an emotional response so qualitative data analysis was the chosen method for this research. Although interviews were used in this study qualitative research also relies on previous research and participant observation (Becker, 2011). Previous research suggested that student involvement can develop a student's sense of belonging to their institution (Tieu et al, 2010). Student engagement is also a factor that can contribute to student success (Lester et al, 2014, Utter et al, 2015). Since student involvement and student engagement are important factors in establishing whether a student will thrive on campus or not, it is important to understand the specific events that lead to a student's decision to stay or leave. Interviewing students and asking intentional questions about

their involvement will lead to a more definitive answer of why they are still pursuing their degree.

Researchers have also studied student retention and strategies that increase the number of students who return to campus each year (Shaw et al, 2012) Strategies such as organized advising have shown to positively affect the number of student who return to the following semester (Cerezo et al, 2012). If institutions are interested in finding ways to increase retention, it would be helpful to know exactly why students stay. This research hoped to uncover what specifically retains students from year to year. Newer studies have started investigating why students stay at their colleges and universities. Vianden found that relationships with faculty and staff can play a major role in student's perceptions of campuses (2015). Lastly, studies have identified provocative moments in students' undergraduate careers that can contribute to their success or their failure (Pizzolato, 2005). This research on relationships and provocative moments may be the reasons students stayed at their campuses until graduation. Asking students that question is what this study was all about.

Semi-structured interviews. The instrument used in this study was semi-structured interviews with questions created ahead of time by the researcher based on the research questions (Bates, Droste, Cuba, & Swingle, 2008). The interview questions used can be found in Appendix A. This structure is designed to uncover if pivotal moments played a role in the retention of students. The prepared questions were adjusted based on the response from the interviewees. If the interviewee needed clarification on a question it was explained or re-phrased. Additionally, the researcher did add or adapt questions

during the interview if needed (Bates et al, 2008). The prepared questions the researcher plans to ask are located in Appendix A.

Interviews were conducted during the middle through end of fall semester 2016, to give returning students time to reconnect to campus. If their pivotal moment was based in a student organization or a relationship with an advisor they may want to refresh those experiences before discussing the experiences with an interviewer. Students had a few weeks to adjust to being back to campus before interviews began. Five students were interviewed to provide a “collection” of pivotal moments that contribute to the study. Interviews lasted roughly 20 minutes to 40 minutes but the interviewer left time open for the student to add any additional information they wanted to share. Interviews were conducted over a month to six-week period so the interviewer had time to transcribe all interviews and find additional participants. The interviews took place in a private office so the interviewee does not feel pressured to answer the interview questions in a particular way and there were no public distractions that could detract from the interview. The interviews were audio recorded for content. The researcher used a journal log after each interview to denote any important non-verbal signals and anything else that sticks out to the interviewer. This way the full description of the participants pivotal moment was captured.

Data Analysis

Responses to interview questions were transcribed from the audio recording device by the interviewer to Microsoft Word. After the interviews were transcribed the interviewer shared the transcription with the faculty advisor. The researcher examined each transcript for patterns, specifically observing how the participants described what

and who helped them achieve a pivotal moment. The researcher assigned codes to the themes found in the pivotal moments disclosed by the students in the transcripts (Saldaña, 2008). After the initial themes were identified the interviewer combined and organized the themes to find commonalities. The researcher did this by organizing the transcripts into lines. Each line was thoroughly read through by the interviewer. The interviewer read through all transcripts and highlighted the core concepts in each. Then the researcher read through all themes found and compared the themes found in each interview. The most common themes are identified used to support the researcher's findings.

Treatment of Data

Participants agreed to an informed consent form before the interview took place. The interview was recorded using an audio recorder provided by the interviewer as well as a video recorder used as a back-up device. The researcher then transcribed the content that was recorded into Microsoft Word. The researcher assigned pseudonym to the participants in the transcription so their identity was kept confidential. All recording devices were kept with the researcher, and the typed transcripts were saved on a flash drive that is password protected. The audio recordings and the coded transcripts will be kept for the researcher's thesis defense and for three years as the institution's IRB protocol mandates. When the three years are up the researcher will destroy the audio recordings and the final printed thesis will be available at the library of the researcher's current institution.

Role of Researcher

As a freshman in college the researcher experienced a pivotal moment that changed the course of their college career. Joining hall council connected the researcher

to the institution and was the pivotal moment that made the researcher want to return to campus each year. The researcher first heard about the position opening from the president of hall council who sat next to the researcher randomly in one of their general education classes. To be elected the researcher had to get the majority vote at the general council meeting. Since they hadn't attended a meeting before they went door-to-door introducing themselves to members of the hall. From that day on, the researcher continually became more comfortable with themselves and more confident in their abilities. Hall council was a community of people all working together to make the hall a fantastic place to live, and they had the honor of being a part of it. Since they experienced a pivotal moment that motivated them to stay connected to campus for four years until graduation the role of the researcher is important to this study.

Summary

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who have experienced a pivotal moment during their undergraduate career. Espinoza (2012) defines pivotal moments as a significant event in a student's career that connects them to their institution. The interviewee decided what that moment was and explained why the pivotal moment had an impact on them. Participants were selected from a Midwestern public institution of about 8,000 students. This quantitative study conducted five semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 20-40 minutes. Data was transcribed by the researcher from the audio recorder and video recorder in the event that the audio recorder failed into Microsoft Word. The researcher verified that the information transcribed was correct. Next, the transcription was coded into themes and the interviews were compared to each

other. The common themes from all interviews were identified and analyzed. Chapter IV will discuss the results of this study in order of research question.

Chapter IV

Results

The purpose of this study was to understand if undergraduate students experience pivotal moments while at their undergraduate institution that keep them connected to their mid-sized Midwestern University. This chapter reports on the themes that emerged through the qualitative analysis of five semi-structured interviews. Several themes are identified and they are organized by research question.

Research Question #1: How do students describe pivotal moments at a mid-sized, mid-western, public university?

Three themes were derived from the first research question. Students describe pivotal moments by telling stories where they help others, discussing being passionate about their major or their future, and through describing experiences where they experienced some type of growth as a student or a leader.

Helping Others

Four out of five of the participants reported that they help others through their various campus involvements. Blake a senior male student involved in many registered student organizations including ballroom dance society, sociology honors society, Residence Life, and Habitat for Humanity was asked what their most meaningful involvement was and they responded with Habitat for Humanity. Blake started out as a general member of the organization and returned for a second year as President. He stated, "Habitat for Humanity is a really great organization that does a lot for poverty and homelessness". Blake went on to describe his most recent service trip and how much he enjoyed meeting the family who was receiving the renovated home. Blake also said,

“working with Habitat is so much more than giving a house back.” It’s clear that Blake really enjoys helping others. Shelby a senior female student involved in New Student and Family Programs, the Wesley Foundation, and Delta Alpha Chi was asked what their most significant involvement was and responded with, “helping students in the office of New Student and Family Programs”. Shelby also said:

I love interacting with new students, now that I’m in a higher position in the office I don’t get to have as much face-to-face time with them anymore but I’ve learned that even though I’m not seeing them face to face anymore everything I’m doing in the office should help students transition so even if it’s not helping them out in the lab or seeing them one on one and getting to talk to them I’m a part of their bigger picture.

Erika a female sophomore involved in history club New Student and Family Programs, ballroom dance society, and an RA experienced helping others while volunteering at a local nursing home. When asked what her most meaningful involvement was Erika responded with, “probably the nursing home, it’s really interesting to see how people age and to get to talk to them about their experiences, hear their stories, it’s really cool”.

When asked what the volunteers help with at the nursing home Erika reported:

We go around and talk to the people there. We knock on the door and see how their day is going. There’s one woman she’s from Naples, we talked to her and she’s really cool. We see how they are doing. Sometimes we hand out popcorn because they have the machine on Friday’s”.

Erika enjoys helping community members at the nursing home in both big and small ways. Julia a female junior student involved in athletics helps others through both

working in the office of New Student and Family Programs and while tutoring for the Kinesiology and Sports Studies department. Julia reported helping others as her most significant and most meaningful involvement. When asked what her most significant involvement was Julia said:

Working in New Student and Family Programs where I was a Prowl leader because that's where you get to help any new student, grad, freshman, or transfer, and you get to help them transition from one institution to another. That's just what I love about that job, I love being able to help students transition and make them comfortable where they are.

When asked what her most meaningful involvement was Julia again referred to helping students. Julia said:

I would say tutoring. I find that to be extremely meaningful too because I get to help student athletes who struggle with school, help them pass and help them be able to play. You'd hate to see teams missing players because they are ineligible when all they had to do is get some help. I'm always open to helping people, I love it, I love volunteering, I love tutoring.

Julia also reported a specific example of when she helped a student that was struggling academically. She described how the student she was helping was responsible for their own success and how she was just a helping hand along the way. All of the participants who described helping others explained how it meant more to them than they think it did to the people they were helping. Many participants learned what they wanted to do with their lives or how they wanted their future to look from the people they served. The

participants truly enjoyed learning from others and giving back whenever they had the chance. Only one participant did not report instances of helping others.

Future Goals

The second theme that emerged from research question one is the passion for the participants future goals. Four out of five participants described their involvements as supportive of their major or how their involvements gave them the skills they need to be successful in the future. When Shelby was asked to describe how their involvement in college was different than their involvement in high school they said:

I'm in a lot more leadership positions now than I was in high school. I'm very centered on the things I'm doing and how that will play into what I want to do as a profession. I want to do Student Affairs so being in New Student and Family Programs, teaching the university foundations course, and being a peer minister all interconnect in that they all work with students.

Erika had a similar experience. When asked what would be the most painful if dropped, Erika responded with, "really the history major is something I am so interested in. I want to be a museum curator when I get older so the thought of giving up history is crazy".

Ericka experienced a pivotal moment when she learned that she chose the right major, and discovered how her major could connect her to her future goal of becoming a museum curator. When Aubrey was asked what their most meaningful involvement was they replied:

Probably the Student Event Planners Association because that's what I want to go into so it made a good impact on me because we will go to different venues and talk to different event planners. We actually had the CEO of Student Event

Planners Association come visit us. She's actually really close to everyone in Student Event Planners Association and she gives us such good opportunities like with the new website they just developed where we can get scholarships. We get a bunch of stuff from Student Event Planners Association and since it's working towards my major it helps me out a ton.

When asked what was specifically meaningful about Student Event Planners Association Aubrey said:

Because it goes towards my major it will look good on my resume if I say that I was not only involved in it but on the executive board and planning stuff will definitely help, and it gets me scholarships and internships. I need a 250-hour internship over the summer so we can sign up through Student Event Planners Association and the website connects to our LinkedIn account. It's all well organized, it's really nice.

When asked if Student Event Planners Association was similar or different to a typical campus Registered Student Organization Aubrey said, "no, it's so helpful to be in something that's geared towards my major". Student Event Planners Association provided Aubrey with opportunities, such as scholarships and internships, that will help her achieve her future goals making the involvement a pivotal moment. Julia also discussed how participating in campus involvements could benefit her future. When asked if she thought involvements helped or hindered her success as a college student Julia responded with:

It definitely helps. Why would you just live in a house, go to class, come back, and study. Yes you are getting an education because that's why you are in school,

but it's also about what you make of your university, how involved you get. I feel like involvement helps students succeed because it builds connections. Getting involved even if it's just in one or two things, you never know who you are going to meet. I've met people I've never thought I would. Involvement helps with grad school and jobs too, it shows that you can do all those and still get good grades, it's not just one or the other, it's a nice blend.

Julia believed that involvements in college outside of academics gave her the opportunity to build relationships that could become useful when working towards a future goal.

Blake did not specifically speak about how his involvements will help in within his major or in his future but did say he was a part of an honors society for his major, where he may be gaining skills that he could utilize in his future.

Leadership Opportunities

The last theme from research question one are leadership opportunities. All five participants described instances where they were put in situations that encouraged the participant to step up or where the participant pushed themselves to be better. When asked what his most significant involvement was Blake responded with:

I would say Residence Hall Association Vice President because I didn't want to step up but I had some shoulder tapping and some good friends that influenced me to step up and once I did step up I realized that I could be a better leader and I can challenge myself in different ways. Once I was learning the role I could engage better and lead better, I didn't think it was out of reach but I needed that extra push.

Later in the interview Blake referenced his leadership experience again, describing how it pushed him outside of his comfort zone and important it is for students to grow in their leadership. When asked what her most significant involvement was Shelby said:

It would probably be the Office of New Student and Family programs, just because it has given me many opportunities. I get to see all the students come in and I do their orientation, it gives me the opportunity to see more faculty and staff, and I know a lot more people on campus and they know me too. The office helps me build a lot of connections.

For Shelby, the office she worked in presented her with leadership opportunities to grow and she took advantage of those by speaking with students about their campus experience, connecting with new faculty members, and learning about new opportunities that she could apply for. Shelby is another example of how a leadership opportunity can advance a student. Shelby also disclosed how a personal illness and the support she received on campus contributed to her growth as a student. When asked what has made the largest impact on her during her college career Shelby disclosed:

I have fibromyalgia and got diagnosed with it during my junior year and it probably shook my world the biggest of all the things I've done. It just made thinks a lot harder, I had to readjust how much I was going to do and had to have that conversation with my supervisor. The initial incident wasn't the best but it just reinforced all the support I did have and how people thought about me and my work ethic.

That conversation Shelby had to have with her supervisor was challenging but she was able to have it and grow from that experience. Although she was nervous to speak to her

supervisor about what she needed, she was able to overcome that fear and co-create with her supervisor a better work environment that suited Shelby's needs. As a first year student I don't know if Shelby would have felt confident enough to ask for and take what she needed, but her involvement gave Shelby the strength she needed to make a change. This example highlights how leadership opportunities can push students to step up and take action. Erika experienced growth when asked if she believed that involvements helped her succeed at EIU. Erika said:

Yes. They are a great way to be involved. It's strange that involvements help with time management because then I have to think of how I am going to get my homework done before my history club meeting. I'm not going to want to do anything after the meeting or maybe I have to do this other involvement, so involvements really helped with structure.

Erika grew in learning how to manage her homework and Resident Assistant job so that she could continue to participate in her involvements. Not only did Erika grow my learning to manage her time but also grew by gaining perspective on how to live her life. When describing her volunteer experience at the nursing home Erika stated:

Through hearing some of the residents stories I was like you know I've got to do something with my life, I can't just work the whole life, I've got to go out and do stuff, life is for the living right?

Aubrey attributes her growth to involvements throughout college. When asked how her involvements impacted her Aubrey said:

I guess pushing myself to be the best I can be because I always kind of half did everything in high school besides sports, but then I came to college and realized

that these involvements really impact employers, and my major, and who I am as a person, and how I grow, and how I meet other people, and how it changes me.

Julia experienced her growth as a student when her perspective of the world was expanded. When asked if there were any life lessons learned through her involvements Julia stated:

Probably just realizing that there is more than just where I am from in this area, there's more to the world. I go to leadership conferences, our OVC regulation meetings, and even meeting people from different schools. You'll do something one way and they'll do it another way and you're like oh that sounds really good or you see what's going on at other campuses. Just learning that there's more to life than a 2 hour radius, or an 8 hour radius.

Research Question #2: What pivotal moments influence students to remain at their mid-sized, mid-western, public university?

Several themes were identified from research question two. The three themes collected from five participants that influenced students to remain at their institution are: family pressure, the people, and having more opportunities at their university than they did in high school or at other institutions.

Family Pressure

All five participants stated that their families influenced their decision to attend and stay at their university. When asked how often did others, whether family, guardians, or peers discuss college while you were growing up Blake said:

College was really discussed with my parents because they didn't go to college. My mom has a certificate and my dad dropped out of vocational training school

so they've had a rough time. My aunt came from a poorer background and she went to college, she struggled but now she's really successful.

Blake was then asked if going to college was a choice that he had and he responded with, "I didn't really have an option with my immediate family." When Shelby was asked how often college was discussed while growing up she replied:

A lot. It was always an expectation to go to college. My parents immigrated here in 1995 so just a little bit after I was born in the Phillipines and they worked very hard to get their doctorate and my sister is a nurse so it was just always expected that education is the key to get you where you want to go.

Both Blake and Shelby experienced pressure to attend college from their parents. Erika, Aubrey, and Julia all witnessed their siblings college experience and felt pressure to perform just as well or even better than their siblings did. When asked if college was talked about in her household growing up Erika said:

Yes. I have two older sisters that had to go through the college process, it was always just kind of expected that I was going to college and all my friends were going to college so it was kind of the next step.

Aubrey had a very similar response to Erika in that Aubrey wanted to follow in the footsteps of her four older siblings. Julia had a slightly different experience with her siblings. Instead of wanting to attend college in the same way her siblings had she wanted to finish college more efficiently than her siblings had. When asked how often college was discussed while growing up Julia responded:

It was pretty often, both my parents went to college, both my sisters started college and took a break. One just finished up, she graduates this semester. I have

twin brothers so we always talked about where we wanted to go. They started college and then stopped and want to go back again, so I'm the only one that has gone all the way through.

Julia witnessed her siblings start and stop college and did not want to replicate that behavior. When asked who or what have made the largest impact on you during your college career Julia said:

Probably the fact that I'm the only one in my family who has gone to school consistently, it motivated me to want to stay in college and finish in four years. My parents took a while to get their degrees because they had to work, my sisters are 27 and they just got their bachelors, my brother is nowhere near being done. I can have mine in 3 and a half years.

The People

Three out of five of the participants disclosed that "the people" were the reason they stayed at their public Mid-western institution. When asked what programs or activities at your university have meant the most to you Shelby responded with:

I don't know when it's going to hit me that I have to leave New Student Programs, I don't know what that's going to feel like, I wish I could take all of them with me but they were the biggest people, especially Kim, that believed in me and gave me a voice. I'm going to be really sad leaving the office.

For Shelby her co-workers and supervisor in the office of New Student and Family programs were "the people" that made her want to remain at her university. For Erika it was a recommendation from a family friend that initially made her consider the institution. Erika said, "A family friend came here for the historical administration

program which is what I want to do so that made it really easy to choose.” When Erika was asked what was her most significant involvement Erika disclosed, “I really like ballroom dance society, they are just great people.” Later in the interview when asked what characteristics of her institution made Erika want to stay she responded with, “It’s cliché but there are really nice people here, they always hold doors and it’s just the silliest thing like they hold it for those couple of extra seconds for you to grab the door.” Erika talked about the people on campus as a whole. Aubrey cited several individual members in the office of Housing and Dining as people that made her want to stay at her institution. When asked who or what has made the largest impact on you during your college career Aubrey said:

My Resident Assistant and Associate Resident Director because I was so unhappy living in my hall and they’re the only ones that reached out to me to really help me move into a new building. It shifted my whole outlook on college because I was so miserable there with my roommate and the building having no air conditioning and just always sick from the heat and my friends from Taylor never wanted to walk to hang out with me so being in the middle of campus and having you open to having me here and having my RA adjust me to living in Weller and getting me to meet new people definitely helped out a lot.

More Opportunities

Four out of five participants reported that staying at their institution gave them more opportunities for success whether it was in leadership positions, job opportunities, in their involvement, or by meeting new people. Shelby discussed how having more leadership positions in college than in high school has positively impacted her. Erika

found a new job opportunity at her institution stating, “I got the debut job and thought you know I haven’t really done anything like that, I wish I would have gotten a job sooner.” Erika also found new opportunities outside of campus employment. Erika said, “Get involved there are so many opportunities online and everywhere around you, and registered student organizations, there are over 200, you can do anything you want here, it’s great.” Aubrey discussed how her peers encouraged her to research ways in which she could get involved. Through doing research Aubrey also found there to be many opportunities to be involved, as well as finding many different campus jobs to apply for. Aubrey also suggested that one involvement can feed into another involvement. Aubrey explained:

I know people who end up getting jobs at the rec center and now they teach classes there. It’s like whatever you get involved in influences where you go. I think working at the union and working on campus made me want to get more involved in my hall.

Julia discussed how making the most out of your environment and how meeting new people can lead to having more opportunities in the future. Julia said:

Make the best of what you have like living in the residence halls. You only have one semester or one year and who knows who you will meet, who knows how many friends you will make, get to know your RA and be close with your floor because that’s where the memories are made.

Research Question #3: What aspects of campus create the most defining moments: other involvements, faculty, staff, or campus organizations?

This research question investigates the specific characteristics of the participant's public mid-sized Midwestern university that create defining moments for students on their campus. Three themes were identified for this research question: mentors, faculty, and the close-knit feeling of campus.

Mentors

The first aspect of campus that create defining moments for students were the mentors that they got to know. All five participants described their mentors as being pivotal to their success in college. Blake discussed a mentor he had in community college that helped him select a major in college. When asked what had made the largest impact on you during your college career Blake said:

I had a mentor while I worked at a high school as a network tech. He was a really good network administrator and he was a really big part of why I went into technology and I still love technology and want to keep learning about it.

Shelby found her mentor while in college. When asked which involvement would you classify as your most meaningful Shelby responded with:

New Student and Family Programs is the most meaningful, they've been my emotional support, Kimberly is someone I very much look up too. She is there for me outside of the office and she cares about her staff very deeply and what it means to actually be there for students.

Ericka shared similar feelings about her supervisor as the nursing home she volunteers at, complementing her positive attitude and sweet nature, wanting to adopt the same attitude herself. Aubrey found her mentor through her involvement Student Event Planners

Association. When asked about her involvement in Student Event Planners Association and why it was so meaningful Aubrey said:

Meeting with the CEO of Student Event Planners Association definitely. She started Student Event Planners Association here because she came for a week and got people involved and sat down and got general meetings started. It's kind of amazing she just graduated two years ago and she's already the CEO of her own company.

Julia shared a similar experience in that she was inspired by her mentor, the coach of her softball team. Julia shared this about her coach, "I loved her, she was great, she has a degree in KSS which is what I'm majoring in and she taught me that if you want something you have to go out and get it." Many of the mentors described by the participants shared similar characteristics. Those characteristics include sparking interests in their students, emotional support, and motivation. Blake's mentor was very knowledgeable about technology and was able to pass on what he knew to Blake in an interesting way, making Blake interested in the topic. Aubrey experienced the same spark when meeting the CEO of Student Event Planners Association. Shelby's mentor provided her emotional support when Shelby had to open up about her fibromyalgia condition. That support made Shelby feel comfortable to share and helped that relationship continue. Erika talked about the demeanor of her mentor. Her mentor was always supportive and genuinely interested in the student volunteers so Erika wanted to be that way for others too. Another characteristic many participants shared their mentor's ability to motivate them. Blake was motivated to continue educating himself. Shelby was

motivated to speak up for herself. Erika was motivated to look at life more positively, and Aubrey and Julia were both motivated to jump into their dream careers.

Faculty

In addition to campus mentors that guided the participants, many of the participants cited faculty as an aspect of campus that created pivotal moments for them. When Shelby was going through her fight with fibromyalgia her faculty aided in getting her through. Shelby described:

I've never had any faculty that didn't abide to the accommodations I needed or looked at me differently. I had a professor actually write me a letter of recommendation and one of the things he said was that he admired that I kept going even though it was different and it was harder for me. My professors don't treat me like a number, they're very supportive and open to whatever I need especially when the testing center closed last year. They were more than willing to go above and beyond to accommodate me.

When Erika was asked why she remained at Eastern she described two aspects of campus, the people who attend Eastern and the faculty in the history department. Specifically, Erika references how nice the faculty are and how much they help her within her major. Since the program accepts very few Erika enjoys the individualized attention she receives from her faculty. When Julia was asked what the contributing factors that made her decide to stay at Eastern she said, "I love my professors in KSS, I can go in there and just have conversations."

Close-Knit Campus

The last theme identified in research question three was the close-knit feeling of their mid-western public university. Four out of five participants commented on the close knit campus. When asked what factors contributed to you selecting your university Blake said:

I chose this college because of the small class sizes and because it felt like home.

I felt out of place at bigger institutions but when I visited here I felt like I was a part of the campus even when I didn't belong yet. There were a couple of

professors who even wrote and sent me postcards so that meant a lot to me too.

Shelby also spoke about her experience while on a campus tour. Shelby explained, "the school was really nice and people held the door open and I got to talk to the President and it was just a very solid feeling that this was the school I was supposed to attend". When asked what parts of her current institution Shelby wanted to take with her to her new campus Shelby again referenced the homey atmosphere. Aubrey also discussed the small campus environment. Lastly, when Julia was asked what factors contributed to you deciding on your current institution Julia had this to say, "Campus is small but not too small, and big but not too big, it's kind of like the perfect size, it's not overwhelming."

Summary

Chapter IV discusses the results found for the three research questions proposed at the beginning of this study. Research question one (how do students describe pivotal moments at a mid-sized, mid-western, public university?) found that students describe pivotal moments through helping others, working towards their future goals, and through experiencing leadership opportunities while in college. Research question two (what

pivotal moments influence students to remain at their mid-sized, mid-western, public university?) found that family pressure, the people at the institution, and having more opportunities in college all acted as pivotal moments for students. Research question three (what aspects of campus create the most defining moments: other involvements, faculty, staff, or campus organizations?) found that student's relationships with mentors, experience with faculty members, and the close-knit feeling of campus were the specific pivotal moments student experienced at their institution. Chapter V will discuss the results of this study, and make recommendations for student affairs professionals as well as recommendations for future research.

Chapter V

Discussion, Recommendations, Conclusion

This research used semi-structured qualitative interviews to explore if students experienced pivotal moments while at their mid-sized public Midwestern university. The purpose of this study was to understand how pivotal moments shape a student's campus experience, and if that pivotal moment contributes to whether they stay at the institution or not. Five participants with varying backgrounds and involvements were interviewed and asked the following research questions: (1) How do students describe pivotal moments at a mid-sized, mid-western, public university?; (2) What pivotal moments influence students to remain at their mid-sized, mid-western, public university?; (3) What aspects of campus create the most defining moments: other involvements, faculty, staff, or campus organizations? This chapter discusses the results of this study, recommendations for student affairs professionals, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

In Chapter IV, three research questions were described and several themes were analyzed. Five participants were interviewed and their responses to the above research questions were categorized into several themes. The first research question (how do students describe pivotal moments at a mid-sized, mid-western, public university?) included three themes: helping others, future goals, and leadership opportunities. Research question two (what pivotal moments influence students to remain at their mid-sized, mid-western, public university?) explored several themes including more opportunities, family pressure, and the people. Lastly, research question three (what

aspects of campus create the most defining moments: other involvements, faculty, staff, or campus organizations?) found themes including mentors, faculty, and the close-knit campus feeling. The themes found in Chapter IV will be compared to the previous research described in Chapter II and discussed in Chapter V. Chapter V will also provide recommendations for the mid-sized, mid-western, public university where the participants attend, as well as recommendations for student affairs professionals and for future research on pivotal moments.

Student Description of Pivotal Moments (helping others, future goals, leadership opportunities)

Before pivotal moments were a category of its own, researchers examined specific groups of students, such as minority or transfer students, to attempt to understand student attrition and retention. A 2006 study interviewed why transfer students left a former institution and how they were transitioning to their new university. Flaga (2006) found that students go through five dimensions when transitioning to a new institution. Those stages are: learning the resources of the institution, connecting, gaining familiarity, negotiating, and integrating. To successfully immerse into a new institution Flaga (2006) found that students need to take initiative after they've arrived on campus in order to be successful. All five participants in this study described how their involvements motivated them to step up and take action. For example, Blake said:

I would say Residence Hall Association Vice President because I didn't want to step up but I had some shoulder tapping and some good friends that influenced me to step up and once I did step up I realized that I could be a better leader and I can challenge myself in different ways. Once I was learning the role I could engage

better and lead better, I didn't think it was out of reach but I needed that extra push.

The student who was quoted was given an opportunity to give a little extra effort and their effort paid off. In addition to student leadership participants relayed how their involvements, campus jobs, personal illness, and their involvement as an athlete contributed to them growing as a student. The experiences participants described about their involvements relates to Astin's Theory of Development. Astin's theory explains that involvement requires energy, and how development and involvement are connected. Many of the participants had to take a leap to become involved, but grew as a student and as a person by holding that leadership position.

The previous research on pivotal moments did not discuss how a student's ability to help others or a student's passion for their future goals could contribute to them wanting to stay on campus. Four out of five participants in this study reported that helping others is a significant part of their university experience. One student works with Habitat for Humanity building houses on his spring break, another volunteers at a retirement community every Friday afternoon. The other participants discussed how tutoring and helping students transition to college is not only meaningful to the students they are assisting but are extremely meaningful to them as well. Many of the participants in this study also described how passionate they were about their major or their future aspirations and how that contributes to the pivotal moments they experience. One participant disclosed that her major was influential to her college experience. Another participant discussed how an involvement geared towards her major was one of the most important involvements she was a part of. Additionally, one participant described how

her involvement with the Office of New Student and Family Programs contributed to her figuring out that she wanted to do with the rest of her life.

Pivotal Moments (more opportunities, family pressure, the people)

Student involvement and student engagement have been heavily researched and can be connected to pivotal moments, however pivotal moments as its own topic has just recently been examined. Pivotal moments, also called proactive or defining moments are described by participants as words of encouragement, standing up for a belief, or an event that led to professional success (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010; Pizzolato, 2005). Later Vianden (2015) described pivotal moments as relationships with faculty and peers. Many participants in this research described what moments were pivotal to them. The participants described family pressure to succeed in college, the people they met while at their institution, and having more opportunities in college than they did in high school, as pivotal to why they stay in college. For example, Blake said:

College was really discussed with my parents because they didn't go to college. My mom has a certificate and my dad dropped out of vocational training school so they've had a rough time. My aunt came from a poorer background and she went to college, she struggled but now she's really successful.

Blake saw his parents struggle and how college made his aunt successful. This family observation was pivotal in convincing Blake to attend college. All five participants in this study noted family pressure or family expectations as pivotal in their college decision making process.

The people you meet in college can also be pivotal to a student's success in college. Vianden (2015) suggested that a student's interpersonal relationships heavily

impact their college experience. The results of this study support Vianden's findings, as well as Astin's Student Development Theory. Three out of five participants reported that the people they met in college contributed to why they stayed at their institution. One participant recalled how staff from the Housing and Dining department contributed to her college experience:

My Resident Assistant and Associate Resident Director because I was so unhappy living in the hall I was in and you're the only one that reached out to me to really help me move into my new hall. It shifted my whole outlook on college because I was so miserable there. Now being in the middle of campus and having you open to having me here and having my RA adjust me to living here and getting me to meet new people definitely helped out a lot.

Lastly, pivotal to student's success were the abundance of opportunities a college provides for students. Tieu et al. (2010) reported that students who were involved in out-of-class activities had a more positive adjustment to college. Another study by Hu (2011) concluded that there is a positive relationship between engagement in campus activities and persistence in college. This study also found that the opportunities afforded to students in college were pivotal to student's success. Erika said, "Get involved there are so many opportunities online and everywhere around you, and registered student organizations, there are over 200, you can do anything you want here, it's great!" Four out of five participants reported how opportunities in college have been pivotal to their success.

Campus Experiences (mentors, faculty, close-knit)

Research question two describes what moments can be considered pivotal for student's success in college. Research question three specifically examines what aspects of the participants mid-sized, mid-western, public university are responsible for the pivotal moments students experience. Derby and Smith (2004) found that continued support for student's post their orientation was linked to increased retention. Although the article did not specify what "continued support" looked like on their campus some of that support could be in the form of mentors. Previous research concluded that relationships with faculty can contribute to a student experiencing a pivotal moment (Sandoval-Lucero et al, 2014). This study also found that mentors and relationships with faculty were responsible for many of the pivotal moments students experienced on their campus. All five participants discussed how their mentors had impacted them while in college. When describing one involvement Shelby said:

New Student and Family Programs is the most meaningful, they've been my emotional support, Kimberly is someone I very much look up too. She is there for me outside of the office and she cares about her staff very deeply and what it means to actually be there for students.

Shelby mentioned this mentor several other times throughout the interview proving that having a mentor can be a pivotal moment in a student's education. In addition to mentors several participants described how their professors had contributed to their success as a student. One of the participants recounted how her professor had gone above and beyond to accommodate her when she experienced a medical emergency. Another participant discussed how the individualized attention she receives from her professors contributes to

her success. A third participant described how easy it was to approach and converse with the faculty members in her department.

Where a student lives and how they feel on campus can also act as a pivotal moment for many students. One university developed a living and learning community that catered to freshman students majoring in psychology. Students who lived in that community received higher GPA's, were involved in more opportunities, and had higher retention rates than freshman psychology majors who did not live in the community (Buch & Spaulding, 2011). Four out of five participants in this study described how the close-knit feeling of campus contributed to their success in college. When asked why this participant stayed at their institution they said:

I chose this college because of the small class sizes and because it felt like home.

I felt out of place at bigger institutions but when I visited here I felt like I was a part of the campus even when I didn't belong yet. There were a couple of professors who even wrote and sent me postcards so that meant a lot to me too.

In addition to the small class sizes and the general homey feeling participants also discussed how nice the other students were and how the campus was the perfect fit. Lastly, one participant recalled meeting the President of their university during their campus tour and how speaking with the leader of campus was a unique and special experience.

Relationship to the Theoretical Framework

Aspects of Tinto's Academic and Social Integration Model and Astin's Theory of Development can be found in this study. Tinto's model describes how factors such as family background can affect a student's decision to leave a university when coupled

with academic and social systems (Tinto, 1975 & 1993). In this study all participants were asked if they had ever thought about leaving their mid-sized, mid-western, public university. Two of the participants described what incidents would make them leave their institution. The participants who briefly considered leaving their institution discussed the university's recent financial crises and personal health issues as reasons why they would leave. Ultimately, none of the participants pursued leaving their institution. Astin's (1985) Theory of Development is also applicable to this research. This theory explains how academic performance and student involvement can affect student retention (Astin, 1985). This research asked participants if they had ever felt the pressure to choose between academics and social involvements. All of the participants described a time where they had to choose academics or social involvements and were able to explain how they prioritize in order to perform well in both. Additionally, when asked what aspects of campus create pivotal moments for students, many of the participants mentioned their faculty or their major. Although participants valued their student involvements, ultimately academics still were a key factor in how the participants defined their success in college.

Recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals

Based on previous research on pivotal moments the following are recommendations for student affairs professionals. Goncalves and Trunk (2014) studied why students leave a college or university and found that the students who withdrew had trouble connecting with other students, had difficulty working with the financial aid office, and found that there were limited clubs and organizations for non-traditional students. Student affairs professionals have the opportunity to correct those occurrences

of student attrition. There are many programs, opportunities, and involvements offered on campus but professionals can examine how they publicize events to their students. If professionals believe students need a resume workshop, that workshop could be hosted in the residence halls instead of the career center so the program is more visible to students. The same strategy can be used when publicizing the financial aid office. The office knows when FAFSA deadlines are and when refund checks are given, so finding a better way to prepare students for those events is necessary. Lastly, student affairs professionals need to explore if the involvements their campus offers still fit the needs of their students, not just traditional aged students, but all students who attend the institution.

A few more recommendations were derived from this research. Student affairs professionals should continue to provide service projects and leadership opportunities for students. All of the participants in this study explained how participating in these activities allowed them to grow as a student. Many participants discussed how their faculty contributed to them wanting to stay connected to campus. Professionals in the field can develop more opportunities for students to connect to faculty outside of the classroom, whether that's after class some day or on the weekend. A lecture on a topic the professor is passionate about or engaging in a sporting event together could make a big difference in a faculty-student relationship, and contribute to more participation in the classroom. Participants also described how meaningful it was to have found mentors on campus. Mentors should continue to provide the support their students need.

Additionally, this institution should consider establishing a more structured mentoring program. Some students find mentors through campus jobs or involvements, but many students rely on their college advisor to guide them. Those short advising meetings each

semester may not be enough to give a student the support they need. Lastly, all of the participants discussed how the people on campus and the campuses close-knit feeling made them want to stay at their institution. Student affairs professionals are a big part of creating that friendly environment and should continue to discuss how their campus values feeling at home when recruiting for the institution.

Recommendations for Future Research

Research on “defining” and “provocative” moments is relatively new. Previous studies on why students leave already exist but there is a need for a deeper understanding of why students stay until graduation at their current institution. Earlier studies described how campus involvements can create sense of belonging and keep students on campus (Tieu et al, 2010; Lester et al, 2014; Utter & DeAngelo, 2015). Strayhorn (2008) examined if student engagement affected retention rates and found a positive correlation between establishing relationships on campus and student success. Lastly, Pizzolato (2005) and Vianden (2015) started uncovering what keeps student connected to campus. They found that interactions with faculty and relationships with peers were important factors that explain why students choose to stay enrolled in higher education. The participants of this study described several reasons why they stay at their institution. Those reasons were the ability to help others, becoming passionate about their future goals, and embracing leadership opportunities. Participants also discussed how having more opportunities in college, family pressure, and the people they met in college affected their decision to stay in school. Lastly, participants also disclosed how mentors, faculty, and the close-kint feeling of campus made them feel connected to their

university. After evaluating the previous research and considering what this study found the following recommendations for future research are needed:

- The participants in this study were involved in registered student organizations, campus jobs, Residence Life, the office of New Student and Family Programs, and athletics. Members of the Fraternity and Sorority Life community declined to participate in interviews but their perspective on what keeps them on campus is necessary. This population should be researched to uncover additional pivotal moments.
- Participants in this study described groups such as faculty and mentors as reasons why they want to stay at their university, but did not specifically state what about those interactions were responsible for that connection. Future research needs to find and highlight what qualities of faculty and mentor interactions with students contribute to students experiencing pivotal moments.
- This study identified reasons why students stay until graduation at a mid-sized, mid-western, public university and found that the close-knit campus was significant. A similar study needs to be conducted at a large research institution to see if the reasons students stay connected to campus change based on institution or remain the same.
- One out of five of the participants in this study was a transfer student and explained that his current institution was meeting his needs. A study needs to be conducted that focuses solely on the pivotal moments of transfer students.

Conclusion

This study used qualitative interviews to understand what pivotal moments keep students connected to their institution. Chapter V discussed the findings of this study. This study found that students described how they experience pivotal moments through helping others, working towards their future goals, and jumping into leadership opportunities that grow them as a student. Results found that family pressure, the people on campus, and having more opportunities create pivotal moments for students. The study also examined what aspects of this mid-sized, mid-western, public university created pivotal moments for students and found that mentors, faculty members, and the close-knit campus connected students to their current institution. Both Tinto's (1975) Academic and Social Integration Model and Astin's Theory of Development (1993) explain how students have the potential to experience pivotal moments during while in college. Lastly, recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals and recommendations for future research were provided.

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Appendix A
Interview Questions

The following questions have been created by the researcher.

1. How often or not did others discuss college while you were growing up?
2. What factors contributed to you selecting this university for college?
3. Explain your on-campus and off-campus involvements.
4. Will you describe your most significant involvement?
5. Which involvement would you classify as your most meaningful involvement?
6. Describe a time in college where you felt pressure to choose between academics and other involvements/engagements?
7. Have you ever thought of leaving the institution? What made you stay?
8. How is your involvement in college different from your involvement in high school?
9. Who or what has made the largest impact on you during your college career?
10. What advice would you give to other students entering college?