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An Examination of University Sophomore Students' Thriving Factors, Second-Year Experiences, and Student Success Outcomes

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Abstract

Most universities have focused retention efforts on the first year of college; however, just as many students leave college between the second year and the third year (Berker, He, & Forest, 2002; Lipka 2006). The overarching question for this study was: What is the relationship or impact of Thriving Factors, experiences, and success outcomes during the sophomore year of college. Thriving is defined as engaged learning, academic determination, social connectedness, positive perspective, and diverse citizenship (Schreiner, 2010). Thriving is more than just succeeding in the classroom, it encompasses success outside the classroom, psychological well-being and the relationships which are a part of the college experience (Schreiner, 2010b). Thriving implies students are not just surviving and getting by in college, but are also engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally and are experiencing psychological well-being that contributes to their being successful in college and in life after college (Schreiner, Pothoven, Nelson, & McIntosh, 2009).

Keywords: higher education, student success, student attrition, sophomores

Overview and Purpose of Study

The study of student retention has been a subfield of higher education since the 1930s. The focus of this body of knowledge was centered on what was known at the time as “student mortality,” or the failure of students to graduate from college (Berger & Lyon, 2005). Seminal publications like Gekoski and Schwartz’s (1961) “Student Mortality and Related Factors,” Panos and Astin’s (1968) article “Attrition Among College Students,” and Feldman and Newcomb’s (1969) book, *The Impact of College on Students*, were influential in bringing attention to the topic of retention. Retention is defined as percentage of first-time degree-seeking students who return from fall to fall (Noel & Levitz, 2008). Over the last 85 years, the research and study of retention, and why students leave, has grown significantly.

As the study of retention has progressed, so have attempts to create programs to help retain students at their institutions of matriculation. During the last two decades, there has been an increased focus on improving and transforming the first-year student experience (Alexander & Gardner, 2009). Beginning with summer

orientation and continuing through the entire first year, institutional programs and initiatives focus heavily on first-year students and their experience. New programs have been developed, classes added, staff positions created, and student leaders have received specific training to create an intentional first-year experience program (Marina & McGuire, 2008). The focus placed on the first-year experience has been driven by research that indicates that college attrition is most likely to occur during the first year or before the start of the second year of college (Tinto, 1993).

In recent years, as more retention research has been conducted, there has been a shift to also consider the sophomore, or second-year experience, as it was found that retention through the junior year is also critical to graduation rates (Schaller, 2005). However, the research on the second-year student experience and retention remains meager. Therefore, shifting research priorities toward understanding the role of the sophomore year in student retention and persistence should be the next reasonable step toward improving current persistence and graduation rates (Schaller, 2005). Universities need to focus more attention on sophomores, a group of students who historically have been forgotten in higher education (Tobolowsky, 2008). Sophomores are prone to high levels of dissatisfaction, challenges, attrition, and an overall disconnect with the university, yet they receive the least amount of support from universities (Boivan, Fountain, & Baylis; Gahagan & Hunter, 2006).

Colleges and universities have overlooked sophomores because most institutions have continued to operate under the arguably false belief that first-year programs were adequately and successfully addressing students' needs, and that students were successfully transitioning to college after the first year (Hunter, Tobolowsky, & Garner, 2010). However, colleges are experiencing a high attrition rate after the sophomore year (Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000). After freshmen, sophomores have the highest attrition rate among undergraduates (Gardner, Pattengale, Tobolowsky, & Hunter, 2010; Lipka, 2006; Noel-Levitz, 2013).

To fully understand attrition, retention, and persistence, it is important to understand student experiences in college, how students develop, and challenges encountered during the transition (Astin, 1993). College students encounter many changes and face multiple challenges during their first two years of college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Over the years, colleges and universities have primarily focused on developing engagement and retention initiatives to assist first-year students (Barefoot, 2000). Campuses nationwide have created First-Year Experience programs, which include resources, engagement initiatives, and programs focused on the first-year student (Griffin & Romm, 2008). Research indicates that First-Year Experience programs have strong positive influences on student development, engagement, and retention across the first year (Barefoot et al., 2005). Based on this research, it is not surprising that 95% of colleges and universities in the country have some type of First-Year Experience program (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, a closer look at research has begun to show a high rate of attrition between the sophomore and junior year (Schreiner, 2000).

Normally, student attrition is highest from the first to second year of college, and attrition rates are typically cut in half each subsequent year (Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000). Student attrition is the measure of students who leave after any term compared to the original first-year cohort. Thus, we would expect to see the sophomore-to-junior year attrition to be about half of what the first-year-to-sophomore year attrition rate was in a given year. However, sophomore to junior attrition rates are about equal to or slightly less than first-year to second-year attrition rates (Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000). It is concerning that given the current sophomore to junior year attrition rates, only 46% of institutions that participated in the National Survey of Sophomore-Year Initiatives (2008) indicated they offered at least one specific program for sophomore students.

The sophomore year has been considered the forgotten year, the lost year, and the middle child of higher education (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2007). These stereotypes of the sophomore year are slowly beginning to change as institutions realize the concerning attrition rates between the sophomore and junior year (Gardner, Pattengale, Tobolowsky, & Hunter, 2010). Many institutional leaders are beginning to ask the questions, “Why are students leaving after the sophomore year?,” “What can we do to retain them?,” and “How can we learn from the success of First-Year Experience initiatives?” In 2008, The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition conducted a National Survey of Sophomore-Year Initiatives. The information gathered through this survey indicated a strong correlation between sophomore-year initiatives and second-to-third-year retention rates (as cited in High-Impact Programs on Student Persistence Evidence from Institutional-Level Data, n.d., slides 15-16). According to Padgett (2010), 66.7% of institutions with sophomore initiatives had second-to-third-year retention rates between 75% and 100%, while 33.8% of institutions without sophomore initiatives had second-to-third-year retention rates between 75% and 100% (as cited in High-Impact Programs on Student Persistence Evidence from Institutional-Level Data, n.d., slides 15-16). “Overall, institutions that develop and deliver sophomore-year success initiatives generally yield higher third-year return rates from their students, suggesting that such second-year programming is a worthy investment” (Keup, Gahagan, & Goodwin, 2010, p. 26). Therefore, it is imperative for colleges and universities to identify ways in which they can address the high sophomore to junior year attrition rates to retain students and support their persistence through graduation.

Most universities have focused retention efforts on the first year of college; however, just as many students leave college between the second year and the third year (Berker, He, & Forest, 2002; Lipka 2006). This paper shares an overview and findings of a research study designed to examine university sophomore students’ thriving factors, second-year experiences, and student success outcomes. Specifically, the purpose of this research study was to determine: (1) the level of thriving among sophomore students; (2) what sophomore students are experiencing during their second year of college including the frequency of those experiences and how they report their level of satisfaction with their experiences; (3) the relationship between sophomore students’ perceptions of

thriving factors and students' reported experiences; (4) relationships between students' perceptions of student success outcomes in relation to intent to graduate; (5) which thriving factors account for the greatest amount of impact on student success outcomes; and 6) which sophomore experiences account for the greatest amount of impact on student success outcomes. The overarching question for this study was: What is the relationship or impact of thriving factors, experiences, and success outcomes during the sophomore year of college?

Over the last 85 years, researchers have studied why students leave college, why they stay in college, and experiences that impact those decisions. These findings have led to a transformation of the first-year experience for new students around the country. As of 2005, over 95% of colleges and universities offer new students some type of first-year experience to assist with their transition from high school to college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). These programs have been developed because of research indicating college attrition is mostly likely to occur during the first year of college and before the second year of college (Tinto, 1993).

Since the 2000s, research has shifted to focus on the experiences and needs of sophomore students. The research has explored sophomore retention, the sophomore slump, sophomore experiences, sophomore development, and sophomore initiatives on college campuses. This research has led to an understanding that sophomores are a group of students who have been deemed the *forgotten child* or the *middle child* of higher education (Tobolowsky, 2008). A major source of research has been the Sophomore Experiences Survey (SES) and the National Survey of Sophomore Initiatives (NSSI), both providing valuable information about what is occurring during the sophomore year and what universities are doing or not doing to serve these students.

One of the major findings of previous research has been the revelation that universities continue to operate under the false belief that first-year programs are adequately addressing transition needs for students and that students are successfully transitioning after the first year of college (Hunter, Tobolowsky, & Gardner, 2010; Schreiner, 2010). A focus on retention data indicates sophomores have the highest attrition rates after freshmen, and these rates are continuing to rise (Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000).

It is believed that understanding what sophomores are experiencing during their second year of college will help universities create environments and conditions that foster academic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development, along with high satisfaction and high completion rates. In addition, this study asserted that relationships exist among the constructs of thriving factors, sophomore students' experiences, and student success outcomes and that these constructs impact intent to return and graduation rates.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) encompasses four main factors that comprise the inputs that influence retention and student success: pre-college characteristics, university initiatives and support, Thriving Factors, and student experiences.

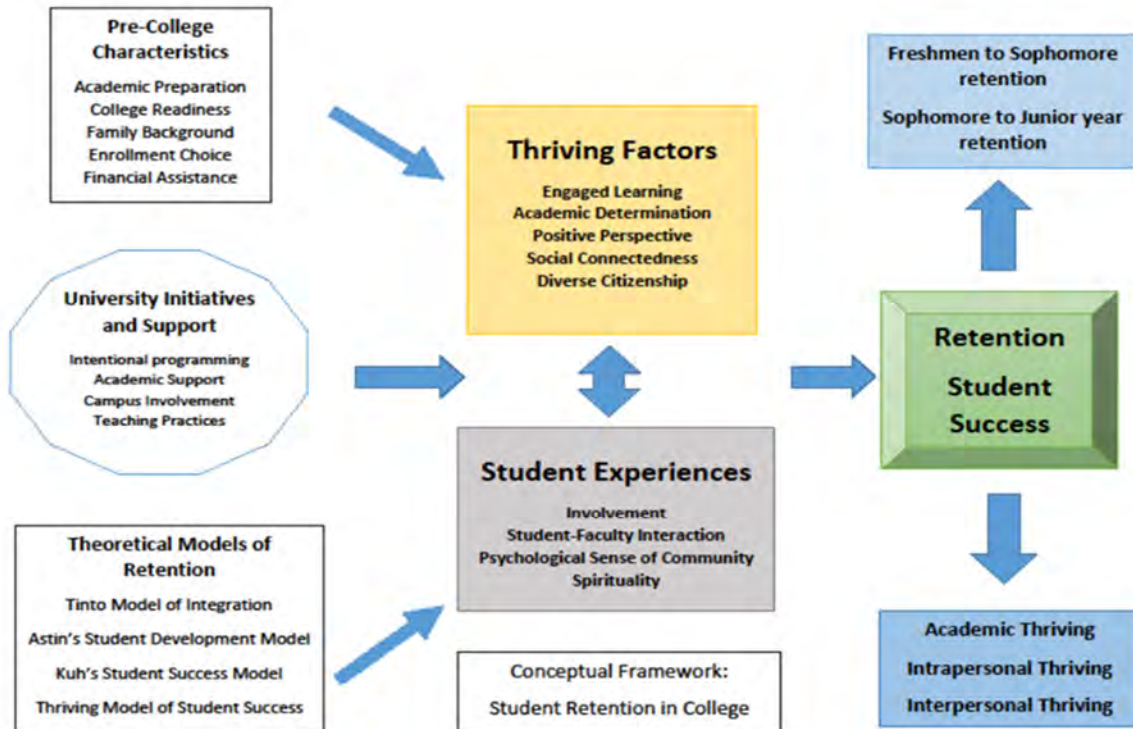


Figure 1. Student Retention and Success in College

The *first factor* of the model represents students' pre-college characteristics. These characteristics include academic preparation in K–12 schools, college readiness, family background, enrollment choices, and financial status, which all play a role in determining students' potential for success in college. The *second factor* represents university initiatives and support, which are created to intentionally support and motivate students towards meaningful learning (Tinto, 1993). The single best predictor of student success in college is the amount of time spent on educationally purposeful activities (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Contributing sub-factors to creating a culture of retention and student success include programs developed to focus on the first-year experience, the sophomore experience, creating an environment of academic support, providing opportunities for campus involvement, and developing intentional teaching practices. The *third factor* of the model represents the Thriving Factors, which impact student success: engaged learning, academic determination, positive perspective, diverse citizenship, and social connectedness (Schreiner, 2010). The *fourth factor* of the model represents student

experiences, specifically student involvement, student-faculty interaction, psychological sense of community, and spirituality (Schreiner, 2010). It is not enough for universities to create a network of support, opportunities, and experiences; universities must induce large numbers of students to participate, engage, and utilize the support services to enhance student retention and success (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2011).

Transitions

Transitions are a way of life, and some of the biggest transitions occur during the college years. “Transition begins with an event or nonevent that is perceived as significant by the student: something occurs that was either anticipated or unexpected, or a significant event that was expected to happen and does not” (Schreiner, Louis, & Nelson, 2012, p. 3). Transitions are a process, not an event, and this process requires students to move in, move through, and move out of this process (Goodman et. al, 2006). “Successful transitions have five characteristics that separate them from unsuccessful transitions: students perceive them positively as opportunities for growth; students use healthy coping skills; students believe they have the support needed to navigate the transition; students access resources during the transition for important information, assistance, and support; and students come out of the transition having grown in significant ways” (Schreiner, Louis, & Nelson, 2012, p. 4).

This study confirms prior research that the sophomore year is a time of continued transitions for students (Baxter & Magolda, 1992; Bridges, 1980; Parks, 2000; Schaller, 2005). Transitions are occurring in all aspects of a students’ life: self, relationships, expectations, and future goals and aspirations. Students respond differently to transitions; what they learn, and how they grow from these transitions is influenced by the amount of support they have during this time. It is critical for universities to realize the importance of continued support during the sophomore year and to provide the support and resources to assist students in persisting to the junior year.

Sophomore Development

Contrary to beliefs, transition does not end at the completion of the freshmen year; it continues into their sophomore year (Schaller, 2007). Sophomores enter their second year of college with excitement after first-year experiences filled with new opportunities, strong support, and intentional programming to assist with their transition and acclimation to the new setting. They are soon faced with the realization that this year will be different than the previous one. Schaller (2007) notes four stages of development sophomores encounter during this second year of transition: random exploration, focused exploration, tentative choices, and commitment. Schaller (2005) suggested that sophomores could move among four different stages relating to themselves, their relationships, their academic experiences, and their decisions. As they progress through these stages, they gain confidence in their decision-making skills, which positively impacts their second year of college.

This study implies the importance of providing an environment on campus that is conducive for development among sophomores. As students move through these stages of development they need adequate

resources to assist them in developing their purpose, recognizing their strengths, committing to a major or career choice, and creating supporting and rewarding relationships. Without a community of support, students may not perceive their transition or development positively which may lead to dissatisfaction and disengagement, which ultimately leads to sophomore slumping to students leaving the university.

Sophomore Slump

Some students encounter what is known as the “sophomore slump” (Freedman, 1956, p.15). Kennedy and Upcraft (2010) characterize the slump as a time when at least one of the following is occurring: (a) academic deficiencies; (b) academic disengagement; (c) dissatisfaction with collegiate experience; (d) major and career indecision, and (e) developmental confusion. Richmond and Lemons (1987) also see it as a time of unhappiness in relationships and increased concern with financial aspects of paying for college.

This research revealed that many students in the study were experiencing the sophomore slump. The respondents indicated difficulties with classes, lower grades, dissatisfaction with their overall experiences this year, and a lack of involvement in the campus community. These students described themselves as not surviving, barely surviving, or surviving when asked: *If they were getting the most out of their college experience, so that you are intellectually, socially, and psychologically engaged and enjoying the college experiences.* These findings suggest a need for universities to provide more support during the sophomore year. Sophomores need assistance and support to succeed in and out of the classroom.

Why Sophomores Leave

Sophomores leave because they are not fully equipped to handle the struggles they encounter during the second year. The struggles typically seen during the sophomore year have related to the higher-than-expected attrition that occurs between the sophomore and junior year (Schaller, 2005). Some of the consequences of these challenges include decreased grade point averages, disconnection from the university, and little or no engagement in the social circles of the university (Flanagan, 1991). In addition, sophomores leave due to financial issues, uncertainty with major and career selection, and housing concerns (Juillerat, 2000). Without the structured support in place, students feel abandoned and left on their own to navigate the university. Research also indicates sophomores place a lot of emphasis on being intellectually challenged through good instruction and strong course content; they desire supportive faculty who are fair and consistent, and expect knowledgeable and accessible advising (Juillerat, 2000). They also desire adequate financial aid, tuition that is reasonably priced, a registration process that is smooth and offers options, and an enriching student experience (Juillerat, 2000). In addition, sophomores are increasingly apathetic, report lower satisfaction, and have decreased motivation due to the challenges encountered during the sophomore year (Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000).

This study reveals that while low grades, difficult classes, and financial issues create challenging transitions that cause many students to experience the sophomore slump, the main reasons students leave are a lack of engagement in learning, poor or inadequate friendships or relationships, and a lack of belonging or sense of community. It can be inferred that universities should focus their efforts on these areas to increase satisfaction, retention, and completion rates.

Thriving Model of Student Success

Thriving is realized when students are functional at a satisfactory level in three key areas that contribute to student success, retention, and persistence: (a) academic engagement and performance, (b) interpersonal relationships, and (c) psychological well-being. “The thriving model of student success addresses well-being across all aspects of a students’ life and is comprised of five factors: (1) Engaged Learning, (2) Diverse Citizenship, (3) Academic Determination, (4) Positive Perspective, and (5) Social Connectedness” (Schreiner, Pothoven, et al., 2009, p. 9). “Rather than defining success solely in terms of academic performance and persistence to graduation, a focus on thriving encourages a more holistic view of student development that includes establishing healthy relationships, contributing to the community, and proactively coping with life’s challenges” (Schreiner, Pothoven, et al., 2009, p. 21).

Academic Thriving. Academic thriving includes the factors of Engaged Learning and Academic Determination. Students who are thriving are engaged, motivated, and commit to continuous effort to be successful.

Engaged learning. Students who are thriving academically are meaningfully processing what happens in class; they are excited and energized by learning in the classroom and remain committed to learning long after class is dismissed. Engagement offers the student the opportunity to create goals, invest effort in reaching their goals, and reflect on the meaning of these experiences. Student who are engaged in learning have immersed themselves in the behavioral and cognitive aspects of learning (Schreiner, 2013). Kinzie (2012) notes that engaging in activities that contribute to learning is a key predictor on whether students will persist and thrive.

Academic determination. Students who are thriving also have a strong sense of academic determinations. These students are self-motivated and give the investment of effort to accomplish goals. Thriving students effectively manage their time, which allows them to successfully balance the demands in and out of the classroom. Grit is an important element of academic determination. Seligman (2013) states grit accounts for extraordinary achievement. “The more grit you have, the more effort you put on a task, the more effort you put towards the completion of a task, the more likely you are to achieve your goal” (p. 121).

Interpersonal Thriving. Interpersonal thriving includes the factors of Social Connectedness and Diverse Citizenship. Students who are thriving have meaningful relationships with others, including those who are different from them.

Social connectedness. Social connectedness is a sense of belonging to a friend group or community. Thriving students develop and maintain healthy relationships with others. These students have good friends—friends who listen and support them. These support groups can be the difference in whether a student retains year after year. Students who are thriving feel connected to others. They feel valued for whom they are, and for the contributions they make to the community.

Diverse citizenship. Diverse citizenship is an interest in understanding people from diverse backgrounds and the willingness to make a difference in other people's lives (Schreiner, 2010c). Thriving students take the time to get to others in a manner that displays openness and curiosity. Openness and curiosity create an increase in reasoning and critical thinking skills. Students who get to know people from diverse backgrounds also get to understand different perspectives. This awareness of others creates a desire to make a difference in their community through service and other volunteer efforts.

Intrapersonal Thriving. Interpersonal thriving includes the factor Positive Perspective. Thriving in college requires a healthy perspective on life.

Positive perspective. Positive psychology is the foundation of positive perspective. Researchers in the field of psychology refer to a healthy state of mental health and a positive well-being as subjective well-being. Seligman (2013) indicated that well-being is made up of the elements of emotions, meaning in life, accomplishments, and relationships (Seligman, 2013). He also asserted that positive emotions and engagement contribute to well-being. Students with an optimistic view of life have better cognitive attention and have more effective problem-solving skills (Schreiner, 2010c), they tend to be happier in general and more satisfied with their experiences and life. When life gives them lemons, they make lemonade. They find the good in negative situations and they learn from every part of the journey. Students with a positive perspective also have a growth mindset. A growth mindset is a belief that effort is a natural part of learning. These students believe they can create positive change and they do. This study revealed that many students at the study university are thriving in some capacity. Most students seem to be in between surviving and thriving. It may be in one or two of the factors, but not in the other three factors. When students were provided with a definition of thriving as “Getting the most out of your college experience, so that you are intellectually, socially, and psychologically engaged and enjoying the college experience,” 22.9% described themselves as thriving most of the time or consistently thriving (scores of 5 or higher on a 6-point scale). Thus, students perceived themselves as not surviving, or surviving to a greater degree than reported by their actual levels of engaged learning, academic determination,

social connectedness, positive perspective, and diverse citizenship. The difference in these answers may reflect the level of sophomore development they were currently experiencing: random exploration, focused exploration, tentative choices, or commitment. If students were in focused exploration, they may still be trying to make sense of what they were experiencing and feeling. This period is a time of self-reflection, and students may not have been able to see the big picture of their development and sophomore experiences.

Methodology

Quantitative research methods were used to address study questions and relationships of study variables. Convenience purposeful sampling was utilized for data collection. The sample population included 2099 students returning for the second year of college at a large-sized, public Higher Research Activity institution in Southern Louisiana. The target population included students currently enrolled in their second year of college (approximately 2000). Data were collected through SurveyMonkey and exported to IBM SPSS Statistics 25.0 to conduct further statistical analyses. A total of 752 responses were collected; however, 426 usable surveys met the criteria for analysis. Data analysis included descriptive statistics, demographics, and student characteristics of the sample; descriptive statistics and frequency analyses for survey items; Pearson's correlation among the variables; bivariate correlations among variables; and multiple regressions.

This study explored the thriving factors of engaged learning, including: social connectedness, academic determination, positive perspective, and diverse citizenship; student experiences, including faculty-student interaction, satisfaction, student involvement, psychological sense of community; and student success outcomes, including tuition worth, college fit, happiness, intent to re-enroll, and intent to graduate. The study's survey instrument, "the Sophomore Experiences Survey (SES), is an instrument that assesses numerous indicators of student well-being, success outcomes, participation levels, interaction with peers and faculty, satisfaction, and entering characteristics" (Young, Schreiner, & McIntosh, 2015, p. 27). Included in the SES is the Thriving Quotient, a 25-item measure of psychosocial well-being that incorporates five factors: (a) engaged learning, (b) academic determination, (c) social connectedness, (d) diverse citizenship, and (e) positive perspective (Schreiner, 2012).

The research questions for this study included the following:

- What is the level of thriving among sophomore students related to perceptions of engaged learning, academic determination, social connectedness, diverse citizenship, and positive perspectives?
- What are sophomore students experiencing during their second year in relation to frequencies and levels of satisfaction?

- What relationship exists between sophomore students' perceptions of Thriving Factors and students reported experiences?
- What is the relationship between students' perceptions of student success outcomes in relation to intent to graduate?
- Which Thriving Factors account for the greatest amount of impact of student success outcomes?
- Which sophomore experiences account for the greatest amount of impact on student success outcomes?

Major Findings and Conclusions

This study identified four major research findings resulting from quantitative analyses of survey responses and open-ended questions.

Major Finding 1

Based on analyses of research, many sophomores are experiencing what is described as the sophomore slump.

Conclusion. Approximately 32% of the respondents are considered slumping based on their reported dissatisfaction with grades, courses selected, amount of learning, health status, living situation, and advising. This confirms prior research, which suggests the main areas of dissatisfaction are around academics, both with sophomores' ability to do well academically, interactions with the faculty, and their perceptions about a lack of institutional support (Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Juillerat, 2000; Schaller, 2005; Schreiner, 2007). Graunke and Woosley (2005) found that choice of major was a significant predictor of sophomore academic success, as were faculty interactions. Feldman and Newcomb (1994) reported that sophomores were the "most likely to be dissatisfied with the college and their experiences there" (p. 92). Sophomores also place a high level of importance on their interactions with advisors, registration, class scheduling processes, faculty feedback, and their interactions with faculty (Juillerat, 2000).

Major Finding 2

Of all the Thriving Factors and student experiences, academic determination has the strongest relationship with satisfaction.

Conclusion. Academic determination was the thriving factor with the strongest relationship (.588) with student satisfaction. This finding suggests academics play an important yet meaningful role students' perception and sentiment of satisfaction. Students with high levels of academic determination describe themselves as being very committed to reaching their academic goals (Schreiner, 2010c). These students invest substantial effort to do whatever it takes to be successful (Schreiner, 2010c). Students with academic determination take control of

their own learning. This finding supports prior research about the role academic experiences and learning play in student satisfaction (Schreiner, 2010c; Gardner, 2000; Adelman, 2006; Juillerat, 2000). Although satisfaction encompasses many different aspects of the college experience.

Major Finding 3

Of all the Thriving Factors, engaged learning makes the strongest unique contribution to explaining student success outcomes.

Conclusion. Engaged learning was the strongest predictor of student success outcomes, which includes the variables of intent to re-enroll, intent to graduate, fit with institution, enjoyment, and choose this institution again. Engaged learners describe themselves as excited about learning. These students make meaningful connections between what they are learning, what they already know, and what they would like to learn (Schreiner, & Louis, 2006). Schreiner and Louis (2006) describe engaged learning as “a positive energy invested in one’s own learning, evidenced by meaningful processing, attention to what is happening in the moment, and involvement in learning activities” (p. 9). This finding supports previous research on engaged learning, which found that engaged learning significantly predicted positive student success outcomes (Schreiner, 2010, Schreiner & Louis, 2006, Schreiner, Pothoven, Nelson, & McIntosh, 2009). Students with high scores on these factors reported higher college grades, a greater sense of fit at their current institution, a higher likelihood of choosing the same school again if given the chance, and stronger intentions to eventually graduate from the institution (Schreiner, Pothoven, Nelson, & McIntosh, 2009).

Major Finding 4

Of all the student experiences, psychological sense of community makes the strongest unique contribution to explaining student success outcomes.

Conclusion. Psychological Sense of Community was the strongest predictor of the student success outcomes. The finding supports previous research that indicates that students who feel socially connected to the university and have high levels of satisfaction with the university are more likely to re-enroll and graduate from the institution (Schreiner, 2010; Schreiner, Miller, Pullins, & Seppelt, 2012). Psychological Sense of Community is the feeling or perception of belonging, sense of making a difference, and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). It is also viewed as perceived institutional support, connectedness, mattering, acceptance, and being valued (Strayhorn, 2012).

Discussion and Implications of Major Findings

This quantitative study is important because it offers an understanding of the issues sophomores are experiencing, which are critical to addressing persistence and success of sophomore students. The thriving construct offers a framework for understanding the sophomore year. Each of the Thriving Factors represents an

element of academic, intrapersonal, or interpersonal thriving that can contribute to sophomore student success. Understanding students' thriving levels, combined with knowledge about their experiences during the sophomore year, along with their impact on student success outcomes will provide data that can increase retention and increase the quality of their student experiences. The implications of the major findings are discussed in reference to the primary constructs and relevant literature.

Sophomore Slump

The sophomore slump is characterized as a “multidimensional phenomenon, which can include one of the following: (a) academic deficiencies, (b) academic disengagement, (c) dissatisfaction with the college experience, (d) major and career indecision, and (e) developmental confusion” (Kennedy & Upcraft, 2010, p. 39). Respondents in this study noted dissatisfaction with the amount learned, the grades received, living situation, health, advising, courses, and with sophomore year in general. The responses to the open-ended questions also reinforced these issues. These responses reflected difficulty with courses, financial challenges, health issues, lack of strong peer relationships, poor grades, lack of effort, and dissatisfaction with faculty as contributing to their response about surviving or thriving. Based on the results of the SES, 32% of respondents are considered to be slumping. Approximately 48% of the respondents indicated they are surviving, barely surviving, or not surviving. These results support previous research on the sophomore slump and about the challenges facing students during the sophomore year (Graunke & Woosely, 2005; Juillerat, 2000; Schaller, 2005; Schreiner, 2007). These results also suggest a myriad of support and programming are needed to help these struggling students.

Thriving Factors

Overall, thriving students are “academically motivated, and have high self-concept, direction, motivation, and engagement” (Young, Schreiner, McIntosh, 2015, p. 43). When reviewing their scores on the thriving quotient, 44.4% are thriving when that is defined as a score of 5 or higher on a 6-point scale. When students are provided with a definition of thriving as *Getting the most out of your college experience, so that you are intellectually, socially, and psychologically engaged and enjoying the college experience*, 22.9% describe themselves as thriving most of the time or consistently thriving (scores of 5 or higher on a 6-point scale). Thus, students tend to perceive themselves as not surviving, or surviving to a greater degree than reported by their actual levels of engaged learning, academic determination, social connectedness, positive perspective, and diverse citizenship. These results indicate students do not see themselves as thriving, but many are indeed thriving. They also reinforce the need for intentional discussions and reflections about their experiences during their sophomore year.

Academic Determination

The thriving factor of academic determination is highly correlated with satisfaction. Thus, when academic determination is strong, satisfaction is as well. Approximately 44% of respondents indicated “agree” or “strongly agree” and had a mean score of 4.50 on the questions related to academic determination. This mean score is lower than the SES national mean score of (.481). Many students are thriving in the area of academic determination. Respondents indicated *People would say they are a hard worker* with a mean of (4.85) and said they are *Confident they will reach their educational goals* (4.78). Those who are thriving in this area are characterized by an investment of effort, an ability to manage one’s time and the personal and academic demands of college, are motivated to succeed and are focused on the pursuit of their goals (Schreiner, 2010). However, the remaining 56% are not thriving and are lacking in many areas needed to be a successful student. A strong correlation with satisfaction indicates that those who are not thriving may not be satisfied with their experiences at the university, especially regarding classes, grades, faculty, support and learning. These results indicate a need to focus on instilling grit and hope in students and equipping them with the tools needed to problem-solve when things get tough.

Engaged Learning

Engaged learning had strong correlations with satisfaction (.576) and psychological sense of community (.561). Engaged Learning was also the strongest unique contributor in explaining student success outcomes. Students’ perception of engaged learning yielded a mean score of (4.12), which is lower than the SES national mean of (4.54). Approximately 55% of respondents reported “agree” or “strongly agree” to the questions linked to engaged learning. These thriving students feel as though they are learning material in their classes that is worthwhile to them as a person, as evidenced with a mean score of (4.27). These engaged students also indicate they find themselves thinking about what they are learning in class when they are not in class (4.24). “Engaged learning is measured by three components: meaningful process, focused attention, and active participation” (Schreiner, 2010, p. 5). For those who are not thriving in engaged learning, they are not energized by learning, don’t see their classes as meaningful, and are not thinking about class when they are not in class. When students are engaged learners, they feel more connected to the university; they feel that being at the university fills an important need in their lives. This connection and sense of belonging drives their enjoyment with college, and their desire to re-enroll and graduate from the institution. These results indicate a need to engage students intentionally in the learning process through structure of classes and activities in class. Students need to be taught how to be engaged when they are in class and when they are outside of class working on class material. Lessons are needed on how to ask questions, how to reflect on the meaning of the lessons, and how to connect new material

to prior knowledge. Creating a community of engaged learners is a must; the university and the student will both see the most gains from this effort.

Social Connectedness

Respondents' perceptions of social connectedness yielded a mean score of 4.09, which is higher than the SES national mean score of 3.80. Thriving on the scale of social connectedness denotes students who have friends and healthy relationships. They are connected to others on and off campus in good, positive ways. They have people in their lives who listen and support them. Approximately 36.5% reported a high level of social connections. The factor of social connectedness did have correlations with psychological sense of community (.404) and satisfaction (.354) and is considered a predictor for student success outcomes (.321). Feeling supported and valued by others is important. These results indicate a need to create a sense of belonging and acceptance for all students. The correlations with psychological sense of community, satisfactions, and student success outcomes suggest the importance of belonging, feeling comfortable, and fitting in are more important than having the ability to succeed academically. If students are unable to find people to connect with, hang out with, or feel supported by, they may not retain or graduate from the institution. The results infer a need for the university to create opportunities for students to interact and connect with one another so friendships can be forged. Today technology allows us to feel connected to everyone, yet not really connected to anyone. Students spend more time on gadgets and less time interacting in person, and there is a need to intentionally create connections for students.

Positive Perspective

Respondents indicated a mean score (4.21) which is lower than the SES national norm mean (4.30). Students who are thriving on the scale of positive perspective have healthy attitudes about themselves and learning. These students have a positive outlook on life and view the glass as half-full. Thriving students can put things into perspective and see the bigger picture. Approximately 30.3% of respondents reported "agree" or "strongly agree" to questions related to positive perspective. Positive perspective did have correlations with satisfaction (.284), student involvement (.220), and psychological sense of community (.264). Positive perspective was removed in the stepwise regression model. It was the only factor that did not impact student success outcomes. However, positive perspective is the cornerstone of thriving. The positive, can-do attitude is what helps students get through the difficult times. The results indicate a need to help students understand who they are, learn how to identify strengths, and how to use these strengths to navigate all aspects of college life. In order to change the perspective of a struggling student, programs should teach them to shift their focus from unproductive thoughts (e.g. what is not working, what skills are lacking, why tasks seem undoable), to productive thoughts such as their strengths and the skills that they possess.

Diverse Citizenship

Thriving students have a deep appreciation for, and a desire to understand, those who are different from themselves. Thriving students have a desire to serve their community. “They also can internalize one’s values and beliefs while respecting others’ rights to have differing views and beliefs” (Schreiner, 2010, p. 8). Approximately 57% reported a high level of diverse citizenship. Respondents indicated a mean score (4.60), lower than the SES national mean score (4.76). Diverse citizenship did have small to medium correlations with student involvement (.375), faculty interaction (.168), satisfaction (.307), and psychological sense of community (.474). The stepwise regression model revealed diverse citizenship is a predictor of student success outcomes. Surprisingly, the study students scored the highest on this factor.

Satisfaction

“Student satisfaction results when [the institution’s] actual performance meets or exceeds the student’s expectations” (Elliot & Healey, 2001, p. 2). Approximately, 77% of respondents indicated being satisfied with their overall experiences at this institution. Respondents indicated some level of satisfaction with faculty, grades, learning, peers, health, living situation, and academic advising. Approximately 16.6% are satisfied or very satisfied with the amount of money they have to pay for college at this institution. Satisfaction correlated with all of the Thriving Factors, student involvement, psychological sense of community, and faculty interaction. Satisfaction was also a predictor of student success outcomes. Prior research indicates satisfaction is a predictor of academic success, intent to return, intent to graduate, feelings of fit, and pride in university (El Ansari, 2011; Schreiner, 2009; Schreiner & Nelson, 2013; Suhre et. al, 2007). High satisfaction benefits both the student and the institution.

Faculty-Student Interaction

Previous research indicates that satisfaction with faculty-student interaction is a strong predictor of sophomores’ academic success and satisfaction to overall experience (Graunke & Woosley; 2005; Keup, 2002; Schreiner, 2010a). Respondents indicated infrequent interaction with faculty outside of the classroom; however, 42% indicated satisfaction with the quality and the amount of faculty interaction this year. The results revealed that the quality of interactions with faculty within the classroom is more impactful than informal interactions. Faculty who create a classroom environment that is engaging and supporting are promoting an environment conducive to thriving.

Student Involvement

Student involvement was found to positively impact students’ success in the classroom (Kuh et al., 1991, 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Student involvement in co-curricular activities and groups such as student organizations, leadership positions, and activities in campus residence halls, has a positive correlation with

retention and academics (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Approximately 33.9 % indicated some involvement with organizations. However, only 20% of the respondents of this study indicated some attendance at co-curricular activities. Overall, students reported infrequent and occasional involvement in student organizations. These scores were surprising, considering 57% said they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with *Your experiences with your peers on this campus this year*. Astin (1993a) indicated that a student’s peer group is the single most important source of influence on growth and development during college. Previous research from Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) also revealed student interactions with peers play an important role in retention, diversity appreciation and understanding, interpersonal relationships, choice of study, career choice, and overall development. Student involvement did have correlations with all the Thriving Factors except engaged learning. In a 2010 study using the SES, student involvement explained less than 3% of the variation in thriving. In this study, student involvement was not a predictor of student success outcomes.

Psychological Sense of Community

Previous research indicates that sense of the community is the strongest predictor of all student outcomes on the SES (Schreiner, Miller, Pullins, & Seppelt, 2012). Strong correlations also exist with all five of the Thriving Factors: engaged learning, academic determination, social connectedness, positive perspective, and diverse citizenship. These results infer that when students report a high level of sense of community, they are more likely to be thriving. Likewise, when there is a high level of sense of community, more than likely, the satisfaction will be high as well due to being very strongly correlated with satisfaction. McMillan and Chavis (1986) describe a sense of community as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p. 9). McMillan and Chavis (1986) propose that sense of community is composed of four elements: membership, influence, fulfillment, and shared emotional connection. First, students must feel like they belong at the institution; second, they must feel like their voice is being heard about important issues; thirdly, students must feel like they have the resources they need and know where to find them; and lastly, they must have connections or an affinity to the university.

Student Success Outcomes

Student success outcomes were found to be impacted by four of the five Thriving Factors with engaged learning, academic determination, social connectedness, and diverse citizenship all displaying as predictors of student success outcomes. The results also revealed that psychological sense of community, faculty-student interaction, and satisfaction are all predictors of student success outcomes. The results indicate that the Thriving Factors, sophomore experiences impact students’ decision to return for the junior year, and whether they will graduate from the institution. This research confirms what prior research has found: universities must offer more

intentional sophomore experiences, with robust programming and support to prevent students from slumping and to keep students persisting to the junior year. The research and results of this study also indicate a need to go beyond understanding how to retain students, to understanding how to push them beyond surviving to a state of thriving. The thriving model of success implies a need to focus on the broader outcomes of the college experience that have been overlooked in prior models of retention. The presence of personal growth, healthy relationships, connections to the larger community, and additional ways of seeing the world allow the student to get the most out of the college experience and life after college (Schreiner, 2012). “Thriving implies more than just surviving the college environment, it conveys that a student is fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally and is experiencing a sense of psychological well-being that contributes not only to his or her persistence to graduation, but also to success in life” (Schreiner, Pothoven, Nelson, & McIntosh, 2009, p. 4).

Implications Related to Conceptual Concerns

The research conducted regarding thriving and the SES has increased over the last ten years. Research is still in its infancy; however, it has become clear that when students are thriving and have high levels of engaged learning, academic determination, social connectedness, positive perspective, and diverse citizenship, they are more satisfied, more likely to re-enroll, and more likely to graduate from the institution. Research continues to increase because of the strong correlations among thriving, student experiences, and student success outcomes. This conceptual framework encompasses four main factors that comprise the inputs that influence retention and student success: pre-college characteristics, university initiatives and support, Thriving Factors, and student experiences. All the factors together result in retention, student success and thriving, and ultimately completion.

Implications for Theory

The findings of this study confirm what the literature and previous research maintain— a strong predictor of student success is the amount of time students spend on educationally purposeful activities (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; 2005). Tinto’s Model of Integration (1993) indicated experiences that support academic success and encourage and motivate students to invest in learning positively impact retention. Universities must focus on the characteristics of students prior to college as well as creating an environment once they are in college that creates positive academic and social experiences. The results of this study also reinforce Kuh’s Student Success Model, which focuses on the educational opportunities and support offered to the student by their institution as the criterion for success, retention, and completion (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, 2005). Finally, this research validates and supports the Thriving Model of Student Success, which suggests student success is defined by more than academic performance, persistence, and completion; a focus on thriving encourages a more comprehensive view of transitions and development that includes developing healthy

relationships, being a part of a community, and learning to overcome life's challenges (Schreiner, Louis, & Nelson, 2012).

Additionally, this research revealed the need to concentrate on the role of belonging and sense of community in sophomore development and student success. A sense of belonging includes the following: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment, and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Individual relationships are vital as well as the connection to the larger campus community. A feeling of belonging, a sense of mattering, and a positive answer to the question, *Does anyone care?* helps create a connectedness that is important to the success of the student. Strengthening the sense of community and belonging will improve the level of thriving, student experiences, and student success outcomes.

The conclusions reached by the researcher support the need to focus on transitions and development that occurs during the sophomore year. Sophomore students need intentional support and resources to assist in reaching the level of thriving, a level which is distinguished by academic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal thriving. Additionally, students need to be connected to the community; need to belong and understand people care about their success.

Implications for Practice and Leadership

For most institutions, the focus has been on engagement opportunities and retention initiatives to support freshmen during their transition from high school to college (Barefoot, 2000). Across the country, 95% of colleges and universities offer first-year experience programs, which include resources, programming, and support for freshmen. This study reinforces the need to expand transition and retention initiatives to include sophomore students. As attrition continues to rise between the sophomore and junior year, universities should begin to address their needs by increasing support, resources, and intentional programming to sophomore students to help them transition, develop, and persist to the junior year. Institutions that develop and deliver sophomore year success initiatives generally yield higher sophomore to junior return rates than those who do not have success initiatives in place (Keup, Gahagan, & Goodwin, 2010). The following suggestions are provided on how universities can support and enhance the sophomore year experience.

- Create a sophomore year experience coordinator to oversee and organize all initiatives related to the sophomores' development and retention.
- Create a sophomore year task force that includes, faculty, staff, and students that advises and implements practices for supporting sophomore students in and out of the classroom.
- Reinforce academic advising to ensure sophomore development and transition needs are being considered.
- Create opportunities for more faculty and student engagement and interaction.

- Create undergraduate research opportunities for sophomore students.
- Create and implement events and traditions that can motivate and reconnect sophomores when they return for their second year.
- Develop mentoring programs by academic college for students in their second year.
- Develop activities to create opportunities for sophomores to develop a sense of community and enhance peer relationships.
- Continue to support major exploration and career exploration.
- Create a regular communication plan with sophomores.
- Create a collaborative and comprehensive space on applicable social media outlets that are specifically targeted at sophomores.
- Develop a sophomore checklist for opportunities and experiences designed for sophomores.

Conclusion

This quantitative study explored the relationships of Thriving Factors, students' experiences, and success outcomes during the sophomore year of college. Therefore, this study explored the Thriving Factors of engaged learning, social connectedness, academic determination, positive perspective, and diverse citizenship; student experiences including faculty-student interaction, satisfaction, student involvement, psychological sense of community; and student success outcomes including tuition value, college fit, happiness, intent to re-enroll, and intent to graduate. The six research questions were used to understand students' perception of the Thriving Factors, students' experiences and satisfaction, and the nature of the relationships among Thriving Factors, sophomore student experiences, and student success outcomes.

Major findings of the study indicate: (1) Many sophomores are experiencing what is described as the sophomore slump; (2) Of all of the Thriving Factors and student experiences, academic determination has the strongest relationships with satisfaction; (3) Of all the Thriving Factors, engaged learning makes the strongest unique contribution to explaining student success outcomes; (4) Of all the student experiences, psychological sense of community makes the strongest unique contribution to explaining student success outcomes.

Discussion of findings was presented in relation to implications for theory, practice, and leadership regarding the need to focus on the transitions and development that occurs during the sophomore year. Sophomore students need to be encouraged by healthy relationships, supported with resources, connected to the community, and engaged in educationally purposeful activities. Recommendations for future research included further research on the sophomore year, with a focus on community college students, student athletes, as well as on the influence of race, gender, and sexual orientation on students' level of thriving and student success.

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