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Broadening The Learning Community Experience: An Outdoor Orientation Program's Impact On Engagement, Persistence, And Retention

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**BROADENING THE LEARNING COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE: AN OUTDOOR
ORIENTATION PROGRAM'S IMPACT ON ENGAGEMENT, PERSISTENCE, AND
RETENTION**

by

CHRISTY DAVID NOLAN

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

2013

MAJOR: EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Approved by:

Advisor

Date

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my parents; John and Betty Nolan,
Team SLAQ, and my spouse, Terra.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my Advisor, Dr. Michael Owens, for agreeing to take me on as his doctoral student, relatively late in this process. Additionally, recognition is deserving of you for also remaining my advisor through this process. Thank you to Dr. Karen Tonso for the guidance, patience, and understanding you have provided throughout this five year roller coaster ride. You have been a great supporter both professionally and personally. Thank you to Dr. William Hill. You have been a part of this learning community since its inception and you have championed all that it stands for. Your daily motivation tactics were the fuel I needed.

To my cohort, the Eleven; there have been additions and subtractions but you were all still there for me when I needed you. Each of you kept me on target at critical moments and for that I am grateful.

To my parents who instilled in me the value of an education and opened my world to exploration through reading, asking questions, and hard work. You are who inspired me to strive to improve myself and to take nothing for granted.

Thank you to my four wonderful children, Shawn, Liam, Aidan, and Quinn. Each of you have given me so much and sacrificed for me to pursue this endeavor. Pursue your dreams, and never stop!

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Chapter I - Introduction

Background

My story, and that of this study, began while working in the Department of Campus Recreation. The department relied heavily on undergraduate students to run all aspects of the building and programming. Within the department there existed the position of student supervisor. That position was essentially a trusted undergraduate who was the manager on duty when a professional staff person was not in the building. This occurred most nights and weekends. One student was my best and most trusted employee. She was enthusiastic, showed great initiative, and was an excellent oral and written communicator. I trusted her to act and empowered her. She was able to do things without hesitation meaning she was in power to make decisions. I did not have to approve anything she did.

It was March of a winter semester and graduation ceremonies were in a little over a month. She ordered her cap and gown and was ready to graduate. I asked her, as graduation was drawing near, where she applied for jobs. She replied that she had not applied for any jobs. I initially thought that she was joking. I asked again and the reply was the same. I then realized that she was not joking. I was very surprised, but then thought she must be going straight to graduate school. However, the answer I did receive was nothing I had expected. She told me that she was the first one in her family to go to college and that was enough of an accomplishment. I was really struck at that moment by her words. I was concerned, but then wondered if I was projecting my values and beliefs on to her unjustly. She was happy and proud of her accomplishment. She had everything to be proud of but there was no new beginning after graduation. She wanted to stay on as a student assistant within the department. Unfortunately, that option was not available.

Many thoughts came into my head at that time. I wondered, even though she was the first in her family to attend college, what could cause her to act in such a manner. She was clearly a good student with enormous potential in her field of study. My attention then turned to other students who were either employees or frequented the facility. I began to realize that there were others in her situation and that many students were taking classes every semester, yet they were 5-7 years into college and not near graduating. I started to think that once students were enrolled the processes to help them and the support services were either inadequate or not being used by these students. These processes include engagement with goal oriented peers, engagement with student centered faculty, and the creation of a support network to aid in persistence that leads to retention. I also began to consider that these students who were four plus years into college with no graduation in sight were unaware of their shortcomings and thought the support services they were aware of were for others, not them. The students were confident in their studies and how they approached college but to them the idea that anyone was graduating in four years and securing a full-time job seemed more fantasy than an actual goal.

I began to have more conversations with students about their progress through their college careers and their goals toward graduation. I listened to their stories and witnessed how they realized late in their college careers aspects of their education they missed out on. These aspects included internships or coop requirements for graduation, miscommunication on advising issues, and likelihood of their degree facilitating employment in their chosen field. Many of these items appeared to be readily obtainable to students who actively participated in their college career. In other words, students who took responsibility, or knew they should, found these answers or were aware of what they needed to do. It seemed to me that the students who did not find answers or only became aware of issues late simply did not know what they did not know.

For many students time ran out. I saw firsthand many students taking classes and not gaining ground. For them their money ran out, their loans became too large to handle, and their progress was less than satisfactory. These students then stopped out. I wanted to contribute positively to the situation and needed the mechanism to direct the resources towards the promotion of engagement and persistence. I did not want students spend years in college and have regrets about missed opportunities and poor communication.

At least two of these issues were already being addressed by my university. I worked at Midwestern, urban research university whose retention and graduation rates were below those of peer institutions. Retention and graduation rates for minority groups are significantly lower than at other institutions *. To improve retention and graduation rates the university created the Undergraduate Retention Strategic Plan. One of five key actions in the plan included the implementation of learning communities to address the needs of all students, particularly those of commuting and transfer students. Shapiro and Levine (1999) define learning communities as an intentional restructuring of students' time, credit and learning experiences to foster more explicit intellectual connections among students, students and their faculty, and between disciplines. Best practices nationally among learning communities include cohort scheduling of classes, facilitated learning (e.g., academic theme/focus), faculty involvement, and development of community (e.g., activities, living situation, study groups/support). Learning communities vary in definition and scope. For instance, a learning community can be defined as any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses – or actually restructure the material entirely – so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990).

*Campus information cited here is taken from public documents on the campus website

Shapiro and Levine (1999) describe learning communities as being structured into one of four basic models. Paired or clustered course learning communities are where the cohort stays together and progresses from class to class. Freshmen Interest Groups or FIGs are where a small cohort exists within the context of a larger class (Gabelnick et al, 1990). Team-taught learning communities are organized around an interdisciplinary theme and involve multiple faculty and courses. The last learning community model is the residential based learning community. This involves adapting a particular model from one of the first three described above and incorporating a residential component in which cohort lives and studies together. Some residential models also include faculty advisors living among the cohort. The learning community model was a strategic attempt to transform the institution's culture to one of engaged students and proactive support networks for students. According to Shapiro and Levine (1999) the ultimate success of the campus culture transformation, in this case to learning communities, depends on how the change is managed, who authors it, who supports it, and who the beneficiaries of the change are. They continue by stating it is critical to move from teaching institutions to learning institutions where both students and faculty learn. Berger (2001) supports these findings and theorizes that it is critical for universities to understand the organizational nature of student persistence. Institutions of higher learning must incorporate the proper structure to provide students with an environment that is conducive to retention and persistence. Berger (2001) postulates that there are seven keys to make universities effective in student persistence. They are:

1. Provide students with information and clear line of communication about campus goals, values, policies, and procedures (communicate expectations)

2. Provide opportunities for students to participate in organizational decision making. (formal and informal means to communicate).
3. Provide a campus environment characterized by fairness towards others. (enforcement of academic and social goals)
4. Provide balance between structure and responsiveness (clear lines of communication)
5. Actively engage student in political activity on campus (don't promote apathy)
6. Provide students with advocates.
7. Build shared meaning through aesthetic symbols that are used with integrity.

Berger's (2001) seven points synthesize a university's mission, goals and objectives into a workable and discernible framework across the campus community. Students know where and how to communicate with the administration about their experiences and in return the administrations clearly articulates the academic and social expectations. Furthermore, the university provides the means (staff, faculty, space, funding) to comprehensively assist every student in achieving those expectations. This institution had not fully incorporated all the aspects fundamental to campus transformation as Berger (2001) would see necessary.

The learning community model of retention and persistence was first piloted on campus in 2000 (Hill & Woodward, 2013). As a means to positively impact graduation rates relative to peer institutions, The University Undergraduate Retention Strategic Plan (2006) provided the structure and funding for learning communities to be expanded on campus in the fall of 2006 with full implementation in the fall of 2007. The Office of Undergraduate Programs and General Education sent general call for learning community proposals to the entire campus community. Individual departments, faculty, and staff were all encouraged to create learning communities to

address students' retention within their units. The core component for all learning communities was that they were linked to at least one academic course.

The Department of Campus Recreation made the decision to be part of this initiative and submit a learning community proposal after assessment of its current program offerings and daily interactions with students. In 2004 the department began adventure programming for the campus population. The Department of Campus Recreation was created in the fall of 2000 and aside from exercise equipment it offered little to students. The adventure programming initiative was undertaken to direct attention to the department's climbing wall, and to use the wall as a base camp for more advanced programming. It was discovered through feedback from students that there existed a need for programming that was away from the brick and mortar of campus. The theory was once students were exposed to rock climbing and bouldering on the wall, their desire for adventure and unexplored personal experiences would grow. The new programming consisted of a wide range of activity that was apart from the regular fitness and wellness offerings. New offerings included but were not limited to day hikes, mountain biking, white water rafting, how-to clinics, skiing, trail running, skydiving, and rock climbing. These types of programs in an urban setting became popular among the student body.

The department was also active in the annual on-campus freshmen orientation process. From their involvement in the orientation process the staff realized that students were not making connections with peers during the day. The on-campus orientation consisted of very large groups of students essentially taking a tour across campus. Students were lectured to by multiple departments through the day. Interaction amongst freshmen and with presenting departments was noticeably absent. Even though an extra fee was charged and the program was mandatory significant numbers of students did not attend or would leave prematurely.

The experiences that students reported after their involvement in the adventure programs; new friendships and a connection to others on campus, pride in their accomplishments, and the thrill of trying something new, were some of the core components that the department wanted to build into an orientation program. These components centered on the process of engagement of students with their peers. Students who were involved in adventure programming made comments about creating more friendships, getting more involved in campus activities, and discussed overcoming the challenges of the adventure program. The convergence of adventure programming experience and an alternative orientation program became the foundation for the department's learning community proposal submission. The concept of the department's Keystone Learning Community was to provide an extended, off-campus orientation experience in which incoming freshmen could build relationships with peers and meet face to face with significant faculty and staff on campus. The role of the faculty was to serve as an additional support network for the students during their college career. The desired outcome was, that by spending time together on the river and at the campsite, students would become comfortable with the faculty and forge a relationship in which the student was mentored by the faculty members, consistent with Milem and Berger's (1997) ideas. Milem and Berger (1997) describe this type of early faculty involvement with students as being significant in the process of student persistence. They continue by stating that early student involvement and students' perceptions of support may be the process by which to better understand persistence. Berger & Milem (1999) found that early involvement in the fall semester positively predicts spring involvement and has significant indirect effects on social integration academic integration, institutional commitment and persistence.

This study examines the Keystone Learning Community through the eyes of the participants. The focus of this research is to address the questions of what are the impacts of the Keystone Learning Community on student engagement, persistence, and retention, and how these factors might interact with one another and relate to graduation. In Chapter II, I outlined a history of outdoor orientation programs and provide some explanation for their emergence. I examined the variables of engagement, persistence, and retention and how these variables are individually impacted through participation in such programs. An overview of the Keystone Learning Community is presented with its goals, and the operational methods to achieve those goals. Chapter III discusses how the Keystone Learning Community differs from the studies discussed in this chapter and how the Keystone LC facilitated engagement, persistence, and retention. This study contributes to what is known about outdoor orientation programs by examining the student's perception of the impact the Keystone Learning Community has on each of the three variables. This study also enhances understanding and benefits of extended outdoor orientation programs (Bell, 2006).

Chapter II – Literature Review

This chapter provides a brief history of outdoor orientation programs and the benefits to students as a result of participation. I explored the impact that outdoor orientation programs have had on student engagement, persistence, and retention. Traditionally, institutions of higher learning attempt to initiate academic and social integration with the on-campus orientation. A walk around most college campuses through the summer should yield groups of freshly admitted, bewildered students being led by a tour guide providing information pertaining to policy, facilities, registration and so on. This, sometimes assembly line style, orientation philosophy, at most institutions, does little more than accommodate large numbers of students in the timeframe allotted. Higher operating costs, increased tuition and fees, and other variables have amplified the importance of the college orientation program (Galloway, 2000). These factors add pressure to the institution to provide as much information as possible into an orientation programs, and therefore, they might not be achieving the desired goal of integration. Increasingly, institutions are creating and implementing alternatives to the traditional orientation program to assimilate freshmen to the campus culture. Barefoot and Fidler (1992) conducted a national survey in which they discovered 696 institutions offered a freshmen only seminar or colloquium. From 1991-1994 the number of institutions offering such programs had risen to 727 (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996). Program types ranged from extended orientations, outdoor orientation programs, academic seminars with uniform content across sections, to basic study skills seminars. These programs may include learning communities, first-year experience courses, and increasingly, outdoor orientation programs (Bell 2007). The freshmen seminar that is the focus of this study is the Keystone Learning Community which is a learning community that begins with an outdoor orientation program.

Outdoor Orientation Programs

Fears and Denke (2001) define outdoor orientation programs as a small group of first-year students in a wilderness setting where backpacking and camping are the primary outdoor activities. Outdoor orientation programs as a method of positively transitioning students to institutions of higher learning began at Boston University as far back as 1888 (Bonner, 1972). Outdoor orientation programs have been used as a means to teach academics at the college level for several decades. O’Keefe (1988) found that many schools used outdoor orientation programs as a means to transition freshmen to college life. Programs with very specific, freshmen oriented goals existed in all regions of the country. These outdoor orientation programs were categorized into one of three models based on the specific program goals. Model I emphasized the role of the student leader, the importance of having fun, and the importance of establishing a peer group of friends prior to starting college. Model II emphasized the role of faculty, decision-making skills, small group skills, and the development of peer group identity. Model III emphasized the connection between wilderness orientation program and academic persistence, the important role faculty play in the process, the desire for freshmen to adjust and mature through the process, the development of problem solving skills, and the desire to reduce stereotyping. Models I and II are the most common types of outdoor orientation programs. All three models of programs highlight personal growth and social skills goals. The primary objective of outdoor orientation programs is to better prepare or transition the freshmen for their college career. Some suggest that the first step may be student engagement.

Engagement

Previous studies have illustrated that outdoor orientation programs positively impact retention and facilitate engagement of students. This section examined the additional reported

benefits of participation in an outdoor orientation program and evidence that students who complete an outdoor orientation program have a better chance of persisting through their college careers and graduating (Brown, 1998). Bell (2006) states that students who enrolled in an extended wilderness orientation program (extended programs include classroom and follow up sessions in the semester after the outdoor orientation experience) exhibit higher GPAs and persistence levels than those who did not enroll in an outdoor orientation program. Extended outdoor orientation programs give freshmen the opportunity to be further mentored by the faculty and upperclassmen they first meet during the outdoor experience. Additional faculty, who may have been unavailable for the outdoor experience, may be brought into classroom session to further the student's transition experience.

Galloway (2000) found that lack of inclusion of faculty in programs limits students association with the persona of academia, which may be as important as the construction of peer networks. By including faculty programs outdoor orientation programs become more balanced and seem to have the highest chance of transitioning the incoming freshmen. It makes sense that by building a network of social support, friends, and making sure that the student and their peer group is prepared for college academics and college life that students are more likely to fit with their institution. If there is a fit between the student and the college, the student then might be more inclined engage with peers and faculty. The program administrators also have ample opportunity to ensure that the student's individual's needs are being taken care of during the course of the first semester. Administrators also have the chance to fully evaluate the effectiveness of the program over time. Outdoor orientation programs may also provide benefits that reach far beyond the initial trip and subsequent classroom sessions. Participants in Presbyterian College's (SC) outdoor orientation program report many friendships that begun on

the outdoor orientation program have last through four years of college and beyond (Altizer & Patterson, 1994). These benefits of outdoor orientation programs may be significant and enduring for the participants (Paxton & McAvoy, 2000). Gass (2003) conducted a survey of outdoor orientation participants to assess the long term effects of the program on the individual. The surveys were conducted 17 years after the outdoor orientation experience. The feedback he received centered on three recurrent themes:

1. How participants were led to challenge their assumptions of themselves and others
2. How the development of close peer friendships helped with their initial transition to college as well as how these connections often became the foundation of lifelong friendships.
3. How the orientation program positively affected their undergraduate education as well as their lives after graduation.

These results show just how influential the experience can be. In summary, the outdoor orientation shaped the entire college experience. The relationships that were formed were the foundation that the participant's social and academic lives were built on. Fiori (2003) suggest that outdoor orientation is an "ecstatic experience that jolts incoming freshmen out of their previous existence into a new world of fresh ideas and infinite possibility" and functions as a "Rite of Passage" (ROP). Outdoor orientation programs can operate as a ROP if the Contemporary Adventure Model (CAM) is applied (Bell, 2003). The CAM moves the freshmen from their existing phase of teenager through the liminal/challenge phase, and then into the final phase where the freshmen as an individual searches for her new role within the institution; new knowledge and positive changes (from the outdoor experience) help initiate action to find a new role (Bell, 2003). The ROP can be attained if there is a community of support for the individual

in their new role. The desired outcome of the outdoor orientation program is achieved through the interaction of a combination of many aspects which include the environment, the activities, the group dynamics, the processing of the experience, the instructors, and the individual participants (McKenzie, 2000). First Tracks, the outdoor orientation program at the Colorado State University, reports that students stepped out of their comfort zones, made friendships, had fun, and took the initial steps toward understanding college life (Rastall & Webb, 2002-2003).

The question for this study is to what extent and in what ways the Keystone Learning Community impacts engagement, persistence, and retention and how those variables are related to each other through the learning community.

Retention

For decades, institutions of higher learning have been striving to improve college students' first year out of a need to survive, self-interest, or just trying to do the right thing (Barefoot, 2000). All three conditions may be the reaction enacted by higher education in response to the growing concern of dropout rates and student retention. Gass (1990) states that the reason for this concern may be attributed to fewer numbers of potential college applicants, the financial and personnel losses suffered by the institution when students fail to complete their undergraduate education, and a decrease in efficiency of the processes of the institution. This lack of efficiency and production at the institution has initiated the transition to performance based higher education funding. Colleges and universities are being held accountable for retention and graduation rates as indicators of performance (Jacobs & Archie, 2008). Jacobs and Archie (2008) note that 32 states currently enact these two indices for official performance review. Policy makers at the federal level are considering a revision of the Higher Education Act linking federal student financial aid programs to graduation rates.

The initiative to improve retention rates is a major factor that feeds into many institutions' decision to offer an outdoor orientation program. Outdoor orientation programs that focused on retention took into account that retention is complex interaction of specific academic and social variables (Gass, 1990). He identified six academic and social factors orientation programs need to focus on when the goal is transitioning students to college:

1. Positive peer-group development
2. Positive interaction with faculty members
3. Development of career and/or major course of study plans
4. Strong interest in academics
5. Adequate preparation for college academics
6. Compatibility with student expectations and college offerings.

He also found that outdoor orientation programs that had any combination of some or all of these variables had a significant effect on student retention (Gass, 1990). In his paper on the proceedings of The Conference on Outdoor Pursuits in Higher Education, Smathers (1976) provided three examples on how the outdoor environment may be used to enhance learning for three very different academic disciplines. The first was a program run by the University Of Massachusetts School Of Education in which participants, teachers working on in-service requirements, reported a gain in self-confidence, increased sense of potential, and an improved ability to relate with others. Similarly, Appalachian State University ran an outdoor experience for student teachers with overwhelmingly positive results. Those results, known as the Smather's study (Smathers, 1976), showed that students who entered the program reported they were better prepared for their teaching experience, showed increased involvement in the learning process, and increased interpersonal relations with other students. The Second program highlighted was

the Wilderness Workshop offered by the State University of New York in which a three credit course in American Literature is offered to both undergraduates and graduate students. This course built strong relationships in the cohort group through the inherent teambuilding exercises of making camp, hauling gear, and surviving in the outdoors. One participant stated, “We are no longer just a group of 13 people, but have become as one” (Smathers, 1976). A very powerful statement from students enrolled in an American Literature course. It is obvious that reading Thoreau and relating to their own experiences in nature has had a lasting effect. The final academic tie presented was a more direct relation to nature and the course content. Appalachian State University Department of Anthropology enlisted the expertise of the ASU Office of Wilderness Experience to assist with instruction for a course titled “Man and his Environment”. The course was used for three main goals:

1. To build individual initiative and group communication in classes with no specific environment theme.
2. A major optional project in the Man and His Environment course.
3. An experience in primitive living in a North American Indians Class.

Positive reports from ASU include formerly quiet students became active participants in class and the interchange between students and faculty became much greater and less formal. Positive reports from Appalachian State University include formerly quiet students becoming active participants in class and the interchange between students and faculty becoming much greater and less formal.

In the 1980s, compared to the 1970s, there were more formal attempts using the positive gains from the outdoors applied to outdoor orientation programs. In 1983 Salisbury State College created a six-night, seven-day canoe excursion in Algonquin Provincial Park, Canada for

incoming freshmen. The program was created to address the two main concerns exhibited by freshmen. The concerns of incoming students focused their anxiety over being able to perform academically at the collegiate level and equally as stressful were the students' concerns over making friends (Gilbert, 1984). Freshmen were subjected to pre- and post-test surveys to ascertain the effects of the program. Gilbert (1984) reported that participants in the Salisbury State College Algonquin Provincial Park orientation cohort exhibited a higher retention rate than students in the traditional on-campus orientation program. Additional results showed that students from the Algonquin cohort were more involved in extracurricular activities by more than double that of other freshmen. Subsequent research on the program at Salisbury State College (Brown & Armstrong, 1995) continued to show positive outcomes from trip participants. Students who successfully completed the outdoor experience showed a gain in confidence and direction. The program helped students realize they could succeed in college. Brown (1998) administered the College Transition Questionnaire to admitted Salisbury State College freshmen prior to their selection of an orientation program. Following the completion of their selected orientation program (classroom vs. outdoor), students were then given the Adaptation to College Questionnaire. The survey results showed that students who chose the outdoor orientation program adjusted better to college life and had higher retention rates than students who experienced orientation in the classroom. Self-efficacy, which factors into persistence, was also found to be higher in students who participated in outdoor orientation programs than those students who experience regular on campus orientation (Bobilya, Akey & Mitchell, 2009; Frauman & Waryold, 2009; Sheard & Golby, 2006). In general, these types of programs positively correlated to better grades and increased retention and persistence (Barefoot, 1993). Thus far the literature suggests that outdoor orientation programs have a positive impact on

retention, however, the means by which the programs accomplish specific classroom goals, increase GPA, and factor into retention might be understood through their facilitation of engagement.

The National Resource Center for the First-year Experience reports that over 70% of U.S. colleges and universities offer special first year seminars to ensure that new students have a class in which the primary goal is the development of peer relationships and improve academic skills (Barefoot, 2000). Institutional fit, a concern of incoming freshmen (Thompson et. al., 2007), may also be addressed by outdoor orientation programs. Research suggests that outdoor freshmen orientation programs do accomplish the goal of creating peer relationships and also enhance the first year experience by facilitating institutional fit (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1996; Devlin, 1996; Swenson et al., 2008). Austin et al. (2010) support the research that outdoor orientation program promote the formation of peer relationships and continue by stating that a student is more likely to form these relationship in an outdoor program vs. on campus orientation. Outdoor orientation programs that provide extra in and out of class involvement promote student development and show high gains in providing students with a social support network (Flowers, 2004; Bell, 2006). Achieving program goals, like identifying social skills and the development of peer groups, coincides with characteristics of the involved and engaged student. This builds on the discussion of outdoor orientation programs impacting retention as Astin (1999) writes that the involved student is more likely to return for their sophomore year. The creation of a peer network and institutional fit help the student become comfortable and feel like they belong. This makes them more likely to be retained into a second year and persist onto a degree.

There is further evidence that the engagement opportunities provided through participation in an outdoor orientation programs are the vehicle to help transform the shy and

self-conscious to the energetic and ambitious. An adventure in the outdoors can turn a quiet and nervous student into a leader, risk assessor, guide, educator, backcountry chef, conflict manager, steward, and business person (Oldmixon, 2007). In addition, students who complete an outdoor orientation program report reduced stress levels and fears, and the disposition to be a more productive student on campus (Oldmixon, 2007). In many ways these principles are put into place in the sophomore, junior and senior years. Majors and labs are split into cohort groups. Group presentations and papers are a given part of almost any college education. The process of the group dynamics and learning communication and leadership styles is almost more important than the final result or submitted assignments. Students learn how to interact with others. A good outdoor orientation program provides freshmen the opportunity to learn these skills in a more relaxed environment. True, the actual activities may be challenging but are inherently fun. The novelty of camping for the first time or completing a high ropes course provides an adrenaline rush and sense of accomplishment. That sense of accomplishment may drive the freshmen to challenge themselves more academically and perhaps socially. Bell (2006) writes that students report the largest impact of outdoor orientation program is the opportunity for forming peer relations and not the actual course content. This type of early engagement is a factor on the variable of retention as Baker and Siryk (1984) found that early engagement is critical to a student's long term adjustment to college. The support of a peer network and early interaction with faculty should dispel feelings of loneliness and anxiety over new surroundings and encourage students to interact with faculty in the classroom, attend study group sessions, and experience college life.

Miami University reported similar results learned from its outdoor orientation program (Parks, 1997). Miami Bound evolved as a collaborative effort among the Outdoor Pursuit Center

and the Office of First Year Programs and Orientation. Students selected from a variety of outdoor experience trip destinations and activities. Participants in the program were better equipped to confront issues of transition into the academic and social aspects of college life. Parks (1997) also reports that students formed strong bonds with other trip participants, faculty, and staff. It is one of the goals of the Keystone Learning Community to also form strong relationships among the participants. Of particular interest to this study is if the bonds the participants form are perceived by the participants, to aid in their retention to the institution.

Persistence

The impact that outdoor orientation programs have on persistence to graduation seems to be forged through the program initiating engagement which leads to retention, and then to persistence. It is the lasting effects of that engagement and the prolonged engagement that may play a significant role in graduation of program participants. In both four year and two year institutions many traditional-aged college students have nontraditional responsibilities such as parenting, full time employment, or being financially independent (Barefoot, 2008). These added responsibilities make use of the student's limited resources and can infringe on the overall experience the student has at the institution. There are other variables that may contribute to lower retention rates on campus and the need for institution to address these variables early in the student's college career. According to most college faculty, programs to address freshmen year dropout rates would focus on the deficiencies of the students themselves: "students are academically disengaged, unmotivated, can't write, can't spell and expect instant gratification" (Barefoot 2000). These factors in any combination with the characteristics of non-traditional students make the role of the institution in addressing a student's particular needs that much more important. Programs that are designed to enhance retention for disadvantaged youth at least

keep the disadvantaged on pace with other cohorts (Braunstien, Lesser, & Pescatrice 2008). In this regard the impact that an outdoor orientation program has on retention and the engagement that assists with retention and onto graduation requires further examination. A “one size fits all” retention program does not correlate with success for non-traditional students (Cavote & Kopera-Frye, 2006-2007). Although they may be out of their comfort zone, the opportunity to mix with faculty and peers in the outdoor orientation program by be enough encouragement to persist. Thus, I began to wonder about the ways that The Keystone Learning Community contributed to students’ persistence through their undergraduate degrees.

As indicated in Chapter I, this research examines the impacts of the Keystone Learning Community on student, engagement, persistence, and retention. The first step to understanding what the Keystone Learning Community is and how it creates an environment to impact these three concepts. The Keystone Learning Community is based on O’Keefe’s (1988) Model III outdoor orientation program in which a connection is made between the outdoor experience and persistence through college. The Keystone Learning Community employs Model III then continues the experience with dedicated classroom sessions and assignments. The Keystone LC adds to the understanding of O’Keefe’s (1988) Model III by illustrating the added value to the students who participate in an extended outdoor orientation program. The Keystone LC continues the connection to the wilderness experience through the use of readings and class discussions. The learning community also emphasizes a connection to faculty by including them in all aspects of the follow up class sessions. By doing so, the Keystone Learning Community shows the need and benefit of continued faculty engagement. The next section outlines the details of the two-phase Keystone Learning Community experience and the methods through which it attempts to impact engagement, persistence, and retention, for incoming freshmen.

Chapter III – Methods

This chapter provides the site summary and the details of the Keystone Learning Community. The chapter also provides a discussion of participants and their recruitment, the researcher's paradigm/ research worldview, data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness.

Site Summary

The institution is a nationally recognized metropolitan research institution offering more than 370 academic programs through 13 schools and colleges to nearly 29,000 students. The main campus in Southeast Michigan comprises 100 buildings over 200 acres; its six extension centers offer higher education to students throughout Southeast Michigan. The institution is also home to the most diverse student body among public institutions in the state.

The Keystone Learning Community - Phase I

Day one begins by driving the students 4.5 hours away from campus where they are placed in an environment where they are a captive audience. In the vans, both faculty and freshmen are led by upper-class leaders in various games to instill name recognition and to have fun on the long trip. Cell phones and other technology are prohibited so that students immerse themselves in the experience and focus on building relationships with their peers and faculty. Prior to launch the cohort takes turn as individuals sharing their goals for the trip and how they would like to be treated. This discussion is captured in writing on a piece of cloth that serves as the cohort's flag (a symbol of their journey together). The cohort is also encouraged to create a group name. Once the cohort arrives at the river, students are purposely provided minimal canoe instruction and divided into pairs to launch into the river. This first section of the river is surrounded by State owned land and is undeveloped. The paddle to the first camp site is approximately three to four hours and provides for a feeling of isolation from the civilized world.

For this section of the river, students are instructed to learn three things about their canoe partner that the group does not already know to be shared at the campfire that night.

The campsite activity begins with the erecting of tents by the students. No instruction other than location is provided. Once the tents are up the students are given the task of securing enough fire wood to cook meals and provide warmth for the evening. The campfire discussions begin with the students sharing what they learned about their canoe partner. This functions as an ice-breaking activity and promotes a fun atmosphere. This then leads into a debriefing about the experience of being paired with a stranger, not knowing how to properly maneuver a canoe, and having the task of arriving at the campsite before dark. The students share their discussions of success and failure and how they ultimately achieved the goal. The trip leaders discuss the concepts of leaders, followers, introverts and extroverts. The focus is that roles may sometimes adjust depending on the situation and that it is up to the individual or pair to decide how to achieve the outcome. The cohort is supplanted with the notion of self-reliance and critical thinking to achieve the outcome as opposed to relaying on instructions and a set pattern of tasks. The remainder of the night is spent engaging in informal discussions and games.

Day two on the river consists of two, three-four hour sections of canoeing broken up by an extended lunch at mid-day. Lunch time features several large group teambuilding activities where the students are challenged to complete specific tasks. After each activity the cohort is debriefed on communication, leadership, and how each applies to what they will experience in college. The campsite is set up in similar fashion to the previous evening. While dinner is being prepared the cohort is instructed to find a rock for an activity. The upper-class leaders take the cohort to the river bank, absent of faculty/staff, and have a brief discussion about fears and anxiety. The cohort is asked to write down a fear they have about attending college on the rock.

Once everyone has written something on their rock, volunteers are asked to share what they wrote on their rock. Once the sharing aspect has been completed, as a group, the students throw their rocks into the river. This symbolizes the letting go of one's fears about college. The premise behind the sharing of the fears is to promote a sense of community among the students and they learn that even though they are all individuals from diverse backgrounds, they hold similar fears and are maybe not so different from each other. The second evening's campfire discussions typically include topics from Housing & Residential Life, Public Safety, and the Academic Success Center. After the formal topics have all been completed the cohort generally diffuses to relax and pursue questions individually with presenters.

Day three on the river is a short two-three hour trip. The section of the river widens considerably and is also quite deep. The canoes are all tied up together creating a large floating platform that students and staff can move about freely on. Lunch is served on the river and the entire group is led in an activity by the lead faculty for the course. The activity involves the passing of an icon (football, trophy, and scepter) from one person to the next. When holding the icon the individual is to state to the group a reason they appreciated another individual over the course of the trip. Faculty and the upper-class leaders take part in this activity as well. River time typically concludes with water fights and sprints to the landing to conclude the journey. The equipment is then packed back into the vehicles for the return journey to campus.

In summary, Phase I facilitates peer and faculty interactions for incoming freshmen through an outdoor orientation program. Students are provided information pertinent to new students and are educated on how to get involved on campus and the benefits of doing so. Kuh and colleagues (2008) examined NSSE information from eighteen undergraduate institutions to see if there was a link between student engagement and the outcomes of academic achievement

and persistence. This is supported by Kuh and colleagues (2008) and his two major findings: First, student engagement in educationally purposeful activities is positively related to academic outcomes in the first year and is represented by student grades and persistence between the first and second year. Pre-college traits (standardized test scores, high school GPA) affect the first year student, however, the effects of these traits diminish significantly once the college experiences are taken into account. For example, students who enroll in a learning community in which they form strong peer relationships and have positive faculty interactions, may be more likely to persist onto their sophomore year. The second major finding was that engagement has a compensatory effect on first year grades and persistence to the second year at the same institution. Exposure to effective educational practices generally benefits all students, but the effects are even more pronounced for students with lower ability and students of color when compared to white students. Phase I of the Keystone Learning Community could be beneficial for all students; however, students who are at risk of not persisting could witness larger benefits than those who are not at risk. When examining the data from this study, the domain analysis looked for participants' responses that make reference to their experiences in the Keystone Learning Community being the catalyst for any success in college they report.

The Keystone Learning Community - Hiking Option

The Keystone Learning Community began in 2008 with 37 participants. In 2009, enrollment in the program increased by 119% to up to 81 students. In the weeks leading up to the Phase I canoeing portion of the program, the department received numerous forms of communication from students asking about alternative dates and changing the duration of the experience to accommodate their summer schedule of vacations, work, and so on. The department was unable to make adjustments to the published schedule for that program year,

but was proactive in creating a shorter version of the experience that did not require the same time commitment as the canoeing trip. This is important to the data analysis of this study to see if there was any difference in the student's perception of engagement, persistence, and retention based on the duration/option of Phase I that they enrolled in.

This new option was a hiking trip that occurred at a State Park about an hour west of campus. Students would commute as a group by bus to the trail head, hike 5 miles to camp, and stay overnight. In the morning, the students would eat breakfast reflect on the experience and hike back to the trail head. By the time the cohort made it back to campus their Phase I experience lasted a little more than 24 hours. As with the canoeing option, upper-class students lead the hiking trips and are accompanied by faculty and staff from various departments on campus. Teambuilding activities and fireside discussions are also part of the experience. Students who enrolled for the hiking option participated in the same Phase II portion as the students who enroll for the canoeing option.

The Keystone Learning Community - Phase II

Phase II consists of four official classroom sessions with the lead faculty member from Phase I who also serves as the learning community coordinator. The four class sessions are evenly spread across the fall semester with one class each month. The course is graded on a Pass/Fail basis with all assignments and class activities requiring full completion. A mix of reading assignments, small and large group discussions, and papers are requirements for receiving a passing grade. Reading assignments are taken from the following texts and are no longer than one chapter.

- Peart, N., *Ghost Rider: Travels on the Healing Road*, E C W Press, June 2002.

- Sobel, D., *Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education*, Vol.[# is missing], The Orion Society, June 2005.

- Louv, R., *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, March 2008.

- Krakauer, J. *Into the Wild*. Anchor Books, 1996.

Students are divided into small groups to discuss the assigned reading together. After small group discussion, a spokesperson from each group presents the groups thoughts to the larger class. Debate and discussion follow as the students converse over what the reading meant to them as an individual. In addition to covering the readings, in class work includes writing workshops and tutoring, presentations from Career Services, and sessions on creating a plan of work that is associated with fees. This latter exercise is designed to show students the value in taking a full time credit load, 15 credits, and time to graduation measured in dollars.

There are four writing assignments due over the course of the semester:

1. A paper on the student's leadership and communication style. Is the style the student currently exhibits going to remain as is throughout their college career?
2. A paper outlining what the student wants to achieve academically at the institution.
3. A paper on the advice regarding transitioning to college the student would give to the next incoming class of freshmen.
4. A paper on how the student has changed during their first semester of college.

Students are provided feedback on writing assignments and often asked to resubmit with corrections or further content to get them accustomed to writing and submitting college quality work. Accompanying the class room session are several optional extracurricular events that occur specifically for the LC throughout the semester. These include bowling and pizza parties,

high ropes course and climbing wall nights, debates about assigned readings, movie nights, and study sessions. The desired outcome of the mix of in class, homework assignments, and extracurricular activities is that students are engaged in critical thinking and exhibit general academic growth. This correlates to Astin's (1993) study in which he examined 20,000 students, 25,000 faculty from 200 schools found the following: A student's growth in general knowledge is associated with the number of courses taken that emphasize writing skills, science or inquiry, history and historical analysis; critical thinking is generated through the development of writing skills, active engagement in discussion, debate, class presentations and discussing career and vocational plans; overall academic development is influenced by student centered faculty and collaborative learning; and leadership and interpersonal skills are most closely related to student interaction and socializing with students from different racial and ethnic groups and the number of writing courses taken.

The fall semester for students enrolled in the Keystone Learning Community culminates with the learning community assessment survey. This instrument is used by the faculty overseeing the program to evaluate the program year and make adjustments necessary to ensure the learning community is achieving its goals. The results of the survey are also reported to the institution so that its impact is evaluated relative to other learning community initiative on campus.

Participants and Their Recruitment

Since the inception of the Keystone Learning Community in 2008, 296 incoming freshmen have self-selected the program. The learning community is listed in the course catalog and is advertised directly to incoming freshmen through the Department of Campus Recreation website and informative postcards mailed directly to admitted freshmen. At the conclusion of

Phase I, all students who have enrolled for the Keystone Learning Community are contacted via email and invited to participate in the study. To avoid coercion the emails were sent by a third party not associated with the learning community and named in the original IRB submittal. Students choosing to participate in the study met with the third party and were provided informed written consent as approved by the University IRB (Appendix B). All identifying information in the appendices has been redacted to maintain the confidentiality of the site and the participants. Throughout this study all policies and procedures as set forth and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) were followed. A copy of the IRB initial approval is included in Appendix A, along with the approval to amend the initial submission to include learning community assessment surveys. Institutional IRB approval was obtained by the principal investigator for surveys, institutional, and interview data. The IRB granted a waiver of consent for the principal investigator to use data collected through learning community assessment surveys.

As detailed in Table 1, from 2008-2012 from 27-81 canoeing, and 16 hiking, students participated in the Keystone Learning Community Research. From among these participants, a total of 13 students were interviewed from 2008-2011 cohorts. Participants represented a wide range of racial and ethnic group, with most identifying as white or African American. Slightly more women than men participated in Keystone Learning Communities. Students' college-entry qualifications indicated SAT scores that averaged in the low-mid 20s (ranging from 11 to 34), with GPAs of 3.1-3.45 (out of a maximum of 4.0). Students came from a variety of majors ranging across pre-medicine, pre-nursing, engineering, business, psychology, mortuary sciences, criminal justice, and undecided.

Table 1 Participant Profile

	-	2008	2009	2010 (Canoeing)	2010 (Hiking)	2011	2012
Total Participants	-	37	81	63	16	57	42
Interviewees	-	1	2	1	1	8	0
Gender	M	48%	40%	52%	38%	42%	55%
	F	52%	60%	48%	62%	58%	45%
Ethnicity	Asian	8%	8%	< 5%		10.50%	15%
	Af-Am	24%,	24%	10%,	38%	12.30%	7%
	Hisp	5%		< 5%	6%	3.50%	< 5%
	Nat-Am	< 5%		2%			
	White	48%	60%	28%	31%	63.20%	60%
unknown	10%	6%	22%	25%	10.50%	16%	
Majors	-	Pre-Med, Pre-Nursing, Undecided, Business	Pre-Med, Pre-Nursing, General Engineering	Pre-Med, Pre-Nursing, Mortuary Science, Misc.	Pre-Med, Pre-Nursing, Psychology, Misc.	Pre-Med, Criminal Justice, Pre-Nursing	Pre-Med, Pre-Nursing, General Engineering
ACT Scores	-	21.8	22.4	21.97	22.8	23.7	25.1
ACT Score Range	-	15 – 31	13 – 34	11 – 31	14 – 31	11 – 33	16-31
HS GPA	-	3.24	3.28	3.1	3.27	3.45	3.14

Data Collection Procedures

Three central types of data underpin this research project: participant observation researcher journal about field activities, individual interviews, and surveys run by the university on learning communities. Table 2 indicates the number of each type of data that accumulated through the course of this study.

Table 2 Data Sources

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Data 1 Researcher Journal	n = 7	n = 8	n = 8	n = 15	n = 2
Data 2 Interviews	n = 1	n = 2	n = 2	n = 8	n = 0
Data 3 Surveys	n = 0	n = 41	n = 76	n = 58	n = 55

* The survey was not run in 2008. Also, some students, who participated in multiple learning communities, completed a survey for each LC. But, the University had no way to know which of the student's responses related to which of the LCs. Thus, these multiple surveys are included as if they came from different students. For instance note that there were 55 surveys in 2012, but only 42 participants.

Researcher Journal

Following Spradley (1980), and Lincoln and Guba (1985), I maintained a researcher journal with three kinds of information: a log of field activities, with a running commentary on how planned events were modified, and a description of key events that stood out in my mind; my reflections on events in the field, especially my impact on the field and its impact on me; and my emerging sense of the preliminary findings that needed to be checked in interview data-collection activities. Both the key events and the preliminary findings informed the interview guide, which helped me connect what happened in learning community activities to my research interests. The journal entries were kept without identifiers and primarily include information about the operation of the Learning Community, and my responsibilities and decisions there, not about individual group members.

Interviews

The interview asked questions about students' interactions with fellow students, interactions with faculty and staff, use of university resources such as libraries, involvement in extracurricular activities, and overall satisfaction with the institution. Additionally interview questions focused on students' descriptions of their experiences in both Phase I and Phase II of

the Keystone Learning Community. Interview subjects were given the option of not answering questions of their choosing. All participants were provided the opportunity to view the interviews and their transcription at any point in the study for verification or omission purposes. Upon final approval from the subject, all interview responses were transcribed then to remove identifiers linking tapes to specific individuals. Any identifying materials, including tapes, were destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

A total of 13 interviews spread across five years comprise the interview data set. In this research study, students participated in a 45-minute, video-taped interview. Descriptive questions (McCurdy et. al., 2005) were asked about the student's experiences prior to, during, and after their Keystone Learning Community experiences (Appendix C). Questions covered interactions with fellow students, interactions with faculty and staff, use of university resources such as libraries, involvement in extracurricular activities, and overall satisfaction with the institution. The interviews also asked participants to discuss their motivation behind certain actions and events within the program, mini tours, as well as story questions to elicit more in depth detail pertaining to cultural context of the question and experience (McCurdy et. al., 2005). Participants had the option of not answering questions of their choosing. All interview responses were coded to remove identifiers linked to specific individuals. All participants were provided the opportunity to view the video and its transcription at any point in the study for verification or omission purposes. The audio track of the video tapes was transcribed word for word. Proper nouns in the audio track were replaced with pseudonyms or generic identifiers – such as “faculty” or “other student.” Any potentially identifying materials, including tapes were destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

Survey

Each year, learning community assessment surveys are administered by the Provost's Office at the conclusion of the academic year. This survey is listed in the assignment section of the Keystone Learning Community course syllabus. Students are encouraged to complete the survey so that faculty and the institution may assess the effectiveness of the learning community experience. The surveys are sent to the students' university email by a third party that administers the survey and compiles summary results for the institution. No identifiers are used by the third party when providing the results to the institution and principal investigator. The third party only knows how many students have completed the survey. There is no penalty to students for not completing the survey. Since the survey only contains summative data and no identifiers are associated with the instrument for the institution or the PI to view, the university's IRB granted a waiver of consent for the survey's use in this study.

Data Management

All of the data, research, notes, survey results, etc. are kept on a password protected, 300GB external hard drive that is property of the PI. At the conclusion of this study all data materials were destroyed and deleted from both external hard drives.

Data Analysis

Three analysis strategies were used to attempt to answer the research questions in this study. A preliminary domain analysis (McCurdy, et al. 2005) was performed on each of the forms of data by independently by group (researcher journal entries, interviews, and surveys). Taxonomies by cohort were created to organize data into like domains and patterns of sameness across data sets (types of data). Then, a search for sub-domains within each major domain were completed to further refine the analysis. In this way, the taxonomic analysis provides a way to

organize within the domains. Once this is completed, a componential analysis (McCurdy, et al. 2005) were performed to examine nuanced variation across participants or cohorts.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a level of achievement that researchers in the naturalist environment strive to obtain, a measure of the quality of their research findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define four criteria for producing and evaluating the quality of research work: credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability. These criteria parallel those used in positivist research: internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity, respectively.

To move towards credibility, I used the framework as set forth by Lincoln & and Guba (1985). Credibility may be built through: a.) Prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation of sources and method, peer review, negative case analysis, and referential adequacy. In the main, this research project depended on triangulation of sources (multiple participants) and of methods (different data-collection strategies). Having faculty with whom to discuss emerging findings provided for peer review. In addition, I read and reread data to rule out completing explanations (seeking cases that negate my findings) and revising findings until it became unnecessary.

Once credibility is assured, the other criteria can be considered. Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings from this study are applicable to another time or place. This is not something that can be determined completely during the current research process. However, by including rich, thick descriptions about the site, circumstances there, and the KLC, readers can determine for themselves whether this study can be applied elsewhere. Dependability and confirmability are strengthened through audits and the audit trails created through the process of

data analysis. The research methodologist on the committee performed an audit of findings, as a final check on trustworthiness.

Chapter IV presents the analysis of participant responses to both surveys and interviews. The results of the data analysis are exhibited in the domains that were investigated: engagement, persistence, and retention. Sub-domains that emerged as the data analysis was conducted are discussed under each domain heading.

Chapter IV – Results

This chapter discloses the results of the data analysis and provide insight on the methods by which the Keystone Learning Community impacts Engagement, Persistence, and Retention.

Findings emerged in several broad categories: students' reasons for enrolling; engagement with peers, faculty, and upperclassmen; student persistence; student retention; and what students said about what they learned. As will become evident in what follows, for many the learning community was a life-altering experience grounded in lasting connections to peers, faculty, and upperclassmen. Also, several notable aspects of persistence emerged, which ranged across learning to have confidence in their own capabilities, creating a support network, and learning their way around campus expectations, resources, and writing demands. Likewise, retention meant more than just staying around, and implicated being prepared, as well as improving skills, using resources, and getting individual attention when needed. Finally, students talked about learning many things: to relax, to engage in self-discovery, to write better, and to realize that their own fears were often shared by others.

Reasons For Enrolling

Before we enter the discussion of peer engagement and how that is facilitated through the Keystone Learning Community it is important to first touch on the motivating factors the incoming freshmen provide for self-selecting for the experience. The learning community is advertised as a fun experience for incoming freshmen and a great opportunity to meet new people and build friendships. It follows then that this was the reason for participating provided by the large majority of students. However, when the taxonomic analysis was performed a subdomain of students wanting to address shyness or nervous anxiety emerged. This subdomain is best illustrated by the following statements by students on why they registered for the learning

community: "...to come out of my shell more because I am kind of a quiet person and to meet new people" (Interview 6, pg. 1, 2011). "So I was nervous about people not liking me and then when I left I felt pretty good. I mean we talked. We kind of did a few things" (Interview 1, pg. 2, 2011). This student describes enrolling as a method to meet her shyness and be placed in a situation where she is almost forced to make friends.

For many students, registering at a university in a large metropolitan area can bring much anxiety and fear of the unknown. Questions surrounding this topic are often addressed during registration for the learning community or at information tables during tours and open houses. To ease some of the general nervousness about being in the wilderness for three days a pre-trip meeting is held for the incoming freshmen to receive their camping supplies and to ask questions pertaining to the outdoor portion of the trip. The typical vein of questions focus on lack of flush toilets, bugs, lack of cell phone service and other amenities associated with everyday life. What was not verbalized was the undercurrent associated with entering this new environment. Or as one student noted:

Before the meeting I was nervous and did not know what to expect. I was really looking forward to meeting the people I would be going on the trip with. When looking around the table at all of the new faces who would be attending the trip with me, I was excited and surprised. All of the stereotypes that I heard about before moving to the city did not exist in the classroom. There were people of all different cultures who would be mixing together. I really enjoyed meeting everyone at the trip and know that I was going to become close with several of the people. (Interview 3, pg. 2, 2008)

One student described his experience at the pre-trip meeting as realizing that despite outward appearances the freshmen were all the same: "I was feeling excited especially after conversing with some of my fellow students that were about to attend the trip with me. I felt like we all had the same feelings, which made me feel more comfortable" (Survey, pg.9, 2012). The following student enrolled for the specific reason to learn about differences among her peers:

Really to understand more about people from different backgrounds from me [how I] grew up. How they think and go about things and different experiences. Like, situation in the canoes like when it's just you and one other person you have to talk and get to know them, unless you just want to sit there and be quiet the whole time. You have to talk and get to know people. (Interview 4, pg. 1, 2010)

“Instead of being around people I grew up with I wanted to meet people like people from other backgrounds, schools and cities and get to know them” (Interview 4, pg. 1, 2010).

Another student alluded to peers acting differently while in their comfort zones but when placed in the wilderness with a group of strangers the relationships began to change: “I mean in the middle of the woods, in the middle of nowhere, with people who are probably just as goofy as you and put on the same facade, it's nice to just break down the barriers and get to know people for who they really are. So that's the good thing about being in the middle of nowhere” (Interview 1, pg.5, 2011). During the pre-trip meeting many of the “façades” the student is referring to are very much in place with some students cracking jokes to ease tension or to fill gaps in conversations. Once on the river, through various exercises and some other portions of the trip discussed in later sections, the cohort began to come together as one unit. In the words of a 2012 participant “We all became like a big family over the three days of our trip. It was really great!” (Survey, pg. 21, 2012). In the next section the cohort begins to form this “family” unit as described by the student and see how the Keystone Learning Community facilitates peer engagement among incoming freshmen.

Peer Engagement

Peer engagement in the Keystone Learning Community officially begins the morning of the trip. It is stated in the pre-trip meeting that mobile devices, phones, tablets, etc. are not permitted on the trip. This requirement eliminates much of the distracting behavior exhibited by today's college age students. For transport to the river some 3.5 hours from campus, students are

randomly divided into small groups. During this travel time, students participate in a number of games to learn everyone's names and a little of each participant's personality. These games are designed to be fun and free flowing allowing for many tangent conversations along the way. Once at the canoe launch site the small groups join as one large cohort again. At this time the cohort is instructed to create a cohort flag, name, and to write on the flag how they would like to be treated over the next three days. This discussion offers a little more insight on each participant. Typically most describe themselves as having no camping or canoeing experience, and coming from an environment where everyone is just like them in appearance. Providing a comfortable space to move beyond these kind of boundaries is a goal of the camp. Removal of technology and the isolation is new for everyone and hastens the bonding process. The trip has its share of this "natural" engagement, but offers more as illustrated by the following two student comments: " I got to know them and their backgrounds, we all connected" (Survey, pg. 20, 2012), "More schools should have trips like these for freshmen. It was a good way to learn and meet new people that you normally wouldn't have talked to" (Survey, pg. 26, 2012).

After this the physical portion of the trip begins with minimal canoeing instruction, the group sets out for nine miles on the river to the first campsite. Once at camp the participants are provided tents and asked to set up the tents at specific locations. As with the canoeing, there is minimal instruction provided to the freshmen on how to set up the tents. Minimal instruction instills in them a sense of self-reliance and also facilitates communication among their peers to accomplish the goal. The following excerpt is from a participant contrasting the Keystone trip to an on campus orientation tour. "[For the campus orientation tour] It is go, go, go. Where on Keystone you have time in the tent. You have time on the river to just talk and get to know one another that you just don't get at orientation" (Interview 3, pg. 5, 2008). On the first day of

canoeing the students are given directions to find out three interesting facts about their canoe partner to share at the evening's campfire. This helps break the ice for the new shipmates and hopefully fuels discussion on how to navigate the waters of the river to get to camp by the designated time. Many times the staff found groups of canoes lashed together and several students engaged in a conversation at once. Those conversations then continue at the campfire with the entire cohort learning more about peers on the trip. It is important to note that as the conversation around the night's fire is progressing there is no limit to the topics for discussion. Everything starts with the three new items one learned about their canoeing partners, but it can go anywhere from that starting point. As questions arise the upperclassmen and faculty provide insight and once an item is addressed we move onto the next canoe partners and what they learned about each other. The goal of the staff is to approach all topics in a fun and open way that is inviting to all to join the conversation. Describing this from the student's perspective: "I would talk to pretty much everyone; I liked to be with people that make me laugh and people that I would make laugh. I made some friends and had an overall good time with the people I met" (Survey, pg. 20, 2012). The time on the river does eliminate several barriers that exist in the on-campus environment.

This next piece from a student interview summarizes the student perspective on peer engagement. Here, a student touches on a new situation, anxiety and the value of that peer engagement or friendship:

As every freshmen student wants to get close friendships, the college experience is when you meet those friends who are going to last a lifetime. Being from a small town and moving to a large city, I had my close knit friends back home. I was moving to somewhere where I was going to be by myself. I have no family here and I only knew two other people from here. I was thrown into this completely different environment with no friends I guess. Friends are the people you do things with around campus. Friends are the people you go to when you are having a bad day. It's nice to have that one on one, face to face connection with somebody. (Interview 3, pg. 1, 2008)

The student describes having that one on one connection or friend as a support network to turn to when having a bad day.

It appears that the Keystone Learning Community fosters peer engagement by breaking down some of the common barriers that students experience when coming to a campus for the first time. These barriers may include the size of the campus, time constraints, distractions from home, anxiety of the unknown, and attraction to those of similar background. The relative isolation of Phase I of the learning community seems to hasten the process allowing for bonds to be formed quicker than they might form while in the campus setting. According to the students the outdoor learning experience brings them out of their comfort zone and they intermingle with other students from backgrounds and experiences that are starkly different from their own. There are more layers to the peer engagement discussion than just being with others who are different from one's self. The next sections explore the participant's idea that they have accomplished something difficult and forged through an adventure not experienced by other freshmen who were not enrolled in the learning community.

Something Special

“I have made friends while being part of a life-altering experience” (Survey, pg.9, 2009). This is profound statement by a student, and the feeling it describes can be witnessed by everyone in the cohort as the canoes are all tied together on the last morning on the river. The river is wide enough for up to 12 canoes to be tied together side-by-side. More canoes are lashed in the front and the back of the flotilla. The entire group—freshmen, faculty, upperclassmen—are tied together for about two hours. Snacks are shared across canoes and the morning is relaxing as the group lets the current take them downriver. The final organized activity while on the river involves the freshmen thanking someone on the trip for an act of kindness or words of

support while on the trip. The students may say what they want and address peers or others on the flotilla. Each student has the floor while holding an icon chosen by the group. The icon can be anything; football, Frisbee, talking stick etc. and it serves as a sign that the holder is the only one speaking at the moment and that others should be listening. It is during this time that everyone present can see the statement of a life-altering experience become tangible. The freshmen share overcoming fears of the outdoors, coming to the end of a strenuous physical activity (canoeing 44 miles over a three day period), and the appreciation of others taking the time to show they take an interest in student success in college. A final emotional release is common as many students break down as they share their experience from the past three days (Researcher Journal, pg. 5, 2008; Researcher Journal, pg. 2, 2009). The first time this occurred it took everyone by surprise; however, over the course of multiple trips every year for five years it has become common and still exhilarating to witness. One student described the learning community as: “A friendly supportive group of people that are sharing a unique bond of starting out in college as freshmen” (Survey, pg. 8, 2009). Part of this perceived benefit is the notion that the cohort shared a unique experience by participating in the trip. This somehow set them apart from peers who did not enroll in the learning community. The students felt strongly that they have built very strong bonds that will last over time.

Lasting Connections

Throughout the trip a growing sense emerged that something special was occurring within the cohort. It started with witnessing simple interactions among the freshmen. Sometimes these interactions stand out and are reviewed at the nightly staff debriefing where we discuss logistics, itinerary changes, and potential issues to keep an eye on. These meaningful interactions were confirmed during the last morning when students are thanking others for random acts of

kindness on the river. There is the emotional release by the students speaking, which can also be witnessed in the eyes and body language of those who are listening intently and nodding in confirmation because they share that same emotional bond. These experiences funnel into a sub-domain of strong and lasting connections that are present across the cohorts. When describing what a student learned about himself on the trip, he responded: “I was able to open up to people I barely knew at the time and make everlasting friendships” (Survey, pg. 22, 2012). Other students provided more examples of the belief in the experience, saying: “The major benefit of the learning community is being able to communicate with people like you and to be able to make connections with people that could possibly last a lifetime” (Survey, pg. 11, 2010), “I have made lifelong friends” (Survey, pg. 9, 2009) and, “We had fun. We got to know each other. We talked. We figured out what kind of sports we all played. What we were into in high school. We played euchre and football. We just hung out and got to know each other. We still keep in touch now a couple of months after the trip” (Interview 2, pg. 3, 2011).

The interpersonal connections are a strong part of the success of the learning community. An aspect of the engagement of students is making them feel at home or safe at the institution. Having a strong peer network assists with this, but is only one thread of the fabric that comprises student engagement. “By being a member of a learning community, I have not only fostered a connection to fellow students but also to the school. The LC provides a unique self-realization experience to the university freshmen that would otherwise be remiss for much of his or her counterparts. Some of the benefits I have enjoyed include valuable insight, as well as new friendships and a multitude of extracurricular activities promoted by the LC” (Survey, pg. 9, 2010). The student above is speaking of a connection to the institution. Conversations with peers in canoes, games, and tasks of setting up camp facilitate peer engagement for the freshmen. The

next topic to explore is that connection to the institution and how the sub-domains of faculty and upperclassmen engagement help forge a bond of the freshmen with the institution.

Peer engagement is facilitated by the Keystone Learning Community through the participants' belief that they have been a part of something special and that something special, created relationships that will continue long after Phase I has been completed. The participants combine their efforts for three days to construct shelter, scavenge for firewood, paddle their canoes, and stay warm. These tasks can be physically and mentally draining on the participants. While exerting themselves physically, the participants are opening up lines of communication with their peers and sharing emotions, of all kinds, along the way. A mutual trust that one's peers are genuine solidifies this engagement and fuels the belief and desire for the lasting connection to those who shared the experience.

Faculty Engagement

Faculty engagement by the freshmen in the Keystone Learning Community is one component of the program that motivates participants to enroll for the experience. Faculty engagement may be divided into subdomains of comfort with communicating with faculty, fostering of relationship with faculty, and reception of advice from faculty which assists with the freshmen's transition to college.

Comfort with Communication

Faculty and staff from the institution are mixed in with the incoming freshmen for every aspect of Phase I of the Keystone Learning Community. They are involved from the moment the first freshman arrives on the morning of the trip. Name memory games, mystery facts, and finding out three interesting facts about one's canoe partner also involve all the faculty and staff. Faculty engagement may occur through a freshmen being paired with a faculty member as a

canoe partner due to uneven numbers, a casual conversation as a faculty canoe pulls alongside a freshmen canoe, one-on-one conversation at the campsite, or through formal discussion time lead by faculty members. For some students, the opportunity to meet faculty was their motivation for enrolling: “I was from a small town and it (camping) had been something that I had done with my family. It was something I enjoyed then. When I had spoken to you guys at orientation, briefly, you talked about how there was going to be other freshmen and how there were going to be faculty and staff on the trip. So I thought it was a good opportunity for me to meet other people” (Interview 3, pg. 1, 2008).

Faculty and staff were recruited through word of mouth and various communication outlets internal to the university. Typically, once interested the faculty asked what their responsibilities are during Phase I. They were instructed to be themselves and talk to students about faculty/student interactions in any manner that seems to work for them. Pre-determined discussion time existed where faculty speak on a specific topic; however, if causal conversations were organically happening the upperclassmen staff leaders did not interrupt what was already occurring. Students spoke about these formal discussion times and about how the faculty made communication comfortable and easy.

We had specific time periods where the communication professor spoke to us. Previously in high school I never had the opportunity to take any advanced placement or higher level courses. I came from a very baseline school system. So when I came here I was worried whether or not I would be able to fulfill the professors’ expectations. We talked about communication and meeting during office hours. He said, “Hey, listen I am a person too.” He understood that we were all freshmen. He said when he has freshmen in his classroom he tries to help us out a little bit more. Whether it is difficulties in email or on Blackboard, he talked about how he is more than willing to help out and how that is a normal feeling amongst most professors. He understands we are going to forget stuff when we come into class. He was squirting us with squirt guns and doing those things that every other person would do. He was making us realize he is just a person and not some God-like being. (Interview 3, pg. 4, 2008)

The faculty member who accompanied this cohort clearly made this student feel at ease despite the student's hints at a preconceived notion about how faculty acted among students. Through the faculty member's actions of speaking to the student as a colleague who is interested in student success and participating in the activities in Phase I, both formal and social, the faculty member eliminated the initial anxiety the student held about faculty. This comfort with communication that the students experience with faculty enables the incoming freshmen to feel an overall sense of ease with the faculty member that becomes more than a onetime encounter.

Fostering of Relationships

Because student/faculty interactions were perceived to be genuine by the freshmen and the faculty were viewed as people first, the participants were able to create relationships with the faculty. These relationships grew from the formal and casual conversations that the faculty had with the freshmen. This is best represented by these two examples: "The faculty was ready to give us advice on anything and joke around with us. There was no student/teacher relationship. It was purely friendly and comforting" (Survey, pg. 18, 2012), and "I both personally spoke with the staff and listened to them as they spoke to the students. I liked how all the adults treated us, the students, as adults. This wasn't like 5th-grade camp anymore; it was much more fun because we were (mostly) responsible for ourselves" (Survey, pg. 19, 2012). The examples show that the manner in which the faculty treated the freshmen directly affected the mood of the trip and built the foundation for a true relationship to be formed. This relationship was built on trust and comfort and enabled the faculty in Phase I to impart advice to the freshmen on various topics, but more importantly, for the freshmen to positively receive the advice provided.

Reception of Advice

Many adults provide information and advice to incoming freshmen during on-campus orientation and open houses. Though such advice is pertinent to student success and very valuable, for many young college aged students, faculty and staff members may seem out of touch. In three different cohorts, students readily accepted assistance provided by faculty. One student was actively seeking the input of a faculty member: “Faculty is extremely helpful and most are willing to work with me and answer my questions” (Survey, pg. 9, 2010). Another student appreciated advice they received: “I loved the faculty they were amazing and the things that I was told about on the trip [and] during class helped out tremendously” (Survey, pg. 5, 2011). “I really enjoyed speaking with the faculty members on the trip. They were able to give me good insight on how to be as successful as I could” (Survey, pg. 18, 2012). “The faculty were pretty cool as well. The two had good advice about campus life and college in general. They taught us some necessary things to know about campus if a student was ever in need of help. They also taught us good skills to know for college and the future, as they were professors themselves and knew the ins and outs of students” (Survey, pg. 18, 2012). The views represented above show that by proactively approaching the students, a dialogue is opened and engagement is embraced by students.

Assistance with Transition to College

The impact that the Keystone Learning Community has on faculty engagement may be summarized with the following student statement: “I’ve made valuable connections with other students and faculty. It has also helped me transition to a collegiate level of learning” (Survey, pg. 10, 2010). Ultimately, the goal of the learning community is to provide this ease of transition

to college for incoming freshmen. This smooth transition provides engagement opportunities with peers and faculty and is perceived as valuable to the incoming freshmen.

The Keystone Learning Community facilitates faculty engagement by placing the faculty side by side with the participants during Phase I. By having the faculty fully participate in the same activities as the freshmen, the freshmen become comfortable with communicating to the faculty. This comfort opens up more communication, thus, creating a relationship between the faculty member and the freshmen. The relationships formed assist the freshmen with receiving advice from faculty and that advice, and continued faculty engagement yields ongoing assistance with the transition to college.

Upperclassmen Engagement

Upperclassmen engagement with the freshmen on the Keystone Learning Community was facilitated in the same manner as peer engagement and faculty engagement with one slight alteration. The upperclassmen participated in name-learning games and were mixed in with the freshmen while on the river. The function that set the upperclassmen apart from the faculty was that of trip leader. The upperclassmen lead every aspect of Phase I of the learning community. It was the voices of upperclassmen providing directions on timeline, setting up camp, rules at camp, collecting firewood, and so on. None of these directives came from faculty. When formal fireside discussion was led by faculty, it was an upperclassman, making introductions. This was designed purposely so the freshmen saw other university students just a few years older assuming great responsibility and doing so in a fun manner. The largest benefit from upperclassmen engagement was summarized by one of the students: "I thought the upperclassmen leaders were really helpful in giving us advice and making us feel better about the overall college experience" (Survey, pg.17, 2012). The main advantage that the trip leaders have

over the faculty is that their age is closer to the freshmen students'. The leaders are still involved in their own college journey and have learned from their experience. The relative age of the leaders to the freshmen allows the freshmen to perceive the leaders as peers, but the role leaders fulfill makes them knowledgeable and trusted sources of advice for the incoming freshmen. : "They were a blast to be around, and I could really relate to what they were talking about" (Survey, pg.17, 2012). "My first canoe partner was ____who was a Keystone leader. He was an experienced canoe partner and was very friendly. We talked the entire time we were on the river. He answered all of my questions that I had about _____ and my upcoming college experience" (Interview 3, pg.3, 2008). That statement depicts two college age students enjoying the day on the river and discussing anything that comes to mind. Topics that would have been taboo to discuss with faculty could be discussed with the upperclassmen. The taboo areas typically included fraternity and sorority life and the party lifestyle that is often attributed to that aspect of college life; "Another upperclassmen talked about joining fraternities and sororities, which is something they don't talk about at regular orientation...Which I'm really glad this upperclassman brought it up because now I'm in a sorority and I love every minute of it" (Interview 1, pg. 4, 2011).

Placing undergraduates in a leadership role has proven very valuable to the Keystone Learning Community and its engagement of incoming freshmen. The trip leaders have the ability to know what is important to the incoming freshmen and deliver the information such that it will be received appropriately by the freshmen. "They were really helpful. I talked to them about pretty much anything I did not know about; classes, what teachers not to take, if I should buy books for certain classes. Maybe about certain majors and pretty much any question I had, they answered. I received answers to all my questions" (Interview 8, pg. 3, 2011). We see this advice

on anything in another example from a discussion on Greek life on campus, “Um, I remember_____ talking to us a little bit about like his social experience and how he is like in an engineering fraternity and he was talking about that. That was definitely interesting. I always just assumed that frats and sororities were only just for partying people to do whatever and all that party stuff. He said there was a frat or a sorority for everyone...” (Interview 7, pg. 3, 2011).

Freshmen engagement with upperclassmen also has a unique impact on the participants of the Keystone Learning Community. This type of engagement, like peer and faculty, assists the freshmen with their shyness and enables the freshmen to have questions answered by those who were recently in their shoes. In all, Peer, Faculty, and Upperclassmen engagement through the Keystone Learning Community positively influenced the students. As one noted:

By being a member of a learning community, I have not only fostered a connection to fellow students but also the school. The LC provides a unique self-realization experience to the _____ freshmen that would otherwise be remiss for much of his or her counterparts. Some benefits I have enjoyed include this invaluable insight as well as new friendships and a multitude of extracurricular activities promoted by the LC. (Survey, pg. 9, 2010)

This student transferred those emotional connections with people, to the institution. This process of having strong connections to individuals and the institution will assist the freshmen in their transition to college.

The Keystone Learning Community facilitates upperclassmen engagement by placing the upperclassmen in a leadership role within the learning community. Participants witness, first hand, students only a couple of year older than themselves leading a three day journey and imparting college survival techniques. The proximity of the age of the trip leaders to the freshmen; enables their survival techniques, wisdom, and other information to be valued and highly regarded by the freshmen participants.

In summary, the impact of engagement of all kinds—peer, faculty, and upperclassmen—is very powerful. All three forms of engagement are facilitated in a similar manner during Phase I, but the outcome of this engagement across the three forms varies depending on the source. Peer engagement brings with it a sense of belonging to a group and, even though the members of the cohort come from a wide array of backgrounds and abilities, the members all have similar fears and anxiety about attending college for the first time. The freshmen make friends and perhaps gain a deeper understanding of themselves as a student.

Faculty engagement provides the incoming freshmen with some relief to their fears about their own ability to keep up with the work load and academic rigor at the university. The freshmen learn how to effectively communicate with faculty and discover that the faculty are genuinely interested in student success. Finally, the mystique of faculty is dispelled as the freshmen understand that the faculty are real people, are approachable, and desire student interaction.

Engagement of incoming freshmen with peers, faculty, and upperclassmen is a benefit within itself; however, it is also a stepping stone from which the incoming freshmen exercise persistence. The next section looks at ways that freshmen persistence is influenced and shaped through the three methods of engagement.

Persistence

Persistence in the Keystone Learning Community participants is positively impacted in several ways throughout both Phase I and Phase II. Peer, faculty, and upperclassmen engagement that occurs builds a foundation from which the incoming freshmen feel connected to and part of the institution. The participants consider that they can accomplish anything they try. The students understand or come to the realization that Phase I of the learning community is a metaphor for

the college journey they are about to embark on. The process for persistence in the participants of the Keystone Learning Community is fostered through the following steps: Understanding or realizing that Phase I can be a metaphor for their college journey, having a true sense that as a student they can accomplish anything they set out to do, setting goals and following through, creating a support network on campus, knowing the expectations, understanding and willingness to make use of institutional resources, and understanding one's ability to write.

Phase I as a Metaphor for College

Seeing Phase I as a metaphor for college came from a student's answer to a question about accomplishing the goals you set for yourself when you enrolled in the Keystone Learning Community. "Yes. I would say I did. 'Cause going through the river is kind of like going through college and the phases of trying to get your way through everyone, and buildings. Just making your way" (Interview 10, pg. 4, 2011). The student recalled challenges on the river and knows that college will bring with it new challenges yet to come. As stated earlier Phase I strives to instill responsibility and self-reliance into the students through the physical challenges on the river and at camp. For most of the population that enrolls in the Keystone Learning Community, camping, canoeing, and going three days without a shower are just not ideas that are entertained. Making it to the end of a forty-four mile canoe journey is quite the accomplishment and emotional release for the students. They completed a difficult task they would never have considered attempting on their own. Now, having attained their goal of completing the trip, other goals are seen as attainable. This theme is continued across the cohorts:

Oh yeah. When something comes up in my life, whether it's on paper or face-to-face in person, every so often, I will be reminded of an experience I had on that trip. The experience with _____ I mentioned earlier or the experience with the papers in class. Those come up often and when I can go back and remember; ok, this is what I did in that situation and this is what I did in that situation and this is the outcome. How do I want to approach this situation? (Interview 5, pg. 4, 2009)

“When I walked into the classroom to do my student teaching, I felt well prepared to be able to direct people in highly tense situations partially because of my trip” (Interview 3, pg. 7, 2008).

I Can Do Anything/Goal Setting

The previous section tells us that the freshmen in the Keystone learning Community see completing Phase I as a major accomplishment in their lives. They come to the realization that the outdoor portion of the learning community, with tough situations and learning about one’s self, is very similar to what they are about to encounter when they fully begin their college journey. Having completed a task, Phase I, that they perceive as analogous to college, they have formed a belief in their own abilities. “I learned that no matter how much fear and worries I had, that I can overcome them” (Survey, pg.22, 2012). Overcoming fears of being away from family members, test anxiety, or other obstacles in the future, are examples of what the student might encounter. This student knows that she has already persisted and has the capabilities to push through to the end of any challenge.

The three forms of engagement during the outdoor phase provide the student with many types of advice on how to succeed. Some of this advice is packaged as what not to do in certain situations that may be challenging. It is possible that after participants have completed Phase I the challenges they heard of are not as daunting as they might have originally thought. “I have met new friends, learned college tips, and have more academic confidence...” (Survey, pg. 9, 2010). Students emerged from Phase I with confidence in their own abilities and motivation to persist. As this next student states, the learning community provided self-reliance:

It helped me prepare for doing things on my own. It helped prepare me for bringing me out of my shell. It helped me know how to walk up to someone and say hello it is nice to meet you, how are you doing today? So it helped me. It brought me out of my shell before going to college. It helped me prepare for being on my own” (Interview 1, pg. 6, 2011). “...After the third day I felt I could do anything. If I could get through that and not

break down mentally, yeah I could get through life. I had a few ups and downs, but once I realized what's at stake, I felt I could get back up and I feel as though I have gotten back up" (Interview 6, pg. 6, 2011) and, "I feel like I survived, on a canoe in the middle of nowhere, almost tipped in the water, almost, but I did not tip. Basically since I can be without a cell phone and do all these things, you know, no electronics for a few days, I can pretty much go in blind to a situation and definitely conquer college. It's all about going to the right people and just knowing where to go. (Interview 8, pg.5, 2011)

The confidence the Keystone participants gained from completing their adventure trip as a whole, along with small yet significant achievements along the journey, enabled them to realistically set and understand goals. In this next excerpt the student is clearly exhibiting this persistence, "It helped me set goals, and follow through with them" (Survey, pg. 8, 2009). The following-through phrase is the critical aspect of the student's learning outcomes. Setting goals is just the first piece of persistence. Knowing how to follow through, and the work that it takes to achieve one's goals, feeds into persistence. The Keystone Learning Community strives to provide a mixed methodology of academic and social preparedness to the incoming freshmen so that they are better equipped to make decisions that are in the best interest of their college career. "I have made so many friends and connections. The learning community pushed me to set goals and objectives and accomplish them both socially and academically" (Survey, pg.6, 2011). This student understands that a balanced approach to her college journey is one that will most likely lead to success. The social side of college, engagement, in the students' perception is vital to their efforts to persist. Students may end their learning community experience at the end of the semester; however, they realize those they were engaged with have become a strong support network for them to rely on.

Creation of a Support Network

"I have made friends and have a support system for when it just gets to be too much" (Survey, pg. 9, 2009). A simple statement, but one that encompasses the mission of the learning

community. A student may understand that their stress level is getting high, but many, unfortunately, may internalize that stress and perpetuate the situation. Having a support network and the willingness to confide in or make use of it is a part of persistence. The students who enroll in the Keystone experience understand their new friends are people they can rely on: “I have gained a lot of friendships. With having more friendships that I was able to build, I was able to have people that supported me throughout the semester and helped me with my struggles” (Survey, pg. 6, 2011). The data has also exposed that the faculty engagement is viewed by the student as a friendship and a trusting relationship as shown in the next two statements: “It’s been very nice to have reality check sessions with students that we knew during the summer time from the trip. I have enjoyed talking honestly with the instructors and receiving their helpful feedback. They have made it very clear that they are always available if we need help with something. I greatly appreciate their thoughtfulness toward the students” (Survey, pg. 10, 2010). “So, I felt really comfortable with all the upperclassmen and all the staff. They’re all really nice. They were really inviting. There were; accommodating is not really the word you like; they were like if you ever need anything when you get on campus don’t hesitate to contact me. It was really nice to know I was going into college with the support of, not only my peers, but with people experienced beyond my years” (Interview 1, pg. 4, 2011).

The willingness to make use of the support network should not be underestimated. From the various sources, surveys and interviews, across the cohorts, participants in the Keystone Learning Community know that the support network is there for them for both social and academic issues, which added to students’ ability and/or desire to persist. If they know there is someone to turn to in time of need they should be more likely to press on. For instance, participants still understand that more challenges will come; however, they feel great relief

because they realized the other incoming freshmen were experiencing the same anxieties about college: “I was still a little scared but I felt as if a huge weight was lifted off my shoulders because I knew how to go about things and I knew people who were going through the same thing as me” (Survey, pg. 23, 2012).

Um, when I went on the trip I think I had the goals of kind of understanding where everyone else was at. Um, getting my feet wet like these guys are already in college. These guys have kind of done this once or twice so maybe they can tell me like when I go for a major should I apply soon, should I apply late? When you did this how many times did you have to do this? How hard was that? I want...my goal was to come away with an understanding of that and also to try to have friends that were trying to do the same things that I could relate with. I think I found both of those things. (Interview 5, pg. 1, 2009)

The engagement facilitated opportunities to share among students. Through activities designed to do so, and organically occurring discussions, students found out that regardless of backgrounds, they are not as dissimilar as they might have previously thought. They learned that they all have the same basic anxiety associated with starting college and they all have the same basic desire to succeed in college. They, therefore, take comfort in speaking to their peers about difficulties because they know their peers are experiencing the same issues and might offer solutions. The participants also take comfort in approaching upperclassmen and faculty about issues because those groups were approachable and exhibited sincere interest in the participant's success in college. More than that, the upperclassmen and faculty acted as friends and were side by side with the freshmen during their outdoor experience.

Thus far, the discussion has dissected persistence into Phase I as a Metaphor for College; I Can Do Anything/Goal Setting, and Creation of a Support Network. Part of success is knowing the answers before the questions are asked. In the Keystone Learning Community students are provided specific scenarios and step by step instructions on what to or how to act when those scenarios become reality. In addition, students on every trip asked very direct and specific

questions about academics and social life at the institution. The participants are provided with realistic and direct answers to their questions, so that they understand the realities of college life. Knowing what is expected of them assists the participants in preparing for the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Knowing the Expectations

Throughout both phases of the Keystone Learning Community the participants are reinforced with the theme that they are responsible for themselves and must take ownership of their college journey. “I have become more responsible as a college student, and have realized the severity of my actions, or possible lack of actions in all my classes” (Survey, pg. 8, 2009). This involves both academic and social engagement at all levels. Having an understanding of the individual performance that each participant must put forth contributes to the concept of persistence. Knowing the expectations adds to the confidence level of the student and thus their ability to persist. In addition, the subtle engagement and advice provided to the participants contributed to the overall experience of students.

...The upperclassmen leaders assisted us on the river and helped in the cooking. They strengthened our relationship with one another and were always willing to teach us something new. The faculty and staff were really helpful on the trip. The police officer gave us a lot of helpful hints. The all-girls talk with ____ allowed us to open up about private girl things. The professor relieved the concerns I had about being able to fulfill the expectations of college professors. Overall I grew connections with of the people on the trip. (Interview 3, pg.4, 2008)

These two vignettes describe the student’s understanding of their role in their college career, but also illustrate how that understanding of their role was created. Through the many instances of engagement or connections to individuals and groups, the participants gained an improved understanding of how they were expected to perform.

I have made some really great friends in college and I had really great heads up on some information that [was] really important for college. I have benefited from my LC because

I understand the expectation of college a lot better and work harder to achieve my aspirations in life. (Survey, pg. 6, 2011)

By being a member, I have learned what to expect from college and how to be prepared. I have learned the importance of getting involved and getting to know those around you. Keystone has opened me up to strangers and has allowed me to make friends and have experiences that I would not have had otherwise. It has really taught me a lot about how the university works and what I need to pay attention to as a student, such as, what my specific classes are that I am taking each year in order to graduate on time. Without this class I would not have been as prepared for college.... (Survey, pg. 5, 2011)

The last line talks about being prepared for college. The participants know the expectations and are better prepared for their college experience. They have the support network, they have confidence in their abilities, and are able to better set goals for themselves. Even though there is a better sense of responsibility among the participants, they are capable of persisting because they can identify institutional resources to utilize when needed.

Understanding of Resources

The understanding of institutional resources, and perhaps more importantly the willingness to make use of them, emerged from simple statements like “The university success center has helped me” (Survey, pg. 10, 2009) to more complex responses about knowing one’s own ability: “I really wanted to make sure that I applied myself more than I did in high school. In high school I was more of an average student and I felt like college would be a fresh start. I felt like the environment here would help me. It would help me focus more, and have more resources and people to come to if I needed the help” (Interview 4, pg. 3, 2010). The participants realized that their new support network is also a valuable resource to guide them on their journey through college: “...I felt like I asked good questions and I received good responses and ample information to at least tell me close enough to where I need to go to find the answer” (Interview 8, pg. 5, 2011). The faculty interactions made it known to the students that they should feel comfortable with making use of the institutional knowledge the faculty held “...The faculty on

the trip told me if I ever needed help with anything to come see them and I could talk about it” (Interview 6, pg. 2, 2011).

The final component of persistence that was pulled from the data sources concerned participants’ understanding their ability to write at the college level and how that translates to success in college.

Understanding Writing Ability

“At first I had many errors with my writing structure and I didn’t know that my writing ability wasn’t at college level yet. So I’m glad it caught up to me that I need to improve my writing ability” (Survey, pg. 13, 2010). This student knows that his or her writing needs to improve to be at the college level and the student has the desire to make that improvement. This is another piece of the persistence puzzle. The inner sense that one can do anything, in this case improve a skill needed in college, has added to the participants’ ability and/or willingness to persist. Another student writes, “Due to the feedback we receive on our paper and during the class meetings, my writing ability has increased. Getting feedback, positive or negative helped to greatly improve my writing style. It allowed me to see where I need to be to acquire good marks” (Survey, pg. 13, 2010). Knowing that improvement was needed and how to enact that improvement assured the students that they were more than capable of rising to the challenge. The next response summarizes the previous conclusion well; “I became more confident in my writing ability and was able to write more fluidly” (Survey, pg. 13, 2010).

Thus far, the study has illustrated how the Keystone Learning Community impacts engagement and persistence. Student persistence as an outcome of the Keystone Learning Community is comprised of six sub-domains. These include; Phase I as Metaphor for College, I Can Do Anything/Goal Setting, Creation of a Support Network, Knowing the Expectations,

Understanding of Resources, and Understanding Writing Ability. Collectively, the sub-domains build off of each other to provide the student with a solid foundation to want to persist and the tools to back up that desire to persist. Reviewing how those variables are impacted a picture begins to unfold of how each variable feeds off of the other. The flow begins with engagement then transitions to persistence. Persistence ties back into further engagement, however, persistence generates, in part, retention. The next section uncovers how the Keystone Learning Community impacts retention.

Retention

Retention of students concerns many institutions across the country. The Keystone Learning Community was created with a specific intention of bolstering retention. The assumption was that by facilitating student engagement retention will be positively impacted. The results show that engagement through Keystone develops students' drive or ability to persist. The previous section illustrated that persistence can lead to further engagement, however, the responses in the next section discuss that persistence creates retention as well. The discussions and results to this point have started to uncover that the relationship between engagement and persistence is not strictly linear, but a relationship where each variable nurtures the other. The combined effects of engagement and persistence create an impact on retention. Retention, as experienced through Keystone, is divided into the following sub-domains; Transition, Preparation, Improved Skills, Resources, and Individual Attention.

Transition

It is important to note that as the results are discussed that each variable—engagement, persistence, and retention—do not exist separately from each other. Each variable is dependent on the others and a cumulative impact is flowing among all three variables. The Keystone

Learning Community was first described as assisting with the students' transition to college in the discussion in the discussion of engagement. The engagement that was facilitated builds into persistence, and then retention. As one student noted: "Everything they had to say was comforting to know, that my expectations of college were wrong. That there would be time for partying. It was not all study, study, study. And the study tips. Getting to know your professor. It all helped a lot in transitioning to college" (Interview 2, pg. 2, 2011). This student's transition to college was made easier due to her participation in the learning community. The student was provided the expectations of the academic and social aspects of college life. She was able to forge a personal relationship with faculty who became a component of her support network. Persisting involves the courage to make use of the support network, and retention results from the confidence and support the faculty and others in the network provide to the student. Upperclassmen as well as faculty have insights the freshmen need to navigate the decisions they will face as a college students. Having practical scenarios from those with the insight adds to the retention of students by equipping students with accurate and usable information. A smooth transition from high school to the environment of college immediately adds to the likelihood of retention.

Having the resources to make good, informed decisions as freshmen might make the difference between being retained or transferring and the possibility of stopping out. "I learned a lot of the to do's and don'ts about college and it helped me a lot in transitioning to the university" (Survey, pg. 9, 2010). This student appreciates the role the faculty and upperclassmen served in the learning community. The knowledge students gained made for a good transition to the institution. Had the initial transition to the institution not gone as well, the

drive to persist might have been replaced with anxiety and feelings of doubt. Instead, the good transition set the student up with the tools to be retained.

Preparation

Preparation on the part of the Keystone participants involved applying what they learned in their transition to the institution. The first example depicts a student having that moment of understanding, and then applying that knowledge to coursework throughout the semester.

That was a goal, to have friends. To know someone on campus that I could ask those questions of. As for writing the papers and doing all those kinds of things, for goals to be able to understand what teachers are like looking for and stuff. From those assignments I feel that I was able to understand what teachers were asking for. I remember one assignment in particular there was this question. It was worded like how and many people made the mistake of answering what and a lot of people ended up answering it wrong. It made me say, "Ok, in college, you really need to be attentive to what the question is asking for." I remember on multiple papers after that, I was doing that and keeping the question in mind. It's not asking why it's asking how. It's not asking this it is asking that. I wanted it. That was my goal, to know what teachers and professors were asking of me. I would say, "yeah, my goals as a whole, were achieved. (Interview 5, pg. 3, 2009)

The Keystone Learning Community prepared students to be critical thinkers through several class discussions based on reading assignments and written papers. The students were provided a reading and simply asked what the reading meant to them. The focus of the exercise was to not reiterate what the words in the reading were stating, but to guide students in evoking their values into a particular subject matter. The students learned that they need to provide background information for their discussion and that the reading is only the starting point. The feedback the students received on their class discussions and writing assignments was then applied to their work in other courses. This practical application of knowledge gained provides a means to do well and be retained. "The learning community made me think through the things I was going through as a freshman, which helped me figure out what I was supposed to do more than if I were not in the learning community" (Survey, pg. 11, 2010). That statement illustrates the

application of the knowledge gained through participation in learning community. The student remembered the experiences provided by the learning community and was better prepared to make good decisions as the freshmen year progressed. Another student summarized: “I felt more prepared especially with a group of friends that would literally be a two-minute walk away from my dorm” (Survey, pg. 23, 2012). The student was prepared for the challenges to come and knew a support network was readily available for assistance.

Improved skills

In this section, results highlight that participants recognized a distinct improvement in a particular skill set crucial to their personal success in college. The three examples refer specifically to writing skills and the attention given to that skill in Keystone: “I have made many best friends and my writing skills have tremendously improved” (Survey, pg. 9, 2009). “I had fun going on the trip and learned writing skills to help in other classes and made new friends” (Survey, pg. 8, 2009). “I really had trouble with my grammar but now it’s a lot better” (Survey, pg.13, 2010). Thus, a key part of retention was improved skills germane to academic success.

Participants also addressed organizational skills, communication skills with faculty, and the desire to continue to hone their skills: “Yes, it did. They gave a bunch of study tips, which were really helpful and time management tips. It all helps when you get in college and you think about what they said. It is really helpful when you implement it” (Interview 2, pg. 5, 2011). “By being a member of this LC, I learned techniques to improve my grades and do better in school overall. Talking and meeting with professors is the best advice I’ve ever received” (Survey, pg. 5, 2011). “I made a lot of friends that I have been able to keep throughout the semester and plan to keep them. Acquired learning skills that I will continue to develop” (Survey, pg. 9, 2010).

Assignments designed to address these skills included having participants write out a monthly calendar in the beginning of the semester. This calendar included all homework, study time, eating, sleeping, and social time. Communication skills with faculty began during Phase I, but continued as participants were required to attend two office hour sessions of each of their professors before the end of the semester. The participants must obtain their professor's signature and provide a small write up on the topics discussed with the professor.

Resources

In the discussion of persistence the responses showed that persistence was impacted through the participants' understanding of resources. Resources, the acknowledgment of what is available and the willingness to make use of those resources, played a role in the retention of students:

...The trip taught me basically overall how to ask for help. In terms of like, classes. Find someone that is in your major to help you with your homework. If you are having trouble with your homework don't try to do it by yourself. Like you learn how to network basically. In a student organization or maybe people in your major, or just regular friends that you want to just hang out with. Just get to know people. (Interview 8, pg. 6, 2011)

This student used a resource, his support network, for both academic gain and a social outlet. Next, students were engaged by upperclassmen, a resource, in Phase I who connected the students to other valuable campus resources: "...They were good leaders to bring. ____ was really helpful with the academic aspect like when she was talking about the SIs (supplemental instructors). I now love my SI for Bio because it's really helpful and that was like really good advice that she gave us" (Interview 7, pg. 3, 2011). "They helped me academically and told me about seminars, workshops and offices where I could receive help academically and with career options. I also made friends" (Survey, pg. 8, 2009). Others reported that they "...got to meet so many new friends because of this class. I learned a lot from the person who gave the presentation

on the different types of jobs we could have and because of the encouragement to visit the academic center, I actually did and it was very helpful” (Survey, pg. 5, 2012). Yet others reported that “I saw the faculty from the trip on campus and we would talk. I kind of you know had some problems with some things and talked to another about that” (Interview 6, pg.3, 2011). “They have not only helped me meet new people and to challenge myself, but they have also helped me academically. I would recommend every freshman to go on this trip! It was a blast and you get two credits!” (Survey, pg. 7, 2009). Here, clearly, resources came through social contacts made on the trip, and these proved essential for academic success.

Individual Attention

Working across the sub-domains of retention from the data analysis, students were retained, in part, because the Keystone Learning Community provided individual attention to the participants. as one students noted: “I have not only met a great group of people while participating, but I have received attention and concern that I haven’t received anywhere else since I’ve been in college. Not to mention the camping/canoeing trip which I may not have experienced for years if it were not for the Keystone LC” (Survey, pg. 9, 2009). Attention and concern. Attention and concern are two variables that, from the results of the data analysis, have a considerable effect on engagement, persistence, and retention.

Retention is positively impacted by the Keystone Learning Community by the following sub-domains; Transition, Preparation, Improved Skills, Resources, and Individual Attention. These items emerge from the impact the Keystone LC has on engagement and persistence. All three variables; engagement, persistence, and retention contribute to, and develop from, one another. Now, the data analysis describes what the participants say they learned from their

experiences in Keystone, in addition to how the learning community impacts engagement, persistence, and retention.

What Students Say They Learned

Students were asked what they learned through their participation in the Keystone Learning Community. This section contains the answers to that question as it was posed through both interviews and the learning community assessment survey. Sub-domains of participants learning outcomes include learning to relax, self-discovery, writing ability, shared fears, and life lessons.

Learning to Relax

Through participation in Keystone students experienced a variety of engagement techniques. The overall experience taught the participants that having some anxiety about college is normal, however, they of their own merit, are equipped to handle the challenges and opportunities that await them in college; furthermore, the faculty and staff from the learning community were with them every step to assist as needed. These students shared how the experience taught them to relax: “On the trip I learned that going into new experiences I am too uptight and I need to learn to relax. Going into the canoe trip I was incredibly worried about what people would think of me, if people wanted to canoe with me, if I was doing things right, if I was doing things wrong. I was really worried about what they thought of me because I was so concerned about them liking me that I did not relax right away and just let them get to know me. That’s something I learned” (Interview 1, pg. 5, 2011), and “This particular learning community allowed me time to relax and have fun outside of what I would normally do. It also fostered my ability to think abstractly” (Survey, pg. 7, 2011). The students expressed an anxiety that is experienced by most people when faced with a new environment. This common anxiety is

discussed further in a later section, but the attention for the students is if they are going to be welcomed into that environment and if the transition will be smooth or bumpy. As discussed in previous section, the engagement provided partially alleviates that anxiety and enables the student to persist and function normally.

Self-Discovery

Learning about oneself is not always the simplest task to complete. Sometimes it takes drastic circumstances like adversity or it might just take a new environment and little more independence. Here, a participant describes knowing one aspect about himself as a leader, but not realizing, until immersed in Phase I, that his leadership style could be abrasive and actually not perceived as leading at all: “I learned that I am a natural leader, but I can be pushy when people do not conform to my desires. The second day I had a canoe partner who sat on the back of the boat with her paddle out of the water. At first, I was trying to ignore this behavior, but it was exhausting me to keep going. Then I tried to motivate her, but she thought it was funny. Once I became frustrated, our communication decreased and it tensed the situation. As the trip came to a conclusion, I learned about being a leader and helping others who were not as strong as I was” (Interview 3, pg. 6, 2008). Being a leader involves communication and the participant learned that his method of communicating needed to change to become an effective leader.

Another student discussed lessons learned on leadership and the learning to shift roles:

I think I did a lot of confirming of things I thought previously about myself. I know I was always competitive. I know I always like to push past obstacles in my way. At that point I thought I was a leader and could consider myself a leader. I felt like that trip affirmed some of my thoughts. Could I, could I take other people who were trying to do something, could I go over there and help them? Could I show them how to do this if I knew how? Could I ask for help if I needed it? I remember that was one of the things I was thinking about during that trip because it was made by the counselors, you know this is something you should try. If you are a leader try to be a follower. This is what it means to be a leader. This is what it means to do this and these kinds of things. Consciously, thinking about that and given the opportunity to practice those things. I had the

opportunity to see where I actually fell. I was pleasantly surprised. I felt I did have certain qualities of a leader. (Interview 5, pg. 3, 2009)

When it comes to communication, students must have the courage to put a skill to the test and let go of a preconception of self: “I learned that I tend to psych myself out in terms of communication skills because I used to always say that I’m a bad communicator, but I never actually really got up and tried communicating until the trip” (Interview 6, pg. 4, 2011). Another said, “I don’t know how to say this. I guess I was better at interacting with others that I thought. I was a little bit shy. I felt like I had an easier time meeting new people than before” (Interview 9, pg. 3, 2008). Students had preconceived notions of their ability to communicate, but acknowledged that until the Keystone experience they had never really attempted to communicate to strangers. The Keystone Learning Community provided the students the opportunity, either by want or necessity, to test that conception of communication. One student learned that she could talk to strangers when needed. This skill or rather confidence in a skill should benefit the student throughout her college career and beyond.

Writing Ability

The ability to write at the college level was discussed in the sections on persistence and retention so it is not discussed at length here. Nonetheless, the largest sub-domain in learning outcomes was writing ability. The three examples provided insights into the aspects of participants’ writing ability and the participants’ thoughts on the subject: “My writing had improved by a good amount. Now I have better grammar and paragraph structuring in my papers” (Survey, pg. 14, 2010). “Before college my writing was horrible and after a while my writing progressed little by little with each paper turned in. With the help of my professor I improved my writing skills everyday” (Survey, pg. 10, 2011). “I feel as though I have a better understanding of what it takes to write effectively at the college level” (Survey, pg. 10, 2011).

Shared Fears

The realization that other incoming freshmen have common fears and anxiety about entering college for the first time proved one of the most powerful learning outcomes of participation in the Keystone Learning Community. Participants' responses to the question about learning outcomes included the following: "One thing was that I found out that I was not alone. That many others shared the same fears as me at that I could talk about them without fear" (Survey, pg. 22, 2012). "I realized that we both had the same fears about school..." (Survey, pg. 16, 2012). As related earlier, a student spoke about the fears of entering an institution with an abundance of diversity that the student did not experience in high school. Addressing that anxiety and realizing that it was unfounded most likely contributed to engagement, persistence, and retention. The student became comfortable in an unfamiliar environment and became enabled to be receptive to engagement, felt like she belonged which added to persistence, which ultimately bred retention. The examples of this influential outcome continue: "Basically we are all in the same boat. We are all wondering what is going to happen the first day when we get to campus. What classes we are going to take and how are we going to navigate through campus. We interacted well" (Interview 8, pg. 4, 2011). "I felt like the interactions with other incoming freshmen were very chill. I did not feel like anyone was judging another person. We were all just ready to make friends and trying to find a common ground between us" (Survey, pg. 20, 2012). "In the beginning of the trip, I was wondering what it would be like to meet people all over again after high school. After the trip, I realized that everyone was in the same boat. We all wanted to meet new people and we did" (Survey, pg. 22, 2012). All of the participants' responses speak about the realization that everyone was the same. Preconceived notions the participants held about people of different ethnicity, socioeconomic status, physical appearance, etc. were

discarded and other participants were viewed as other freshmen with similar anxiety and not as a member of another group. They were all considered part of a new group; the cohort that completed the outdoor trip together. “The trip changed people’s lives. Definitely. It really does. It teaches not just things about college but things about life. Things that you could use in just everyday life. I say definitely do the trip without a doubt” (Interview 8, pg. 7, 2011).

Participants of the Keystone Learning Community report that, in addition to how engagement, persistence, and retention are impacted; their experience in the learning community taught them how to relax, self – discovery, about their writing ability, and that they have the same fears as their peers. These four specific areas of learning have an acute effect on the participants and filter in further engagement, persistence, and retention.

Summary

This chapter has illustrated the impact that the Keystone Learning Community has had on engagement, persistence, and retention as expressed through the words of the participants. The first variable, engagement, was found to encompass three distinct categories. These are peer, faculty, and upperclassmen engagement. Two of the three types of engagement are further divided into sub-domains. Peer engagement is built from the sub-domains of something special and lasting connections. Faculty engagement is built from the sub-domains of comfort with communication, fostering of relationships, reception of advice, and assistance with transition to college.

The second variable, persistence, encompasses five distinct categories. These are; I can do anything/goal setting, creation of a support network, knowing the expectations, understanding of resources, and understanding writing ability. The participants willingness to persist is

reinforced, and their ability to persist is strengthened through the multiple facets of engagement provided by the learning community.

The third variable, retention, also encompasses five distinct categories. These are transition, preparation, improved writing skills, resources, and individual attention. Retention is a direct outcome of the engagement and persistence the participants experience in the learning community.

The sub-domain of creation of a support network is prevalent across all three variables. In retention, the support network is created through the individual attention provided to the participants. Sub-domains focused on participants writing ability were discovered in persistence and retention. Participants cited specific increases in ability and understanding of writing at the college level. The sub-domain of transition, or influenced transition, was dominant in the variables of engagement and retention.

Additional findings reveal that participants in the Keystone Learning Community report specific learned outcomes. These learned outcomes include sub-domains of learning to relax, self-discovery, writing ability, and shared fears.

Chapter V - Discussion & Conclusions

This chapter will address how the Keystone Learning Community supports and contributes to the existing literature on outdoor orientation programs and learning communities. This chapter also acknowledges the limitations inherent in this study and how those limitations might have impacted participant responses. Future research is discussed and takes into account the limitations and methods to overcome them. The final section, presents a conceptual framework of how the Keystone Learning Community impacts engagement, persistence, and retention and the relationships that exist among those variables.

Discussion

In Chapter I the principal investigator described how conversations with students' talk about missed opportunities and miscommunication at various points in the students' college careers motivated the current research. Frustrations on the part of students involved enrolling for courses not required for their particular degree, lack of communication about resources to assist students with their studies, and dwindling funds due to length of time in college. The Keystone Learning Community addresses these issues by facilitating engagement and providing tools and resources to students in the effort to assist students with persistence. This facilitation is founded on O'Keefe's (1998) Model III outdoor orientation program. Model III emphasizes the connection between wilderness orientation programs and academic persistence, the important role faculty play in the process, the desire for freshmen to adjust and mature through the process, the development of problem solving skills, and the desire to reduce stereotyping.

The current data analysis supports O'Keefe's (1998) Model III outdoor orientation program. Participants in the Keystone Learning Community certainly made connections between Phase I and academic persistence. This evidence is in the sub-domain "Something Special." The

participants also report firmly the importance and value that faculty serve in the learning community. This is discussed in faculty engagement, persistence and retention. When introducing the three models of outdoor orientation programs, O’Keefe (1998) did not discuss the success of any particular model or make comparisons among the three models. Thus, the results of this study add to O’Keefe’s (1998) Model III by making a strong connection between the model and student engagement, persistence, and retention. Results also show Model III is very successful in reducing stereotypes as shown in sub-domains “Shared Fears” and “Self-Discovery.”

The Keystone Learning Community is additionally supportive of Kuh’s (2008) findings that student engagement in educationally purposeful activities has a positive impact on academic outcomes in the first year and is manifested by in student grades and persistence. Kuh (2008) continues that the effects of pre-college traits (high school GPA and standardized test scores) diminish significantly once college experiences and engagement are taken into account. Table 1.0 Participant Profile details the ACT range for all five cohorts of the Keystone Learning Community. Each cohort included low standardized test scores that were at or near the minimum for provisional College admissions. A correlation between the engagement the Keystone LC provides and the results of the Kuh (2008) findings can be hypothesized. Participants report very positive results of their enrollment in the learning community; however, a limiting factor is that this study did not undertake any examination of cohort’s academic records post college enrollment.

In Chapter II, I examined how previous studies explored the impact outdoor orientation programs have on engagement, persistence, and retention. Galloway (2000) stated that lack of inclusion of faculty in outdoor orientation programs limits the participants' association with the

persona of academia and that this was as important as the formation of peer networks. The Keystone Learning Community illustrated what can occur when faculty are included these programs. Results of Keystone yield strong faculty engagement that prepares the participants for open communication with faculty on campus. By being at ease when communicating with faculty, Keystone participants report the creation of true relationships (support network) with faculty. This enables the participants to accept advice and have a smoother transition to the college environment. Furthermore, by having upperclassmen in a leadership role, the Keystone LC provides engagement with upperclassmen, which assists participants in forming a bond to the institution (Survey, pg. 9, 2010). Where Galloway (2000) states the cons of lack of inclusion of faculty, Keystone provides additional insight into how influential faculty involvement in outdoor orientation programs can be.

Altizer and Patterson's study (1994) found that friendships formed during outdoor orientation programs last throughout the participant's college years and beyond. Gass (2003) discovered that these relationships were still in place seventeen years after the initial outdoor program. In Keystone the participants perceived from their experiences in the learning community that the relationships they formed with peers were significant and of duration past their college years (Survey, pg. 22, 2012; Survey, pg. 9, 2009; Interview 2, pg. 3, 2011).

Fiori (2003) stated that outdoor orientation programs can function as a Rite of Passage (ROP) if the participants view their experience as jolting them out of their previous existence into a realm of infinite possibility. Bell (2003) confirmed Fiori's (2003) findings concerning ROP, but only if the Contemporary Adventure Model (CAM) is applied. One of the aspects of the CAM is a community of support for the freshmen in their new role. Participants in the Keystone Learning Community reported that they participated in a life-altering experience

(Survey, pg. 9, 2009) and that the learning community “changed people’s lives” (Interview 8, pg. 7, 2011). Applying the CAM’s community of support for the freshmen in their new role to the Keystone Learning Community, makes it possible to understand how the participants perceived their experience to be life-altering. The participants in Keystone reported that they created and discovered various communities of support through faculty engagement (Survey, pg.18, 2012; Survey, pg. 9, 2010; Survey, pg. 5, 2011; Survey pg. 18, 2012; Survey, pg. 10, 2010). Participants in Keystone also reported on their peers, and on peer engagement in particular, saying that the unique bond formed in Keystone was friendly and supportive (Survey, pg. 8, 2009). Ultimately, Keystone participants built a support network through engagement with peers, faculty, and upperclassmen. Each of these networks supported the freshmen in their role and assisted in the transition to college.

One of the goals of the Keystone Learning Community is to promote student engagement and ease the transition to college. The desired outcome of the outdoor orientation program is achieved through the interaction of a combination of many aspects which include the environment, the activities, the group dynamics, the processing of the experience, the instructors, and the individual participants. The Keystone Learning community provides the interaction McKenzie (2000) discusses by facilitating various forms of engagement through a challenging three-day journey. Throughout Phase I, the upperclassmen leaders facilitate not only activities to promote communication and critical thinking, but also to process the experiences. Every activity is debriefed and the discussion closes with methods to transfer the learning outcomes of the activity to what can occur during the students’ time in college.

Previous studies have illustrated the impact that outdoor orientation programs have on retention. In his study, Gass (1990) described six academic and social factors that programs need

to focus on to achieve a goal of transitioning students to college. Positive peer-group interaction and positive interaction with faculty were two of the key factors. The Keystone Learning Community provides peer and faculty engagement as reported by the participants. Through their interactions with the freshmen, faculty in Keystone assisted the freshmen comfortable with communicating with faculty in the LC, and on campus (Interview 3, pg. 4, 2008; Survey, pg. 18, 2010; Survey, pg. 19, 2012).

Gilbert (1984) reported that participants in an outdoor orientation program exhibit higher retention rates than those who do not participate in the program. Barefoot (1993) reported that participation in outdoor orientation programs correlates to better grades and increased retention and persistence. Bell (2006) also reported that students who participate in an extended outdoor orientation program have higher GPAs than those students who did not participate. This study did not examine year-to-year retention rates of cohorts and participants. However, some participants did consent to interviews after their initial enrollment in the Keystone Learning Community. (Some interviews occurred a few months after Keystone and others were a few years later.) Although, their responses to questions pertaining to the Keystone experience were positive, participants were not asked direct questions about their GPA or potential non-enrollment semesters.

Flowers (2004) and Bell (2006) describe how outdoor orientation programs that provide extra in and out of class involvement promote student development and high gains via providing students with a social support network. In addition to the responses the participants provided that correlate to engagement, Keystone students also viewed their interaction with faculty as assisting with their transition to college (Interview 2, pg. 2, 2011). Participants learned from faculty valuable do's and don'ts associated with entering college (Survey, pg. 9, 2010). Knowing how to

react to the challenges and opportunities one experiences in college could be the key to retention for some students.

Oldmixon (2007) noted that students who complete an outdoor orientation program report reduced stress and fears. By asking directly what they learned from their Keystone Learning Community experience, participants reported that they realized that the cohort shared the same fears and anxiety about attending college (Survey, pg. 22, 2012; Survey, pg. 16, 2012). Participants described this as finding common ground (Survey, pg. 20, 2012) and being in the same boat as their peers (Survey, pg. 22, 2012). This echoes the findings of Smathers (1976) in which participants report no longer being individuals but becoming as one. Participants in Keystone described a smooth transition to college as a result multiple forms of engagement. Knowing that others share the same anxieties can reduce feelings of isolation and assist in promoting a positive transition to college.

The largest impact of outdoor orientation programs as reported by participants is the formation of peer networks (Bell, 2006). In the Keystone Learning Community, participants report the significance of bonding with their peers. From the sub-domains of “Something Special” and “Lasting Impressions” to self-discovery and shared fears, we understand that participants view this engagement as preparing them for a positive transition to college; a transition that the participants are prepared for because they have created support networks, understand resources, and know what is expected of them in college. All of these issues factor into retention.

Brown (1998) suggests that students in an outdoor orientation program are more likely to persist than students who do not experience an outdoor orientation program. As stated previously, this study did not examine GPA or retention rates; however, participants in the

Keystone Learning Community confidently reported that they were prepared and of the mindset to persist to obtain their college goals. The sub-domains that emerged in persistence include: Phase I as a metaphor for college, I can do anything/goal setting, creation of a support network, knowing the expectations, understating the resources, and understanding their writing ability.

Limitations

Two major limitations exist to this study and the results contained within. The first, and probably the most important, is that the Keystone Learning Community is an experience in which participants self-enroll. Print and video marketing materials depict the learning community as a fun experience that is designed to assist incoming freshmen with their transition to college. Other benefits highlighted in marketing materials include meeting new freshmen prior to beginning the fall term and concentrated faculty interaction throughout the learning community. Students who participate may be those who are high achievers in high school and recognize aspects of the Keystone Learning Community as beneficial to their college career. Their self-enrollment and subsequent experiences may possibly create a self-fulfilling prophecy. The participants expect positive results and know what is expected of them in college. This knowledge is reinforced through their participation in the Keystone Learning Community. In the Table 1.0 Participant Profile, the average ACT score of each cohort is 25.1 or lower and that the full range of scores is relatively broad in each cohort. This alleviates to some degree concerns that only highly successful high school students enrolled in Keystone LC, but no comparison of the samples used in this research and the general campus was made. While participants reported positive benefits of the learning community, since grades and retention levels were not measured, no correlation can be made between the participants' progress and the Keystone experience. Braunstien, Lesser, and Pescatrice (2008) write that programs designed to enhance

retention keep the disadvantaged on pace with the rest of the cohort. This study did not investigate this aspect of the 2008 results.

The second major limitation is the scheduling of the survey and interviews relative to the participation in the Keystone Learning Community. The learning community assessment survey is optional for participants, but it is administered at the conclusion of the learning community experience. Students who are still transitioning to college and have a positive learning community experience may be apt to rate the experience based on tentative notions about support they perceive from the experience. Many may not have had adversity occur in college to this point and may rate the learning community high, and their sense of their support networks might change after such an event. A better test of the impact might come from a survey administered later on in the participants' college career after students encounter challenges to ascertain to what extent the Keystone Learning Community has impacted the outcome of those challenges. Concerns about sample bias due to self-selection are also possible in the interviews, since in some cohorts only one student interview exists. Other students with more negative perceptions about the Keystone LC might have been less inclined to participate in interviews than those for whom the experience was mostly positive.

A few of the interviews were conducted two or more years after the conclusion of the participants' learning community experience. Although students were asked to recall their learning community experiences and described them, the interview subjects were not asked about any direct correlation of their Keystone experience to GPA and decisions to remain enrolled at the institution. In both the surveys and interviews participants reported positive experiences and being prepared for their college career. This study does not undertake any correlative work with regards to participant/cohort, GPA, retention, or graduation rates.

Participants cite that they are prepared for their college career, although no other evidence to substantiate their perceptions was investigated.

Participants also report friends with whom they have lasting connections and very strong bonds. In some cases, these initial claims are substantiated through interview responses and confirmed to be lasting up to a length of four years. For the majority of the participants, the reported strength and duration of the relationships formed during the Keystone Learning Community is recorded after one semester. What is not studied is if these relationships last throughout the participant's college career. Another benefit reported by participants is the understanding and use of resources. Some freshmen discuss their use of university resources; however, actual cohort use of resources is not independently measured.

Future Research

To further the understanding of how the Keystone Learning Community impacts engagement, persistence, and retention, future studies might include two time periods from which to solicit responses from the participants. This study solicited responses to the learning community assessment survey at the conclusion of the participants' first fall semester. That time frame should remain for future studies; however, a follow up survey could also be administered two or more years after the initial learning community assessment survey. The follow up questions for the second time frame would include similar items to those asked in the initial and focus on how participants' responses vary over time. All interviews for this study were conducted in December of 2011. Thus, participants from the prior cohorts, 2008-2010, spoke about their earlier experiences. Instituting a follow up interview two or more years after the initial interview for all subjects would not only increase trustworthiness of the study and any findings, but allow gauging how initial perceptions proved to be the case over time.

Other means to provide increased trustworthiness of future studies involve the principal investigator obtaining consent to track grades and stop-out decisions for future cohorts. Such data would reduce the dependence on students' self-reports and make it possible to study potential correlations between participation in the Keystone LC and academic achievement indicators.

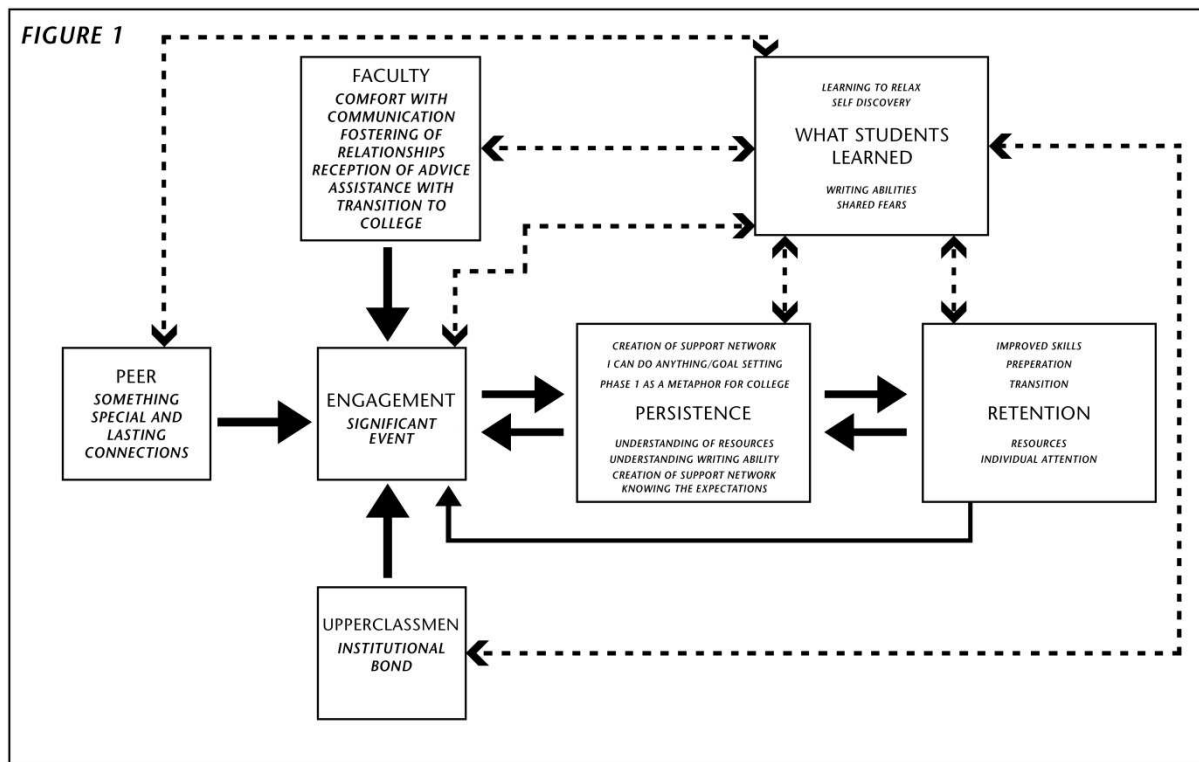
Future research might also use a control group. If a control group is consented for interviews, surveys, GPA, and retention rates; the control group's progress can be tracked parallel to the Keystone Learning Community cohort of the same year. Responses to interview questions and surveys can be examined relative to each participants' GPA and cohort retention rate. From this study, we might infer that future participants in the Keystone Learning Community will respond in a similar manner to the cohorts contained herein. The focus might be to ascertain to what extent the impact of the Keystone Learning Community, might be higher than the control group, which did not enroll in the program. A comparison of individual GPA, cohort GPA, and retention rates can be compared between the control and Keystone students. Particular attention might be given to those students with pre-existing traits that do not correlate favorably to success in college. These traits include ACT score below 20, and a high school GPA below 2.5. Having a control group would permit the researcher to examine if the Keystone Learning Community keeps the disadvantaged on pace with others in the cohort.

Conceptual Framework

The results of the data analysis show that the Keystone Learning Community impacts engagement, persistence, and retention in a meaningful way for the participants. All three variables work together to provide a smooth and meaningful transition to college life for the participants. This relationship of the engagement, persistence, and retention working together is

depicted graphically in Figure 1, the Nolan Model of Outdoor Orientation Impact (2013). At first glance, Figure 1 resembles Tinto's (1993) model of student development, however, there are distinct differences.

Figure 1 Nolan Model of Outdoor Orientation Impact



Both the Nolan Model of Outdoor Orientation Impact (2013) and Tinto's Longitudinal Model of Student Departure (1993) take into account pre-existing traits. Where the Nolan Model diverges is the influence those pre-existing have on the student. Tinto (1993) has the pre-existing traits of the student as a major variable throughout their college experience and in the student's departure decision. In the Nolan Model, providing the proper significant event for the freshmen is the catalyst for everything to begin a successful transition to college life. As suggested by Kuh and colleagues (2008), the Nolan Model (2013) suggests that with the proper significant event to facilitate purposeful engagement, the impact of those pre-existing traits diminishes as the student

becomes integrated into the institution through engagement, persisting, and being retained. In the Nolan Model (2013), student development is initiated with engagement from three different sources; peers, faculty, and upperclassmen. While there exists some similarity in the benefits from each source, each of the three sources of engagement in the Keystone Learning Community has unique properties that the freshmen participants value. It can be hypothesized that each source of engagement on its own would be viewed as beneficial, however not as beneficial as the sum of the three sources together. The factor that enables the blending of the three sources to provide for meaningful engagement is the significant event provided by the Keystone Learning Community. This significant event is Phase I, the outdoor orientation program. In this program the participants are challenged both physically and mentally over the course of three days and two nights of canoeing and camping. At every step, the participants are accompanied by peers, faculty, and upperclassmen. Relationships are formed and trust is built providing in depth engagement. Participants report a strong sense of achievement and lasting relationships with those who accompanied them during Phase I.

Other differences from Tinto's (1993) model are how the Nolan Model of Outdoor Orientation Impact acknowledges academic and social integration. In the Nolan (2013) model, these two items are not necessarily separate from each other and occur at the same time. Students in Keystone Learning Community form study group with peers, and upperclassmen. The time spent studying is also social time. Faculty relationships are not only as teacher and student. There does exist that delineation, however, faculty are viewed through a different lens due to their participation in Phase I with the freshmen. Faculty worked to set up camp, cook food, disseminate information, and socialized by playing cards, stargazing and sharing campfire

stories. That faculty engagement was both social and academic integration. Blending of the two, as reported by the participants, provided numerous benefits.

After meaningful engagement is established, the path is set for the participants to persist in college. Participants reported the lessening of anxiety and an emboldened sense of what they can achieve as a result of the initial engagement. The participants have created a large support group and are seeking, and receptive, to advice. Participants learned coping strategies and understood all the resources that are available to them through their support networks and support services on campus. This process of persisting deepens and extends engagement within the participants' support network and the institution. The student's persistence also results in their retention at the institution. Tinto (1993) also argues that negative experiences serve to weaken or malign the students' intentions and commitments. In the Nolan Model (2013) those negative experiences are worked through because the student has a three tiered integrated support network of peer, faculty, and upperclassmen who have personally expressed interest in the students' academic success. Without the engagement that the Keystone Learning Community provides, the student might know or learn about coping strategies and resources on campus, but may be less likely to seek the support and assistance those resource provide. The participants in the Keystone Learning Community report that they are not only aware of the resources and support networks that surround them, but they are ready for the challenges they will face, and consistently report that once facing adversity in the college setting they were prepared well by their keystone experiences to meet those challenges head on. The physical and mental challenges of completing Phase I emboldens the Keystone participants and helps them realize that they are responsible for their academic success.

Retention is impacted in the Keystone Learning Community through the processes of engagement and persistence. Engagement leads to persistence. Persistence leads to retention. The retention that the participants reference is a product of their previous experiences through the learning community. The participants report actively engaging in institutional resources and employing the advice they received from their support network. Both the acts of persisting and being retained involve deeper engagement of the participants with their peer, faculty, upperclassmen, and the resources available at the institution.

Finally, Tinto's (1993) model is a longitudinal model. It is not quite static, but it does flow in one direction and with other variables only coming into the flow. The Nolan Outdoor Orientation Impact Model is a compounding and dynamic model in which the participants report that their acts of persistence and being retained provide them with deeper enjoyment within their support networks and deeper commitment to the institution. There is a flow outward from each variable of knowledge students obtained along their journey. That newly acquired knowledge then goes back into each of the variables of engagement, persistence, and retention and makes those experiences more robust and the participants' bonds within their networks and the institution, stronger.

APPENDIX A: ORIGINAL IRB APPROVAL

NOTICE OF EXPEDITED APPROVAL

To:

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

From:

Chairperson, Behavioral Institutional Review Board (B3)

Date:

August 13, 2008

RE:

HIC #: 064508B3E

Protocol Title: Broadening the Learning Community Experience Through the Collaboration
Between the College of Education and the Campus Recreation Center and
the Effects it had on Retention of First Year Students from an Urban Institution

Sponsor:

[REDACTED]

Coeus #: 0806006093

Expiration Date: August 12, 2009

Risk Level/Category: No greater than minimal risk.

The above-referenced protocol and items listed below (if applicable) were **APPROVED** following *Expedited Review* (Category 7*) by the Chairperson/designee for the [REDACTED] Behavioral Institutional Review Board (B3) for the period of 08/13/2008 through 08/12/2009. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals that may be required.

- o Consent Form

-
- Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. You may receive a "Continuation Renewal Reminder" approximately two months prior to the expiration date; however, it is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval *before* the expiration date. Data collected during a period of lapsed approval is unapproved research and can *never* be reported or published as research data.
 - All changes or amendments to the above-referenced protocol require review and approval by the HIC **BEFORE** implementation.
 - Adverse Reactions/Unexpected Events (AR/UE) must be submitted on the appropriate form within the timeframe specified in the HIC Policy [REDACTED]

NOTE:

1. Upon notification of an impending regulatory site visit, hold notification, and/or external audit the HIC office must be contacted immediately.
2. Forms should be downloaded from the HIC website at each use.

*Based on the Expedited Review List, revised November 1998

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW APPROVAL

NOTICE OF EXPEDITED AMENDMENT APPROVAL**To:** [REDACTED]**From:** [REDACTED]

Chairperson, Behavioral Institutional Review Board (B3)

Date: November 01, 2011**RE:** IRB #: 064508B3E

Protocol Title: Broadening the Learning Community Experience Through the Collaboration Between the College of Education and the Campus Recreation Center and the Effects it had on Retention of First Year Students from an Urban Institution

Funding Source: Unit: [REDACTED]

Protocol #: 0806006093

Expiration Date: August 25, 2012**Risk Level / Category:** Research not involving greater than minimal risk

The above-referenced protocol amendment, as itemized below, was reviewed by the Chairperson/designee of the [REDACTED] Institutional Review Board (B3) and is APPROVED effective immediately.

- Protocol - Changes to data collection methods and/or instruments which includes changing from a survey to a videotaped interview to obtain qualitative data to accompany the quantitative data. This change does not affect risk to participants.
- Consent Form (revision dated 09/30/2011) - Behavioral Research Informed Consent modified to reflect protocol changes. Currently enrolled students will be given notice through Blackboard; the new consent form will be posted with instructions.

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW INFORMED CONSENT APPROVAL

Title of Study: Broadening the Learning Community Experience Through the Collaboration Between the College of Education and the Campus Recreation Center and the effects it had on Retention of First Year Students from an Urban Institution.

Behavioral Research Informed Consent

Title of Study: Broadening the Learning Community Experience Through the Collaboration Between the College of Education and the Campus Recreation Center and the effects it had on Retention of First Year Students from an Urban Institution.

Principal Investigator (PI):

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

When we say "you" in this consent form, we mean you or your child; "we" means the researchers and other staff.

Purpose

You are being asked to be in a research study of First Year Experience Courses because you have registered for [REDACTED]s. This study is being conducted at [REDACTED]. The estimated number of study participants to be enrolled at [REDACTED] is about 300. **Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.**

In this research study, you will be asked to participate in two, 45 minute video taped interviews. The interviews will ask questions about your GPA, interactions with fellow students, interactions with faculty and staff, use of university resources such as libraries, involvement in extracurricular activities, and overall satisfaction with the institution. The interviews will also ask you to describe your feelings about the [REDACTED] trip and course.

Study Procedures

If you agree to take part in this research study, you will be asked to participate in a 45 minute video taped interview after you complete your canoeing adventure. A second 45 minute interview will be conducted if needed to follow up on responses from the first interview. Your total participation time is about 2 hours with instruction time. The duration of your participation in the study is to be approximately 2-3 months depending on scheduling and logistics. Each time you are interviewed will be identical. You will be given a set of instructions and procedures to follow and then you will be asked some open ended questions.

The interview will ask questions pertaining to your thoughts and emotions prior to, on, and after the canoeing experience. You will also be asked about involvement in campus life, and interactions with peers, faculty and staff. You have the option of not answering questions of your choosing. All interview responses will be coded so there will be no identifiers linking tapes to specific individuals. All participants will have the opportunity to view the tapes and their transcription at any point in the study, for verification or omission purposes. Any identifying materials, including tapes will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

Title of Study: Broadening the Learning Community Experience Through the Collaboration Between the College of Education and the Campus Recreation Center and the effects it had on Retention of First Year Students from an Urban Institution.

Benefits

As a participant in this research study, there will be no direct benefit for you; however, information from this study may benefit other people now or in the future.

Risks

There are no known risks at this time to participation in this study.

Study Costs

Participation in this study will be of no cost to you.

Compensation

You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

Confidentiality

All information collected about you during the course of this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. You will be identified in the research records by a code name or number. Information that identifies you personally will not be released without your written permission. However, the study sponsor, the Human Investigation Committee (HIC) at [REDACTED] or federal agencies with appropriate regulatory oversight [e.g., Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP), Office of Civil Rights (OCR), etc.] may review your records.

When the results of this research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You have the right to choose not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part in the study you can later change your mind and withdraw from the study. You are free to only answer questions that you want to answer. You are free to withdraw from participation in this study at any time. Your decisions will not change any present or future relationship with [REDACTED] or other services you are entitled to receive.

Title of Study: Broadening the Learning Community Experience Through the Collaboration Between the College of Education and the Campus Recreation Center and the effects it had on Retention of First Year Students from an Urban Institution.

The PI may stop your participation in this study without your consent. The PI will make the decision and let you know if it is not possible for you to continue. The decision that is made is to protect your health and safety, or because you did not follow the instructions to take part in the study.

Questions

If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact [REDACTED] or one of his research team members at the following phone number [REDACTED]. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Human Investigation Committee can be contacted at [REDACTED]. If you are unable to contact the research staff, or if you want to talk to someone other than the research staff, you may also call [REDACTED] to ask questions or voice concerns or complaints.

Title of Study: Broadening the Learning Community Experience Through the Collaboration Between the College of Education and the Campus Recreation Center and the effects it had on Retention of First Year Students from an Urban Institution.

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. If you choose to take part in this study you may withdraw at any time. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by signing this form. Your signature below indicates that you have read, or had read to you, this entire consent form, including the risks and benefits, and have had all of your questions answered. You will be given a copy of this consent form.

Signature of participant : Legally authorized representative *

Date

Printed name of participant : Legally authorized representative *

Time

Signature of witness**

Date

Printed of witness**

Time

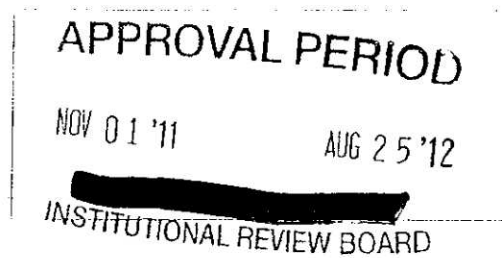
Signature of person obtaining consent

Date

Printed name of person obtaining consent

Time

*



Broadening the Learning Community Experience Through the Collaboration Between the College of Education and the Campus Recreation Center and the effects it had on Retention of First Year Students from an Urban Institution

Proposed interview protocol

Welcome and thank you for coming today. Today's interview will video and audio taped. I want to remind you that participation in this interview is voluntary and at any time you are free to opt out of a question or the entire interview. The questions will focus on the [REDACTED] and Learning Community with specific attention to the canoeing and camping phase of the course.

1. What prompted you to enroll for the course? What is your own decision or did your parent/guardian insist on your registration?
2. What are all goals if any did you hoped to accomplish on the trip?
3. Prior to the course, did you have any canoeing or camping experience?
4. Did you attend the pre-trip meeting? If so, did any family members attend with you?
5. Tell me about your feelings about starting college prior to the trip?

6. Can you describe how you were feeling just prior to attending the pre-trip meeting? And after?
7. Please describe for me how you were feeling the morning of the trip as you entered the [REDACTED]
8. How did you feel about your canoe partner when you first got on the river?
9. How did you feel about you canoe partner at the end of the first day?
10. Describe for me your interactions with upperclassmen leaders, faculty, and staff on the trip.
11. Did the trip provide information that was not covered in the on-campus orientation?
12. Describe for me your interactions with other incoming freshmen during the trip.

13. Did you learn anything about yourself on the trip? Could you give an example, please describe from beginning to end.
14. What were your feelings about attending college after the trip?
15. Did you accomplish the goals you set for yourself on the trip?
16. Do you have any regrets from the trip?
17. Did the trip help prepare you for life in college?
18. Would you recommend the trip to other incoming freshmen?
19. What if anything would you do to change or improve the trip experience?
20. Is there anything you would like to add about your experience?

That concludes our interview for today. Once the tape has been transcribed you will have the opportunity to check the transcription for accuracy. You are free to edit or omit responses as you deem necessary. Once that process is complete the recorded interview will be destroyed.

APPROVED

NOV 01 2011

01/01/2011

[REDACTED]
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

APPENDIX D: LC SURVEY AND WAIVER OF CONSENT APPROVAL

NOTICE OF EXPEDITED AMENDMENT APPROVAL**To:** [REDACTED]**From:** [REDACTED]**RE:** IRB #: 064508B3E

Protocol Title: Broadening the Learning Community Experience Through the Collaboration Between the College of Education and the Campus Recreation Center and the Effects it had on Retention of First Year Students from an Urban Institution

Funding Source: Unit: [REDACTED]

Protocol #: 0806006093

Expiration Date: August 12, 2013**Risk Level / Category:** Research not involving greater than minimal risk

The above-referenced protocol amendment, as itemized below, was reviewed by the Chairperson/designee of the [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Institutional Review Board (B3) and is APPROVED effective immediately.

- Protocol – Change to data collection methods and/or instruments which includes using just the Student Voice survey data from learning communities and comparing this data with other [REDACTED] learning communities. This data, coupled with qualitative data from personal interviews, will allow for a robust description of the student's learning community experiences. This change does not affect risks to participants.

- A waiver of consent for access to Student Voice survey data has been granted according to 45CFR 46 116(d) and justification provided by the Principal Investigator in the Protocol Summary Form (no identifying information is collected by [REDACTED] in the Student Voice survey. The survey is built into the syllabus for the learning community but is not a requirement and there is no method to identify who completed and who did not complete the survey).

This waiver satisfies: 1) risk is no more than minimal, 2) the waiver does not adversely affect the rights and welfare of research participants, 3) the research could not be practicably carried out without the waiver, and (4) providing participants additional pertinent information after participation is not appropriate.

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ABSTRACT**BROADENING THE LEARNING COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE: AN OUTDOOR ORIENTATION PROGRAM'S IMPACT ON ENGAGEMENT, PERSISTENCE, AND RETENTION**

by

CHRISTY DAVID NOLAN

December 2013

Advisor: Dr. Michael Owens**Major:** Educational Leadership**Degree:** Doctor of Education

The Keystone Learning Community was implemented by the Department of Campus Recreation to address retention at the institution. This learning community for incoming freshmen consists of two phases. Phase I is an outdoor orientation program that includes a three day, two night canoeing and camping experience led by upperclassmen leaders. Faculty and staff from the institution complete every aspect of Phase I with the freshmen. Phase II is class time that concentrates on development of critical thinking and writing skills.

Through surveys and interviews, participants in the Keystone Learning Community reported strong peer, faculty, and upperclassmen engagement initiated by the completion of Phase I. Participants in the Keystone LC considered Phase I to be a significant event in their transition to college. The engagement facilitated in Phase I created and strengthened the ability to persist in the participants. The strategies to persist the students gained through their engagement leads to retention of the participants. Both persistence and retention as facilitated through the Keystone Learning Community feed back into deeper engagement at the institution. A conceptual framework is introduced that purposes a non-linear alternative to the Tinto model

of student departure. This new framework highlights the dynamic complexity and interactions between engagement, persistence, and retention.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Christy David Nolan

Education	<p>Doctor of Education Wayne State University Major: Educational Leadership & Policy Studies</p> <p>Master Public Administration University of Michigan – Dearborn Major: Non-Profit Administration</p> <p>Bachelor of Science The Pennsylvania State University Major: Psychology</p>
Professional Employment	<p>2004 to present — Director of Campus Recreation Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan</p> <p>2010 to present — Associate Athletic Director Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan</p> <p>2001 – 2003 -- Associate Executive Director Livonia Family YMCA, Livonia, Michigan</p> <p>2000 – 2001 -- Branch Operations Director Wayne/Westland YMCA, Westland, Michigan</p> <p>1995 – 2000 -- Program Director/Sports Program Mgmt. Team Leader Livonia Family YMCA, Livonia, Michigan</p>
Professional Membership	<p>American College Personnel Association National Intramural Recreational Sports Association Michigan Recreational Sports Association</p>