

Exploring the Factors that Influence Undergraduate Retention: What Do We Need to Know?

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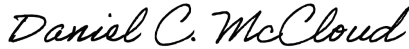
EXPLORING THE FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE UNDERGRADUATE RETENTION:  
WHAT DO WE NEED TO KNOW?

A Scholarly Research Project

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

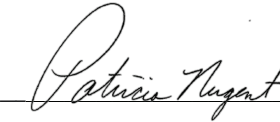
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## ABSTRACT

This study was designed to understand the factors that influenced undergraduate students to return to a midwestern private university for their second year. The study was designed to (1) explore how undergraduate students identify and describe the factors that influenced them to return to the university for their second year, and (2) explore how the factors that influenced students to return to the university for a second year differ by demographic group. The study was guided by two research questions: (1) What factors influenced undergraduate students' decisions to return to the university for a second year? (2) How do the factors that influenced undergraduate students to return to the university for a second year differ by demographic group? This study was unique in that it focused on the whole student experience and the aspects of the institution that influenced their return to the university. The theoretical framework that guided the study was Tinto's (1993) model of student departure. The study was designed as a quantitative study using action research through survey research. The Fall 2021 Retention Survey was administered to students who entered the institution in the Fall 2020 semester and chose to return for their second year in Fall 2021. The results demonstrated that the student's decisions were influenced by academic factors, social factors, and financial factors. There were some differences in how the students described their experiences when the results were reviewed by race/ethnicity, gender identity, first-generation status, college with which they identified, and financial need. Implications for practice include establishing support structures for faculty and staff, such as professional development workshops, and reviewing student financial aid awards.

## DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to my daughter. May you always have the support to follow your dreams and achieve your goals in life.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Introduction

Continued enrollment of undergraduate students from the first year of college to the second year of college is the critical first step toward degree completion. Policymakers, parents, faculty, staff, and administrators pay close attention to institutional retention rates. Accreditors suggest student retention rates should be public information, so that prospective parents and students, as well as members of the public, are aware of this institutional data. Organizations, ranking agencies, and governmental entities collect these data points from institutions annually.

Many theories behind retention initiatives have been developed and researchers have published studies on factors that may impact student retention. However, institutional retention initiatives are often unsystematic, resulting in different experiences for different groups of students (Sweat et al., 2013). The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2022) reports that nationwide, 66.4% of students that entered institutions of higher education in Fall 2020 returned to their starting institution for a second year. The same report also breaks down the Fall 2020 retention numbers by race and ethnicity as follows: 79.7% of Asian students, 68.8% of White students, 61.4% of Latinx students, and 55.2% of Black, and 50.3% of Native American students returned to their starting institution for a second year. The national data begin to demonstrate some differences in undergraduate student retention by demographic group, but without additional data about the students' experiences, it is difficult to know how best to support students.

Institutional data collected at one private midwestern university indicate that first-year to second-year undergraduate retention rates are higher than the national average. Many

institutional initiatives have been implemented to monitor and influence institutional retention rates. However, the institution has not systematically collected data about undergraduate students' decisions to return to the university for a second year. Like the national data, the institutional retention rate data demonstrate that there are differences in undergraduate retention rates by demographic groups.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This study was conducted at a midwestern private university. The undergraduate population is primarily residential, and the majority of students fall into the 18-22-year-old age range. The five-year average first-year to second-year retention rate of this institution is 84.41% (J. Steffen, personal communication, February 6, 2023). Analyzing the factors that influence students to return to the university for a second year and how those factors may differ based on demographic groups will help inform institutional practices. Understanding how students identify and describe the factors that influenced their decisions to return to the university for a second year will help the institution build upon its strengths and recognize areas for improvement. Additional institutional data about the factors that influenced undergraduate students to return to this university for their second year is needed.

### **Literature Review**

This introductory literature review provides an overview of the retention literature to support the need for this study. This initial review focuses on institutional support structures, retention challenges, and institutional culture. An extensive literature review follows in Chapter two.

## **Institutional Culture**

There are several factors that may influence a student's decision to return to their starting institution. In reviewing the literature, many of the studies are conducted within the context of a single institution. When discussing implications for further research, studies encourage institutions to conduct their own analysis in order to understand the factors that are influencing their own students (Craig & Ward, 2008; Mungo, 2017). Each institution has its own culture and its own student population. Understanding how students interact within the institutional structures and among each other is the first step in understanding the factors that influence students' decisions to return to the university.

Kuh (2002) describes the impact of institutional culture through a case study of a single institution. The analysis provides an exploration of institutional culture and defined shibboleths related to institutional culture. In describing the steps institutions can take to act on their own culture, Kuh encourages institutions to comprehensively examine the student experience inside and outside of the classroom to understand how the institutional culture is impacting the student experience. The author concludes by stating, "taken together, a college's cultural elements can influence student satisfaction, achievement, and ultimately whether a student persists and graduates" (Kuh, 2002, p. 37). Understanding an individual institutional culture and how that culture impacts retention is a critical first step in helping students achieve their goals.

In a second study focused on student success, Oseguera (2005) found that the student experience within an institution can vary depending upon the subgroup with which the student identifies. This study was focused on a longitudinal sample of 303 baccalaureate-granting institutions that participated in the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's (CIRP) annual survey administered to first-year students. The research matched students' first-year responses to

the CIRP survey with public Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System's (IPEDS) four and six-year degree attainment data. This was a very robust and detailed study, which was able to break down student information, provided through the CIRP survey, with institution-reported graduation rate data. The study looked at many institutional characteristics and identified aspects of the student experience which may impact student outcomes. In the implications for future research, Oseguera encourages additional studies to consider the institutional environment and the variables that may be at play to impact student success. Building upon this work, institutions need to not only understand their own institutional culture but also further understand how those variables are described by demographic groups.

In their study designed to examine retention and student success at a community college, Craig & Ward (2008) discovered specific institutional data elements that served as predictors for student success. The study was focused on a community college environment and existing institutional data, but the findings and recommendations for future research are relevant for all institutions. In comparing the elements that impacted students at their institution, such as having an above average GPA or having few dropped courses resulting in unearned credits, the researchers discovered that although these factors were significant for their study, other studies had shown different variables to be predictive of student success. The authors indicate that their findings reinforce the notion that institutions need to conduct their own retention analysis to have a firm basis for retention policy and initiatives.

As the studies above indicate, an understanding of institutional culture and the identification of aspects of that particular institution that impact student retention is critical. Students entering an institution may also face individual challenges related to their ability to remain enrolled at the institution in which they started. However, whether or not a student feels

supported in addressing the challenges is a function of institutional culture. The same can be said for institutional structures that may be designed to influence retention. The institutional culture can serve to enhance or detract from support structures that are in place as well.

### **Retention Challenges**

Institutional structures can support students in their decisions to enroll and return to the university, but there are challenges that students face in making their decisions. One such challenge is the ability to finance one's education, which may especially be a challenge for students from underrepresented groups. However, an institution may be able to help students address such challenges by providing financial support structures (Anumba, 2015; Britt et al., 2017). In their peer-reviewed study, which used enrollment and financial data to develop a predictive retention model, Britt et al. (2017) discovered that based on a student's financial information, the institution could predict 84% of the cases where students discontinued their education. The findings demonstrated that students who had taken out an average of \$2,000-\$3,000 in additional student loans during their first two years were more likely to discontinue their education. Along those same lines, students with higher financial stress, which included students' perceptions that they had a high amount of student loan debt, were less likely to remain enrolled.

In a second study conducted by Anumba (2015), students reported that finances were stressful, but institutional structures that were in place to help students in their educational journey helped them feel supported and contributed to their decision to remain at the institution. This study was focused on a small group of African American males who were the first in their families to pursue a college education. In this case, the institutional structures helped them feel supported and made a difference for these students to remain enrolled. It is possible for the



institution to support students and help them address their challenges. In order to understand the needed structures, however, institutions need to understand the experiences and challenges of their own students.

Another challenge students face is their interactions with the institution and how they navigate their feelings of belonging. The experiences that students bring with them as they enroll have an impact on how they fit in or interact with the institution. Loeb & Hurd (2019) attempted to quantify students' Subjective Social Status (SSS), or their perceived standing relative to their peers, through their study. Students that were from historically underrepresented racial or ethnic groups, were first generation, or were Pell Grant Eligible were asked to complete a survey designed to measure their SSS. Students were asked about their perception of their own social status prior to entering the institution and after enrolling at the institution. The results showed that the study participants indicated an average drop in SSS after enrolling at the institution compared to their reported status prior to entering the institution. The study examined other attributes of a student's overall affect and did not find any other indicators of a negative affect; they attributed the change in perception about their social status to the change in environment. The authors note that "while education is considered an essential tool in eliminating inequality, even those underrepresented students who earn acceptance to elite postsecondary institutions struggle to graduate at the same rates as more privileged peers" (Loeb & Hurd, 2019, p. 11).

Although the authors raise an interesting point about students' challenges when enrolling in the institution, a limitation of the Loeb & Hurd study is that they did not collect any data from the majority students. This notion of SSS and belonging within an institution may play an important role in student success and continued enrollment. Without the comparison of majority students, it is hard to know how much institutional context contributes to a change in SSS.

However, knowing that a change did occur, it is important to recognize that as students change environments, their perceptions of themselves have been changing as well.

Continuing to focus on student belonging and engagement within an institution, Samura (2016) notes that there are not many studies that have been conducted about Asian students. In this study, the author discovered that a student's sense of belonging is a continual process of remaking oneself. This peer-reviewed article was based on a case study that explored how Asian American students navigate their college experience. Specifically, the study investigated how the students navigated through the physical and social spaces within their institutions. Interviews and photo journals were used to obtain feedback from the students. The students described how in some instances they felt as if they belonged, but then in other instances they felt "different, judged, and out of place" (Samura, 2016, p.140). The findings of the study described the challenges the students faced and the processes that the students went through to remake themselves, reposition themselves, or remake their space to increase their feelings of belonging. The students described that belonging was not a state to be achieved, but they went through a continual process.

In terms of retention initiatives and identifying why students remain at an institution, Samura's finding that belonging is a continual process is important for institutions to bear in mind. The students described how they felt as if they belonged in some social situations, but not others. In addition, they may feel as if they belong academically, but not socially. This study also speaks to the importance of hearing from students about their experiences. How a student feels they connect with an institution can have an impact on their decision to return. As students navigate institutional structures and figure out how they fit in an institution, the support structures that are in place, their peer interaction, and their academic experiences can impact the

student experience and their connection to the institution. This in turn may impact the student's choice to return to the institution.

Like students and their feelings of belonging, faculty also need to feel supported by the institution. In a study focused on undergraduate research, the researcher examined four paired faculty and student mentoring relationships in chemistry and physics. The students were all students of color, and consistent with the research, the students indicated positive experiences as a result of the relationship in terms of experiential learning, retention, career guidance, and mentoring. However, where this study differed from previous studies, is that it also explored the faculty's perceptions of the experience. The faculty indicated that the emotional, professional, and financial costs overshadowed their satisfaction about the experiences (Schwartz, 2012). This study suggests that additional financial and professional structures may need to come from the institution to address this challenge in supporting the faculty in retention initiatives.

There are many challenges to student retention. Individual student financial situations, students' sense of belonging, and institutional support of retention initiatives are just a few of the challenges to student retention that both students and institutions face. It is important for institutional decision-makers to understand the factors that are influencing students' decisions at their institution to better understand the institutional culture, the challenges that exist, and how those challenges can be addressed to best meet the needs of students and support them toward a successful outcome.

### **Institutional Support Structures**

Many institutional structures have been implemented to support student success. Understanding how those structures may positively influence student retention within an individual institution also assists in understanding how the mechanisms that are in place to

support student success are impactful from the student perspective. Student support services, relationships with faculty and peers, and engagement in High-Impact Practices are three specific examples of institutional structures that may positively impact retention.

In their study focused on at-risk students and retention, Laskey & Hetzel (2011) focused on student record data, a personality inventory, and tutoring visits to try to identify factors that may influence student retention. The study was focused on the students enrolled in their institution's Conditional Acceptance Program (CAP), and they found that the students in the CAP program who received tutoring were more likely to be retained. The influence of tutoring on retention is an important factor for institutions to consider in terms of student success. Understanding how students describe their interactions with academic support staff and the impact of those interactions are important aspects of the student experience.

Some additional factors that can influence student retention are student involvement and student relationships with peers and faculty. In one study, Palmer et al. (2011) explored the academic and social experiences of minority juniors and seniors with a grade point average of 2.5 and above through in-depth interviews and open-ended questionnaires. Students identified the impact of student involvement and relationships with faculty and peers as factors related to their academic success. Although the participants were active in student organizations, the participants of this study desired more cross-cultural engagement.

A second study conducted by Simmons (2019), affirmed involvement in campus organizations and connecting with faculty as two factors influencing retention. This study was conducted with African American males and was designed to understand how they persist within the context of a predominately White institution. Two of the findings indicated that connections

with faculty and participation in ethnic-based organizations assisted students in their decisions to remain at the institution.

These studies were both looking at aspects of the student experience. The groups of students from two institutions had different opinions about the available student groups. In the Palmer study, students desired more cross-cultural engagement, but in the Simmons study, participants affirmed the benefit of ethnic-based organizations. The results of these studies, although focused on small sample sizes within a single institution, support the value of conducting an analysis within an institution. By conducting an institutional analysis, an understanding of the support structures that students view as critical to their success will emerge.

High-Impact Practices (HIPs) are another institutional practice that can positively influence retention. According to the American Association of Colleges & Universities (2008), HIPs are defined as practices that “educational research suggests increase rates of student retention and student engagement” (“High-Impact Educational Practices: A Brief Overview” section). The American Association of Colleges & Universities has outlined and defined eleven practices that are High-Impact. Service-learning is one example of a High-Impact Practice. In a study that used institutional data to assess the use of service-learning in Sociology or English Composition general education courses, the logistic regression model that emerged from the analysis predicted that 47.4% of students who had taken courses with service-learning experiences would graduate. For students without service-learning courses, 34.4% were predicted to graduate. The researchers concluded that service-learning was valuable for this institution (Mungo, 2017). Although the study was conducted within a single institution, the focus was on all students who had entered the institution in Fall 2008 or Fall 2009, so the data were based on a very robust sample.

HIPs may also help students as they engage with an institution. In a study conducted by Sweat et al. (2013), the researchers focused on how HIPs may correlate with a student integrating with the institution. They administered a survey focused on HIPs and cognitive and behavioral aspects of student learning. The authors found that White students were exposed to HIPs more often than minority students, and the authors point out that the incorporation of HIPs in institutions is often unsystematic. The unsystematic implementation leads to unequal opportunities to participate in the HIPs and may contribute to differences in student outcomes.

It is possible that systematic implementation of HIPs could positively impact the success of all students. In the Mungo (2017) study, the focus was specifically on service-learning experiences that were included in general education courses. However, not all general education courses in the institution included service-learning. It is not clear if there were systematic decisions about how the courses were designed to include service-learning opportunities. In the Sweat, et al. (2013) study, it was clear that students from different demographic groups participated in HIPs at different rates. The differences in opportunity to participate in HIPs may contribute to differentiated outcomes. In this current study, the university has implemented a university-wide requirement, which went into effect in Fall 2019, to include specific HIPs within the university's general education program. Data about the impact of this requirement are just starting to be analyzed.

Access to HIPs, faculty mentors, peer support structures, and student support services are all pieces of the institutional support structures that can work together to retain students. Most of these studies were conducted within the context of an individual institution. Therefore, it is important for an individual institution to understand its own culture, the ways in which students feel supported, and how those aspects of an institution work together to inform student decisions

to return to the university. Additionally, students from different demographic groups have different experiences within an institution. Understanding the perspectives of all students is critical to informing institutional practice.

### **Research Purpose and Questions**

This study was designed to (1) explore how undergraduate students identify and describe the factors that influenced them to return to the university for their second year, and (2) explore how the factors that influenced students to return to the university for a second year differ by demographic group.

The study was guided by two research questions:

1. What factors influenced undergraduate students' decisions to return to the university for a second year?
2. How do the factors that influenced undergraduate students to return to the university for a second year differ by demographic group?

### **Definitions**

Consistent with the literature and national data reporting definitions, retention is defined as the continued enrollment of first-time full-time students within the same institution from the fall semester of the student's first year to the fall semester of the student's second year for the purposes of this study (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

### **Significance of the Study**

Many studies on retention initiatives are focused on a specific aspect of an individual institution that a researcher chooses to investigate (Britt et al., 2017; Laskey & Hetzel, 2011; Mungo, 2017). Other studies have very in-depth interactions with a small number of students, who are part of a particular demographic, such as African American males, or Asian students

(Anumba, 2015; Simmons, 2019; Samura 2016). In the recommendations for future research, the researchers encourage others to conduct similar studies in their own institution in order to understand the variables that impact the retention of their own students (Craig & Ward, 2008; Kuh, 2002; Oseguera, 2005). What makes this study unique is that it was focused on the student experience and those aspects of the institutional culture or structures that resonate with the student, helped them feel supported, and impacted their decision-making.

Although this study was focused on an individual institution, the findings will add to the existing literature in documenting the factors that have an impact on student retention. The study was designed to investigate how students describe their experiences in order to inform institutional leaders about future retention initiatives. By understanding the student experience and how students describe their choices, the data can help direct continued student support initiatives.

### **Organization of the Research Report**

This chapter introduced the need for collecting additional institutional data about the factors that influenced undergraduate students to return to this university for their second year. This report is organized into a total of five chapters. After this introductory chapter, a comprehensive literature review follows in Chapter two. Chapter three describes the detailed research methodology and methods. Chapter four reports the study's results and includes a discussion of those results. Finally, Chapter five summarizes the study conclusions while also discussing implications for practice, suggestions for future research, and limitations.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

Chapter one introduced the current study and the need to conduct this research. Student retention is dependent on an individual institution's culture and structure. Knowing why students choose to return to an individual institution is key for institutional leaders' understanding of its own student population and support structures that may need to be enhanced or established to help students succeed. Cole et al. (2018) describe the need for institutions to understand their own data and to conduct their own retention initiatives. The authors indicate that researchers should "note that important factors explaining retention on one campus may be more relevant there than on another campus. Therefore, the burden rests with the campus staff to understand which local factors contribute to retention" (Cole et al., 2018, p. 192). Chapter two is designed to review and reflect on the literature that has been written and the research that has been conducted on the efforts to enhance student success.

As retention rates have become the focus of decision-makers, institutional leaders have established, researched, and reflected upon the efforts that have worked or not worked so well within a given situation. This study is designed to explore the institutional factors that have influenced students to return to the midwestern private university for their second year. This study is focused on institutional retention efforts. The search terms that were used to identify relevant articles for review included the phrases "undergraduate student experience," "undergraduate student retention," "undergraduate retention," or "undergraduate students" and then combinations of the following terms: student needs, campus climate, socioeconomic status, social class, and race or ethnicity. Searches were conducted in the ERIC database and through

PsychArticles. Decisions needed to be made about which demographics to focus on or include given the breadth of available articles and research focused on student success, persistence, graduation, and retention efforts. Articles that focused on race or ethnicity, first-generation status, and socioeconomic factors were included. Additionally, articles that focused on organizational factors, as opposed to experiences within a specific major or field, were included.

### **Summary of the Research Problem**

This study is being conducted at a midwestern private university where the five-year average first-year to second-year retention rate is 84.41% (J. Steffen, personal communication, February 6, 2023). Differences in retention rates by race or ethnicity have been documented. Although the university studies retention rates and patterns, very little is known about how students are making their decisions to return to the university. Knowing how students describe the factors that influenced their decision to return to the institution for a second year can help the institution effectively support students. With the aim of supporting student success and first-year to second-year retention, additional institutional data about the factors that influenced undergraduate students to return to the university for their second year is needed.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In reviewing the literature, Tinto's (1993) model of student departure is referenced throughout the literature that was reviewed for this study, and it serves as the theoretical framework for the current study. The model describes the interactions between the student and the institution. The institution consists of both a social system and an academic system. The model states that students must feel connected to both the social system and the academic system in order to remain enrolled. The academic system consists of academic performance and interactions with faculty and staff. The social system consists of interactions in extracurricular

activities and peer group interactions. Positive experiences interacting in the academic and social system reinforce a student's commitment to the institution, whereas negative experiences weaken a student's commitment to the institution. A student's decision to leave the institution may also be impacted by the external environment, the student's previous experiences, and the student's own educational goals. This study is designed to build on this framework by exploring the student experience within a midwestern private university.

### **Literature Review**

Tinto's (1993) model of student departure laid the groundwork for much of the retention research that is found in the literature today. Building on that initial model, Tinto's work continues to provide a solid basis upon which to understand undergraduate student retention. The following literature review remains anchored in Tinto's research. Each section begins with an historical context, which is followed by examples and evidence from current practice on how the various aspects of institutional culture and student attributes can impact the student experience. The review concludes with a section devoted to the experiences of students from diverse demographic groups. Although this review is divided into three sections, it is important to note that all of these aspects can be working together to support or hinder student retention and success.

### **Institutional Culture**

Institutional culture can impact students' retention decisions. Tinto's (1993) model of student departure provided the foundation for much of the retention research that we see today. Building on the model of student departure, additional research by Tinto (2012) focused on institutional actions that can be taken to influence retention. In addition to understanding how the student experience can be influenced by interactions, institutional representatives must also

acknowledge their role in student retention and success. Institutions can set clear expectations for students through the actions of administrators, published institutional policy, and interactions with faculty and staff. Establishing clear expectations is especially important to support first-generation or low-income students, who may not have the background knowledge to understand an institution's expectations. Student support services that the institution makes available, such as academic support or learning communities, are components of institutional culture and provide the foundation for success. Additionally, short-term financial support may have a direct impact on student success. Support can also impact student success in the classroom through assessment and feedback. Timely feedback to students helps them to understand how they are meeting expectations and can help them to be successful. Finally, student involvement, which enhances connections to the social systems in the institution, can assist students in being successful.

Aspects of an organizational culture can impact the institutional climate for student persistence. Despite the best efforts of institutional members, retention initiatives may fail due to other characteristics, such as student specific attributes that may impact their experiences at the institution. Focusing on a success-orientated campus culture may assist institutional members in implementing successful retention initiatives. Recommendations for a success-oriented campus culture include clarifying expectations to students and conducting a comprehensive examination of the student experience, both inside and outside the classroom (Kuh, 2002). Building on Kuh's work, additional research on the campus environment has demonstrated that positive interactions with faculty members outside the classroom promote student success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). One way that students can have meaningful experiences with faculty outside of the classroom is by engaging in high-impact educational practices. The American Association of

Colleges & Universities (2008), defines eleven high-impact practices that can positively influence retention within a given institution. These are practices, such as first-year seminars, writing-intensive courses, or service-learning activities, that can be integrated within an institution's culture to help students have meaningful educational experiences and positive interactions with faculty. Institutional implementation and integration of high-impact practices and the choice of which practices to incorporate into an institution's curriculum are influenced by institutional culture.

### ***Institutional Variables***

Institutional culture can impact the specific variables that influence retention choices within an individual institution. Institutions are encouraged to review all available data pertaining to retention and understand the data in the context of that institution (Cole et al., 2018). Factors that influence retention at one institution can be specific to that institutional situation. For example, research conducted at an individual community college using existing institutional data discovered that above average GPA and few dropped courses were predictors for student retention at this individual institution. These were elements that had not been predictors at other institutions (Craig & Ward, 2008).

Institutional culture can influence how expectations are communicated and how students are informed about institutional resources. In a peer-reviewed study using a mixed-methods approach, McCallen & Johnson (2020) focused on first-generation college students and their interactions with institutional agents through a survey and focus groups. The authors reviewed 43 survey responses and conducted 10 interviews. The results confirmed that institutional agents, especially college faculty, are significant sources of student support for first-generation students. Academic advisors and student services staff were also mentioned, but the number of students

who referenced them in their survey responses was far below those that reflected on the impact of the faculty. Setting clear organizational expectations can not only help the students, but also the faculty and the staff in communicating with students.

In a quantitative study that examined factors influencing the academic success of at-risk students, the role of institutional agents impacting retention emerged again. Laskey & Hetzel (2011) focused on students who had been admitted to a Conditional Acceptance Program (CAP). They measured personality traits through the NEO-FFI inventory and student records data, which included the number of tutoring visits. For this population of students at this institution, the authors concluded that some personality factors can predict GPA and retention of at-risk students. For example, students who scored higher in extroversion were less likely to be retained at the institution. They also discovered that the number of tutoring visits had a positive impact on retention as students in the CAP program who received tutoring were more likely to be retained. Tutoring staff would be effective institutional agents at this institution in terms of supporting student success and retention. In terms of the current study, it is important for the institution to be aware of its own effective institutional agents aiming to adequately support students.

Academic Advising is another institutional experience that can impact student retention. Advisors have the power to connect students to an institution. In a peer-reviewed study focused on experiences at three midwestern comprehensive and undergraduate-focused institutions, Vianden (2016) reviewed qualitative survey responses regarding critical incidents about academic advising. Of the 29 responses, 18 participants described satisfactory academic advising experiences. The students described positive interactions with advisors that supported the students' sense of belonging within the institution. On the other hand, unsatisfactory advising harmed the student experience by causing them to avoid future interactions with their advisor

and impacted their emotional well-being. Students providing the negative experiences also had a decreased motivation to persist at the institution. Institutional culture can impact how students interact with their advisors, their connections to the institution, and their sense of belonging.

It is important for institutions to also realize that any faculty or staff member could be viewed as an institutional agent. In a peer-reviewed study of 30 first-year students, Farrell et al. (2018) used a mixed-methods approach to survey and interview students about their feelings of connectedness. The results demonstrated that students experienced the institution in a way that was interconnected. The lines between the social and academic systems on campus were blurred, and both aspects worked together to influence the students' experiences. As a result, students described interactions with other students, faculty, and staff across the institution when describing their feelings of connectedness. The researchers encourage institutions to be aware that any interaction between a student and a campus employee can play a role in the students' feelings of connectedness to the institution.

Each institution has its own unique culture that can impact students' experiences with the institution. As a result, there are different variables that may impact retention at each institution. Therefore, institutions need to understand their own culture and how that culture is impacting the student experience and their sense of belonging. In terms of the current study, understanding how students are describing their interactions with institutional agents and which interactions have been the most helpful is important.

### ***Sense of Belonging***

Institutional culture can impact a students' sense of belonging within the institution. In addition to impacting interactions with institutional agents, the culture can impact interactions with peers. Results of the Diverse Learning Environments survey administration conducted by

Hussain & Jones (2021) demonstrated that experiencing discrimination and bias can have a negative impact on students' sense of belonging for students of color. However, frequent, meaningful peer interactions were necessary to mitigate the negative impact of experiences with discrimination and bias. The meaningful connections with peers helped students to feel more connected to the institution. In terms of institutional culture, positive perceptions of the institution's commitment to diversity also positively impacted the students' experiences.

Institutional commitment to diversity is important as research has explored feelings of belonging based on different demographic variables. In a peer-reviewed qualitative case study, Samura (2016) explored how Asian American students navigate through the physical and social spaces within their institution found that the process of belonging was continual. The 36 student participants described how they felt as if they belonged in some instances, but in other instances they felt out of place. They described a process where they felt as if they needed to remake themselves, reposition themselves, or remake their space in order to increase belonging.

Thelamour et al. (2019) used a mixed methods approach to investigate the relationship between Black students' racial identity and their sense of connectedness to their college campus. The researchers explored both race and ethnicity as they considered responses from two ethnic groups of students: Black American students and African and Caribbean students. The authors discovered that same-ethnic friendship was a predictor of campus connectedness. However, having racially Black friends was necessary for survival.

In an innovative approach to studying feelings of belonging on campus, Museus et al. (2018) explored and contrasted the experiences of both White students and students of color through a peer-reviewed quantitative study conducted by administering the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) 4-year college survey. Reviewing 870 survey responses, the



central question that the researchers explored was the relationship between culturally engaging campus environments and sense of belonging among White students and students of color. The authors confirmed that the culturally engaging campus environment measures were correlated with a sense of belonging for both White students and students of color. Additionally, the researchers found that the support that is provided to students by institutional agents may also influence a sense of belonging among students. It is important for institutional members to understand the cultural backgrounds of students and engage those cultural identities meaningfully.

By understanding its own data, organizational culture, and student backgrounds, institutional leaders can take appropriate action to influence student success and belonging. Laude et al. (2018) demonstrate the impact of institutional action on a sense of belonging. They describe the work that has been done at the University of Texas at Austin in order to change the institutional culture, focus on students' sense of belonging, and help students succeed. The institution was able to increase the four-year graduation rate from 51% to 66% from 2011 to 2017 and the first-year persistence rate rose from 92% in 2011 to 95% in 2017. The institution used a collaborative leadership model to increase teamwork and collaboration to focus on student success. The institution also developed new methods for tracking students and identifying those that needed help. This gave faculty and staff the opportunity to intervene and help students succeed as needed as they had more readily available data about the student experience. They also enhanced the first-year experience with cohort-based initiatives and increased academic success programs. Finally, they developed the University Leadership Network, which provides students with scholarships and participation in a campus-wide leadership development program.

The goal of the leadership network is to provide financial support to students while also increasing a sense of belonging at the institution, leading to student success.

Sense of belonging is another aspect of student retention that is influenced by organizational culture. The institutional structures that support students and help them navigate the academic and social environment can support students' sense of belonging or detract from it. Commitment to diversity is an aspect of institutional culture that can impact students' feelings of belonging and connection to an institution. High-impact practices are another institutional structure that can help connect students to the institution by connecting academic experiences and engagement with faculty and staff.

### ***High-Impact Practices***

The institution's investment in high-impact practices and the ability of students to engage in high-impact practices can influence retention. High-impact practices can help engage students in the academic aspects of the educational experiences and increase rates of student retention (American Association of Colleges & Universities, 2008). As students engage more with faculty and staff through high-impact practices, feelings of belonging increase and connections to the institution are made. Institutional culture can determine the extent to which an institution invests in retention and which high-impact practices should be integrated into the curriculum.

Service-learning is one high-impact practice that may positively influence retention. In a study focused on the use of service-learning in two general education courses, Mungo (2017) assessed the use of service-learning to increase retention and graduation rates. Mungo's study was a quantitative, nonexperimental, ex post facto research design. The researcher downloaded data from the institution's student information system for first-time students who took either an Introduction to Sociology or English Composition class. Institutional data were analyzed for the

classes that entered the institution in 2008 and 2009, which totaled 2,728 students. The model reviewed their student status in Fall 2013 and predicted that 47.4% of the students who had taken courses with service-learning experiences would graduate. For students without service-learning the model predicted that 34.4% would graduate. The findings support that service-learning could be very valuable for this institution.

Undergraduate research is a high-impact practice that can influence retention, especially in the STEM fields. However, expectations and communication about high-impact practices need to be clearly communicated to all students. In a study taking place in a Hispanic-serving institution, 35 students completed the Undergraduate Research Experiences: Mentoring, Awareness, and Perceptions Survey (URE MAPS). Rodriguez Amaya et al. (2018) were encouraged by the results that demonstrated LatinX and first-generation students had awareness of research activities at their institution. However, the study also confirmed low participation rates of undergraduate research at Hispanic-Serving institutions. The results indicated that only eight students participated in a mentoring relationship with faculty. The institutional culture can work to support students engaging in high-impact practices by communicating the benefits of participation to students and by helping to support students as they engage in high-impact practices.

Schwartz (2012) analyzed undergraduate research focused on four paired faculty and student relationships in chemistry and physics. The students were students of color. The study was designed as a qualitative phenomenological study to examine the nature of the Undergraduate Research (UR) relationship for both the faculty and the students of color. The UR mentoring agreement was a three-month commitment. Overall, the findings supported the broader literature on Undergraduate Research in affirming the benefit to the students. The

students indicated positive experiences in terms of experiential learning, career guidance, networking, and retention. However, the faculty findings indicate that the emotional, professional, and financial costs outweigh any satisfaction they may have from these activities. The research suggested that more financial support may need to come from the institution to support the faculty in Undergraduate Research activities. Providing high-impact experiences for students is great, but institutions need to ensure the experiences are adequately resourced and that faculty, as critical institutional agents, are supported.

In a study focused on high-impact practices (HIPs) broadly, Sweat et al. (2013) investigated the practices that may correlate with a student integrating with the institution. The findings were based on a quantitative research study with 267 respondents. The survey results indicated that students were exposed to HIPs at varying rates. The researchers discuss how a college degree should be accessible to all who pursue it, but White students were exposed to HIPs more often than minority students. The researchers also discuss how at many institutions the incorporation of active and engaging learning practices is unsystematic, which may be detrimental to student learning. In terms of the current study, it would be beneficial to understand how students are engaging with HIPs and identifying the access and availability of HIPs.

A final example of the benefits of high-impact practices comes from additional research from Tinto (1997). Building on his model of student departure, Tinto's research has continued to focus on the student experience and interactions within the institution leading to retention choices. In a study focused on students enrolled in the Coordinated Studies Program at Seattle Central Community College, Tinto argues that the classroom is where academic and social involvement and integration must occur. The results of a longitudinal study demonstrated that students participating in a shared learning community developed a network of support, which

helped the students connect to the college. The social activities that the students engaged in influenced their learning and their connections to the institution. The students were able to make connections between learning and persistence as a result.

High-impact practices can be a very valuable resource for both students and institutions. Student engagement in high-impact practices can increase their connections to the institution and support continued enrollment. The practices can help support the students and successful degree completion. However, institutional leaders need to be able to resource the practices effectively and support the faculty who are engaging with the students through the high-impact practices. Finally, institutional leaders need to analyze the institutional culture and ensure that all students, regardless of background, have the opportunity to participate in high-impact practices.

### **Student Attributes**

As students enter institutions of higher education, they bring their own attributes and experiences with them. These attributes can impact student retention decisions. In his model of student departure, Tinto (1993) argues that external variables, including individual attributes, related to the student experience can impact retention decisions. As a follow-up to past research focused on student persistence, Tinto (2017) encourages institutional members to also focus on the factors that are motivating students to succeed. Although it may be the institution's goal for the student to be retained and persist until graduation, the student may have very different goals. Students may be more interested in completing a college degree without regard for the institution who confers the degree. The author explains that students may engage in a process called swirling where students attend multiple institutions at once in order to complete their credential that is important for them and their future directions. Additionally, students are not always clear in their motivations for attending college. The author describes a model of student motivation

which demonstrates how a student's decision to persist is influenced by interactions throughout the institution, as well as self-efficacy and their perceptions of themselves and their experiences.

In addition to student motivation and an individual student's educational goals, a student's academic performance also impacts a student's decision to remain enrolled. A student's academic performance is an indicator of continued persistence. Perhaps just as important, a student's perceptions of their academic performance can influence decisions to remain enrolled (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). There are many student attributes that can impact and influence academic performance as well as motivation and desire to persist. The last section explored the institutional variables that influence student retention. This section will explore the student attributes that influence retention decisions.

### ***Impact of Institutional Retention Efforts***

Institutional retention efforts are typically based on the student experience as understood through institutional data. The retention initiatives that an institution chooses to invest in impact how students engage with the institution and their choices to return. Barbera et al. (2020) summarized the past research on student retention and included both a history of retention research and application directed at recent retention challenges. The study acknowledges that the social and academic integration described through Tinto's (1993) model of student departure is still relevant. However, the landscape of higher education has changed since 1993. Essentially, faculty, staff, and administrators need to be aware of the student experiences in the context of the changing college environment within their own institution.

Xu (2017) also encourages administrators and faculty members to be aware of what factors contribute to attrition within their own institutional contexts. The author encourages an understanding of the specific institutional student population before resources are spent on other

institutional initiatives. A quantitative study based on 735 survey responses was designed to explore the specific institutional environment and its role on student persistence. Findings from the study led the author to suggest that reducing class sizes allowing faculty to be more available to students would be beneficial for this institution. Curricular changes to assist faculty in providing personal contact to students was also a potential recommendation that emerged from this study. The findings reinforce the need for retention efforts to be specific to the institution based on the needs of the students in a particular learning environment.

It is important to understand an individual institutional culture, but it is also important to understand and explore the needs of the students in a specific learning environment.

Understanding the interaction between the institutional academic and social environments as well as the needs and characteristics of the students help institutional leaders to have an understanding as to how best to invest to support student success and retention. By listening to students and implementing suggested changes, the institution is then demonstrating commitment to students. Students' commitment to the institution also influences their decisions to remain enrolled.

### ***Student Commitment***

Building on Tinto's (1993) research, it is important to understand both how a student's commitment to the institution as well as how the students' perceptions of the institution's commitment to them can impact student success. In a study that focused on relationship theory to measure students' commitment to the institution, similar to how one's commitment to their partner would be measured, Savage et al. (2019) recruited 251 full-time undergraduate students in their first three calendar years of college to complete an out-of-class questionnaire. The findings indicated that students who intended to graduate from the institution were more likely to

persist. As their commitment to the institution increased, their perceptions of the quality of alternative institutions decreased. In terms of the institution's commitment to the student, the results showed that as the students' perceptions of the institution's satisfaction increased, and as their perception of the institution's investment increased, their own goal of graduating from the institution increased. The researchers argue that it is important to acknowledge the relationships between students and institutions to understand the effects of commitment on persistence.

Student commitment to the institution can also be influenced by student attributes. Stephenson et al. (2020) argue that low self-control and student mindset are two additional variables that can impact student commitment and continued enrollment within the institution. The college environment is different from the structured environment students experience in elementary school, junior high, and high school. Given the lack of a formalized structure in the college environment, the authors argue that self-control is an important characteristic of student success. They administered a self-control survey and received 360 responses from first-year students. Their research found that low self-control had a negative impact on retention. The authors suggest that institutional leaders may consider administering the self-control survey in order to better understand students and identify those who may have low self-control. Understanding the student population can help institutional leaders resource appropriate services in order to retain more students.

In a second study focused on student mindset, Feldman et al. (2018) suggest that student mindset may influence how a student is integrating with the institution, their feelings of belonging, and their academic performance. Students enter the institution with opinions about their own abilities. They may either enroll with a fixed mindset or a growth mindset. A fixed mindset may be linked to students choosing to leave the institution as they believe their academic



abilities are fixed. If one bad grade is received, a student may become very frustrated, not put in effort to succeed, and leave the institution. A growth mindset is linked to the belief that effort can reduce past failures. The authors argue that institutional leaders can help students understand the construct of mindset and help students succeed through implementing interventions and training to help students understand common struggles and opportunities within the institution.

Institutional leaders need to understand their own student population, the students' perceptions of institutional support and commitment, their commitment to the institution, their degree of self-control, and their mindset upon entering the institution. Understanding the student population and the attributes and experiences that can impact their decisions can help the institution better serve and support its students. For example, if appropriate for a given institution's student population, implementing initiatives focused on self-control or mindset demonstrate the institution's commitment to the students' success and can help students remain enrolled.

### ***Student Perceptions***

Student perceptions of themselves, their financial situation, and their academic performance may influence their decision to return to the institution for a second year. One's identity as a student can be the foundation that shapes student perceptions and interactions within an institution. The extent to which one's identity as a student is central to their experiences can potentially influence their decision to remain enrolled. Bowman & Felix (2017) focused on the construct of student identity centrality and its impact on retention. The authors surveyed 449 students in an introductory psychology course, so they were early in their college career. The survey was designed to measure the extent to which one's identity as a student was central to their belief structure. The results showed that identifying oneself primarily as a student was

positively related to goal commitment, institutional commitment, and the intent to persist in college. A major limitation of this study, however, is that the authors did not use institutional data to determine whether students actually persisted. They used survey response data to measure student's intent to persist. It is important for institutional leaders to recognize the competing priorities that students may have and the degree to which those priorities influence student identity and experiences within an institution.

Perceptions of an individual's social status may also impact enrollment decisions. Loeb & Hurd (2019) conducted a quantitative study focused on 329 first-year undergraduate students who completed a survey designed to understand student's perception of their social status during their first year of college. The researchers defined eligible participants as: students who identified with historically underrepresented racial or ethnic groups, students who were first-generation students, or students who were Pell Grant eligible. Students were invited to complete the survey in a lab. The survey focused on their social, emotional, and academic functioning. A tool was administered that identified students' subjective social status (SSS) before entering the institution and after enrolling. The results indicated that the respondents reported an average drop in SSS after the transition from home to college. An additional finding was that the decline in SSS was aligned with lower perceived academic competence. The authors had also administered a tool to measure students' general affect. They did not find evidence of a more negative affect, which supported the conclusion that the drop in SSS between home and school was related to a change in environment. In terms of student identity, however, this study provides additional information in that students who are perceiving themselves as dropping in social status as they enroll in college are also perceiving themselves as having lower academic performance. Instead

of serving as the great equalizer, the college environment is potentially having a negative impact on students' perceptions of themselves and their academic ability.

Perceptions of social status can also influence student financial choices and behaviors, which in turn can also impact student decisions to remain enrolled. Britt et al. (2017) conducted a study focused on financial attitudes, behaviors, and status identified that students who had taken out an additional \$2,000 to \$3,000 in student loans during their first two years of college were more likely to discontinue their education. Additionally, students who had the perception that they had large amounts of student loans were also at risk of discontinuing their education. Students with higher financial stress were more likely to discontinue college as well. The researchers used institutional data combined with survey responses from 2,475 students and found that their resulting regression model predicted 84% of the cases where students discontinued their education.

Student attributes and perceptions can impact student enrollment decisions and desire to return to the institution in which they first enrolled. It is important for institutional leaders to understand the changing nature of students in general as well as their own student body specifically, in order to adequately support students. Students' commitment to the institution can be influenced by their own motivation as well as external factors, including their perceptions of themselves, their academic abilities, and their financial situation. Their connections to the institution also influence their commitment to remaining enrolled at that institution. Students are also focused on an institution's commitment to them as students. They are paying attention to the messages they receive from administrators, faculty, and staff. Finally, one's identity as a student, and how central that is to their experiences, can influence decisions to remain enrolled as well as an individual's level of self-control. Institutions need to be aware of the student attributes that

can impact the student experience and how those variables may influence the interactions they have within the academic and social systems of the institution. The more institutions understand about their specific student population, the better institutional agents can work together to support students and help them succeed.

### **Demographic Group Experiences**

Understanding student populations and the experiences they bring to the institution is important. Institutions also need to understand the demographic makeup of their student body and how students from diverse backgrounds may have different experiences within the same institution. Experiences within the institution can vary by demographic group. Though student experiences may be influenced by a student's background, institutions are also cautioned against overgeneralizing experiences for every member of a certain demographic group (Tinto, 1993).

An institution needs to be aware of its own campus climate as it impacts the adjustment of students and prevalence of prejudice and discrimination. In a study comparing the experiences of African American and White students, survey responses from 1,454 incoming first year students indicated that a campus climate of prejudice and discrimination impacted both groups of students. The researchers concluded that institutional practices that are focused on student needs, as opposed to ethnicity, may help support students. They further encouraged institutions to foster a culture of education and understanding to overcome stereotypes (Cabrera & Nora, 1999).

In another study focused on institutional degree completion and race/ethnicity, Oseguera (2005) focused on institutional characteristics that can influence degree completion along with race/ethnicity. The results showed that institutional context can have different impacts on unique demographic groups. The longitudinal study focused on the survey responses of students from 303 baccalaureate-granting institutions that participated in the Cooperative Institutional Research

Program's (CIRP) annual survey of entering freshman. The CIRP responses were then aligned with four and six-year graduation rates of students that were obtained from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System's (IPEDS) enrollment files. In the implications, the researcher acknowledges that institutional structural variables have an impact on retention as well. While this study was focused on institutional structures, the author recommends that future studies examine the impact of additional environmental characteristics on different communities of students.

Understanding the student experience and the current educational environment can help institutions support students and help them succeed. Historically, through retention research and institutional actions, institutions have essentially engaged in victim blaming as they focused on reasons why students failed, as opposed to how institutions failed students. Retention research has evolved over time, especially as the experiences of students from different backgrounds have continued to be researched and understood. Research on student involvement and engagement demonstrates how retention is everyone's business within the institution. Understanding the experiences of students by race and ethnicity is one variable for institutions to understand, but data has also demonstrated the gap between low-income and affluent students has increased over time. Institutions need to find ways to understand and support students of different demographic groups (Tinto, 2007).

### ***Experiences by Socioeconomic Status***

The first demographic group to explore is how the student experiences and interactions with peers and the academic environment can be influenced by socioeconomic variables. In one study, researchers tested relationships between institutional and interpersonal classism, work volition, and academic and life satisfaction (Allan et al., 2021). These authors also discussed

marginalization and its harmful effects as a tactic used to oppress students in an academic setting. The findings included evidence of institutional classism, where students were limited in participating in certain activities due to hidden costs. For example, not all students were able to participate in school trips or study abroad. Students who were unable to participate in the activities were likely to experience social class prejudice from other students. Additionally, hidden course fees could be a source of financial burden for students. The authors urge institutions to consider how institutional policies can contribute to the marginalization of economically disadvantaged students.

A second study, conducted by Warnock & Hurst (2016), focused on low-income, first-generation, and working class (LIFGWC) students, who were in the minority student population, at an elite college. The researchers attempted to interview students who were part of a newly-formed group designed to support LIFGWC students. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with sixteen students. The students described challenges in being their authentic selves, due to differences in social class and financial resources from the other students. For example, the White respondents indicated that they may not be seen for who they really are, as assumptions about their social status were made based on skin color. The authors describe how social class is “an invisible and stigmatized identity,” especially at this institution (Warnock & Hurst, 2016, p. 271). The researchers also discovered that students were hesitant to describe themselves as falling into a low-income category as college is supposed to be the great equalizer, allowing people to move up in social status. Defining oneself as low-income seemed to limit one’s ability to see themselves changing social class in the future. These authors also concluded their study with a recommendation for institutions to develop support structures and mechanisms to help this group of students.

Students come from a variety of backgrounds and social situations. The external environment from which a student enters campus influences the student experience. By understanding the student experience better, institutions can develop policies and support structures to help all students succeed. Understanding the student experience by socioeconomic class is one demographic variable that may impact the student experience. First-generation students are another demographic group for whom additional data and information can be gathered in order to establish appropriate institutional support structures.

### *Experiences of first-generation students*

First-generation students bring a unique set of experiences with them to the institution in which they enroll. As just one example, the students' external support system may not have the experiences to help the student navigate the institutional structures to register for classes, contact faculty, or seek help as needed in order to succeed. First-generation college students (FGCS) may also be coming from a lower social class. In a study using the cultural mismatch perspective focused on FGCS, Chang et al. (2020) used a mixed-methods approach to survey and interview 71 FGCS on cultural norms, relational concerns, coping, and social support. The authors hypothesized that differences in the first-generation student experience could be related to the differences between an interdependent culture at home and the independent culture that was experienced within the institution. The results demonstrated that students did embrace independence and self-expression, which are indicators of resilience. However, the authors also discovered that the students were still influenced by interdependent cultures prior to entering the institution as the students were putting others' needs before themselves. Instead of seeking out help when needed, the students were worried about becoming a burden to the institutional agents from whom they would have sought support. This then limited the amount of help and support

those students sought and received, which could have supported them in their educational experience.

In a second study of FGCS based on the cultural mismatch perspective, Phillips et al. (2020) looked at aspects of the experiences of first-generation students through a study that used both a cross-sectional and a longitudinal design. They developed a cross-sectional study investigating whether the college experience changed FGCS by exploring whether students made decisions using independent or interdependent motives. The longitudinal study was focused on whether students moved social classes upon graduation. The authors discovered that the first-generation students displayed more interdependent choices, and they did not identify any change in social class status between entering status and post-graduation status. The results led the authors to conclude that students from different social class backgrounds continue to experience the same institution differently. “Even when first-generation students gain access to college and persist to graduation, initial cultural mismatch (interdependent motives in an independent context) shapes their experiences and outcomes throughout their time in college” (Phillips et al., 2020, p. 1125). Thus, the authors argue that institutional leaders need to be aware of this mismatch and understand that access to the educational institution is not enough.

In another study focused on FGCS, Demetriou et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study, interviewing 16 successful undergraduate students who were scheduled to graduate within four to four and a half years. The students who participated were involved in activities and discussed the importance of relationships. The participants described how academic and mentoring relationships were all important to helping them stay on track to graduation. The students also described high-impact practices that they were involved in, such as undergraduate research and study abroad. The researchers also noted the importance of high-impact practices and



encouraged institutions to market high-impact practices directly to their first-generation students in order to help them be aware of the available opportunities. Another notable aspect of this study is that the researchers made the choice to conduct the study focused on successful students. Similar to the current study, the researchers wanted to know the factors that helped the students continue at the institution, remaining enrolled until graduation.

### ***Experiences by Race or Ethnicity***

Students from diverse races or ethnicities may have different experiences within the same institution, which impacts retention choices. Variation in retention rates by race and ethnicity are happening nationwide (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022). Recent articles have focused on the experiences of Hispanic or Latina/o students and Black students on college campuses. Microaggressions, financial resources, relationships with peers and faculty, and student involvement are all factors that can influence students' enrollment decisions that can also be viewed in the context of race and ethnicity (Anumba, 2015; Harper et al., 2018; Hernández & Villodas, 2019; Mills, 2020; Palmer, 2011; Simmons, 2019; Samura, 2016).

Chapter one began looking at the experiences of students by race. In terms of institutional actions and student support, the institution needs to understand the culture and the needs of its own students in order to adequately support its students. Research has demonstrated the need for students to be involved within the institution in order to remain enrolled (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). But the types of organizations that can be helpful to students within a given institutional structure are dependent upon a given culture. In studies conducted by Palmer et al. (2011) and Simmons (2019), findings supported the impact of student involvement on minority students' continued enrollment. In the Palmer study, the students were actively involved in student organizations, but they desired more cross-cultural engagement across organizations. In

the Simmons study, the students were also actively involved in student organizations, which positively impacted their commitment to the institution. However, the students in this study desired more ethnic- or gender-based student organizations. Student involvement is important, but institutional leaders need to know their own institutional culture and where to invest and support organizations that will help their own students.

Institutional culture can impact all organizational structures that are put in place to support students. In a qualitative study focused on Critical Race Theory and African American males who were the first in their family to pursue a college education, Anumba (2015) used interviews, observations, and field notes in order to understand the experiences of eight students and their decisions to remain enrolled. Institutional structures identified in this study that facilitated the students' retention were financial support; supportive professors and peers; small class sizes; access to resources; and a positive interactive institutional environment.

In another study that used Critical Race Theory to understand the experiences of Black undergraduate students at an urban university, Harper et al. (2018) began by reviewing quantitative institutional data about currently enrolled students. The institutional data was then combined with data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) website. Follow-up interviews were conducted with 23 Black undergraduates and 20 members of the Black Student Success Task Force. In reviewing the institutional data, they discovered that 81.2% of the Black undergraduates reported a commitment to persisting from one year to the next and 84.9% indicated they were committed to completing their degree program. However, the 6-year completion rate for Black students was 7.6%. Only 43% of the Black students who started the institution as first-time first-year students returned for a second year. Students indicated concerns about a racist climate and had experiences with microaggressions. Many of

the students attending the institution were place bound and often commute up to two hours to get to campus. Harper et al. also noted that there are very few faculty or staff members that are Black, meaning that the decisions based on data are predominantly coming from a White perspective. Finally, the authors conclude by pointing out that many of the Black students are from low-income families and bring Pell Grant money to the institution, which is money the institution gets to keep. Based on the data, 92% of the Black students who began at the institution do not complete degrees within six years. The researchers point out that those students are leaving without a degree, but the institution still gets to keep the money. Institutional leaders need to be watching their own enrollment and graduation number and helping students succeed until graduation. Understanding the context of the student experience is an important component of understanding institutional culture.

Microaggressions can have a negative impact on institutional culture, and they can take many forms. In a qualitative study focused on 17 undergraduate students at a Midwestern University, Mills (2020) investigated the environmental and racial microaggressions the students experienced. The focus group participants were Black or African American sophomores, juniors, and seniors. The researchers identified six racial microaggressions that were experienced by the focus group participants: segregation, lack of representation, campus response to criminality, cultural bias in courses, tokenism, and a pressure to conform.

In a study focused on microaggressions and coping strategies, Hernández & Villodas (2019) explored how collectivistic coping can assist students in supporting their feelings of belonging within an institution after experiencing microaggressions. The study participants were 681 undergraduate Latina/o and Chicana/o students at a large public, research university. The study found evidence that linked experiencing racial microaggressions to lower college

persistence attitudes. However, students who had stronger ethnic identities and who had sought out more social support when experiencing microaggressions reported feeling more committed to completing college. Students who tried to deal with the negative microaggression experience on their own had lower persistence attitudes. The authors found support for community building in order to help increase attitudes toward persistence. The authors offer a critique of Tinto's (1993) model of student departure, indicating that it does not accurately reflect the lived experiences of students of color on campuses. Those students who were able to make a stronger social connection, after experiencing a negative microaggression, were more likely to persist. Although the microaggression would be a negative experience, the students have used their own identity and background to form a positive connection with others in the institution, which had a positive impact on their choice to remain enrolled. It is important for institutional leaders to understand the experiences of their student population and help them develop or find their support systems.

Student experiences within an institution can vary by demographic group. First-generation students, students from lower socioeconomic classes, and students of color can all experience the institution in different ways. Support structures, such as financial support, student organizations, or peer support may help students remain enrolled and succeed academically. Negative experiences, whether through prejudice based on financial need or through experiencing microaggressions can negatively impact the students' decisions to remain enrolled. Ensuring that students are aware of the support structures and opportunities is also an important institutional consideration. In terms of the current study, institutional leaders need to understand the experiences of the students enrolled in order to effectively support them and resource appropriate support structures.

## Summary of the Literature

In order to effectively resource and implement retention initiatives, institutional leaders need to have a good understanding of their own institutional culture and climate for students. Institutional leaders need to know how students describe their experiences with institutional agents or how they describe their sense of belonging (Hernández & Villodas, 2019; Hussain & Jones, 2021; Laskey & Hetzel, 2011; McCallen & Johnson, 2020; Museus et al., 2018; Samura, 2016; Vianden, 2016). Understanding how students view the availability of and opportunity to participate in high-impact practices is important (Mungo, 2017; Rodriguez Amaya et al., 2018; Schwartz, 2012; Sweat et al, 2013). Uncovering institutional policies and procedures that may negatively impact student retention, such as hidden costs or unclear financial policies would be helpful (Allan et al., 2021). Research indicates that an institution's commitment to diversity is important, but research also indicates that students from diverse backgrounds can have varied experiences within an institution (Harper et al., 2018; Mills, 2020). Institutional leaders need to understand the experiences of students from diverse backgrounds. It is important to evaluate and recognize whether institutional messaging and priorities are setting clear expectations and helping students succeed (Tinto, 2012).

Research has the tendency to look at the students who did not succeed, but an important component of supporting students is also understanding the experiences of students who are succeeding. The current study is designed to focus on students who have chosen to return to the university for their second year. Many of the studies referenced in this chapter are based on small sample sizes and are focused on the student experience at a specific institution, so the results are not generalizable. The current study is necessary in order to understand the experiences of students at this university. Knowing the factors that helped students succeed and building upon

those factors can help support students in the future as support structures are appropriately resourced and implemented. Next, Chapter three will discuss the specific methodologies and methods used to conduct this study.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

#### **Introduction**

Chapter one was designed to introduce the research and the literature focused on undergraduate student retention. The initial research supported the need to conduct this study as many of the studies in the current literature are focused on specific populations of students or specific interventions, whereas this study is focused on the broader institutional factors that influenced student decisions. Chapter two provided a detailed review of the literature related to undergraduate student success and retention. Chapter three is focused on the specific methodology and methods that were used to conduct this study. This chapter begins by reviewing the research problem, purpose, and questions that were used to guide this study. Next, it describes the research methodologies followed by the specific research methods that were used to conduct the study and answer the research questions.

It is important to note the timing of this study. This study was conducted during the Fall 2021 semester. The study was designed to ask students how their experiences during their first year influenced them to return to the same institution for their second year. The first academic year for the students in this study, 2020-2021, was unlike any other due to the institution's protocols in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students were able to take courses either online or in-person, and vaccines were not yet widely available. The researcher made the decision to not ask students about COVID specifically, but it was anticipated that some of the student responses may reference the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **Research Problem, Purpose, and Questions**

The specific research problem, purpose, and questions that guided this study follow.

## **Statement of the Problem**

This study was conducted at a midwestern private university. The undergraduate population is primarily residential, and the majority of students are ages 18-22 years old. The five-year average first-year to second-year retention rate of this institution is 84.41% (J. Steffen, personal communication, February 6, 2023). Although this rate is higher than the national average, there are differences in retention rates when they are examined by demographic groups. Analyzing the factors that influenced students to return to the university for their second year and how those factors may differ by demographic group will help inform institutional practice. Additional institutional data about the factors that influenced undergraduate students to return to the university for their second year is needed.

## **Research Purpose**

This study aimed to (1) explore how undergraduate students identify and describe the factors that influenced them to return to the university for a second year, and (2) explore how the factors that influenced students to return to the university for a second year differ by demographic group.

## **Research Questions**

The Study was guided by two research questions:

1. What factors influenced undergraduate students' decisions to return to the university for a second year?
2. How do the factors that influenced undergraduate students to return to the university for a second year differ by demographic group?



## **Research Methodology**

This study was designed to hear directly from students about their experiences at this institution to understand the experiences that influenced their return to the institution for a second year by analyzing and determining which university structures supported students' decisions to return. The specific research methodologies used for this study are detailed in the following sections.

### **Quantitative Methodology**

According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), a quantitative methodology can be used to understand the relationships that have influenced students' decisions. Understanding the student experience and the various relationships that they established within the institution were critical components for answering the research questions focused on students' decisions to return to the institution. As discussed in Chapter two, the theoretical framework that has guided this study is based on Tinto's (1993) model of student departure. This model describes how students connect with the academic and social systems within an institution. Those connections and experiences have influenced how students made their decisions to remain enrolled at this institution. A quantitative methodology helped the researcher understand the factors aligned with the social and academic systems within the institution that contributed to the students' decisions to return. This methodology also allowed for demographic data to be collected and analyzed to further understand the student experience.

### **Action Research**

In addition to using a quantitative methodology, this study was also structured as action research. Mertler (2020) defines action research as a form of research that is commonly used in educational settings and designed to support systemic inquiry into how schools function or how

students are learning and navigating the school structure. Designing this study as action research provided a process for using the data, in addition to guiding how the study was structured. The study was developed in alignment with the theoretical framework and the literature reviewed and detailed in Chapter two. Both the theoretical framework and the literature provided a solid foundation for this study. Through identifying the factors that influenced students' decisions to return to this institution, additional information was gathered and understood about how students have navigated their college experiences and developed relationships with others to succeed. The final component of action research implies that a researcher will share the data with the institution being researched sparking change. As mentioned in the problem statement above, this study was designed to help inform institutional decision-making, and the data have been shared with institutional stakeholders.

### **Research Design**

The research design for this study was survey research. Survey research is designed to answer descriptive questions about the population that is being studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study was designed to investigate and understand the student experiences as well as their attitudes and opinions, which is consistent with the goals of survey research. Survey research is appropriate to obtain information about individual's experiences (Bhattacharjee, 2012). One criticism of survey research is that poor item construction can limit results (DeVaus, 2004). This survey was developed in collaboration with other institutional stakeholders, and the items were pilot tested prior to administration, however, which increased the validity of the item construction and the applicability of the data as a result.

Survey research has also been used by other researchers in similar studies. For example, Campbell & Mislevy (2013) conducted their study focused on student retention and attrition.

They were focused on student perceptions, collaborated with an internal assessment committee, and administered an online survey that was called the Beginning Student Survey. Herbert (2006) designed a study that was focused on identifying the variables that were significant for student retention in online courses through an online course survey. Finally, Xu (2016) conducted a study focused on understanding the factors that impacted student persistence in STEM majors through an online survey. All three studies successfully utilized survey research using online surveys in order to answer their research questions related to student retention. The survey design for the current study aligned the survey responses with the research questions and provided guidance for analysis and review of responses.

### **Researcher Positionality**

The primary researcher for this study holds a staff position at this university. Although the position is not student-facing, the researcher collaborated with other staff, the university's retention group, and the researcher's direct supervisor in order to pilot test the survey items, gather feedback on the survey, and ensure appropriate words and titles of offices and other structures were used. The project was supported by the retention group, which is chaired by the Vice President for Student Affairs (VPSA). This is similar to the Campbell and Mislevy (2013) research and survey that was developed in consultation with the institution's assessment committee. This scholarly research project was connected to work that was being done with the university's retention group, which collects and reviews data related to student retention decisions. The action research design of this study highlighted the importance of using this data for institutional change purposes. According to Herr & Anderson (2015), this project is positioned as an insider in collaboration with other insiders. In other words, the researcher was a staff member at this institution, and collaborated with other institutional stakeholders while

conducting the study. The researcher does not interact directly with students, so it is unlikely that student responses were biased or filtered. However, the researcher participated in several university-wide committees, including the retention group, so a potential bias that needed to be monitored is their own expectations about potential factors that emerged from the student responses.

### **Summary**

Consistent with research conducted in an educational setting, this study was designed as an action research study that used a quantitative research survey design to understand the factors that influenced students to return to the university for their second year. The action research structure was designed to help institutional stakeholders understand the learning environment and potential areas for improvement (Mertler, 2020). The quantitative survey design approach allows for the researcher to have an accurate understanding of the student experience by surveying students directly (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach is consistent with studies designed by other researchers focused on questions related to student retention.

### **Research Methods**

After spending the final months of the Summer of 2021 drafting survey items, collaborating with institutional stakeholders, and seeking approval from the Committee on the Use of Human Subjects in Research (CUHSR), the survey was administered during the Fall 2021 semester. The specific methods that were used to implement this study are described in the following sections.

### **Setting**

The research setting was a midwestern private university with a total student population of approximately 6,000 students. Most of the students at this institution are undergraduate

students. The survey was administered via email. Students eligible to participate in the study received an email message to their institutional email account. The message invited students to complete the survey and included a link to the survey, which was developed using Qualtrics ([www.qualtrics.com](http://www.qualtrics.com)) survey software. In order to contact students through a name that was recognizable to them, the emails were sent from the office of the Vice President for Student Affairs, who was an internal collaborator in this study.

### **Timeline**

Preparation for data collection began in the Summer of 2021 as the researcher collaborated with internal stakeholders about the survey, and then refined items and clarified wording as the result of these conversations. Following the revisions to the survey, the Committee on the Use of Human Subjects Research (CUHSR) form was submitted on September 13, 2021, and approval was obtained on September 20, 2021. The Office of Institutional Effectiveness Analyst generated a list of student email addresses after the institution's Fall 2021 Census date. The email address list was used to send the email messages from the office of the Vice President for Student Affairs. Students were contacted via email from October to December of 2021, and the survey closed on December 17, 2021. Data analysis was conducted from February through December of 2022.

### **Participants**

The study population was the students who entered the university in Fall 2020 and returned to the university for their second year in Fall 2021. The total survey population was 886 students. A total of 196 students accessed the survey. Five students did not give consent to complete the survey, and 113 students provided consent and completed the entire survey.

## **Participant Recruitment and Selection**

After approval to conduct the research was granted by the Committee on the Use of Human Subjects in Research (CUHSR), the Office of Institutional Effectiveness Analyst was able to provide a list of email addresses for all of the students that entered the institution in Fall 2020 and returned to the institution in Fall 2021. Offices within the university coordinated who is able to contact students with specific requests. The researcher coordinated with the Vice President for Student Affairs to contact students and send emails through his office. An initial email was sent to the student population describing the purpose of the study and inviting them to participate at the beginning of October 2021. Three reminder email messages followed the initial invitation. The first reminder was the week of October 26, after fall break. The second reminder was the week of November 15, right before Thanksgiving. The final reminder was sent the week of November 29, which was after Thanksgiving but before finals. The emails included a brief description of the study, an invitation or reminder to participate, and a link to the survey, which was developed using Qualtrics survey software. The survey remained open until December 17, 2021.

Informed consent was obtained through the first item of the survey, which respondents saw as soon as they clicked the link to access the survey. The statement described the study, the names and contact information of the researchers, and advised them that there were no known risks to participate in the study. Students were not able to continue with the survey without providing consent. The consent item was a forced response item, and if they answered that they did not consent, they were taken to the final landing page of the survey. The students were also told that items may be skipped and that they could leave the survey at any time. As a result, seventy-eight participants chose to leave the survey without completing it. One possible

motivation for participating in the study was the opportunity to reflect on their experiences at this institution.

### **Data Collection**

The instrument used for this study was a researcher-developed survey, named the Fall 2021 Retention Survey. The survey was anonymous and asked students to self-identify demographic variables. The link that was used to administer the survey was an anonymous link, so responses cannot be connected to an individual. The data for this study were collected using Qualtrics survey software. The university maintains a Qualtrics contract and access to the survey and responses were password-protected and only accessible to the primary researcher. Qualtrics allows for data to be downloaded onto an individual computer. The data were stored on the primary researcher's computers. The computers are password-protected and used solely by the researcher.

### **Data Analysis**

The Fall 2021 Retention Survey was comprised of both quantitative and qualitative items. The quantitative items were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions. The qualitative items were analyzed using an inductive approach and descriptive coding to identify common themes of student responses. The responses were objectively coded in order to describe and report on the student responses. In order to answer the second research question, all quantitative data were analyzed by demographic variables. To ensure participant confidentiality, all responses were reported in aggregate.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter described the research methodology and methods used to conduct this study. The Fall 2021 Retention Survey was administered using sound research methods, designed to

protect participant identities and keep data confidential using password-protected computers and tools. Students were recruited through the Vice President for Student Affairs' office and had the option to choose to respond or ignore the email. Students were not able to continue with the survey without providing informed consent. The use of a quantitative research methodology that was aligned with an action research structure is appropriate for this type of research. The action research structure will help affirm the importance of the data and ensure that it is used within the institution for improvement of the student experience. Chapter four will discuss this study's findings and results.



## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **Introduction**

This study was focused on undergraduate retention and was designed to (1) explore how undergraduate students identify and describe the factors that influenced them to return to the university for their second year, and (2) explore how the factors that influenced students to return to the university for a second year differ by demographic group. Chapters one and two were spent introducing this study and the literature surrounding undergraduate retention research. Chapter three described the specific methodologies and methods used to conduct this study. Specifically, this study was a survey research study conducted through a quantitative research and action research methodology. The survey was administered during the Fall 2021 semester to students who entered the institution as first-year students in Fall 2020 and returned to the institution for their second year in Fall 2021. Chapter four begins with a summary of the results of the study and concludes with a discussion of those results. The chapter breaks the results down by research question and theme. The study was guided by two research questions:

1. What factors influenced undergraduate students' decisions to return to the university for a second year?
2. How do the factors that influenced undergraduate students to return to the university for a second year differ by demographic group?

#### **Results**

The Fall 2021 Retention Survey was administered from October to December 2021, during the Fall 2021 semester at a midwestern private university. The survey closed on December 17, 2021. Data analysis began in February 2022 and continued through December

2022. The survey consisted of both quantitative and qualitative items. The following results summary includes an analysis of the quantitative and qualitative items organized by overall themes.

### **Factors that Influenced Decisions to Return**

The first research question for this study asked: what factors influenced undergraduate students' decisions to return to the university for a second year? The theoretical framework that guided this study and the creation of the Fall 2021 Retention Survey was Tinto's (1993) model of student departure. The survey was designed to ask students both about their academic and non-academic reasons for returning to the university.

The survey item that most aligned with this first research question asked respondents to list the top three to five reasons they chose to return to this university for their second year. The responses were analyzed using an inductive approach to coding with descriptive codes. Table 1 summarizes the responses. There were 90 responses to this item, which resulted in 277 coded reasons for returning to the university. The reasons in Table 1 are ordered by the largest number of comments to the smallest number of comments. Of the 277 comments, 77 comments were focused on academic aspects of the educational experience, such as major courses, professors, and experiential learning. The social environment, such as friendships, social activities, and relationships formed, were mentioned in 71 of the comments.

It is worth noting that the survey concluded with an open-ended item asking respondents if they would like to provide any additional comments. It was possible that these comments would lead to additional themes or factors that influenced decisions to return to the institution. However, the actual responses to that item were from 30 individuals who provided 20 uniquely coded individual praises and grievances about their experiences. The top categories included six

individuals, 13.33% of comments, who provided details about dining concerns, and four individuals, or 8.89% of comments that detailed specific financial concerns, such as the rising cost of tuition. There were also four individuals who described how they were happy to be here, and four individuals who detailed housing concerns. The comments were focused on individual issues, but given the anonymous nature of the survey and the lack of specific information included in the comments, the comments are not actionable at this time. Given the individual nature of the comments, they are unable to be grouped and themed in a meaningful way for this analysis.

**Table 1**

*The Top Three to Five Reasons for Returning to the University This Year*

Reason	Number of Comments	Percentage of Comments
Academics	47	16.96%
Friends	40	14.44%
Comfortable	27	9.75%
Social	26	9.39%
Professors	19	6.86%
Financial	18	6.50%
Transferring is too difficult	16	5.78%
Want to graduate	14	5.05%
In-person courses	12	4.33%
Experiential Learning	11	3.97%
Campus	7	2.53%
Live on my own	7	2.53%
Pathway to career	6	2.17%
Relationships	5	1.81%
Negative	5	1.81%
Facilities	3	1.08%
Helpful Staff	3	1.08%
Other	11	3.97%
Total	277	100%

In addition to asking respondents to describe their reasons for returning to the university through open-ended items, the survey also included Likert scale items for respondents to indicate how much of an influence particular aspects of the educational environment had on their decision to return to the institution. The first three parts of the survey asked respondents how much

academic, non-academic, or support services influenced their choices to return to the university. Summarizing the responses together, as displayed in Table 2, shows how the respondents ordered the academic, non-academic, and support services in terms of their perceived influences. Frequencies of response, means, and standard deviations for the items in the first three sections are summarized by item mean from largest to smallest.

**Table 2**

*How Did the Following Influence Your Decision to Return to the University This Year?*

Reason	N/A		Did not Influence		Somewhat Influenced		Influenced		Strongly Influenced		M	SD
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
Major courses	1	.9	13	11.5	18	15.9	36	31.9	45	39.8	2.98	1.05
Friends	6	5.3	22	19.5	13	11.5	21	18.6	51	45.1	2.79	1.34
Faculty in class	2	1.8	17	15.0	32	28.3	34	30.1	28	24.8	2.61	1.07
Other students	3	2.7	30	26.5	21	18.6	29	25.7	30	26.5	2.47	1.22
Financial assistance	7	6.2	35	31.0	15	13.3	22	19.5	34	30.1	2.36	1.36
Campus organization	11	9.7	34	30.1	18	15.9	25	22.1	25	22.1	2.17	1.34
Academic Advisor	-	-	43	38.1	26	23.0	27	23.9	17	15.0	2.16	1.10
Faculty out of class	4	3.5	33	29.2	35	31.0	25	22.1	16	14.2	2.14	1.10
Core curriculum courses	1	.9	56	49.6	30	26.5	18	15.9	8	7.1	1.79	.97
Residence halls	12	10.6	57	50.4	24	21.2	15	13.3	5	4.4	1.50	1.00
Career Center	15	13.3	60	53.1	12	10.6	20	17.7	6	5.3	1.49	1.10
Student billing	16	14.2	60	53.1	15	13.3	15	13.3	6	5.3	1.42	1.06
Registrar's office	15	13.3	71	62.8	9	8.0	14	12.4	3	2.7	1.28	.94
Academic success center	23	20.4	61	54.0	12	10.6	11	9.7	5	4.4	1.23	1.03
Experiential learning	32	28.3	52	46	10	8.8	10	8.8	9	8.0	1.22	1.19
Minor courses	55	48.7	18	15.9	13	11.5	17	15.0	10	8.8	1.19	1.41
Writing intensive course	27	23.9	55	48.7	18	15.9	8	7.1	5	4.4	1.19	1.03

The themes that were identified through the qualitative comments and summarized in Table 1 also appear in Table 2 in a similar order. Overall, respondents highlighted how the academic and social aspects of their experiences informed their decisions to return. They also

described how financial factors influenced their decisions. The comments helped to provide context for the responses to the quantitative items.

The responses to the first three sections were broken down by demographic variable and the order of importance, as determined by item mean, was compared across demographic characteristics. The top eight items generally remain the highest areas of importance across each demographic group: major courses, friends, faculty in class, other students, financial assistance, campus organization, academic advisor, and faculty out of class. In general, some groups may have prioritized organizations over academics and others prioritized academics over organizations, but the items that are the highest means in Table 2 remain the highest areas of influence across demographic groups with a few exceptions. There were two respondents who identified with the program for undecided majors. Those two respondents prioritized student billing along with financial assistance. Asian respondents also prioritized the academic success center and the registrar's office. The five respondents who were unsure about their first-generation status also prioritized the Smith Career Center. Hispanic/Latino respondents prioritized the "another academic experience" option and wrote in "classmates" and "research with professors" as strongly influencing their decision to return. Hispanic/Latino respondents also prioritized "another social experience" and provided comments indicating that they were excited to see other students on campus again, and that campus giveaways, athletics, and a sorority strongly influenced their decisions to return. The next section will analyze the responses by demographic group in more detail.

### *Academics*

In the responses to the questions asking about the factors that influenced their return to the institution, respondents indicated academic reasons as the primary reason for returning to the

institution for their second year. In part one, 72% of respondents indicated that their major courses influenced or strongly influenced their decisions to return to the institution for their second year. Academic reasons were also the number one reason respondents provided for returning to the institution when listing their top three to five reasons with 17% of the comments providing an academic reason for returning. The written responses coded as academic often named a specific department or course that was the reason for their return. Other respondents just indicated “my major” or they indicated a specific major that was either highly rated or not available at a lot of other institutions. One respondent noted that they returned to the institution “because I’m familiar with the campus, and I enjoy my professors and their classes.” Other academic comments described the role of professors specifically as nearly 7% of responses focused on relationships with professors. These comments also align with the faculty in class and faculty out of class items in part one. The faculty in class item had 55% of respondents agree or strongly agree that was a factor that influenced or strongly influenced their return while 36% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with interactions with faculty out of class influencing their decision.

In comparison, it is interesting that the other academic coursework items were farther down the ordered list. Core curriculum courses had 23% of respondents indicate they were influenced or strongly influenced to return. Experiential learning courses, minor courses, and writing intensive courses were at the bottom of the list in terms of influencing factors. However, 4% of the respondent comments mentioned experiential learning as a reason for returning to the institution. An example of that type of response comes from one respondent who indicated, “I also have a research project in progress here that I don’t want to abandon.” It is possible,

however, that the research project excitement was more about the relationship with the faculty member than the experiential learning aspect of the research.

### ***Social Environment***

In reviewing the responses, it appears that the social environment is playing as much of a role in students' decisions to return as the academic environment. Looking at Table 1, the first category was academics, but the next three categories, friends, social activities, and feeling comfortable, describe social aspects of the institution. The results in Table 2 are very consistent with these responses. Friends were the influencing factor with the second highest mean and other students closely followed faculty in class as a reason for returning. In reviewing the comments from the respondents, they elaborated a bit more on the impact of the friends and the social aspects of the institution, which included comments about feeling comfortable at the institution, or being involved in a specific organization or athletic team. Many respondents just used the word "friends" as their response, but a few respondents elaborated a little bit more. For example, one respondent indicated "I made so many really good friends that I wanted to see again and live with!" The qualitative responses allowed for a little bit more detail about both the positive and negative reasons for returning. Nearly 10% of respondent comments described a comfortable environment at the institution, either because it was close to home, or because it was a smaller campus. The smaller environment was commented on both in terms of small class sizes and getting to know people on campus, which allowed some respondents to make friends. One respondent noted that the "small campus life allows me to feel seen and heard." Other respondents described being comfortable at the institution and used phrases like "how happy I feel here" to describe a reason for returning.

In addition to asking respondents about the top reasons for returning to the institution, respondents were also asked two additional open-ended questions aligned with the social environment. Respondents were asked how they have managed any challenges they have faced since enrolling and how have they celebrated accomplishments since enrolling. Table 3 summarizes the comments related to how respondents celebrated their accomplishments. The responses for these items were also coded using an inductive approach with descriptive codes.

**Table 3**

*How Have You Celebrated Your Accomplishments Since Enrolling?*

Activity	Number of Comments	Percentage of Comments
Haven't celebrated	26	30.23%
Treat myself	15	17.44%
Friends	13	15.12%
Breaks	12	13.95%
Family	9	10.47%
Miscellaneous	6	6.98%
New goals	2	2.33%
Other	1	1.16%
Faculty	1	1.16%
Update resume	1	1.16%
Total	86	100%

In response to the item focused on celebrating accomplishments, 71 respondents provided 86 categories of comments. It is worth noting that 30.23% of the comments indicated that they hadn't celebrated since enrolling. However, the majority of respondents did report some form of celebrating related to the social environment at the institution as 17.44% of respondents indicated that they would treat themselves, 15.12% of respondents would celebrate with their friends, 13.95% of respondents took breaks, 10.47% of respondents would celebrate with their family, 2.33% would celebrate by establishing new goals, and one respondent indicated they would celebrate by reaching out to faculty that they formed relationships with. One respondent also celebrated by updating their resume. The miscellaneous category represents the 6.98% of



responses that were random comments that didn't exactly respond to the prompt. Many of the comments that were coded as haven't celebrated included very little detail. As just two examples, one respondent indicated "No I have not" and another respondent indicated "haven't really." Examples of the comments focused on treating oneself include respondents indicating activities as follows: "I've celebrated with grabbing a coffee and going to sit on either [quad]" or "getting taco bell after every quiz/test." The students who talked about taking breaks typically describe taking a break or relaxing after a big test or project.

In terms of managing challenges while enrolled at the institution, Table 4 outlines the comments received related to challenges. Respondents indicated a variety of ways in which they have managed the challenges they have faced. A total of 77 respondents provided 108 examples of how they have dealt with challenges since enrolling. The highest percentage of respondents, 16.67%, asked friends for help or advice. Another 16.67% provided comments that were related to the specific challenges they faced. Additionally, 15.74% of respondents worked their challenges out on their own, 13.89% of respondents reached out to their advisor or a faculty member, 8.33% of respondents received support from home. The next group of comments reflected responses associated with campus services as 8.33% of responses focused on help through broadly-defined campus organizations, and 7.41% of respondents received help through counseling services specifically. Of the remaining comments, 6.48% of respondents sought help in another way, 5.56% of respondents addressed their challenges through studying, and one respondent indicated Chegg was the answer to their challenges. Comments were coded as "Counseling" if they specifically mentioned the counseling center. Many responses mentioned organizations broadly or campus recreation. An example of such a comment is as follows: "I have a lot of people on campus I could talk to. I go to counseling, I have friends I could talk to,

and I am not afraid to reach out to anyone on campus, whether it's about financial assistance, room and board, academic help, etc.”

**Table 4**

*How Have You Managed Any Challenges That You Have Faced Since Enrolling?*

Activity	Number of Comments	Percentage of Comments
Friends	18	16.67%
Miscellaneous	18	16.67%
Worked out on own	17	15.74%
Advisor or Faculty	15	13.89%
Family/Home	9	8.33%
Campus Organizations	9	8.33%
Counseling	8	7.41%
Sought help	7	6.48%
Studying	6	5.56%
Chegg	1	0.93%
Total	108	100%

### ***Financial Reasons***

In reviewing the data in both Table 1 and Table 2, it is noteworthy that financial reasons influenced students' decisions to return to the institution. Nearly 50% of respondents indicated that the financial assistance staff influenced or strongly influenced their return to the institution. Additionally, nearly 7% of the comments provided by respondents mentioned financial reasons for returning to the institution. Some respondents mentioned specific scholarships or awards, others just indicated “money.” One respondent elaborated a little bit more and indicated “I have good financial assistance and a good price package here.”

It is also important to note that although the atmosphere may be comfortable and welcoming for many, there were six percent of comments that indicated they chose to return to the institution because transferring to another institution is just too difficult. One respondent indicated “it's easier to return than to go through the transfer process.” Another respondent took that description a step further and noted, “going to a different college is not really an option; and

so if I were to leave I would be essentially dropping out of all academic things. And if I were to drop out it would be a waste of time and money so far into it. It's sort of an abusive relationship but it will theoretically be worth it if I get a degree." It is important to be aware of both the positive and negative comments and reasons for returning. Academic and social reasons for returning to the institution may be strong influencing factors. However, the financial impact of higher education cannot be forgotten. For many students it seems to be that financial reasons are a strong factor for returning to the institution. Financial reasons may impact students from some demographic groups more than others.

### **Demographic Group Results**

The second research question asked: how do the factors that influenced undergraduate students to return to the university for a second year differ by demographic group? The Fall 2021 Retention Survey included self-reported demographic variables for race and ethnicity, gender or gender identity, first-generation status, the student's college or program affiliation, and whether the student was eligible for the federal Pell grant or a state grant, which served as indicators of financial need. This section explores survey responses by demographic group. As mentioned in the first section, the responses to the items in parts one to three were consistent across demographic groups. In part four of the survey, the items asked respondents four questions about aspects of the overall university experience. The items in part four begin to show some differences by demographic groups. This section will explore the demographic breakdown of respondents through the context of the four overarching questions.

The four questions focused on the overall university experiences are included in Table 5. The table displays the four items and the frequency of responses for each item along with the means and standard deviations. Breakdowns of the responses by demographic group will follow.

Student success focused on race and ethnicity is a current institutional priority. This section will include an analysis of each of the items by race and ethnicity as well as a breakdown by any additional relevant demographic variables.

**Table 5**

*Fall 2021 Retention Survey Responses to Part 4: Overall University Experiences*

	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree		M	SD
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
I believe [the] University cares about me as an individual	18	15.9	25	22.1	60	53.1	10	8.8	2.55	.87
I intend to graduate from [the] University	3	2.7	7	6.2	38	33.6	65	57.5	3.46	.73
I have the financial resources to purchase all required course materials.	14	12.4	16	14.2	64	56.6	19	16.8	2.78	.87
I have the financial resources to fully participate in University activities, such as paying organizational dues or participating in [University]-affiliated travel	12	10.6	19	16.8	67	59.3	13	11.5	2.73	.81

The self-reported demographic characteristics for the Fall 2021 Retention Survey respondents are included in Table 6. Of the 112 respondents who chose to identify their race or ethnicity, 74.1% of the respondents identified as White and 8.0% of respondents preferred not to say. The remaining respondents identified as 8.9% Hispanic/Latino; 4.5% Asian, and 3.6% Black or African American. One respondent identified as two or more races. White students were overrepresented in this sample. Respondents generally reflected the institutional population when reviewing the demographic breakdowns by college. The university is made up of five colleges plus one academic program for undecided majors. There were only two respondents representing the undecided major program, but given that students were asked to complete the survey in the fall semester of their second year, this number makes sense.

**Table 6***Demographic Characteristics of the Fall 2021 Retention Survey Respondents*

Characteristic	N	%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
Asian	5	4.5
Black or African American	4	3.6
Hispanic/Latino	10	8.9
Two or more races	1	.9
White	83	74.1
Prefer not to say	9	8.0
<b>College or Program</b>		
College 1	15	13.3
College 2	16	14.2
College 3	21	18.6
College 4	23	20.4
College 5	36	31.9
Undecided Program	2	1.8
<b>Parent Bachelor's Degree</b>		
Yes	69	61.6
No	38	33.9
Unsure	5	4.5
<b>Gender or Gender Identity</b>		
Male	37	33.0
Female	65	58.0
Non-binary/third gender	6	5.4
Prefer not to say	4	3.6
<b>Pell Grant</b>		
Yes	30	26.8
No	51	45.5
Unsure	31	27.7
<b>State Grant</b>		
Yes	25	22.3
No	51	45.5
Unsure	36	32.1
<b>Financial Aid Award Change</b>		
Yes	31	27.7
No	48	42.9
Unsure	33	29.5

The survey respondents also reflected the student population of first-generation students. Respondents were asked whether either of their parents had a bachelor's degree. Of those that responded to the survey, 33.9% were first-generation students, 61.6% of respondents were not first-generation students, and 4.5% of respondents were unsure about their parents' bachelor's degree status. The survey also asked respondents to identify their gender or gender identity. The

male students were underrepresented in the 112 survey respondents with 33.0% of respondents identifying as male and 58.0% of respondents identifying as female. Additionally, 5.4% of respondents identified as non-binary/third gender and 3.6% of respondents preferred not to disclose their gender or gender identity.

The survey also asked a few additional demographic questions. First, the survey asked if respondents were enrolled in the same program in which they entered the university. As a result of 99% of respondents indicating that they were still enrolled in the same program, additional analysis on this item was not conducted. The survey concluded by asking respondents about their financial need. It is important to note that nearly one-third of all respondents were unsure about their financial awards. Of the 112 respondents that chose to answer the financial questions, 27.7% were unsure if they had received a Pell grant, 32.1% were unsure if they had received a state grant, and 29.5% were unsure whether their financial aid award changed from Fall 2020 to Fall 2021. Although there were some interesting items of note describing the experiences between the respondents that received grants and those that did not receive grants, the last group of unsure respondents was excluded from further comparisons.

### *The University Cares*

When looking at the overall responses to the item: I believe [the] University cares about me as an individual, 62% of respondents agree or strongly agree with that statement, meaning that 38% of respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement as indicated in Table 5. However, given the large number of White respondents, the results tend to reflect their feelings with 62.6% of White respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that the University cares. When looking at the responses by race/ethnicity, the data tell a slightly different story. Keeping in mind the small sample sizes in Table 6, there are still some differences to consider in

response to this question by race/ethnicity. When broken down by race/ethnicity, 80% of Hispanic/Latino respondents, 60% of Asian respondents, 50% of Black or African American respondents, and 33.3% of respondents who preferred not to indicate their race or ethnicity strongly agreed or agreed that the university cared about them as an individual. Although the sample sizes are small, further investigation and research into these differences may be a future direction for research.

Reviewing this item through the lens of additional demographic categories provides additional information about the student experience. The institution includes five colleges and one academic program for undecided students. When breaking down the results by college, 60% of respondents in College 1, 76.2% of respondents in College 3, 69.6% of respondents in College 4, and 61.2% of respondents in College 5 indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that the university cared about them as an individual. However, in College 2, 43.8% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the university cared about them as an individual, meaning that 56.3% of respondents from that college disagreed or strongly disagreed that the university cared about them as an individual.

It is also important to note some differences in responses by gender. The male responses indicated that 59.4% of male respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the university cared about them. The female responses indicated that 66.2% of female respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the university cared about them. However, the non-binary/third gender respondents agreed or strongly agreed 50% of the time, meaning that 50% also disagreed or strongly disagreed. The respondents who preferred not to identify their gender disagreed or strongly disagreed 75% of the time that the university cared about them with 25% agreeing or strongly agreeing the university cared. It is important to note the small sample sizes indicated in Table 6

related to the non-binary/third gender and the prefer not to identify respondents, but also important to acknowledge they may be feeling undervalued by the institution.

Finally, some differences were noted between those respondents that indicated they had financial need and those that did not. The respondents who received the state grant felt like the university cared about them as individuals more than the respondents who did not receive that award with 72% of state grant respondents indicating that they agreed or strongly agreed. Of the respondents who did not receive the award, 56.9% agreed or strongly agreed that the university cared about them as an individual. Interestingly, respondents that did not receive Pell grants and respondents that did receive Pell grants were in more alignment. Of the respondents who did not receive Pell grants, 60.8% agreed or strongly agreed that the institution cared about them, and of the respondents who did receive Pell grants, 63.3% agreed or strongly agreed that the institution cared about them.

It is interesting to note the differences in response by demographic group to their perceptions of whether the university cares about them as an individual. Although the sample sizes in respondent groups by race and ethnicity are small, it is an area for institutional conversation and awareness. The difference noticed among respondents from College 2 is also an area for further conversation and investigation. The male and female respondents were in general agreement, however, the non-binary/third gender respondents and the respondents who preferred not to identify their gender seem to feel undervalued by the institution. This is also an area for future investigation and awareness. The response from 72% of those respondents who received the state grant seems to align with the respondents who ranked financial assistance in the top factors that influenced their return to the institution. The impact of financial need cannot be overlooked.



### *Financial Concerns*

As indicated in Table 5, 73.4% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they could purchase all required course materials, and 26.6% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they could purchase all required course materials. Additionally, 70.8% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had the financial resources to participate in university activities while 27.4% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they could fully participate in university activities. Once those responses are broken down by demographic variables, a better understanding begins to emerge. When looking at the responses by race and ethnicity, 80% of Asian respondents, 78.3% of White respondents, 55.6% of respondents who preferred not to disclose their race or ethnicity, 50% of Black or African American respondents, and 50% of Hispanic/Latino respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they had the financial resources to purchase all required course materials. Along those same lines, 76.9 % of White respondents, 55.6% of respondents who preferred not to indicate a race or ethnicity, 50% of Black or African American respondents and 33.3% of Hispanic or Latino respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they had the financial resources to fully participate in university activities.

When looking at the data by college, it is worth noting that 81.3% of respondents from College 2, 71.4% of respondents from College 3, 82.6% of respondents from College 4, and 77.8% of respondents from College 5 agreed or strongly agreed that they could purchase all required course materials. When looking at College 1, 46.6% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they could purchase all required course materials, meaning that 53.4% of College 1 respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they could purchase all required course materials. There were not any differences of note related to participating in activities when looking at the data by college.

When looking at the responses by first-generation status, 60.6% of first-generation respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they could purchase all course materials. Additionally, 54% of first-generation respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they could fully participate in university activities. The respondents who were not first-generation agreed or strongly agreed they could purchase course materials 79.7% of the time. A similar trend emerged for fully participating in activities. The respondents who were not first-generation agreed or strongly agreed that they could fully participate in activities 82.4% of the time.

Additionally, when reviewing the responses by financial need, 64% of those respondents who received state grants and 63.4% of those that received Pell grants agreed or strongly agreed that they could purchase all course materials. In comparison, 74.5% of those that did not receive state grants and 76.5% of those that did not receive Pell grants agreed or strongly agreed that they could purchase all course materials. Similarly, 62.5% of those that received the state grant and 58.6% of Pell grant recipients strongly agreed or agreed that they could fully participate in activities. In comparison, 76.5% of those that did not receive the state grant, and 78.5% of those that did not receive Pell grants strongly agreed or agreed that they could fully participate in activities.

It is important to note the financial challenges that respondents may be facing and to be aware of how those challenges may differ by certain demographic groups. Underrepresented students, first-generation students, and students who received a state grant or a Pell grant reported that they are more limited in their ability to purchase course materials and to engage in institutional activities. It is important to consider how these limitations impact institutional connections.

Respondents were able to elaborate on their responses through qualitative comments. The comments were analyzed and coded using an inductive approach and descriptive codes. Of the 113 respondents, 63 individuals provided comments about the course materials that were difficult to purchase, and 28 individuals provided comments about the activities that were difficult to finance. Table 7 summarizes the comments focused on course materials, and Table 8 summarizes the comments focused on activities. The comments are once again ordered by the highest percentage to the lowest percentage of comments.

The 63 respondents provided 78 unique comments about course materials that were difficult to finance. Over 50% of respondents commented on textbooks being the most difficult to purchase. Course materials, which included comments focused on access codes, McGraw Hill Connect, and WebAssign were examples of specific materials mentioned by respondents that were difficult to purchase beyond textbooks. In responding to this item, 10.26% of respondents included the response “none” to the prompt, and an additional 7.69% of respondents took the opportunity to discuss other financial comments related to costs or financial stress.

**Table 7**

*Course Materials That Were Difficult to Purchase*

Course Material	Number of Comments	Percentage of Comments
Books	40	51.28%
Course Materials	20	25.64%
None	8	10.26%
Financial Comments	6	7.69%
Tuition	2	2.56%
Course Fees	1	1.28%
Summer Courses	1	1.28%
Total	78	100%

Respondents also had the opportunity to provide some context for activities that have been difficult to finance. Although 28 individuals provided 29 categories of responses, the highest percentage of responses, 34.48%, was individuals who indicated they did not experience

activities that were difficult to finance. The next category of respondents, 24.14%, indicated that Greek Life was difficult to finance, followed by Study Abroad at 10.34% of respondents.

Respondents again took the opportunity to comment on financial stress for this item with 10.34% of respondents also commenting on this area. Respondents also indicated that travel was difficult to finance, but also that they did not have the time to participate in activities.

**Table 8**

*Activities That Have Been Difficult to Finance*

Activity	Number of Comments	Percentage of Comments
None	10	34.48%
Greek Life	7	24.14%
Study Abroad	3	10.34%
Financial Stress	3	10.34%
Travel	2	6.90%
Time	2	6.90%
Organization Swag	1	3.45%
All Activities	1	3.45%
Total	29	100%

***Commitment to Graduation***

The one item in part four of the Fall 2021 Retention Survey where the respondents were in relative agreement, even when the responses were broken down by demographic variables was their intention to graduate from the university. As shown in Table 5, 91.1% of respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that they intended to graduate from the university. It is important to keep in mind that this group of students had already chosen to return to the institution for their second year.

When breaking the numbers down by demographic variables, 75% of Black or African American respondents, 77.7% of the respondents who preferred not to indicate a race or ethnicity, 91.5% of White respondents, 100% of Asian respondents, and 100% of Hispanic or Latino respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the intention to graduate. It is important to

note that over 90% of respondents in four of the colleges intended to graduate from the institution. However, 80% of respondents from College 1 indicated they agreed or strongly agreed that they intend to graduate from the institution. This is the same college where 53.4% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were able to fully purchase all course materials. Finally, when looking at the percentages by first-generation status, 84.2% of first-generation respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the intention to graduate compared with 98.6% of respondents who were not first-generation students.

### **Discussion**

The Fall 2021 Retention Survey was designed to help identify the factors that influenced students' enrollment choices as well as contextualize the respondents' university experience. The survey also contained demographic variables in order to identify themes or factors that were described by some demographic groups and not others. Some common themes about the factors that influenced continued enrollment were identified. Demographic differences in interactions with the university were also identified.

#### **Academic, Social, and Financial Factors**

The theoretical framework that guided this study focused on Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure. The theory describes how the academic and social systems of an institution work together to influence student enrollment decisions. As noted previously, the survey was designed to ask students about what academic, social, and institutional structures influenced their decisions to remain enrolled. In response to the first research question, the themes identified from the survey results indicate that students at this institution are influenced by both academic and social factors to remain enrolled. Respondents also described financial factors as impacting their decision to remain enrolled.

Respondents described the impact of friendships as well as the impact of their major courses and their relationships and interactions with faculty in their decisions to remain enrolled. It is interesting to note that it does seem to be the students' major courses and relationships with faculty that are either associated with their major or associated with experiential learning, such as undergraduate research, which have had the most impact on the decisions to return. Other academic aspects of the educational environment, such as core curriculum courses, were not mentioned in comments or rated as highly as the major coursework experiences. Students described relationships with faculty in their comments, but also the friendships they had formed, how they were looking forward to seeing friends, and how they felt connected through campus or social organizations to the institution. Students also described a comfortable institutional environment. The themes were consistent across demographic groups, and it is important to recognize that the academic experience as well as the social experience are working together to inform students' choices.

Despite the positive relationships that students may have formed, the reasons for returning to the institution were not always directly focused on relationships. Some respondents indicated that they were remaining enrolled due to financial reasons, such as having received good grants or scholarships. Other respondents indicated that they remained enrolled because transferring to another institution was perceived as too difficult. Respondents indicated both financial reasons in their written comments, and respondents also recognized that financial assistance was an organizational structure that influenced their continued enrollment.

It is important to consider how the academic experience, the social experience, and financial factors work together to influence enrollment decisions. Consistent with the literature, these factors are indeed working together to influence student decisions and perceptions of their

educational experience. Institutional leaders have the opportunity to reinforce the internal connections between the academic and the social components of the institution. Positive interactions with faculty members have the ability to influence student success and continued enrollment (Tinto, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, it is important to recognize that students are engaging with the institution and that they don't differentiate between the faculty support and the staff support they are receiving (Farrell et al., 2018). Both faculty and staff need to understand how students are engaging with the entire institution, and both groups of employees need to be supported as they continue to support and engage with students.

The connections that students are making with an institution are influenced through their social connections and financial resources. Helping students to foster institutional connections and a sense of belonging with the institution as well as ensuring adequate financial support for students can be especially helpful for first-generation college students (Pratt et al., 2019). Institutional support and recognition of the social environment is critical for student connection and engagement. The sense of belonging that a student feels to an institution is impacted through connections to peers and close friendships (Bronkema & Bowman, 2019). However, faculty may also influence the students' feelings of connection and belonging to the institution based on their engagement with students in the classroom (Kirby & Thomas, 2022). Financial stress, described by respondents through challenges in purchasing course materials or the ability to fully engage in institutional activities, may impact student connections and their decisions to remain enrolled. It is important to recognize that taking out additional financial aid to support engagement in activities is not always feasible for students. Additional loans may negatively impact students' ability to remain enrolled by increasing their feelings of financial stress (Britt et al., 2017). The hidden costs of fully participating in activities may be a barrier for students (Allan et al., 2021).

It is important to recognize how all of these factors have contributed to the students' decisions to remain enrolled at this institution.

### **Demographic Trends**

When looking at the overall university experience items in part four by demographic variables, some differences began to emerge. The overall experience items were designed to gauge students' perceptions of how the institution cared for them, their decisions to remain enrolled until graduation, and financial barriers that may impact students' engagement with their courses or institutional activities. It is important to note that there are small sample sizes of students in certain demographic groups. For example, when looking across the racial and ethnic variable, students of color were underrepresented in the respondent pool. Therefore, there are very small numbers of students in every racial or ethnic group besides White students. These results need to be interpreted and discussed with caution. However, there is an opportunity for institutional stakeholders to collect future data and further investigate the experiences of students from different backgrounds. Breaking down responses by demographic group can help institutional leaders begin to understand the student experiences in the context of their identities (McNair et al., 2020). These results provide a starting point for additional conversations and investigation within the institution.

When looking at students' intention to graduate from the university, 100% of Asian students and Hispanic/Latino students indicated that they intended to graduate from the institution. This is a potentially interesting contrast to the 75% of Black or African American students and the 77.7% of the students who preferred not to indicate their race or ethnicity. Given the small sample size, it is difficult to know if this is a meaningful difference, but it is one for institutional stakeholders to consider as an opportunity for future research. It is also important to



acknowledge the differences in first-generation respondents where 84.2% of respondents indicated they strongly agreed or agreed with the intention to graduation from the university compared with 98.6% of those students that were not first-generation students.

There were some differences to explore among the respondents by College as well. The respondents from College 1 reported more difficulty purchasing course materials with 53.4% strongly disagreeing or disagreeing that they were able to purchase all materials. Additionally, while over 90% of the students from the other four colleges indicated that they intended to graduate from the university, 80% of the students from College 1 agreed or strongly agreed that they intended to graduate from the university. When breaking the intention to graduate item down by the remaining demographic variables, students were consistent in their desire to graduate.

Along those same lines, it is important to understand how students feel the institution cares about them. Although the respondents indicated their intention to graduate from the institution, when reviewing the responses focused on how they felt the institution cared about them, the responses were a bit different. Although all Hispanic/Latino respondents indicated they intended to graduate from the institution, 80% of Hispanic/Latino respondents felt that the institution cared about them, and 20% of the Hispanic/Latino respondents strongly disagreed with that statement. When looking at the Asian responses, 60% agreed that the institution cared about them as an individual and 40% disagreed with the statement. When reviewing the White student responses, 63% agreed or strongly agreed that the institution cared about them, and 37% disagreed or strongly disagreed. The Black or African American respondents were split in half in terms of their perceptions of whether the institution cares for them as an individual. Although

there were differences with first-generation status when viewing the intention to graduate, there were not differences of note related to this university cares item.

Some other demographic differences emerged from the respondents as well. When reviewing the responses from College 2, 56.3% of the respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed that the institution cared about them, and 43.8% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the institution cared about them. The non-binary/third gender respondents and the respondents who preferred not to identify their gender also indicated that they did not feel the institution cared about them with 50% of non-binary/third gender respondents and 75% of respondents who preferred not to identify their gender strongly disagreeing or disagreeing that the university cares about them as an individual. Finally, it is important to recognize that 72% of respondents who received the state grant agreed or strongly agreed that the university cares about them as an individual. It seems as if the institution may be paying close attention to students who have a financial need, but students in other categories may need more attention and investigation.

In reviewing the literature, research suggests that students are influenced to remain enrolled until graduation based on both the perceptions of the institution's commitment to them along with their commitment to the institution (Savage et al., 2019). It is important to be aware of students' feelings about the levels of institutional support or care, and how those feelings may differ across subgroups. Additionally, institutions need to provide students with opportunities for success. One opportunity to demonstrate commitment and influence student success may be to partner with students to develop programs or initiatives to help them succeed and remain enrolled (McDevitt & Allen-Stuck, 2018). This type of collaboration could demonstrate care while also supporting student success. Institutions need to ensure students from diverse backgrounds are feeling supported and connected to the institution (Meyer, 2021).

Financial concerns emerged through the lens of demographic trends as well. Although over 70% of White respondents indicated that they could purchase all required course materials and participate in activities, those numbers were closer to 50% for Black or African American respondents and Hispanic/Latino respondents in terms of the ability to purchase all course materials. When considering the financial resources needed to participate in institutional activities, 33.3% of Hispanic or Latino respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that they had the financial resources to participate in institutional activities. First-generation students and students who received the state grant or the Pell grant also reported challenges purchasing course materials and participating fully in activities. Of the respondents who indicated they were first-generation students, 39.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they could purchase all course materials, and 45.9% of first-generation respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they could fully participate in university activities. Of those respondents that reported they received state grants, 36% strongly disagreed or disagreed that they could purchase all course materials, and 37.5% strongly disagreed or disagreed that they could fully participate in activities. Of those respondents that received Pell grants, 36.7% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they could purchase all course materials and 41.3% strongly disagreed or disagreed that they could fully participate in activities.

Although there appear to be some areas for further investigation, it is important to remember that there were small sample sizes included among the respondents to this survey. Additionally, Tinto (1993) cautions researchers against overgeneralizing to entire groups of students based on perceived demographic differences. Further investigation into financial support, the experiences of students by race and ethnicity, the experiences of first-generation

students, and the experiences of students in College 1 and College 2 are some future directions for additional investigation to consider, however.

### **Conclusion**

The Fall 2021 Retention Survey was designed to investigate the factors that influenced students' decisions to return to the institution in which they enrolled as first-year students for a second year. The survey also provided an opportunity to begin to review the results and understand the student experience across demographic variables. The results demonstrated that the academic and social experiences are working together to influence students' decisions to remain enrolled. Financial considerations impacted students' choices, and it is important to note the financial challenges facing students. When reviewing the data by demographic variables, some financial differences by demographic group begin to emerge. The data seem to indicate students are able to pay tuition to remain enrolled, but the expenses for course materials and activities that may not otherwise be part of a financial aid package may be difficult for some students to pay. Finally, although the respondents generally agreed that they wanted to graduate from the institution, there were differences in perceptions of how much the institution cared about them as an individual. It is worth investigating those feelings in the context of the broader connections to the institution. Chapter five will synthesize these results and discuss the implications and limitations of this study next.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSIONS**

#### **Introduction**

This study was designed to (1) explore how undergraduate students identify and describe the factors that influenced them to return to the university for their second year, and (2) explore how the factors that influenced students to return to the university for a second year differ by demographic group. Chapters one and two were spent introducing the need for this study and the literature surrounding undergraduate retention research. Chapter three described the specific methodologies and methods used to conduct this study. Chapter four summarized and discussed the results of the study. Chapter five synthesizes the study's results by offering conclusions and implications for practice. This chapter will also discuss future research opportunities and the limitations of this study. The chapter begins with a summary of the study and an overview of the themes that emerged through the survey results within the context of the study's research purpose and questions.

#### **Summary of the Study**

This study was conducted by administering a survey to students at a midwestern private university during the Fall 2021 semester. The population invited to complete the survey was students who entered the institution as first-year students in Fall 2020. They made the decision to return to the same institution for their second year in Fall 2021. This study was guided by two research questions:

1. What factors influenced undergraduate students' decisions to return to the university for a second year?

2. How do the factors that influenced undergraduate students to return to the university for a second year differ by demographic group?

The survey results were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and the qualitative items were coded using descriptive codes and an inductive approach to coding. The qualitative responses helped to contextualize the quantitative responses.

### **Factors that Influenced Students' Decisions to Return**

The factors that influenced students' decisions to return to the university for their second year were academic factors, social factors, and financial factors. The qualitative and quantitative results consistently supported these themes. The qualitative responses provided further details to understand the quantitative results.

#### ***Academics***

Students were clear in both their qualitative and quantitative responses that one of the factors that influenced their decisions to return to the university for a second year was academics. Respondents prioritized academic reasons in the quantitative section by highlighting major courses, faculty in class, and their academic advisor as factors that influenced them to return to the university. Those responses were also supported by the qualitative comments as respondents described academics, predominately through the lens of their major courses, professors, and the desire to graduate as reasons for returning to the university for their second year. Through the qualitative comments, respondents also described sharing successes with faculty.

#### ***Social***

The respondents were clear that it isn't just academics that influenced their reasons for returning to the university for their second year. In the quantitative items, respondents prioritized friends, other students, and campus organizations aligned with the social factors for returning to

the institution. In their qualitative comments, respondents further described the friendships they had made, the comfortable campus environment, and the social environment of the institution. Students also described celebrating successes with friends and managing challenges with friends and campus organizations.

### ***Financial***

Respondents prioritized the financial assistance area as one of the services that influenced their decision to return to the university as well as describing some of the financial reasons for returning to the institution through their qualitative comments. For example, respondents described specific scholarships or grants they had been awarded. Respondents also described how they felt their continued enrollment was financially important, that the process to transfer to another institution is difficult, and that there was the potential to lose money by transferring. Students were also asked about any course materials that were difficult to purchase or any activities that were difficult to engage in as other indicators of financial challenges. Respondents described textbooks and online course materials that were difficult to purchase. The respondents who described challenges in participating in activities noted that Greek life, study abroad, and travel were some areas in which respondents were not able to participate fully.

### ***Summary***

The first research question was answered in terms of the three themes identified through the Fall 2021 Retention Survey results. The factors that influenced undergraduate students' decisions to return to this institution for a second year included academic factors, social factors, and financial factors. Given how the respondents prioritized and described their reasons for returning to the institution, it is important to recognize how all three of these factors are working together to influence student decisions. It is important to recognize that students are engaging

with all aspects of the institution, and that each of these areas need to be supporting students effectively.

### **Factors by Demographic Group**

In addition to asking respondents about the factors that influenced their decisions to return to the university for their second year, the Fall 2021 Retention Survey also included demographic variables with which respondents could identify. The goal of including these items was to be able to further break down the results by demographic group and identify whether there were any differences in how different groups prioritized the factors that influenced their decisions to return in order to answer the second research question. Overall, the responses to parts one to three of the survey, where respondents were asked about the factors that influenced their decision to return, were consistent across demographic groups. Once respondents reached part four of the survey, however, some demographic differences began to emerge. Part four of the survey was designed to ask students about their experiences with the institution. Result summaries organized by race and ethnicity, gender or gender identity, first-generation status, the student's college, and financial need follow.

#### ***Race/ethnicity***

When reviewing the responses to part four of the survey by race and ethnicity, some trends begin to emerge. Hispanic/Latino respondents and White respondents felt that the institution cared about them more than Asian respondents, Black or African American respondents, or respondents who preferred not to identify their race or ethnicity. Asian and White respondents were more likely to report being able to purchase all course materials and engage in activities than Black or African American respondents, Hispanic or Latino respondents, and respondents who preferred not to identify their race or ethnicity. Asian, Hispanic/Latino, and



White respondents were more likely to report their intention to graduate from the university than Black or African American respondents or respondents who preferred not to identify their race or ethnicity. These data suggest an opportunity to further investigate the experiences of students across racial and ethnic groups.

### ***Gender or Gender Identify***

When reviewing the responses by gender or gender identity, 102 out of 112 respondents identified as either male or female. Ten respondents either identified as non-binary or preferred not to disclose their gender or gender identity. There were gender differences noticed on the first item in part four, which focused on whether the respondents felt the university cared about them as an individual. Male and female respondents were in relative agreement with 59% of male respondents and 66% of female respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with that item. However, 50% of non-binary/third gender respondents and 75% of the respondents who preferred not to disclose their gender disagreed or strongly disagreed that the university cared about them. The response to this item stands out as each of the gender groups were in relative agreement in their responses to the remaining items in part four. Although there is a small sample size of non-binary/third gender respondents and those individuals that preferred not to disclose their gender identity, these data suggest an opportunity to investigate the experiences of non-binary students.

### ***First-generation Status***

When comparing the responses from first-generation respondents to the respondents who were not first-generation students, financial trends emerged. The first-generation student responses indicated that it is more difficult for this population to purchase all required course materials, and it was more difficult for first-generation respondents to fully participate in

activities when comparing their responses to the respondents who did not identify as first-generation students. Additionally, fewer first-generation respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the intention to graduate from the university than those students who did not identify as first-generation students. The responses from first-generation students can help inform future support mechanisms for this population of students.

### ***College***

The institution is comprised of five colleges. When breaking down the responses to the items in part four by college, the data for respondents from four of the colleges were in general agreement in terms of their goal of graduating from the institution with 90% of the respondents from College 2, College 3, College 4, and College 5 agreeing or strongly agreeing that they would like to graduate from the institution. College 1 had 80% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that they would like to graduate from the institution. College 1 also had 53.4% of respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were able to purchase all course materials. Additionally, over 60% of respondents from College 1, College 3, College 4, and College 5 agreed or strongly agreed that the university cared about them, but 43.8% of respondents from College 2 agreed or strongly agreed that the university cared about them. These data provide an opportunity for further investigation into the experiences of students in College 1 and 2. It would be interesting to explore how the student experiences in College 1 and 2 may be differing from those in College 3, 4, and 5 who were in more consistent alignment with each other.

### ***Financial Need***

The Fall 2021 Retention Survey attempted to gauge financial need by asking respondents whether they received a federal Pell grant or a state grant based on financial need. It was

interesting to note that the respondents who received the state grant felt that the institution cared about them more than the respondents who did not receive the state grant. The respondents who indicated that they received the Pell grant and those who indicated that they received the state grant reported that it was more difficult for them to purchase all course materials or fully participate in activities than respondents who did not receive Pell grants or the state grant. Although the institution may be sending signals to respondents with financial need that they are cared about, there may be other financial limitations for further consideration.

### ***Summary***

The second research question was answered by reviewing the student experiences with the institution as a whole by demographic group. Students were in consistent agreement about the academic, social, and financial factors that influenced their decisions to return when reviewing the results in parts one to three of the survey. There were differences by demographic group when reviewing the responses to the items in part four concerning how respondents felt the institution cared about them as an individual, any course materials or activities that were difficult to finance, and students' intention to graduation from this institution.

### **Implications for Practice**

The survey results demonstrate that students at this midwestern private university are engaging with the academic and social aspects of the institution, and they are both influencing students' decisions to return to the institution. It is important to recognize and support how both areas are working together to assist students and influence their decisions to return to the institution. The work of the faculty, staff, and administration are often described as separate responsibilities. In reality, students are engaging with the entire institution, and the institutional employees need to be working together to support the whole student experience. For example,

research conducted on first-generation students suggests that faculty who make the effort to get to know their students and learn about their lives outside of the classroom are viewed as supportive by students. A future institutional priority may be to implement professional development opportunities, such as faculty development workshops that can be implemented to further support faculty in the classroom in order to enhance student connections to the institution (Elliott, 2018; Schademan & Thompson, 2016).

Institutional leaders also have the opportunity to reflect on the services that are available to students, and ensure that both faculty and staff are working together to support students and their continued enrollment. Faculty and staff may each have hidden assumptions about what students know about support services and how the services are being communicated to students. Faculty and staff need to be aware of these underlying assumptions and work together to ensure support services are clearly communicated to the students (Tevis & Britton, 2020). All members of the institution are educators and have the potential to influence students' continued enrollment. Institutional faculty, staff, and administration need to collaborate together in order to effectively support students and their continued enrollment (McNair et al., 2016). However, all employees need to be supported in their work to effectively serve students and their continued enrollment.

Students also report that financial reasons influenced their decisions to return to the institution for a second year. Students described their financial aid awards, expressed concerns about the rising costs of tuition, and identified financial services as an institutional support structure that influenced their decisions to return to the institution. The results provide an opportunity to review financial aid awards and funding allocations to students. Although the financial awards may impact a decision to remain enrolled, the ability to purchase course

materials and the ability to participate in campus activities also require financial resources for the students. It is important to recognize that the ability to purchase course materials and to participate in campus activities may not be accessible to all students. Students are making financial decisions that need to be acknowledged. For example, it may not be possible for students to cover costs through additional loans. Taking out additional loans for students who may be considered low-income or Pell-eligible may actually have a negative impact on student retention (Herzog, 2018). It is important to consider the financial feedback from the students and to investigate any impact between student retention and loan debt at this institution.

This study was also designed to explore how students described their experiences through the lens of the demographic groups with which they identify. The survey asked students to self-report demographic variables and the survey results have been analyzed and discussed through the lenses of those characteristics. It is important to take these experiences into account and recognize how students from different demographic backgrounds may have different experiences within the same institution. The results suggest an opportunity to implement additional professional development opportunities to focus on students from diverse backgrounds, for example. Future possibilities may include workshops focused on inclusive approaches to teaching, and programming focused on supporting students in the classroom and their interactions with the institution (Guzzardo et al., 2021; O'Leary et al., 2020). As the survey results demonstrate, the students who participated in the survey intended to graduate, however, there are differences in demographic groups in terms of their perceptions of how much the institution cares for them. These results may indicate barriers that exist in their interactions, which could be addressed through future workshops or programming.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

This study was focused on one group of students who entered one midwestern private university as first-time first-year students in the Fall of 2020. The results of this study provide an opportunity to reflect on the reasons why students are choosing to return to this institution. The Fall 2021 Retention Survey was designed to explore the factors that influenced students' decisions to return to this institution for their second year. Although this survey was focused on students within an individual institution, it provides an opportunity for other institutions to consider why students are choosing to return to their institutions for a second year. Each institution is unique and includes its own unique culture and opportunities for engagement among institutional constituencies. This study adds to the literature by helping to contextualize how students at an individual institution describe and define their reasons for returning to the institution at which they started. The study also adds to the literature by describing how the student experience may vary for students in different demographic groups.

This institution has some areas for future research to consider as well. The survey respondent pool for this study was 113 total respondents. The disaggregated results included very small numbers within some groups. This institution has an opportunity to conduct follow-up studies focused specifically on students within certain groups. There is an opportunity to engage with Hispanic/Latino and African American students to understand their feelings about how the institution cares for them. There is an opportunity to explore the experiences of non-binary/third gender students. There is an opportunity to further study and explore financial aid packages and their impact on continued enrollment. There is an opportunity to explore the experiences of students in College 1 and 2 in order to understand how those experiences may differ from those

in College 3, College 4, and College 5. Finally, there is an opportunity to continue to investigate the experiences of first-generation students and students with financial need.

### **Limitations**

This study was conducted at a single midwestern private university. Therefore, the results are not generalizable to other institutions. Additionally, the results broken down by demographic groups, particularly race and ethnicity and gender identity, need to be interpreted with caution given the small sample sizes of students within the groups. Finally, it is important to recognize that this study was conducted in Fall 2021 based on students who entered the institution in Fall 2020, and that these responses represent a subset of one cohort of students. This time period was during the COVID-19 pandemic and the institution was operating with some hybrid and in-person courses, which was a departure from normal campus operations. It is important to consider that responses to this survey may differ when administered to different cohorts of students at different points in time.

### **Conclusion**

The Fall 2021 Retention Survey results provide some important institutional context and information to consider. First, students are choosing to return to the university based on their academic and social experiences as well as their financial support. Second, there are differences in how demographic groups describe their experiences. Students from Hispanic/Latino and African American or Black backgrounds report feeling like the institution cares about them less than Asian or White students. Hispanic/Latino and African American or Black students report more financial need than Asian or White respondents. First-generation students, and students who received Pell grants or state grants indicated that they have more difficulty purchasing course materials and participating in activities than students who were not first-generation or did

not receive Pell grants or state grants. Additionally, first-generation students were not as likely to indicate their intention to graduate from the institution when compared with those students who did not identify as first-generation students. The results suggest opportunities to influence the student experience through professional development opportunities and faculty and staff.

Additionally, future investigation into financial aid packages and how they are awarded can further help support students and their educational journeys. The results identified that future research opportunities may include studies to learn more about the experiences of African American or Black students, Hispanic or Latino students, first-generation students, students that are receiving the state financial grant or the federal Pell grant, and non-binary/third gender students.



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## APPENDIX

### FALL 2021 RETENTION SURVEY

#### Informed Consent Agreement

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study focused on your experiences with [this] University. Participation in this study means completing the following one-time survey. You are invited to complete the survey as an undergraduate student who entered [this] University in Fall 2020. The purpose of this study is to explore how students describe the factors that influenced their decision to return to [the] University. This is an anonymous survey; there is no link between your name and the responses you provide. Your participation in this study will take approximately 10 minutes. Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. You may also choose to skip questions. There are no known risks in participating in the study, but a possible benefit is that it will provide the opportunity for you to reflect on your experience with [the] University.

Questions about this study may be directed to Jennifer Gruening Burge, EdD Higher Education Administration Candidate [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. If you have general questions about being a research participant, you may contact the Committee on the Use of Human Subjects office [REDACTED]

By clicking the “I agree” button below, you are voluntarily making a decision to participate in this study. Clicking the "I agree" button means that you have read and understand the information presented about the study, that all of your questions about the study have been answered to your satisfaction, and that you have decided to participate. If you think of any additional questions, you may contact the researchers listed above at any time.

If you do not wish to participate in the study, please click on the “I do not agree” button and exit the survey at this time.

I agree

I do not agree

Thank you for agreeing to complete the Fall 2021 Student Retention Survey. The following questions are designed to help understand what contributed to your decision to return to [this] University for Fall 2021. Thank you for your time and participation.

**Part 1:**

Thinking about your experiences with your academic coursework over the last year, how did the following components influence your decision to return to [this] University this year?

	Did not Influence	Somewhat Influenced	Influenced	Strongly Influenced	N/A
Courses related to my major					
Courses related to my minor					
Faculty interactions in-class					
Faculty interactions out-of-class					
My Academic Advisor					
My Core Curriculum courses					
My Experiential Learning (EL) course or activity					
My Writing Intensive (WI) course					
Another academic experience.					

Please describe this experience in the space below.

**Part 2:**

Thinking about your out-of-class experiences over the last year, how did the following components influence your decision to return to [this] University this year?

	Did not Influence	Somewhat Influenced	Influenced	Strongly Influenced	N/A
A campus organization					
Friends					
Interactions with other students					
Residence halls					
Another social experience. Please describe this experience in the space below:					

**Part 3:**

Thinking about times when you needed additional help or support last year, how did the following support services influence your decision to return to [this] University this year?

	Did not Influence	Somewhat Influenced	Influenced	Strongly Influenced	N/A
Academic Success Center					

Financial Assistance  
 Registrar's Office  
 Smith Career Center  
 Student Billing  
 Another support service.  
 Please describe this service in the space below:

**Part 4:**

Please consider your experiences with [the]University overall as you answer the following questions.

I believe [the] University cares about me as an individual.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Agree

Strongly Agree

I intend to graduate from [the] University.

Strongly Disagree (1)

Disagree (2)

Agree (3)

Strongly Agree (4)

I have the financial resources to purchase all required course materials.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Agree

Strongly Agree

Please describe any course materials that have been difficult to purchase.

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I have the financial resources to fully participate in University activities, such as paying organizational dues or participating in [University]-affiliated travel.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Please describe any activities that have been difficult to finance.

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**Part 5:**

Please provide specific examples from your experiences as you answer the following open-ended questions.

In your own words, please list the top 3 to 5 reasons you chose to return to [this] University this year.

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How have you managed any challenges that you have faced since enrolling at [the] University?

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How have you celebrated your accomplishments since enrolling at [the] University?

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**Part 6:**

Please tell us a little bit more about yourself.

With which University college or program are you affiliated?

College 1  
College 2  
College 3  
College 4  
College 5  
Undecided Major Program

Are you affiliated with the same University college or program as when you enrolled in Fall 2020?

Yes  
No

What is your race/ethnicity?

American Indian or Alaska Native  
Asian  
Black or African American  
Hispanic/Latino  
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander  
Two or more races  
Nonresident  
White  
Prefer not to say

What is your gender or gender identity?

Female  
Male  
Non-binary/third gender  
Prefer not to say  
Prefer to self-describe

Do either of your parents have a Bachelor's degree?

Yes  
No  
Unsure

Have you ever received any of the following forms of financial assistance?

	Yes	No	Unsure
Pell Grant			
[State] Grant			

Has your financial assistance award changed from Fall 2020 to Fall 2021?

Yes

No

Unsure

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

Please use the space below to include anything else you would like to share about your decision to return to [the] University this year.

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