

2014

# An Examination of Areas of Involvement That Foster Student Retention

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*Eastern Illinois University*

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An Examination of Areas of Involvement That Foster Student Retention

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Abby Ford

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FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Science in College Student Affairs

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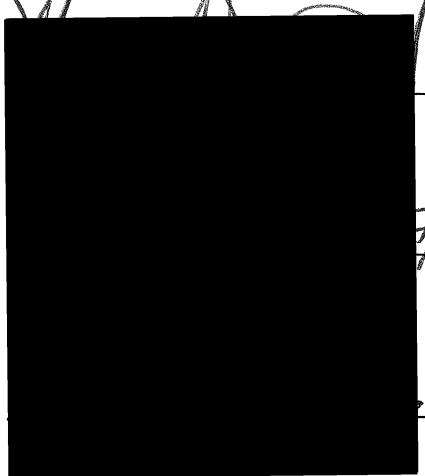
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An Examination of Areas of Involvement that Foster Student Persistence

Graduate Thesis

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Dr. Mona Davenport  
Dr. Dena Kniess  
Dr. Michael Gillespie

## ABSTRACT

Campus involvement has been proven to improve the persistence of students through college. This qualitative study was designed to learn if there are certain areas of involvement that are more influential to creating a perceived sense of belonging for students and in turn influencing their persistence. Using a qualitative approach the researcher gathered narratives from four undergraduate students who were involved in varying out-of-class activities and analyzed the resulting data for important themes. Three major themes emerged which were importance of involvement, connectedness to the university, and employment. The results indicated that being involved in extracurricular activities is influential in students' college experiences. Participants confirmed that their personal experiences were enhanced by the opportunities they had taken advantage of and the activities in which they had participated.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When tackling a graduate thesis there are many paths a student can take. There are seemingly endless topics to address, the decision of taking a qualitative or quantitative approach, selecting a committee, and finally executing the actual writing of the thesis. For myself, many of these decisions were made based on personal connection and past experiences. The topic of this thesis is near and dear to my heart due to my many involvements as an undergraduate student. While the thesis undertaking was a labor of love there have been many people who have guided and supported me from the time the research was a mere idea and have continued to do so through its completion.

From the moment I stepped foot onto my undergraduate campus I was encouraged to get involved in different campus activities. As I moved through my college years I was consistently involved in the National Residence Hall Honorary. This organization and more specifically its two advisors at the time, was one of the most influential aspects of my college career. In a time when I considered leaving the University it was my involvement in that organization and my relationship with the advisors that changed my mind. Those advisors have continued to support and encourage me even through my graduate career. A heartfelt thank you to both of these advisors.

I am grateful for my committee members, Dr. Dena Kniess and Dr. Michael Gillespie, and my thesis chair Dr. Mona Davenport. These individuals have provided me with direction and support when the road seemed rough. It is due to the patience and shared knowledge of these three that I was able to reach the finish line.

Without the four students that agreed to participate in this study there would be no data. I would like to thank these students for sharing their stories for this study. They are all strong students on this campus and have shown what being involved has done for their experience and can do for others. I wish all of them the best of luck in their future endeavors.

Finally, to my closest friends and family, I must thank each of you for your continued support and encouragement. You have inspired me daily and pushed me to keep moving forward. Each have you have provided welcome breaks from research filled with laughter, a shoulder to lean on, and most importantly confidence that I could do it. The most sincere thank you to all who have stuck by me through this entire process.

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## CHAPTER I

### **Introduction**

In recent decades student retention has become an increasingly important topic. Between twenty-eight percent and thirty-one percent of college students drop out during their first year (ACT, 2008; Bozick, 2007). To increase retention, the factors that most influence it must be understood. Research suggests that there are several factors that affect university retention including ability and motivation, transition to the university, campus involvement (out of class activities), and sense of belonging (Ackermann & Morrow, 2012; Alarcon & Edwards, 2012; Brooks 2010; Elkins, 2011; Hunter, 2006). Student involvement is instrumental to student development according to Alexander Astin (1984). Environmental factors also play a large role in students' development and Astin believes that students need to be engaged in their environment in order to continue learning and growing (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). According to research conducted by Astin (1973, 1993), living on campus benefits student engagement (Li, Sheely II, & Whalen, 2005). To promote higher retention rates some institutions are examining different types of incentives that could affect students' enrollment such as mentoring programs, living-learning communities, and out of class curriculum (Barefoot, 2004; Patton, Morelon, Whitehead, & Hossler, 2006). In order to begin increasing retention rates it is crucial to create an environment where students are engaged in the university (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In this study the researcher examined campus involvement in areas such as living in a residence hall, being a member of fraternity and sorority life, employment status, and other out of class activities to determine the

impact they had on a student's perception of sense of belonging to the University. This was then used to determine how campus involvement and sense of belonging impact student persistence.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine if there were specific areas of involvement that affected sense of belonging and persistence at a midsized Midwestern university. Specifically the researcher was interested in examining the involvements of students involved in fraternity and sorority life, that had been employed on campus, and who had lived in a residence hall. Through a qualitative study the researcher gathered narratives from four students, two male and two female, and examined common themes regarding involvement and sense of belonging through the transcription of the interviews. The study was conducted in an effort to assist in future retention efforts. In addition, this study was conducted as a qualitative study in order to provide a deeper, more personal understanding of a topic that is traditionally researched in a quantitative method.

### **Research Questions**

In order to gather more data on what affects university retention this study focused on why students at a midsized Midwestern university in Central Illinois remain enrolled. To determine these factors, the study sought to answer the following questions.

1. How does a student's perception of their involvement affect their relationship to the institution?

2. How do students perceive the type of organizations they are involved in has affected their sense of belonging to the institution?

### **Significance of the Study**

Student retention is an increasingly important issue (Alarcon & Edwards, 2012). There have been multiple theories that have surfaced that explain the relationship between student retention and involvement. Astin (1973, 1993) explains in his research that student involvement increases student engagement, which in turn increases student retention. It has also been shown by Astin (1973, 1993) that on-campus living helps students be more engaged in their academic environments (Li, Sheely II, & Whalen, 2005). It is crucial for students to be engaged in both their academic environment and their social environment (Townsend & Wilson, 2009). Tinto (1993) states that with sufficient academic and social interactions, students will persist (Townsend & Wilson, 2009). In studies conducted by Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) and Tinto (1993) it was found that living in the residence halls significantly increased the rate of persistence and graduation for students (Li, Sheely II, Whalen, 2005).

With research providing evidence that living on campus aids in the success of students, it is important to look at residency requirements and graduation rates. In the current study the institution requires students to live in university housing until they have completed 30 semester hours. Based on the work of Astin (1973, 1993), Tinto (1993), and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), it is crucial for students to become part of their campus community whether this means living on campus or being involved on campus in another way such as joining a fraternity or sorority, joining additional

registered student organizations, or having an on campus job. By understanding what specific areas of involvement are most effective at engaging students, it will be possible to assist institutions in creating programs and initiatives to increase retention rates by focusing on getting students involved in those areas.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were several limitations in this study. The first limitation is that the study was only completed at one institution and therefore the areas of involvement found to be important could be unique to this institution. There is a vast amount of research on retention and it will be difficult to generalize results collected from this study to institutions that do not match the size, location, and makeup of this midsized Midwestern university. The second limitation is that the study only focused on the perceived reasons for retention of four students that have completed 90 or more hours at the institution during the summer. Therefore, the participants were chosen from a small pool of students who were exemplar candidates for the study. The final limitation in this study was the potential for researcher bias. The researcher had a personal investment in the topic based on personal experiences of being involved on campus and therefore identification and interpretation of themes was influenced by the researcher's lens.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Attrition:** The loss of students (Arnold (Ed.), 1999).

**Campus Involvement:** The amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience (Roberts and McNeese).

**Out of Class Experience:** Any extracurricular activities in which a student is participating outside of the classroom including participation in a club or organization, student government, community service, research with a professor, and on-campus employment (Astin, 1984).

**Persistence:** A student's postsecondary education continuation behavior that leads to graduation (Arnold (Ed.), 1999).

**Retention:** A measure of the rate at which students persist in their educational program at an institution, expressed as a percentage (Summerskill, 1962).

**Sense of Belonging:** A subjective sense of affiliation and identification with the university community (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2003).

**Student Engagement:** The time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities (Kuh, 2001, 2003, 2009).

### **Summary**

To further understand what areas of involvement affect student persistence, this study investigated what activities students at a midsized Midwestern institution are involved in and how those affect their sense of belonging. Students with 90 or more hours who had lived in the residence halls, worked on campus, were part of a student organization and were on campus during the summer semester were the focus of the study. By gathering information on what affects persistence at this institution, this study intended to provide ideas of how to continue increasing retention rates.

## CHAPTER II

### **Review of Literature**

To prepare for this study, the researcher examined previous research on student retention and student involvement. In this section literature pertaining to research conducted on the effects of campus involvement, importance of sense of belonging, participation in fraternity and sorority life, living in university housing, and employment status was examined. The researcher used the existing research to build the current study.

#### **Campus Involvement**

In the 1990s the American College Personnel Association (1994), Kuh (1996, 2003), and MacGreggor (1991) stressed that higher levels of student learning and personal development were achieved through participation in purposeful activities both inside and outside of the classroom (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). The researchers wanted to examine the relationships between students' participation in out-of-class activities and the students' academic performance, educationally productive activities, perceptions of their degree, personal and social development, and also what types of students were most likely to participate in these activities. Data for this study was collected using existing data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which consisted of a sample of 80,479 first year and senior students from 365 four-year institutions that participated in the NSSE study. Zhao and Kuh (2004) chose 47 items from the larger survey to gauge campus environment, student engagement, and self-reported learning outcomes.

Buesseri, et al. (2011) found that a variety and breadth of campus involvement was a key factor in student adjustment and has potential to increase retention.

Research has shown that the more involved students are on campus, the more likely they are to remain at school (Brooks, 2010). Busseri, et al. (2011) also proposed that a variety of involvement and being heavily involved provided positive development in transitioning to the university. In the study the researchers tested this by surveying students at six Canadian universities. It was found that increased levels of involvement over time were related to positive psychological, interpersonal, and academic functioning. In a prior Canadian study it was found that participating in highly structured activities that provides students with enriching, high quality experiences provide a smoother transition experience (Tieu, et al. 2010). In addition, the responsibility to help students succeed is no longer divided between Student Affairs professionals and the faculty. A document, *Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience*, was released by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) calling for academic and student affairs departments to collaborate to ensure the development of the whole student rather than the academic piece or the social piece individually (Keeling, 2004). Student Affairs professionals and faculty are working together to create well-rounded students that are integrated into the university community (Brooks, 2010; Hunter, 2006). Based on this research, getting involved helped students adjust to college life and successful adjustment increases retention (Busseri, et al., 2011).



George Kuh (1995) stated that participation in extracurricular activities and living in a residence hall have been positively linked to both persistence and satisfaction within their institution. A few examples of out-of-class activities described are volunteerism, student government, and on campus jobs. Events that promote diversity and athletic events, both organized and intramural, were areas of involvement that have also been found to promote student satisfaction (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Unfortunately except for a small number of single-institution studies there was little conclusive research on which out-of-class activities have the greatest impact on students (Kuh, 1995). Based on additional previous research from Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) “not all students benefit equally from the same experience” (p. 634). Although students will not all have the same experience, students who were connected and were involved with their institutions were more likely to persist (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). It is clear that out-of-class activities influence the college experience and can be the most significant educational experience for some students (Kuh, 1995).

### **Sense of Belonging**

Failure to feel connected to the campus is a reason often stated for a student’s choice to leave a university (Barefoot, 2004). Feeling connected and part of the campus environment has been strongly related to retention (Astin, 1984; Beil, Reisen, Zea, & Caplan, 1999; Cadet, 2008; Milem & Berger, 1997; Mutter, 1992 as cited in Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). Sense of belonging can mean being connected to the university itself or to the relationships formed with the people at the university. Thornton and Jaeger (2007) found that rituals and ceremonies of a campus can have

an impact on student learning. The more connected the student is to the university, the more invested they will be in their education.

The concept of community building has been one of the most elusive goals in higher education but also one of the longest lasting (Wiley, 2002). Elkins and Noel-Elkins (2011) conducted a study to examine how out-of-class activities influenced students' perceived sense of community on campus. In this study 330 respondents completed an online survey examining how involvement in out-of-class activities influenced students' perceived sense of campus community. The research was based on factors that contributed to sense of community including teaching and learning, residential experience, diversity and acceptance, history and tradition, loneliness and stress, and socialization across backgrounds. Based on the research, overall, students who ranked as moderately or highly involved in student activities perceived a greater sense of community (Elkins & Noel-Elkins, 2011). Cheng (2004) published a study examining students' perceptions of campus community. In this study 1,457 first-year, sophomore, and junior students were surveyed in order to better understand students' experiences at a particular institution by examining their level of satisfaction and attitudes towards issues revolving around community. The study found that students' sense of community was strongly associated with feelings of being cared about, treated in a caring way, valued as an individual and accepted as part of the community. The most negative influence on sense of campus community came from feelings of loneliness. It has been stated that student affairs professionals should aim to build a community that has an open environment, engages faculty and students, provides active social and learning environments in the residence halls, fosters

positive relationships, and provides assistance for students when they are in need (Cheng, 2004).

### **Fraternity and Sorority Life**

When walking onto a college campus Fraternity and Sorority Life can receive mixed reviews on whether or not it is a positive entity. There are many positive benefits to being involved in Fraternity and Sorority Life. Not only are 85% of Fortune 500 executives part of Fraternity and Sorority Life but so was the first female senator (Glass, 2012). From an academic perspective, graduation rates are 20% higher among students involved in Greek life than those outside (Glass, 2012). Another significant benefit to being involved in Greek life is being given the opportunity to develop strong leadership skills. In Greek organizations, students are given the opportunity to serve on committees or serve as officers within their chapter. In these roles, there are certain irreplaceable skills that are learned such as being able to run an effective meeting, speak in public, manage a budget, and motivate others (*“Advantages of going,” 2013*). All of these skills are useful and necessary once students enter life after college.

In addition, a study was conducted at Duke University in 2012 to examine Greek life at Duke and how it relates to students' confidence, belongingness, sexual assault, and gender relations (Greek Culture Initiative, 2013). The survey was distributed to roughly 4500 undergraduate students between the spring and fall of 2012 with a total of 636 responses collected. The results of the study found that students who are affiliated with a Greek organization believed they were more likely to pursue leadership opportunities (Stiehm, 2013). Students that participated in the

study who were involved in Greek life are more likely to feel that they belonged on campus than non-Greek students (Steihm, 2013). The study reported that 82% of Greeks felt they belonged to the university in opposition to 67% of students in a Selective Living Group and 64% of independent students (Steihm, 2013). Although the findings in the study were specific to Duke University, it found that many of the findings were consistent with national findings from similar studies (Greek Culture Initiative, 2013).

### **Living on Campus**

Based on research conducted at Iowa State University, students who lived on campus had higher graduation rates than their peers who chose to live off campus (Coppock, 2011). In a press release from Iowa State University, the University stated that students are 25 percent more likely to graduate if they have lived on campus for at least two years (Residence Hall Living, 2006). Often students who live in the residence hall become acclimated to the university at a faster rate and therefore are more engaged both personally and academically (Coppock, 2011). At the University of Central Florida the Department of Housing and Dining saw retention of first year students increase to 88.96 percent in the 2011-2012 school year (Moses, 2013).

Living on campus provides an opportunity for students to participate in learning and social activities that reach far beyond the classroom (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Cross (1998) stated, "learning communities operationalize a constructivist approach to knowledge whereby knowledge is not simply discovered but is socially constructed." Living learning communities more specifically provide students an environment that is focused on academic success but that also allows them to

discover their voice and develop their identity. These communities also allow students to integrate academics into their larger worldview and social experiences (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). In the study conducted by Zhao and Kuh (2004) which was comprised of a sample of 80,479 first year and senior students from 365 four-year institutions that participated in the NSSE study, it was found that students who belonged to learning communities were more positive about the support received from their institution regarding their academic and social needs. These students were also more satisfied with their overall college experience (Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

### **Employment**

In 1999, Edie Harding and Laura Harmon published the results of a study conducted in the state of Washington examining the role of employment in undergraduate students. One main component of the study was measuring the impact of work on the students' performance. The researchers wanted to know if there was a relationship between the number of hours a student worked and their persistence at the institution. They also wanted to determine if there was a relationship between the number of hours a student worked and their grade point average. Data was retrieved from four databases based on four groups including four-year higher education institutions, the Washington State Employment Security Department, the Higher Education Coordinating Board, and the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges. There were approximately 135,583 students involved in the study from research, comprehensive, and private four-year institutions. Results showed that 69% of students at Washington institutions were employed off campus in the fall and winter of 1997 and of these students 17% worked full-time. In this study there was no

significant difference found in persistence of students enrolled at four-year institutions who worked versus students who did not work. There was also no significant difference found in the number of hours a student worked and their grade point average (Harding & Harmon, 1999).

In 2006 a study conducted by Tracy Kulm and Sheran Cramer the researchers examined the relationships of college student employment and its effect on student life. In the study Kulm and Cramer surveyed nearly 500 19-24 year olds at a mid-western university to explore the relationship between student employment and their role as a student (defined as grade point average), family relationships, social interactions, and persistence. In this particular study 69% of respondents lived off-campus while only 19.6% lived on-campus. Of the respondents 55% worked an average of 15.6 hours on-campus and 70% worked off-campus with an average of 20.3 hours. The findings of the study showed that the higher the number of hours worked, the more employment interfered with study making it difficult for those students to find time to do everything required and expected of them as students. When it came to the relationship between student employment and family relationships there was no significant correlation. The next factor examined was the effect employment had on social interactions. There were three main findings under this category. Student employment provided more opportunities for students to have social interactions beyond class but the higher the amount of hours worked, the less students participated in extra-curricular activities, and finally the more hours a student worked the less the student reported enjoying socializing and having a social life. The last factor in the study was the effect student employment had on student persistence.

It was found in this study that with an increased number of hours worked, persistence toward a degree also increased.

### **Summary**

Based on previously completed research it is clear that several factors have influenced student persistence. Ability and motivation, campus involvement, and a sense of belonging have all proven to affect student retention. By understanding factors that have already been found to affect retention, the researcher was able to better examine what factors could influence retention at this midsized Midwestern university. Through gathering narratives from students who were involved on campus, the following research provides knowledge on what is influencing students to remain enrolled. This information could in turn help the university to increase retention in the future by tailoring programs to student needs.

## CHAPTER III

### **Methods**

#### **Design of Study**

This study was designed to determine if there are areas of involvement that have greater influence on a student's decision to remain enrolled at a midsized Midwestern university in Central Illinois. In order to gain perspective on what areas of out-of-class involvement foster student persistence, the researcher conducted interviews with undergraduate students who were involved in activities outside of the classroom. A qualitative approach was taken to better understand what influences student persistence. In order to gain a sample of students who represented different areas of involvement such as fraternity and sorority involvement, campus employment, or living on campus, the researcher contacted supervisors and advisors of students who were on campus through the summer semester. The template for communication with the supervisors will be provided in Appendix A. After identifying potential participants the researcher contacted each student via email (Appendix B) and requested a forty-five-minute interview to discuss their out-of-class involvements and how those impacted their experiences in college.

#### **Participants**

The participants in this study consisted of a purposive sample of four undergraduate students selected from a mid-sized, public, comprehensive institution in the Midwest. The researcher chose participants that participated in fraternity and sorority life, had been employed on campus, or had lived in university housing.



Because of the limited sample of students remaining for the summer semester, some participants belonged to more than one of the categories listed.

In order to keep the participants' identity confidential, each chose a pseudonym to be known by in this study. The following is a description of each participant, labeled by his or her pseudonym.

*Alex.* Alex is a female student with senior standing. She lived in an off-campus apartment for the last academic year and will continue to live off-campus in the next academic year. She lived on-campus for two years prior to moving off campus.

*LC.* LC is a male student with senior standing. He was a Resident Assistant in the last academic year and will return to the position in the upcoming academic year. He will have lived on campus all four years of college.

*Tabitha.* Tabitha is a female student with senior standing. She was a Resident Assistant in the last academic year but will be moving to an off-campus apartment for the next academic year. She lived on-campus for her first three years of college.

*Tommy.* Tommy is a male student with senior standing. He transferred to the institution at the beginning of the second semester of his first year. In the last academic year he was in an off-campus apartment but will be living in an on-campus fraternity house in the upcoming academic year.

### **Research Site**

The proposed study took place at a midsized Midwestern university with approximately 8500 undergraduate students. In the fall of 2013 this institution had a population of 8,349 undergraduate students with the following demographics: 17

(0.20%) Native American/Native Alaskan, 68 (0.81%) Asian, 1,494 (17.89%) Black/African American, 407(4.88%) Hispanic, 5 (0.06%) Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 5,884 70.48%) White/Caucasian, 154 (1.85%) Multiple ethnicities, 249 (2.98%) unreported, and 71 (0.85%) international. The institution contains four colleges, which are the College of Arts and Humanities, the College of Business and Applied Sciences, the College of Education and Professional Studies, and the College of Sciences. There is a one-year residency requirement in which all students are required to live in an on-campus facility for at least one year. The institution provides over 200 social, religious, academic, service, and athletic registered student organizations. These include but are not limited to student government, a programming board, pre-professional organizations, and fraternity and sorority chapters from the Panhellenic Council, the Interfraternity Council, and the National Panhellenic Council.

### **Data Collection**

Each participant met with the researcher for a forty-five-minute interview to discuss his or her participation in out-of-class activities and the effect this participation had on the student's persistence at the University. Interviews were conducted in a meeting room located in the student union during the summer of 2014. A list of questions regarding what activities students participate in, the number of hours they spend involved in these, and how this impacts their sense of connectedness to the University was utilized to guide the interview and answer the proposed research questions (Appendix C). At the beginning of each interview participants were reminded of the purpose of the study and also that their identity would remain

confidential. A pseudonym was used to provide anonymity. Participants were also notified that the interviews were going to be recorded in order to create a transcript for the researcher to analyze upon completion of all interviews. Although there was minimal perceived risk for any psychological distress by providing answers to the interview questions, participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and if he or she so chose to, he or she could skip questions or discontinue participation in the study.

### **Data Analysis**

After transcribing each interview, the researcher analyzed the transcriptions to find trends and patterns that presented themselves throughout the study. From the interview transcripts prevalent patterns were gathered and grouped together. These common themes were then connected to the research questions the researcher was trying to answer. The researcher used a coding process outlined in *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory* (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). The researcher used Substantive Coding, which includes both open coding and selective coding. Data was analyzed using open coding first where the researcher identified codes and themes in the data. The data was then analyzed again using selective coding, identifying important and recurring themes within. Three main themes emerged from the coding process, which were importance of involvement, connectedness to the university, and employment.

### **Role of Researcher**

The researcher for this study acted as an instrument for both data collection and data analysis through facilitation of interviews and transcription of the data. At

the time of the study I was a graduate student in the College Student Affairs program serving a graduate assistantship in the Housing and Dining department while also acting as a co-advisor for the Residence Hall Association (RHA) for one year.

In addition I had a personal investment in the research. The topic of research was chosen to investigate if there were students with stories similar to my own. At the beginning of college I became involved in hall council but due to personal circumstances considered transferring institutions between the first and second years of college. It was the responsibility and the connections found through this involvement that ultimately kept me enrolled in the university. The realization that it was that involvement in hall council that kept me at the institution spurred my decision to become more heavily involved in the institution and take on leadership roles within different organizations. These involvements provided me with a sense of belonging to the institution and made it feel like home. My personal experience combined with the research of Astin (1984), Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005), and Kuh (1995) sparked a passion for investigating student persistence and determining if there were specific areas of involvement that would influence that persistence and through these experiences the study was built.

### **Summary**

A qualitative study was conducted using four participants that were involved on campus throughout college and were active on campus at the time of the study. The goal was to use the data to determine if students' campus involvement and sense of belonging at the institution affected their persistence at the University. The study examined if there were certain areas that were more influential in retaining students.

The methodology utilized was designed to gain a deeper understanding of students' experiences through narratives they provided and build on other quantitative studies previously completed. At the completion of the study the goal was to be able to provide recommendations on how to best increase student involvement and increase student retention rates.

## CHAPTER IV

### Results

This study was designed to determine if there are certain areas of involvement that are more likely to impact a student's sense of belonging to the university and therefore their persistence to graduation. Data were collected through conducting forty-five minute face-to-face interviews with four participants, gaining insight into their experiences at a midsized Midwestern institution. Upon completion of the interviews and transcription the researcher was able to analyze and identify three significant themes. There were two research questions guiding the study which were as follows:

1. How does a student's perception of their involvement affect their sense of belonging to the university?
2. How do students perceive the type of organization they are involved in has affected their sense of belonging to the institution?

Through analysis of each interview several significant themes were identified and organized into three larger categories, which were importance of involvement, connectedness to the university, and employment. The following provides an overview of those themes in order to provide insight into the experiences of students' out-of-class activities.

#### **Importance of Involvement**

At the start of each interview participants were asked to share what organizations they had been involved in throughout their time at the institution and how their overall experience had been at the university. Throughout the interview

participants were asked to share how they had enjoyed their time at the institution and how their involvements had shaped their experience. Through discussing each participants experience and different involvements the following themes emerged:

- *Importance of experience*, which summarizes how influential each participant's involvement was to them;
- *Reasons for getting involved*, which explores participants' motives for becoming involved;
- *Self-realization/growth*, which explores moments in which their experiences had influenced positive movement;
- *Enjoyment out of class*, which examines how each involvement affected the participants' experience at the institution.

#### *Importance of Experience*

As each interview continued the importance of each participant's involvements became clear. All four participants agreed that the organizations he or she had been involved in were vital to his or her experience. Tommy felt his involvements were so important he said, "I think if I wouldn't have gotten involved I wouldn't be here first of all. I think I would have ended up transferring." At different points in each interview the participants all stated that had they not gotten involved in one or more organizations they would have most likely only gone to class and then spent time in their rooms alone. One participant, LC, had this to say about the importance of being involved. He said "I can definitely tell from people that aren't really as involved or people that just kind of go day by day just going to classes and doing their own thing aren't...as happy as students that have gotten involved and

have gotten to know professors and other students and staff members.” An argument could be made that students who are not involved do not know what they are lacking. Each of the four participants in this study, however, self-reported that his or her experience was improved by being part of a group outside of the classroom. In addition he or she perceived those experiences to be crucial to the time spent at the institution.

#### *Reasons for Getting Involved*

Through describing which organizations each participant was a part of and providing a summary of his or her overall experience several reasons for getting involved came to light. Three of the four participants explained that they had been active in extra-curricular activities in high school and that was a large motivator to become involved in college. Alex was not active a great deal her freshman year but she soon missed it and said, “I was involved in a lot in high school. I was president of clubs and organizations and I was captain of things and I was like, I miss that, I want to get more involved” and used that as encouragement to find extra-curricular involvement in college.

Each of the four participants, though driven mostly by previous participation in extra-curricular activities, had individual reasons for initially getting involved. Tommy had transferred to this institution after not feeling fulfilled at a previous institution. At the urging of his orientation leader he pursued several student groups that aligned with his interests. Due to his experience at the first institution Tommy explained his decision to experiment with multiple organizations by saying, “...I decided, you know what I want to do something different and I want to actually get



involved...” Tabitha wanted to “try something new” that she had not done before but was also motivated by the idea that certain organizations would look good on her resume. Despite the reason for first getting involved participants soon found their involvement having a larger impact on their experience than expected.

### *Self-realization/Growth*

When asked to describe his or her overall experience at the current institution three of the four participants described a specific moment of clarity in the growth those involvements had facilitated for that person. Participants provided explanation as to why they became involved in specific organizations. While providing his reasoning, LC said, “I think throughout all of them, it was just the chance to better myself as a person and as a leader and to enable myself to be a better professional in the future.” The recognition of the potential gains being involved provided LC the knowledge and drive to become active in as many activities as he could handle in order to find what suited him best.

Tabitha had a similar realization but her experience included her decision to first be involved in activities that were geared toward her major more than her interests. She initially joined groups that complimented her major at the time but quickly realized neither was for her. After joining hall council and later being hired as a Resident Assistant, Tabitha realized she enjoyed these activities more and became involved in additional organizations that aligned with her interest in Residence Life and helping people. Tabitha said, “I realized being around these people and like working and just doing something that I enjoyed doing made me grow and change.” Once she had found her niche, her experiences showed her the growth she had

experienced since she had begun college. She goes on to say, “It connected me with people but it also helped me change as a person.”

Tommy also believed his experiences helped him grow as a person. Multiple times throughout his interview Tommy discussed how his involvement in both a fraternity and in an on campus job helped him break free of his comfort zone. The first occurred while explaining how important his involvements had been to his experience at the institution. Tommy said, “...Taking that step to go out of my comfort zone and actually go Greek and do something that I thought wasn’t for me.” He explains that this was a big undertaking for him. He goes on to explain that without having taken that step and getting involved in his fraternity he would not feel as confident in himself and would not be as comfortable.

Alex realized that her involvements were preparing her for life after college. While working for the school newspaper Alex had others relying on her, she had to work with deadlines, and was working with a professor acting as a boss. Through this she was able to have hands on experience that will benefit her in the future. She expressed the importance of this by saying, “You have to jump out there and get your hands dirty.” She goes on to explain that in that experience “You’re faced with life lessons that you’re going to be faced with at your job” and that is why it was so impactful for her. It is the opportunity and pursuit of involvement that provided these participants the ability to see growth in themselves throughout their college experience.

*Enjoyment Out of Class*

Enjoyment is perceived as one of the top, if not the most important quality students look for in a college experience. They want to enjoy the years they spend at an institution as much as they want the degree. All four of the participants were asked how well they have enjoyed their overall experience at their current institution. Each of the four participants said that they had enjoyed their experience and the interviews showed that being involved in out-of-class activities enhanced their experience. Alex said, "I have loved my experience here and I think all those things made it so much better...When I look back when I'm forty I'm going to be like...you did so much and it was great." In a similar thought Tabitha attributed her enjoyment of her experience to her professors, the people she had met, and the activities she had participated in. It is due to the organizations and activities each participant is part of that they feel they have had a better college experience.

### **Connectedness to the University**

The second category that emerged from the data was associated with the relationships gained and lost with peers and the participant relationship with the institution as a whole. Throughout the interviews participants were asked about how they perceived their involvements affected relationships with their peers and also how these affected how they felt about the institution. The following two themes appeared in the data:

- *Relationships*, which summarizes bonds formed and broken because of involvement;
- *Connectedness/Pride*, which explores the participants' relationship with the institution.

*Relationships*

In sharing their experiences at the current institution each of the four participants discussed the relationships they had gained and lost throughout their college years. All four of the participants expressed that getting involved helped them meet new people on campus. Tabitha admitted that she does not often go out of her way to talk to other students in her class, however the organizations she was involved in helped her meet people that were also in her classes, which improved her classroom experience. She said, "I think it definitely has facilitated me meeting people and it has been very beneficial because I've actually met some of the people in my classes through the organizations I'm in and then I know them before that class...I think it's helpful."

Both LC and Tommy have met who they consider to be their best friends through their involvements. LC said that all of his closest friends are fellow Resident Assistants and that he met them through holding that position. Tommy attributes his close friendships to the fraternity he is involved in. He said, "Being in a fraternity you get a bond that's really hard to get because you're living together, you're sleeping together, you're eating together, you compete together, you do everything." He goes on to express the importance and correlation of his relationships and his being involved by saying, "I think at the same time though I wouldn't have made any of the relationships or any of the friendships or met any of these people if it wasn't for getting involved."

In sharing their experiences the four participants explained that not all relationship experiences had been positive. Each expressed that relationships with

friends and family who were not on campus were often strained or had changed over time. Alex shared that even her relationship with her roommate had become strained. They were roommates their freshman year and continued living together throughout the following years. Both women are busy with their own involvements however and have had to adjust to having to work harder to maintain the relationship.

Although the initial reaction to changing relationships was negative participants recognized that their involvements had allowed them to grow and develop and the change in relationships was merely a result of that. Tabitha had the most significant insight into her changing relationships. In regard to friendships prior to college being altered she said:

I feel like it's not having the time because I mean my friends back home they work and go to school too. So sometimes we're just not free at the same time.

Then also it's like, I feel like it's a little bit of disconnect because I am kind of a different person or I have a different niche here compared to how I am at home.

Tabitha felt as though her experiences introduced her to what she is actually interested in and a different aspect of herself. She goes on to express that by saying, "I feel like if I wasn't like meeting these people then I feel like I wouldn't be growing or opening my eyes or making these connections." Through each participants' involvements they had experienced both new relationships and loss of old relationships. The overwhelming feeling though was that being involved had facilitated positive new relationships and growth.

*Connectedness/Pride*

In discussing how connected each participant felt to the University, all four attributed their sense of pride to their involvements. Though they are all involved in numerous different activities and groups, each of them felt that the opportunities their involvements had given them made them truly part of their institution. LC was very excited about the opportunities he had been given at this institution and in his words he said, "I've got all types of [school] pride!" He went on to say that he was a "professional student" and it would be weird for him to leave the institution. The institution had become a home for LC and he said that when he talks about the institution he says he is "coming home." Based on his own experiences, LC being involved in many different areas and truly feeling as if he belonged to the institution, he recognized the importance of connecting to the institution and said, "I think the best way for students to feel connected to the institution is to get involved in something that will make the institution feel like home."

Alex had similar pride for the institution. Through her involvements Alex had the opportunity on several occasions to work and interact with high-level officials of the University and being able to have that personal contact with such important people provided an immense sense of pride for the institution. She was able to provide input on multiple campus-wide projects and in the midst of sitting at a table working with administrators it provided an epiphany and Alex said with a large smile on her face, "I was [the institution] right then."

### **Employment**

Throughout discussion of their experiences, each of the four participants explained to varying degrees that they took advantage of employment opportunities

out of need, not simply desire. Several themes emerged while discussing employment:

- *Importance of employment*, which summarizes the need for employment;
- *Connectedness*, which explores the participants' relationship with the institution.

#### *Importance of Employment*

All four participants had taken advantage of employment opportunities both on and off campus throughout their years at the institution. LC and Tabitha were both Resident Assistants for at least two years while Tommy and Alex both held multiple jobs at a time. Tommy worked for an overnight security program while also working for Wal-Mart and Alex worked in the Admissions Office, for the school newspaper, as well as in several other offices throughout campus.

Though each participant cited varying levels of need for employment, all four stated that they had a job for a reason. The most significant participant was Alex. She was hesitant to share in the beginning but opened up about her need to hold several jobs throughout her college career. Her story started when she moved out on her own in high school and was classified as a homeless student. She had to work to subsist through high school and when she came to college it was even more important for her to have a job. Alex immediately found employment through a hometown friend when she stepped onto campus and from that point added several other jobs to supplement her financial aid.

Tommy, LC, and Tabitha all stated that they had assistance paying for college but that they were responsible for a portion or were at least doing their part to help

their parents. Tommy was the most vocal after Alex about his need for employment. He stated, "I'm one of those students that actually pays for some of their stuff" while discussing the many different positions he had held while attending the institution. His parents had several children in college at the time and therefore Tommy and his siblings became responsible for paying their own tuition and additional costs while their parents paid for housing. For Tommy this did not seem unreasonable. He was willing to work in order to assist his family and decided on his own to begin working a second job in order to be able to provide spending money for himself.

### *Connectedness*

Despite citing necessity as the reason for becoming employed while in college, participants found that through their employment opportunities they became more connected to the University. The positions they chose to hold became more than simply a means to make money. Tabitha, who was employed as a Resident Assistant did not expect to have the experience that she did. She applied in order to have an income but found much more. After holding the position she realized that the job provided her more than its monetary value. She elaborates on this by saying:

I became an RA but didn't think it was going to have the impact on me, like I just wasn't prepared. I thought this is just a job I'm going to do. I didn't think about the connections I was going to make with people or my residents or my co-workers or anybody like that.

Initially the idea of having a job drew Tabitha to the position. In the end though when discussing necessity over experience Tabitha said, "I'd say it was like 50/50 or maybe 75/25 but I think the experience would be more if that makes sense," with the



connections made and the experiences gained outweighing the need for income. Each of the other participants described similar experiences. The baseline need for a job eventually took a backseat to the development of self and the connections made with the institution.

### **Summary**

Through analysis of the participant's narratives related to out-of-class activities and experiences, the researcher was able to gain better insight into benefits seen by these students from being involved on campus. The four participants acknowledged that their experience was enhanced due to the involvements in activities they participated in. Chapter Five will discuss how the findings of this study can influence future research for student affairs professionals and provide recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER V

**Discussion**

This study was designed to determine if there are areas of involvement that have greater influence on a student's decision to remain enrolled at a midsized Midwestern university in Central Illinois. This chapter will discuss how the findings relate to previous research on student involvement and retention. In addition, the chapter will provide recommendations for student affairs professionals on how to assist in overall university efforts to increase retention, as well as include suggestions for future research.

**Significance of Findings***Importance of Involvement*

Based on Alexander Astin's Theory of Involvement (1984) it is imperative in student development for students to be involved on campus and to learn more in college. In a study conducted at six Canadian Universities investigating the relationship between involvement and transition to college, Busseri, et al. (2011) found that higher levels of involvement were linked to positive psychological, interpersonal, and academic functioning aligning with Astin's theory that involvement improves student development and learning. Following Astin's lead, Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005) discuss that what a student does during college could be more influential in their learning and persistence than who they are or what institution they attend. In this study participants shared experiences that reinforce the idea that campus involvement plays a crucial role in the decision of many students to persist through college. While discussing her time at the institution Tabitha recalled a

time when she was considering transferring to a different institution but had this to say about her decision:

“Then that was the year that I got super involved. I enjoyed my job and I guess that was a defining moment because it just turned things around and I think, I honestly don’t think I would be here if it weren’t for the organizations and the extra things I did...I feel like if I would have left, I already had leadership responsibilities and people looked up to me and were like counting on me to fulfill that leadership role the next year. Then like the connections I made with people, I realized I would have to go back and start all over again.”

For Tabitha being involved not only kept her at the institution but it gave her a sense of responsibility and the positions she held were important enough to her that she felt as if she would be letting people down by stepping down. Barefoot (2004) stated that a failure to feel connected to an institution often influences a student’s decision to remain enrolled at the school. It was the beginning threads of connectedness that pushed Tabitha to return for another year.

When asked how important participants felt their out-of-class activities had been to their experience in college, all four explained that those involvements had been essential to their time at the institution. Alex described her opportunities as “vital” stating that they provided her with life lessons that will prepare her for her future career. In discussing his experience Tommy said his involvement had been “extremely important” and attributed his persistence to his involvements and more specifically his fraternity by saying “I think every day, if I didn’t join this fraternity, if I joined a different one or if I didn’t go Greek at all, like how different would my

life be...The fraternity overall has had a huge impact on my life.” He went on to explain that the majority of his other involvements came through opportunities and connections provided to him by the fraternity. Though the fraternity was overall the most impactful for Tommy and opened multiple doors for him, he explains that all of his involvements were significant and developmental in his time at the institution. He begins by describing how his latest on-campus job influenced him by saying, “I felt a lot more comfortable confronting situations and just going out of my comfort zone and just being a role model and leader to people.” Tommy goes on to qualify the importance of his opportunities, saying:

“It really helped me step up and that’s been through all my leadership experience. I’ve been on multiple executive boards, I’ve been in multiple leadership positions and all of them have literally just helped me keep on growing and be more confident in myself. I came into college with a lot of insecurities, a lot of I won’t be able to do this, I won’t be able to do that, but I feel like I’ve made a complete 180 by the end, towards the end of my career here. I feel like I’m a lot more prepared for life after college and I’m like ready for a lot more stuff than most people are.”

By all four of the participants reporting that their involvement was crucial to their overall experience, it confirms Kuh’s (1995) statement that out-of-class activities can be the most significant educational experience for some students. In addition, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) stated that not every student will benefit the same way from the same experience but those students that feel a sense of belonging are more likely to remain at the institution. Although there was overlapping of

involvements between the participants, each had a unique and impactful experience based on those involvements.

*Connectedness to the University*

McLean et al (1999) reported that a sense of connectedness could be the deciding factor on a student's decision to remain at any given institution. Cheng (2004) found that students' sense of belonging was closely tied to feeling like they had been accepted as part of the community. All four participants discussed how their different involvements made them feel as if they were truly part of the current institution and provided a sense of connectedness to the school.

Tommy had previously attended a different institution but did not enjoy the experience and did not feel part of the institution, which prompted his decision to transfer to the current institution. When discussing his experience at his first college versus his current experience Tommy said, "I think if I just went, I would consider myself in my old school before here, I would consider myself probably like [a] shirt wearer. I was there but I never considered myself part of it...I never said I am part of this school. I just said I just live on that campus and I go to classes but I never felt anything from it." His lack of involvement and connectedness to the institution caused him to choose to seek out a better experience elsewhere, falling in line with the approximately 22% of first year students that do not return for a second year (ACT, 2011). It is crucial to create an environment within the university that is caring, supportive and welcoming in order to create a sense of belonging (O'Keefe, 2013). Tommy did not experience this at his first college but explained that his experience was different from day one at this institution. He transferred to the current

institution for the spring semester of his first year of college and explained that even from his orientation day there were people trying to get him involved. While describing his first few weeks at the current institution after transferring Tommy said:

“Then I came [here] and I actually had a lot of the leaders on my orientation day...telling me like, oh you’re interested in this, oh you should get involved and I’m like okay you’re just saying that but it’s probably going to be really hard. I had people, like I remember [one leader] she told me that she had a lot of the same interests...and she told me how she did it.”

Though he was skeptical of the actual ability to get involved at first he had an orientation leader that showed him it was feasible by explaining her own interests and involvements and it encouraged Tommy to try. It was because of this initial interaction combined with a desire to find connections at the institution that got Tommy involved, which in turn provided him the connectedness to the institution that he was seeking.

The other three participants also attribute their success and persistence in part to the connections they made at the institution through their involvements. In regard to feeling connected to the university LC said, “I think the people that have made substantial connections and relationships on campus and the people that have made those same types of connections with faculty and staff on campus are the people that...are more connected to [this school].” For him personally LC said, “I think that connectedness with different types of people on campus really created that bond with the institution.” Though LC has deemed the institution a second home because of the connection his involvements have provided him, he had recognized that students who

have not gotten involved have not found the same connection. Multiple times through the interview LC discussed that he feels the best way for students to feel connected to the institution is to take advantage of involvement opportunities and find something that makes it feel like home. Based on his experience LC said, “Once it feels like home they’re here for the long haul.” The experiences of the four participants support a suggestion by Thomas (2000) that students who partake in activities that broaden their social network are more likely to persist than students who only interact with their peers because those involvements provide a larger community and more connection.

### *Employment*

All four participants reported working throughout their college years with two of the four citing financial need as the reasoning for employment. The two remaining participants also cited need but were not actively assisting in the payment of their tuition or fees. When asked about how many hours participants spent working each week, each of the four reported that they spent at least fifteen hours per week doing their job. Smart, Kelley, and Conant (1999) suggested that once students enter college they often spend more time working than studying. Each of the four participants admitted that their academic work on occasion took a secondary position to their employment and other extra curricular activities, however each held their academics as a high priority. Alex, who relied on loans, financial aid, and her employment to pay for college described the largest struggle between her need to work and maintaining her academics. In her junior year she was working at least 20, hours a week at three jobs in addition to her schoolwork and other extracurricular activities.

Having been on her own since high school Alex was no stranger to having to find balance between school and work. Spring semester of her junior year though Alex said that “homework kind of took a hit” because of her academic load combined with work and her other involvements. When discussing that semester Alex described it saying it was “probably my worst semester.”

Though working was a necessity for the four participants, their employment became about more than the financial gain. Even beneath the financial need, the relationships built and lessons learned from working played a part in the persistence of these four participants. The four participants initially sought employment out of need but chose positions that presented them with deeper connections to their peers, the institution, and became instrumental in their experience. Tabitha for example applied to be a Resident Assistant because of the desirable amenities offered but was unaware of the impact it would have on her. In describing an experience that was influential in her experience she discussed the Resident Assistant position. Tabitha said, “I became an RA but I didn’t think it was going to have the impact on me [that it did], like I just wasn’t prepared so I just thought, this is just a job I’m going to do. I didn’t think about the connections I was going to make with people or my residents or my co-workers or anybody like that.” She had been considering transferring to another institution but in discussing the impact of the Resident Assistant position Tabitha said, “...I think that it just completely swayed me, like I should be at [this school] and this is a good place. Instead of going somewhere else I feel like this is home for me as opposed to a year ago when I wasn’t involved. I felt like this was just somewhere I went to school.”



For one participant, Alex, who was more heavily involved in her employment than in a large number of organizations, it was those employment opportunities that provided her the connections to the campus that influenced her persistence. Her employment offered her opportunities to not only work with high-level administrators but to also form connections with her bosses that she felt would continue after their supervision of her. She described her relationship with her co-workers and her bosses saying, "I've definitely gotten to know my bosses and my co-workers a lot more so that's positive. I mean I'm friends outside of work with most of them. If I ever need anything I can be like hey can you cover a shift or hey do you want to go get pizza or something. It just helped." She even goes on to describe her sense of belonging to the campus in relation to her jobs by saying:

"I mean I wish I could do...all of the jobs on campus and literally get everybody's aspect. I really do feel a connection here and you know, I'm going to be one of those alumni that always comes back and I want to be on the alumni board and alumni association...I feel like I could walk anywhere and be like hey you! So, I definitely feel a connection to campus."

Alex was also chosen through her summer employment to be on a poster displaying her love for her school. While discussing her different jobs and involvements at the institution and the impression they left on her Alex said, "I feel like I am that poster, like I am [this school]." Alex was a unique participant in regards to having more jobs than organizations that she was involved in but when discussing her satisfaction with the University based on her different jobs she said, "It was a great opportunity just to meet more people on campus...I met so many people and I learned so much along the

way.” All four participants were able to gain positive experiences through their employment that both increased their connectedness to the university and also fulfilled their financial need.

### **Recommendations**

It is found both in this study and in previous research by Astin (1984), Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005), and Kuh (1995) that getting involved is influential in student persistence. Based on findings that being involved is more likely to encourage persistence in students it is recommended to examine efforts to engage students in the campus environment. To do so, research should be conducted on recruitment efforts of different student organizations. In doing this, institutions will be able to discover what steps need to be taken to better influence student involvement. This will in turn assist in creating programs to improve retention efforts. Another step to be taken in improving retention efforts is to create a task force or committee to examine retention at a given institution. The task force or committee would best serve the institution by being comprised of faculty and staff from multiple areas on campus. Those involved would examine data from the university focusing on graduation rates, retention, campus climate, and student satisfaction. From the findings of this committee, the institution will be able to improve both student experience and retention efforts. This recommendation comes from an existing committee in place at the institution where this study took place.

It is important to educate students on the benefits of becoming involved and engaged in their campus environment. Creating or improving programs that outline the positive impacts of being involved on campus should be implemented for

incoming first-year and transfer students. In coordination with these programs, an overview of the opportunities available to students and the ways in which to become a member or participant should be provided.

Identifying students that are not engaged is also recommended. Finding students that are not involved in any activities and creating programs or providing resources of activities that might interest those students in order to get them involved is important. As student affairs professionals we need to facilitate intentional interaction, be it through reaching out ourselves or through student staff, that determines how to best encourage involvement in students that may be detached.

It is also crucial that student affairs professionals are working together to encourage and support students in their endeavors. It should not be the responsibility of one select office to get students involved. This can be accomplished through each office marketing the opportunities it provides and collaborating across departments by introducing what each has to offer. These collaboration opportunities include inclusion of fraternity and sorority housing options within residence life, creating programs within residence life centered around involvement and employment opportunities on campus, and interaction with faculty through the advising of different organizations. Collaboration between departments will increase knowledge among students and professionals alike. It is also recommended that student affairs professionals collaborate with academic affairs to bridge the gap between academic and non-academic aspects of college. This can be done by creating programs where faculty are seen outside of the classroom, in the residence halls and elsewhere on campus. By combining forces students will be provided a well-rounded experience

where they are able to focus and succeed in both the academic realm and in their personal development.

Based on the results of the study, it is also recommended to examine employment opportunities for students on campus. It was found that employment was a necessity for each of the participants in this study. There was significant financial need for employment for two of the four participants and the other two participants were employed to create income for themselves. Based on financial need of these students it is necessary to examine the number of employment opportunities on campus. It is recommended to create campus jobs either through work-study positions, residence life office, or academic offices in order to ensure there is an opportunity for employment for any student that needs it.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

This study was designed to investigate if there were areas of involvement that could have more influence on a student's decision to persist through college. It was intended to enable student affairs professionals to better assist students in feeling connected to a given institution in hopes of increasing persistence and retention.

Future research should be conducted to better conclude if there are certain recognized organizations or types of organizations that are more effective in fostering a perceived sense of belonging at the institution. To gain insight into this topic it is recommended to conduct a study with a larger sample, including a wider variety of organizations with multiple participants from each type of organization (e.g. a fraternity or sorority, an academic club, social organization, intramural sports, etc.).

Because this study used a purposive sample of students it does not portray the experience or perceived sense of belonging of students who are not involved in any organizations. This study affirmed that students who are involved in one or more organizations on campus feel connected to the institution and this sense of belonging influences their decision to persist. Future research should also include students who are not involved in any student organizations in order to contrast the perceived sense of belonging between the two groups.

Finally, a separate study could be conducted to determine the impact of on-campus employment versus off-campus employment on student persistence. In the current study, on-campus employment was found to have a perceived positive impact on the persistence of the four participants involved. The students that participated in the current study were employed in areas of campus that allowed them the opportunity to work with other students and build connections both with their peers and with the faculty and staff on campus. Determining the impact of each type of employment would create another avenue to explore when determining ways to get students involved on campus.

### **Summary**

The stories and experience of the four participants in this study aligned with prior research that students who are actively involved and engaged on campus are more likely to persist. It is crucial to encourage students to find their passion and get involved in an organization that interests them right away. Three of the four participants expressed that they wished they had gotten involved sooner, with one of those three actually having transferred institutions because of his lack of involvement.

Although only so much can physically be done it is important for student affairs professionals to continue to challenge and support students in their involvements in order to provide the most beneficial and developmental college experience possible.

With the continued study of student involvement and sense of belonging to an institution, student affairs professionals will have the tools to create the best environment for students as they progress through college.

APPENDIX A

Email Template for Supervisors/Advisors of Potential Participants

Greetings,

My name is Abby Ford and I am currently a graduate student in the College Student Affairs program at Eastern Illinois University and am in the process of completing my graduate thesis. I am examining if there are areas of out-of-class activities that are more likely to foster student persistence at the university. I am contacting you to request suggestions of two male and two female students that you believe would be willing and able to provide their experiences of campus involvement for this study.

Upon receiving a list of students, I will contact these students via email and request a forty-five-minute interview with them regarding their involvement on campus.

If you have any questions, please contact me at [alford@eiu.edu](mailto:alford@eiu.edu) or my thesis Chair, Dr. Mona Davenport at [mydavenport@eiu.edu](mailto:mydavenport@eiu.edu).

Looking forward to hearing from you,

Abby Ford  
Night Assistant Coordinator  
Eastern Illinois University



APPENDIX B

Email Template for Participants

Greetings,

My name is Abby Ford and I am currently a graduate student in the College Student Affairs program at Eastern Illinois University and I am in the process of completing my graduate thesis. In my thesis I am conducting research to examine if there are areas of out-of-class involvement that are more likely to foster student persistence. I am requesting your participation in my study by completing a forty-five-minute interview. In this interview you will be asked a series of questions about your experiences being involved in different organizations on campus throughout your time at the institution. Your participation is voluntary and your identity will be kept confidential.

If you are willing to participate, please respond to this email. Upon agreement to participate a time to conduct the interview will be identified.

If you have any questions regarding the study or your participation please contact me at [alford@eiu.edu](mailto:alford@eiu.edu) or my thesis Chair, Dr. Mona Davenport at [mydavenport@eiu.edu](mailto:mydavenport@eiu.edu).

Thank you,

Abby Ford  
Night Assistant Coordinator  
Eastern Illinois University

APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol

## Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your experience here at Eastern.
2. Tell me about the organizations or clubs you have been involved in.
3. What was it about these organizations that made you want to become involved?
4. Could you share about how you decided to get involved?
5. Was there a defining moment?
6. About how many hours per week do you devote to your different involvements?
7. How important has your involvement in these organizations been to you in your time at the institution?
8. What organizations or involvements have been the most impactful in your experience?
9. What if any employment opportunities have you taken advantage of throughout your college years?
10. Could you share about why you decided to become employed?
11. How many hours do you or did you work in a typical week?
12. How do you feel your employment affected your schoolwork?
13. How has your involvement elsewhere affected your schoolwork?
14. How well have you enjoyed your experience at this institution?
15. How do you feel your involvement in out-of-class activities has impacted this?

16. Could you share about how the impact of your involvement has affected your relationships with your peers at the institution?
17. What about your experience here has had the most impact on your decision to remain enrolled at the university?
18. How has your involvement impacted your perception of connectedness to the institution?
19. If you could, would you choose this institution again?
20. What about your experience here influences that decision?
21. Is there anything you would change about your experience?

APPENDIX D

Informed Consent

## CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

### *An Examination of Areas of Involvement That Foster Student Persistence*

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Abby Ford, a graduate student in the College Student Affairs program. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate

You have been asked to participate in this study because you have been identified as an undergraduate student that would be willing to share his or her experiences of your involvement in activities outside of the classroom and how they have impacted your persistence at the university.

- **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to determine if there are specific areas of involvement that can affect sense of belonging and persistence at a midsize Midwestern university.

- **PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

Participate in a 45-minute interview related to your experiences in any out-of-class activities you have been involved in. The interview will be audio recorded and then will then be transcribed. Following transcription, the audio record of the interview will be destroyed. A pseudonym will be assigned to you, and you will have the opportunity to verify it has sufficiently met confidentiality.

- **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

In this study, you will be asked to share about past experiences with different organizations and activities you have been involved in. Recalling such experiences is not predicted to pose any risk of psychological or emotional distress. In the event of any distress however, you have the right to, without consequence, skip any questions and end the interview at any point in time.

In addition, should you experience emotional distress following the conclusion of the interview, the Eastern Illinois University Counseling Center can be accessed via the following contact information:

By phone: (217) 581-3413

In person: The Counseling Center is located on the first floor of the Human Services Building on Eastern Illinois University's campus. Its hours are Monday – Friday from 8:00 am until 4:30 p.m.

- **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

Research indicates that student involvement is impactful in retention of students but there is minimal research conducted on specific areas that have a more significant impact. By participating in this interview, you will have the opportunity to find understanding in how your involvements have impacted your time in college.

Further, this study will provide a better understanding of specific areas that impact a student's sense of belonging and therefore their persistence through college.

- **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of pseudonym assignment within all resulting data and published material. In addition, any audio recordings will be destroyed following transcription. Only the principle investigator will have access to audio recordings, and solely for transcription purposes.

- **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Participation in this research study is voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University or any other organization sponsoring the research project. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled.

There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

- **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact:

Dr. Mona Davenport  
1124 Blair Hall  
[mydavenport@eiu.edu](mailto:mydavenport@eiu.edu)  
217-581-6690

- **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:



Institutional Review Board  
Eastern Illinois University  
600 Lincoln Ave.  
Charleston, IL 61920  
Telephone: (217) 581-8576  
E-mail: eiuirb@www.eiu.edu

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study

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I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I, the undersigned, have defined and fully explained the investigation to the above subject.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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