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REAL WORLD RETENTION:
A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CAREER PATH
INTERNSHIP PROGRAM AT IDAHO STATE UNIVERSITY

by

Staci Phelan

A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in the Department of Educational Leadership

Idaho State University

Spring 2019

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Committee Approval

To the Graduate Faculty:

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RE: Regarding study number IRB-FY2018-228: Analysis of Retention of Students in the Career Path Internship Program at Idaho State University

Dear Ms. Phelan:

This message is your official notification that your project/survey IRB-FY2018-228: Analysis of Retention of Students in the Career Path Internship Program at Idaho State University does not meet the definition of research under the Code of Federal Regulations Title 45 Part 46.102(d); therefore is not subject to review by the Institutional Review Board. You are free to conduct your study as submitted.

Sincerely,

Ralph Baergen, PhD, MPH, CIP
Human Subjects Chair

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ABSTRACT

Retention of students is a problem faced by institutions of higher education around the world. Higher education institutions are required to report retention data to government agencies and they depend on tuition funding more than ever before. Prior research has identified many characteristics that when present, increase the likelihood of early departure. Most retention research is quantitative, examining large numbers of students to generate findings that are generalizable to the population at large. However, students depart for multiple reasons, not just one. The CPI program provides opportunities for students to gain real-world work experience in their field. The current study aims to determine if the CPI program, as a college experience, contributes to retention for students who might otherwise dropout.

The study used qualitative analysis to gain understanding of student perspectives about why they chose to remain enrolled, as well as their perspectives about the CPI program. Results confirmed prior research for many of the reasons students remain enrolled, such as support from family, connection with a faculty mentor, and a sense of belonging on campus. Every student in this study had at least one characteristic that increased their likelihood of early departure, and 80% of participants had three or more. In terms retention, 80% self-reported a graduation date within six years of starting college and none had a GPA below a 2.0. These findings indicate students in the CPI program are successfully completing college, but further research should examine if CPI students are different from the student body in general.

Keywords: Retention, early departure, persistence, stop-out, dropout, attrition, enrollment management, qualitative, active learning theory, experiential learning theory, theory of student involvement, theory of attrition, theory of student integration, characteristics that affect early departure, career path internship program, Astin, Attinasi, Braxton, Berger, Bonwell, Cabrera,

Hurtado, Carter, Eison, Ishtani, Melguizo, Milem, Pascarella, Pike, Kuh, Saldana, Singell,
Terenzini, Tierney, Tinto.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

In recent years, the State of Idaho, and the State Board of Education (SBOE) for Idaho, has placed a significant emphasis on the “go-on” rate – the percentage of students who go on to attend college after high school. The State of Idaho would like to have 60% of young adults between the ages of 25 and 34 years old to have a post-secondary degree or certificate by 2020 (Corbin, 2016). The SBOE, the State Legislature, and the Governor support this plan. In order to achieve this goal, institutions of higher education within the State must critically examine how they manage student recruitment and retention.

Retention of students is not a problem unique to Idaho, or even the United States. “Higher student attrition rates at university have become one of the most challenging issues in higher education worldwide in the last five decades” (Mansouri & Moumine, 2017, p. 53). Multiple researchers, including Crosling, Heagney, and Thomas (2009), Siekpe and Barksdale (2013), and Wilson (2016) echo this sentiment. Attrition rates are between 30% and 50% in the United States – the highest in the industrialized world – and over 20% in Australia (O’Keefe, 2013). Student persistence in higher education is a complex phenomenon, multifaceted, nuanced, and unique to individual students based in part on their cultural norms, value systems, and life circumstances. Institutions of higher education often grapple with how best to address early student departure.

Student retention is at the top of many university agendas, namely because of the need to comply with governmental targets, such as the one mentioned above, as well as to avoid various adverse funding consequences (Duarte, Ramos-Pires, & Gonçalves, 2014). Further, as the concept of life-long learning becomes more commonplace, adult students tend to view higher

education as a commodity – if they are not satisfied, they are more likely to dropout. Finally, because reports of retention statistics are part of accountability measures, institutions with low retention rates can suffer from a bad reputation, which can then contribute towards low enrollment (Crosling et al., 2009).

Student retention is a complex situation, comprised of many different interconnected variables. Research over the past several decades has shown students make decisions related to departure over time, and are comprised of numerous factors, not just one (Bean, 1982; Braxton, 2000; Cabrera, Casteñeda, Nora & Hengstler, 1992; Crosling et al., 2009; Forsman, Linder, Moll, Fraser, & Andersson, 2014; Siekpe & Barksdale, 2013; Tinto, 1987, 1993). Further, circumstances for students change over time, and students' fluctuating life experiences impact their ability to complete college. Research demonstrates that there are known background characteristics that contribute to early departure, including low high school grade point average (GPA), low college GPA, low mother's education level, lack of academic and/or social integration at the institution attended, race/ethnicity, sex, attendance as a part-time versus full-time student, participation in remedial courses, family size, socio-economic status, or transfer status. Students with these characteristics may have a greater need for additional help or resources to complete their college degree than students who do not share these characteristics.

Institutions across the United States have put various programs in place to assist with increasing retention based on known risk factors. Some schools invest heavily in academic advising, financial aid, tutoring, or bridge programs to assist students identified as at-risk for early departure. Others rely on early intervention with predictive data analytics to identify and reach out to students who may be struggling and identify solutions to potential problems before they lead to early departure.

Idaho State University (ISU) has academic advising, bridge programs, TRiO grants, and other programs geared towards assisting students currently in place. However, the program examined in the current study is the Career Path Internship (CPI) program. Retention was not the focus of this particular program – rather, student work experience that would supplement their degree program, aiding them in obtaining employment after graduation was the primary focus. However, many components of the program provide connections to factors research has shown to increase retention. Such factors include intensive contact with a faculty member or mentor (Berger & Milem, 1999; Tinto, 1993), working on campus (Astin, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), working part-time rather than full time (Martinez et al., 2009; Yorke & Thomas, 2003), and remuneration for their work (Cabrera, Stampen & Hansen 1990; Singell & Waddell, 2010).

Career Path Internship Program

Developed in 2011, the CPI program at ISU is under the oversight of the division of Student Affairs. Stoecker, Pascarella, and Wolfle (1988) found:

Student affairs programs that facilitate interaction with faculty and the opportunity for social involvement and participation would seem to positively influence persistence irrespective of precollege characteristics; initial commitments; the selectivity, size, or racial composition of the institution attended; or one's academic major. (p. 205)

The initial pilot program dedicated \$300,000 to the CPI program. The program found success in its first year, and has grown and expanded to its current annual investment of \$2.4 million dollars, including additional line item funding by the Idaho State Legislature of \$500,000. The CPI program employs between 700 and 1,000 students each year, across multiple departments on campus, as well as outside agencies.

The CPI program allocates funding to departments, and each department is able to choose how best to utilize those funds for their students to have a meaningful experience. Stoecker et al. (1988) state:

...college major seemed to exert significant effects on persistence through its impact on both academic and social integration. This suggests that institutional strategies may be enhanced by creation of a policy focus within the individual departments. Clearly, individual students experience major aspects of an institution through the academic structure of the departmental major and the normative interpersonal influence of faculty and peers in the same major. (p. 208)

ISU created the CPI program to provide an opportunity for students, from freshman to doctoral students, to gain real-world experience in their field of study. “The CPI program at Idaho State University was designed to prepare students for success in their chosen career field” (CPI handbook, retrieved from <https://isu.edu/career/cpi-program/> on 12/2/17, p. 3). In many cases, students are working directly with a faculty member or a staff mentor on campus. In other cases, students work with collaborating agencies throughout the city. Students receive compensation for up to 20 hours per week, the maximum number of hours allowed for work each week. (The program raised the maximum number of hours per week to 25, effective July 1, 2018). The intent is to allow students have work experience in their field, which, when coupled with their degree, will make them more attractive candidates to future employers. CPI positions may continue into the next academic year, but assignments must become increasingly complex for students who return (CPI handbook, retrieved from <https://isu.edu/career/cpi-program/> on 12/2/17, p. 6).

Further, the CPI program allows students to experience working, learning other important soft skills, such as communication, problem solving, and how to make adjustments when projects do not go as originally planned. Universities often hear that graduates perform poorly in professional settings due to a lack of skill in problem solving and communication (Bonwell & Sutherland, 1996). Based on this feedback, Bonwell and Sutherland (1996) advocate for teaching students both cognitive and professional skills to enhance and build upon course content and discipline-specific knowledge. Giving students the ability to think through difficult problems or challenging students to apply various solutions to professional problems they encounter can be an example of knowledge application. The CPI program allows students opportunities to practice and develop this skillset before they enter the workforce. “Internships provide an excellent opportunity for the student to formally meld theory and practice with his or her chosen field of study” (CPI handbook, retrieved from <https://isu.edu/career/cpi-program/> 12/2/17, p. 3).

The CPI program handbook states, “a successful internship is measured by the student’s success at performing the job responsibilities of the internship position and developing professional competencies through a real-world working experience while positively contributing to the internship objective” (CPI handbook, retrieved from <https://isu.edu/career/cpi-program/> 12/2/17, p. 4). Additionally, “this success enables the student to build meaningful work experience, strengthen resumes, and many times allow the student to secure employment before or shortly after graduation” (CPI handbook, retrieved from <https://isu.edu/career/cpi-program/> 12/2/17, p. 4).

Purpose of the Study

Students today face a number of choices, pressures, and competing influences that together, help shape their worldview and decision-making process. Student departure is rarely

the result of just one factor. The review of studies presented here represent findings related to student departure decisions as far back as the 1980's, when modern work in the field began.

There has been a call for examination of student departure across institutional settings, student populations, and at different points in time to better understand and improve retention rates (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000). The current dissertation will contribute to the research on student persistence by discovering if the CPI program at ISU leads to retention of students with characteristics known to increase the chances of early departure or dropout. "The benefits of certain college experiences may be sufficient to override entering traits which often typify the dropout-prone student" (Pascarella & Terenzini 1979a, p. 198). This study aims to determine if the CPI program, as a college experience, contributes to retention for students who might otherwise dropout.

A qualitative design was selected for this study because the majority of student retention studies to date are quantitative. Given the vast amount of research that details the importance of the background characteristics that make students unique, a qualitative data analysis will provide a deeper understanding of the student's personal experience, and whether or not the students view the CPI program as a critical component for their decision to remain enrolled. Qualitative interviews will provide an opportunity for students to inform about their decision making process, their viewpoint about the CPI program as a contributing factor towards retention, as well as any cultural beliefs or external influences that shaped their decision to remain enrolled.

The organization of this dissertation lays its foundation on major three major student retention theories, beginning with Tinto's (1987, 1993) seminal work, and expands to include the theories of Bean (1980), and Astin (1999). These theories help to provide an understanding of

various reasons why students may depart, creating a framework of characteristics known to impact early student departure.

Research Questions

1. What are student perceptions of the CPI program, including their personal CPI work experience, and their experience with their CPI mentor?
2. Would CPI participants interviewed recommend the program to future students, and if so, why?
3. Do students feel the CPI program is a primary reason for retention, or were other factors, such as cultural influences, or the influences of “significant others” more of a factor?
4. To what degree do current CPI student experiences support the existing literature in regards to risk factors identified by major student departure theories?

Definition of Terms

Active learning is “the process of making students the center of their learning” (Warren, 1997, p.16). Active learning can include discussion, debates, role-playing, group work, and higher order thinking (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000). Active learning affects social integration, institutional commitment, and student departure decisions (Braxton et al., 2000; Braxton et al., 2008).

Academic integration relates to grade performance as well as the student’s intellectual development (Tinto 1987, 1993). Academic integration is a core construct of Tinto’s theory, and is essentially how a student perceives their personal academic and intellectual development (Braxton, Jones, Hirschy, & Hartley, 2000).

Goal Commitment is the student's commitment to completion of the goal of graduating from college (Tinto 1987, 1993).

Experiential Learning is a focus on the learning process of the individual, though active participation in the learning process (Winsett, Foster, Dearing, & Burch, 2016). The process by which we make meaning from direct experience, (Itin, 1999) leads to deeper learning as compared to didactic approaches; involves hands-on learning and problem solving, learning by doing; combines thinking and active experimentation (Wurdinger & Allison, 2017); a structured experience in which the student takes the lead in their learning (Fede, Gorman, & Cimini, 2018).

Institutional Commitment is the student's commitment to graduating from this particular institution (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Students with a commitment to the institution are more likely to persist to degree completion (Braxton, et al., 2000).

Integration is the second stage in the process in which students become fully acculturated to the college or university setting (Tinto, 1987, 1993).

Separation originally thought of as the process by which students reject prior cultural norms and values in order to integrate into the dominant culture on campus (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Other studies have called this into question, arguing separation is not necessary for full integration into college (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). For some students, maintaining family connections and having their support is among the most important aspects of a successful transition to college.

Social integration relates to connection with peers and faculty (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Social integration can exert influence on a student's institutional commitment (Braxton, Jones, Hirschy, & Hartley, 2008).

Stop-out: a short-term break from higher education, rather than a permanent departure (Stratton, O'Toole, & Wetzel, 2005).

Theoretical Perspective

Studies of student departure are extensive, and examination of the issue has been ongoing for more than one hundred years. Three major theories of student persistence encompass the theoretical foundation for this study, Tinto's (1987, 1993) theory of student integration, Bean's (1980) theory of student attrition, and Astin's (1999) theory of involvement. Each of these theories contribute toward an understanding of the reasons why students may choose to depart. I also integrate the theory of active and experiential learning to understand and explain why I believe the CPI program may contribute towards increased retention. I believe that the CPI program at ISU provides an opportunity for students to experience active and experiential learning outside of the classroom, which may lead to increased confidence in the classroom/academic integration as theorized by Tinto (1987, 1993), which could contribute to retention.

Theory as foundational principles versus predictive model. This dissertation does not develop a predictive model utilizing the variables discussed by major theories. Rather, this dissertation focuses on determining whether participation in the CPI program at ISU contributes to retention of students whose background characteristics may place them at greater risk for early departure. The theories provide a base of understanding for various factors known to increase early departure. Student departure decisions are multifaceted; usually the result of multiple factors instead of just one, and finally, student departure remains a highly individual and personal decision.

Delimitations

Delimitations of the study include:

1. The study is limited to participants of the CPI program at ISU, and is examining a distinct program, within a unique context, which would make it difficult to replicate in a different setting. Single institution studies avoid potential confounding variables related to institutional or environmental differences (Bean, 1980; Ishitani, 2006; Pike & Kuh, 2005), and “single institution studies are more in keeping with the underlying assumptions of Tinto’s theory, as it seeks to explain the longitudinal process of student departure within a given college or university” (Braxton et al., 2000, p. 581). The single-institution study will allow me to gauge whether or not the CPI program influenced student retention. Chapman and Pascarella (1983) argue that single institution studies do not account for the complexity across college types, however, in this study, the CPI program does not exist across all campus types. Finally, national data do not take into consideration the impact of particular interventions in place at various institutions that may affect retention, such as the CPI program at ISU.
2. Participant responses to the qualitative portion of the study will be their personal reflections of their experiences participating in the CPI program.

Limitations

Limitations of the study include:

1. The results of this study have limited generalizability, due to being a single-institution study. The results will be generalizable to the population of students who participate in the CPI program at ISU who have background characteristics that increase the likelihood of dropout.

2. Due to the nature of qualitative research, different people may apply other interpretations of the data.
3. The qualitative research will rely on purposive sampling methods. Because of this, the researcher cannot guarantee that the sample is representative of the entire population, or that students with specific background characteristics will be included.
4. Because qualitative research is interpretive in nature, the introduction of researcher biases may occur in the findings.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the literature by contributing a qualitative approach to the study of retention programs. At present, I found no studies that explored student persistence in programs like the CPI program at ISU. Understanding whether programs such as this one are able to contribute to increased retention for students who might otherwise dropout is worthy of study, and may assist in the replication of such programs at other institutions. The data yielded from this study may contribute deeper understanding related to the problem of student departure by exploring participant views.

Research has found that students who enrolled in four or more years of college, regardless of their efficiency, had low dropout rates (Duarte et al., 2014). Their conclusion was that past a certain point, students might believe they have come too far to miss the ability to graduate. I will call this point “critical mass” in this paper. The CPI program may be able to assist with keeping students enrolled until they get to this critical stage, as the CPI program requires full-time enrollment to participate. They also believe that decision makers should use tools to plan investments and to manage resources in order to gain a measure of control over the dropout process, (Duarte et al., 2014). A study such as this one can perhaps assist with the

replication of this program, or the creation of a similar program, tailored to meet the needs of another institution.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Studied for over one hundred years, student retention remains a challenge with no ultimate solution. Almost half of students in two-year colleges and one quarter of students in four-year institutions will leave by the end of their first year (Tinto, 1993). Data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) website puts this figure at 41% for open-access institutions like ISU, (retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_ctr.asp 1-27-19). For those that do persist beyond the first year, more than half of students who initially enroll in college will leave without completing a credential (Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinbach, 2005; Desjardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002). In 1982, Bean stated that retention was quickly becoming a matter of institutional survival, not just a matter of academic interest. A decade later, Tierney (1992) stated that student departure could be a central focus of higher education research.

There are myriad reasons why students leave college before completing a degree. Each institution and the students it attracts have unique variables, considerations, pre-entry characteristics, backgrounds, cultures, and goals. No specific approach generates consistent results for institutions across the nation, as student retention behaviors and student integration patterns are different across institutional types, which further adds complexity and nuance to the retention problem (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983).

Some argue that attrition itself is an expected part of the higher education landscape, and the personal decision of a student to withdraw should not affect the institution. Similarly, others say withdrawal and dropout is a function of the rigor and program quality of the institution. Supporting this argument, dropout rates have remained surprisingly stable, despite intensive efforts, and billions of dollars invested in retention programs (Tinto, 1982). Tinto goes on to say there are students, for a number of different reasons, who will not complete their programs of

study, and because of this, not every factor affecting early departure should be made the subject of institutional policy. Student attrition could simply indicate higher education is functioning as designed.

It is clear institutions of higher education have a responsibility to ensure programs and policies are effective and geared towards maximizing student success, yet we cannot ignore the student's role in the educational process. The work completed by Hosch (2008), shows that monitoring student GPA in the first semester can be an important predictor of student success and graduation. This has a significant impact on institutions which are not as selective, or that function as open-access institutions, as ISU does.

Additionally, from a policy perspective, the ability to identify which students are the best “match” for the institution during the admissions process and prior to enrollment, can lead to higher retention rates, and fewer situations in which students depart because of a lack of institutional fit (Singell & Waddell, 2010). Assessing students and making decisions based on their statistical risk may make sense financially, and falls in line with risk-assessments practices in other industries (banking, life insurance, health insurance, mortgage loans) but fails in the assessment of an individual, and raises important ethical considerations (Scholes, 2016). For example, is it appropriate to deny a potential student the opportunity to get an education because of the presence of certain background characteristics, which the student may not be able to control? If so, how many such characteristics need be present before denial of entry? How do decision makers identify, or weight, various factors as more significant? How can a student successfully demonstrate ability to overcome these risk factors? What happens if risk factors, such as a low college GPA arise after admission to the university? These ethical questions do not

lend themselves to easy answers – especially as we know that individuals react differently to these factors.

Characteristics That Can Impact Early Departure

Over decades of study, researchers have identified multiple characteristics that can potentially have an impact on student departure. These variables and the settings in which they occur, work together to influence student learning and affect the decision to remain enrolled (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Students with such characteristics are vulnerable for the entirety of their college education, not just year one (Singell & Waddell, 2010). The forthcoming discussion will review some of the characteristics known to contribute to early departure, such as socioeconomic status, financial aid, first-generation status, GPA, student-faculty interaction, race/ethnicity, international versus domestic status, part-time versus full-time attendance, parental educational level, and transfer status.

It is important to note that students who have background characteristics that may lead to early departure are not inferior scholars when compared to students without these characteristics. Many students with such characteristics, especially those related to their family background, cannot control those factors in their lives. When given support and opportunity, students with these characteristics may go on to be excellent students, just as students without such characteristics may struggle to complete their degree program. Student departure is individual and unique to each student. The characteristics identified here can increase the likelihood of early departure, but their presence does not guarantee a negative result.

Socio-Economic Status. Socio-economic status (SES) was found to have a strong effect on completion of a bachelor's degree, as well as the overall perception of satisfaction a student had during his or her undergraduate experience (Astin, 1993). Students whose parents earn in

excess of \$75,000 (adjusted for inflation) per year are more likely to attend college (Tierney, 1992). Students with higher SES were less likely to depart, and SES had direct effects on a student's decision to persist (Cabrera et al., 1990; Desjardins et al., 2002; Ishtani, 2006). Further, higher SES had positive impacts on a student's willingness to re-enroll in the college, attend graduate school, as well as GPA (Astin, 1993). Family income can influence the development of supportive peer relationships, which leads to higher institutional commitment (Berger & Milem, 1999). Others did not find that parental educational levels influenced support for attending college, but parental income level did (Elkins et al., 2000).

Only 60% of low-income students will earn a bachelor's degree, while more than 80% of high-income students will attain a degree (Bailey et al., 2005). In fact, only one third of high-achieving, but low-income students attend one of the top 200 highly selective colleges, whereas three quarters of high achieving students from higher income homes attend highly selective colleges (Wilson, 2016). Further, the educational aspirations of low-income students are lower than the aspirations of their higher SES peers (Bailey et al., 2005; Martinez et al., 2009). In short, students whose families had a higher SES had more positive outcomes than students whose families had lower SES, (Astin, 1993).

Financial Aid/Jobs on Campus. Finances are a “significant barrier to retention” (Yorke & Thomas, 2003). Financial aid may be able to assist with social and academic integration because financial aid relieves students of the need to work, which grants students the freedom to be more active in social activities, as well as academic pursuits, (Cabrera, Nora, & Castañeda, 1992). Additionally, sufficient financial aid awards may act as a deterrent to transferring to other institutions. Meeting financial need is an important component of retention (Singell & Waddell, 2010).

Tinto (1982) acknowledged his model does not give enough of an emphasis on the role that finances play for students and their departure decisions, and encouraged further research as to the impact of finances on student departure. Tinto states finances, especially short-term financial needs, affect the departure decision only “at the margin” and are just one factor of the overall decision making process, though he is careful to point out that for some groups, such as those with low SES, it can be a bigger factor. His conclusion is students are more willing to take on the financial burden of college if their experience is a positive one (Tinto, 1982). Cabrera et al., (1990) developed a model to examine the role of ability to pay; hypothesizing the ability to pay has a direct effect on persistence. Their study found that the hypothesis was correct – that ability to pay does affect persistence, as well as other variables presumed to affect persistence (Cabrera et al., 1990).

Student satisfaction with financial support received had a direct effect on noncognitive components of academic integration, and financial aid had a direct effect on a student’s decision to persist, (Cabrera et al., 1992). Similarly, Singell and Waddell (2010) also found that financial aid was an important factor in retention.

Working part-time actually mediates some risk of attrition, whereas full-time work is a predictor of attrition (Martinez et al., 2009). Students who had work-study jobs were less likely to drop out in the first year as compared to students who did not receive any aid (Ishtani, 2006). Work-study continued to show positive results for retention when examined in year two. When considered in year four, work-study students were 81% more likely to graduate on time (4 years) than students who did not receive work-study in their first year. Part-time jobs can be beneficial to students, as they can enhance student abilities and interests and provide valuable work experience (Martinez et al., 2009).

While a job can be seen as reducing the time a student has to be “involved,” Astin (1999) notes that having a job on campus reduces departure, because the student is working on-campus, and as such, has greater access to other students, or faculty mentors on campus. The student is more familiar with campus services, and knows how to access those services when necessary. Finally, the financial compensation provided may also act as a way to create a further sense of connection and loyalty to the college. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) have found on-campus work tends to increase academic performance, whereas off-campus work tends to have negative outcomes. Yorke and Thomas (2003) found that part-time employment is more often than not a reality for their students, especially those from lower SES backgrounds.

First-Generation Students. In terms of knowledge of post-secondary education, family income and support, educational expectations, academic preparation, and family obligations, first-generation students are at a disadvantage as compared to peers whose parents have college education (Crosling et al., 2009; Garcia, 2010; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996; Tierney, 1992). First-generation students often report larger academic and social challenges than their peers who are not first generation students (Martinez et al., 2009; Tinto 1987, 1993). Fully integrating into the college academic and social structures requires the student reject, or “break” their family tradition (Elkins et al., 2000).

Research has shown first-generation students experience lower graduation and persistence rates (Pike & Kuh, 2005). SES is often lower than that of their peers (Garcia, 2010; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Terenzini et al., 1996; Tinto, 1987, 1993). Interestingly, Ishitani (2006) also found that the highest level of risk for departure for first-generation students occurred in the second year of their studies, which then declines.

First-generation students are more likely than their peer group to have full-time jobs, or to have a part-time job (Martinez et al., 2009; Terenzini et al., 1996). Perhaps due to work demands, first-generation students typically take fewer credit hours, participate in fewer out-of-class activities, and are more likely to live off-campus, reducing opportunities for social integration (Pascarella et al., 2004).

First-generation students actually get greater benefit from peer interaction and extracurricular involvement than other students, even though they are less likely to participate, because they tend to have less knowledge of how to integrate socially on campus. To combat this, Pike and Kuh (2005) recommend campus policies that would require freshman to live on-campus, at least for the first year. Many institutions have such requirements; however, due to the financial constraints, a full-time job, or other family obligations, this could be another barrier to college.

Support from friends and family in the student's endeavor to remain enrolled is significant. Support students receive from significant others in their lives was positively associated with the decision to persist (Cabrera et al., 1990; Terenzini et al., 1994), but first-generation students had less support from parents for college attendance (Terenzini et al., 1996). Students whose family or community question the value of college attendance may have a difficult time separating from their prior community and integrating into the academic and social communities in college (Elkins et al., 2000). Some parents without formal post-secondary education may even be disdainful of higher education, which puts their children at further disadvantage (Martinez et al., 2009).

Grade Point Average (GPA). University GPA correlates with student performance (Bean, 1980) and with persistence (Markle, 2015). High school GPA as a predictor had direct

effects on student persistence, but interestingly enough, negatively connects to student-faculty involvement (Berger & Milem, 1999), who posit that this, perhaps, is due to students with higher GPA's not having a need to interact with faculty due to not having early academic concerns. First-generation students with low GPA's were even more at risk for attrition, however, college GPA acted as a potential mediator of this risk (Martinez et al., 2009). In a case study of a medium sized public comprehensive university, Hosch (2008) found that GPA at the end of the first semester was the characteristic that had the biggest impact on graduation within six years for first time students. Students earning below a 2.0 GPA graduated at a rate of just 9%, compared to a 63% graduation rate for students whose GPA's were 3.0 or higher (Hosch, 2008).

A University of Oregon study found students not retained by the university had lower GPA's when compared to students who were retained (Singell & Waddell, 2010). Other researchers found GPA lowers the risk of dropout, but the size of this effect decreases over time, and they also found that good grades both reduce stop out and increase the chances of on-time graduation (Desjardins et al., 2002).

Student-Faculty Interactions. Interaction with both faculty and student peer groups were critical to student persistence (Berger & Milem, 1999; Tinto, 1993). "Involvement with one's peers and with the faculty, both inside and outside the classroom, is itself positively related to the quality of student effort and in turn to both learning and persistence" (Tinto, 1993, p. 71). However, "few college experiences are more strongly linked to student learning and persistence than students' interactions with faculty members" (Reason, Terenzini & Domingo, 2006, p. 151). Student-faculty interactions increased both academic and social integration, which lead to increased retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1976, 1979a, 1979b, and 1979c).

Early validating experiences (those that affirm, and are supportive) with faculty members are essential to students connecting with and feeling accepted by their new community (Terenzini et al., 1994). These validating interactions with faculty can increase a student's commitment to completion of a college degree. Contact between students and faculty members also created "a strong positive path between involvement with faculty and perception of institutional support" (Milem & Berger, 1997, p. 369).

Chapman and Pascarella (1983) note that students with higher SES backgrounds, higher achievement, or higher needs for affiliation tended to have more contact with faculty. Students who reported frequently talking with faculty (in their third year) had a higher sense of belonging as compared to students who interacted with faculty less often (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Pascarella and Terenzini (1979a) found that faculty contact was especially beneficial for freshmen women and men whose family had low levels of formal education. If students are close to even one faculty member, they are more likely to remain enrolled. Students who have experiences with faculty members in informal settings, or those outside of the classroom, are shown to be more motivated and interested in the learning process (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). "The relationship between a student and a key figure (whether this be faculty, staff, student mentor, or support staff) within the university can ensure that the student does not exit their course prior to completion" (O'Keefe, 2013, p. 608).

Astin (1993) found that faculty had the second largest effect on a student's undergraduate development. Faculty strongly influenced the student's perception of the overall quality of the college, in terms of instruction and the overall view of the college experience as a whole. Student-faculty interaction positively affected student self-reported intellectual and personal growth, and played a role in the selection of a student's major. Faculty-student interaction yields

strong influence on undergraduates, but faculty members may need to be trained to make a conscious effort to reach out to students who may not feel as comfortable approaching them (Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010).

One study did not find that faculty/staff relationships were crucial to retention, though it marked that as a surprising finding (Bean, 1980). Berger and Braxton (1998) found that white students were less likely to report they felt they related to faculty than non-white students, which is interesting since other studies have found white students feel more comfortable working with professors than minority students (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000).

Early faculty involvement with students provided a positive indirect effect on the institutional commitment of students (Berger & Milem, 1999). Further, they found that faculty play an important role, especially for students who may not be fitting in with their peer groups, and that faculty involvement had a positive effect on student persistence overall. They argue that because social integration is so critical, faculty members may be increasing retention of students, especially students who fail to make important connections to their peers. Faculty may essentially act as support that supplements or replaces peer support. However, not all types of faculty interaction enhance a sense of belonging, especially for minority students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Race/Ethnicity/Culture. Race affects many different aspects of college for students and was found to be significant in many studies (Astin, 1993; Attinasi, 1989; Berger & Braxton, 1998; Berger & Milem, 1999; Elkins et al., 2000; Hosch, 2008; Ishtani, 2006). White students are more likely than their African American or Native American peers to attend college (Tierney, 1992). During a nine-year national study, Astin (1982) found that only 40% of Mexican-American students had earned a bachelor's degree, versus 55% of Anglo students. Mexican-

American students graduate from college within four to five years at a rate that is between one and a half and two times smaller than their Anglo peers (Attinasi, 1989). African-American students are at greater risk than their peers related to persistence. Being African American was the third largest predictor of negative persistence (Berger & Milem, 1999).

The most recent data from the National Center for Educational Statistics showed that Hispanic students in the 2010 cohort graduated at a rate of 31.7%. Black students graduated at 21.4% as compared to 45.2% for whites, and 40.6% for all students. This represents an increase from the 1996 cohort, with 22.8% of Hispanics, and 19.5% of Black students graduating within four years, as compared to 36.3% for whites, and 33.7% for the entire population. These statistics represent all institution types. If we isolate the same statistics for public institutions, like ISU, the rates of graduation for the 2010 cohort for Hispanic students are 26.4%. Black students graduate at 18.5%, White students are 39.4%, and the overall population graduates at 35.5%. (retrieved from: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_326.10.asp on 1-29-19). While strides have been made in increasing graduation rates for all races, minority students continue to graduate at lower rates than their White peers.

Members of minority groups had less support for attending college (Elkins et al., 2000). Financial difficulties had an impact on the GPA of African-American students, but not whites (Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009). White students were more likely to report feeling as though they participate in decision-making processes and relate to their peers than their non-white counterparts, but were less likely to feel as though they related to faculty (Berger & Braxton, 1998). Another study found that Latino students were less likely to graduate than their white peers, and those that do graduate take longer to do so than white peers (Desjardins et al., 2002). One-year retention rates for students in underrepresented minority groups were on

average, 2-3 percentage points lower than students in non-minority groups, and graduation rates were 11-16 percentage points lower, in a case-study of a medium sized, public comprehensive university (Hosch, 2008).

For Mexican-American students, having an expectation of the student attending college, especially when stated by parents, contributed to attendance in college (Attinasi, 1989). Mentors, such as older siblings, or even teachers or high school counselors also contributed – these experiences shared by individuals who had already attended college or were currently attending, gave Mexican-American students an idea of what college might be like for them. Attinasi (1989) found that the “significant other” influence was significant for Mexican American students, despite the effects of background variables, such as SES, or GPA. Mexican American students attend college because of the impact of significant others in their lives that encourage them to attend college. Further, once they are on campus, these significant other expectations often keep them on campus.

Students from minority groups often report feeling exclusion, or racial conflict/tensions on campus. Minority students experience greater pressure to conform to the dominant culture on campus, or various stereotypes. Minority students also have a perception of being treated less equitably by faculty and staff members, perceive a more hostile environment, and report the institution has less commitment to diversity than do Caucasian students (Ancis et al., 2000; Williams & Ferrari, 2015). This is not always the case, however, because when students of color have a positive relationship with faculty, and supportive peer relationships, they have positive perceptions of experiencing fair treatment and acceptance (Ancis et al., 2000; Johnson et al., 2007). The findings above reinforce the importance of Tinto’s (1987,1993) core concept of

social integration on campus, and the ways in which it can affect a student's decision to remain enrolled.

Berger and Milem (1999) found the students who were most likely to persist were those students whose beliefs and behavior were in line with the dominant culture on campus. As a result, campus officials who are serious about increasing retention on campus for groups that have been traditionally underrepresented, the campus environment needs to provide opportunities to reflect the values and customs of a wide variety of students, instead of just the dominant peer group.

Curriculum should be both culturally relevant, and broad enough to prepare students to work in an increasingly diverse and multicultural society (Crosling et al., 2009). Others have found that a campus environment that is welcoming and inclusive, targeting multiple learning styles, and which include faculty from different backgrounds make a significant difference for minority students on campus (Pewewerdy & Frey, 2002). Indeed, Johnson et al. (2007) found the success of a student predicates upon the sense of welcome, or "sense of belonging" students experience at the institution. Students have a strong need to feel they are part of a community that is supportive, affirming, and valuable.

International Students. International students face many barriers to success in academia, including financing their education, as they are typically not eligible for financial aid packages, and are limited in where and how many hours they can work. Additionally, there are language, cultural, and various personal barriers that complicate their path to a degree, as well as concerns about campus and personal safety (Bista & Foster, 2011).

There are challenges that international students or students from other ethnic backgrounds can face when it comes to faculty interactions. These individuals may not feel as

confident approaching faculty for assistance, so faculty need to be intentional about reaching out to these students to establish a connection (O’Keefe, 2013). This view is the opposite of Tinto (1993) who argues that the student is responsible to adjust to the expectations of the institution. Collier and Morgan (2008) share Tinto’s view, indicating that students who better understand faculty expectations are likely to perform better, and they indicate that students (in general, not just first-generation or ethnic students) must be able to recognize and prioritize the amount of time necessary to be successful in school, even at the expense of other commitments. Tierney (1992) points out that social integrationists, like Tinto, believe that college success is dependent on the individual and their ability to separate from their communities and adapt to the prevalent culture.

International students are increasingly important to the finances of American universities (Perry, Lausch, Weatherford, Goeken, & Almendares, 2017). As domestic enrollments have dropped, and are projected to continue to decline, universities are looking to expand the number of international scholars on their campuses to make up for lost revenue. However, many campuses are not equipped to handle the specific needs of this group, which may relate to religious beliefs, dietary needs, and cultural or ideological values. International students enhance cultural awareness of domestic students, preparing them for work in an increasingly global economy.

Support systems for college students are essential for college success. These groups can be family or friends, influential teachers or counselors, or current faculty members. International students are far from home, and may be one of only a few students on campus with their particular culture, customs, nationality, or background. It can be incredibly difficult to create a supportive system in this type of environment. In particular, America’s culture has a strong

notion of individuality (Perry et al., 2017). Other cultures, especially those overseas, are often more community based than is American culture, which can lead to misunderstandings about classroom and homework expectations.

International students are not homogenous, but rather, incredibly diverse, and needs vary between students. For example, students from Asia or Africa – these are vast continents with many different nationalities, cultures, religions, and values. A program for “Asian” or “African” students is not likely to encompass the needs of individual students. A single program for international students cannot be varied enough to meet the needs of each individual student.

Sex. Men and women report significant differences in what influenced their retention decisions. Astin (1993) found significant effects related to sex in almost two-thirds of the eighty-two outcomes he studied. Markedly different results for each sex occurred in both Bean’s 1980 study and Stoecker et al. (1988), also found the need to analyze data separately by sex. For women, peer group influences had a strong positive influence on retention, while for men, institutional or goal commitment was more important for retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979a). This evidence suggests that variables affecting retention are likely to differ by sex.

Bean (1980) found that institutional commitment was the most important variable in predicting dropout, for both men and women. Women had nine variables that helped to explain their institutional commitment: opportunity for transfer, satisfaction, institutional quality, performance, goal commitment, practical value, campus job, opportunity for jobs, and campus organizations. Men, on the other hand, had only four: opportunity for transfer, institutional quality, development, and communication.

Part-Time Attendance. Part-time students have a rate of attrition that approaches 50% (American Institutes for Research, 2010, p. 16). Part-time students have less of an attachment to

the university, and students who must work long hours for pay are also less likely to view themselves as “students” (O’Keefe, 2013). Technology that allows students to utilize remote access for class attendance can contribute to feelings of disconnection, as they have less of a need to spend time on campus. Results on part-time status as a predictor of persistence have had mixed results, with some studies indicating positive effects (Markle, 2015; Metzner & Bean, 1987), and others finding negative effects (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). In one such study, female students enrolled part-time were actually more likely to persist to graduation than those enrolled full time (Markle, 2015).

Non-traditional Students. Non-traditional students, which can include adult learners, those older than the traditional 18-year-old student, or students who are parents (single or married), experience the need to balance multiple competing responsibilities. Non-traditional students are a growing segment served by higher education, and their needs are different from those of traditional college students. These students may be balancing work and school, parenting and study time, financial and academic demands (Casstevens, Waites, & Outlaw, 2012). Non-traditional students have graduation rates that are significantly lower than their traditional age-counterparts – 64% of 18-24 year olds versus 20% of those aged 24-29 and 16% for those students who are 30 or older (Markle, 2015).

A large portion of non-traditional students, about 4.8 million, are parents –about one-quarter of college students in the United States have children (Nelson, et al., 2013; Gault, Reichlin, Reynolds, & Froehner, 2014 b; Huelsman & Engle, 2013). The number of student parents increased by 50% from 1995 to 2011 (Gault et al., 2014b). Having children has a significant impact on the ability to obtain a college degree – 53% of parents left college after six years without completing a degree as compared to 31% of students who did not have children

(Nelson, Froehner, & Gault, 2013). Only about 33% of students with children obtained a degree within 6 years (Gault, Reichlin, Reynolds, & Froehner, 2014). Students who are also parents tend to be disproportionately female, and may struggle to maintain continuous enrollment, which delays their degree completion (Huelsenman & Engle, 2013). Students with children spend in excess of 30 hours per week on care for their children (Gault et al., 2014) in addition to other responsibilities. Women report feeling stigmatized or a perception they are a less serious student due to being a parent (Markle, 2015).

Single parents have additional struggles – 78% of single mothers are low-income, which increases the barriers to post-secondary education for many of them (Beeler, 2016). Single parents make up about 13.4% of the under-graduate population (Huelsenman & Engle, 2013). Women, again, as single parents, are disproportionate in their representation – 71% of the single student parents are women, while single fathers represent 11% of the overall student-parent population – the rest are married parents (Gault et al., 2014). Access to affordable, dependable, and high quality child-care is a significant barrier for many women attempting to pursue higher education, yet access to childcare on campus has declined in recent years (Gault et al., 2014b).

Students with children act as a microcosm of student characteristics that can affect retention. Low-income parents fare worse than low-income students who are not parents, though students who are parents tend to have higher GPA's than older students who are not parents (Nelson et al., 2013). Finally, student-parents more often come from underrepresented minority backgrounds (Huelsenman & Engle, 2013) and are likely to be first-generation students (Nelson et al., 2013). Students with children are more likely to be dealing with poverty – especially single parents, where 88% of single parent incomes are below 200% of poverty, and further, this population tends to have higher levels of student debt (Gault et al., 2014). With child-care

expenses costing upwards of 40% of average monthly income, or in many cases, more than tuition annually, single parents often rely on family members or friends to assist with childcare (Gault, Reichlin, Reynolds, & Froehner, 2014b). Students without the support of family members may not be able to attend college. Students who lack this crucial support system have a more difficult time balancing the demands of parenting and pursuing education.

Remedial Coursework. Not every student arrives at college prepared for a college-level workload. This requires remediation coursework, which helps to ensure that student skills are appropriate for college level coursework. Remedial college coursework is one factor that is sometimes attributed to low graduation rates. Almost one-third of students in four-year universities, and more than two-thirds of students at two-year schools took at least one remedial course (Shields & O'Dwyer, 2017). There tend to be more students of color in remedial courses, but these courses may help to retain the students who might otherwise drop out (Howell, 2011). However, students with low skills must remain in remediation longer than those with a higher skill set (Bahr, 2012), potentially increasing time to graduation.

Ishtani (2006) notes that the number of remedial courses students take has an impact on graduation rates. Similarly, students at four-year universities who took any remedial courses were less likely to complete a bachelor's degree, and for those who start at community colleges, taking three or more remedial courses had a negative impact on transferring and obtaining a bachelors' degree (Shields & O'Dwyer, 2017). A 2015 study showed that students enrolled in remedial courses persisted for five or more semesters at an average rate of 60.5% as compared to 73.2% of students not enrolled in remedial coursework. However, there was no statistically significant main effect found between students enrolled in remedial coursework as compared to their peers related to persistence (Stewart, Lim, & Kim, 2015). This study found that students

who arrived prepared, and did not have to take remedial courses were more likely to persist beyond the first year (Stewart et al., 2015). Bettinger and Long (2009) found that students in four-year universities who took remedial courses were actually more likely to complete a bachelor's degree within four years than their peers who did not, so data is not conclusive on this variable, and is likely to vary depending upon the setting, and the background characteristics of the students involved.

Parental (Mother's) Education Level. "Parental postsecondary education has a significant unique influence on the academic selectivity of institution a student attends, the nature of the academic and nonacademic experiences one has during college, and, to a modest extent, the cognitive and noncognitive outcomes of college" (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 275). This clearly indicates the impact of family education levels on student outcomes. In 1982, Astin found parental education levels closely followed the pattern that parental income levels did – persistence is positively associated with parental education levels. Another study found parental education was a significant predictor of student retention behavior – students whose parents had higher levels of education were less likely to dropout or stop-out when compared to students whose parents had lower levels of education (Stratton et al., 2005). Parental education level can also affect a student's decision to enroll in college immediately following high school, or to delay. Wells and Lynch (2012) found students who had a parent with a bachelors' degree were 34% less likely to plan to delay attending college, and students whose parents lacked a college degree were more likely to delay entry to college.

Another study examined whether or not parental education levels had an impact on a student's educational aspirations – a factor known to contribute to increased retention. Parent educational levels have a linear relationship with high school achievement, personal, peer, and

parent educational expectation levels (Sommerfeld, 2016). Students from households in which neither parent had a high school diploma had significantly lower achievement and expectations than other students, and students whose parents had at least a 4-year degree had the highest levels of achievement and educational expectations (Sommerfeld, 2016).

Transfer Student Status. Community colleges are a vital and necessary component of the fabric of higher education. Community colleges serve as the initial entry into higher education for over 40% of undergraduates in the United States (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). Transfer students are important to higher education because they provide a source of much-needed revenue, especially as the number of high-school graduates decline. Because community colleges are often open-access, the students they serve may not initially meet the selective entry requirements of four-year institutions, or these students may not be able to afford to attend all four years at a university (Jenkins & Fink, 2015).

Over 80% of students who initially enroll in a community college have aspirations of transferring to a four-year institution, but only about 25% actually transfer, and of that population, 65% will complete a bachelor's degree (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). Monaghan and Attewell (2014) found that 25% of transfer students earned a bachelor's degree within six years, whereas 46% of non-transfer students did. Transfer students tend to be older, married, working, and less likely to have been at the top of their class in high school (Jacobsen et al., 2017).

Chapman and Pascarella (1983) state that transfer students may have difficulty integrating socially, because their classmates and peers who started as freshman are likely already socialized, making social integration more difficult. Additionally, those populations that have been historically underserved, such as racial minorities, first-generation students, and low-

income students, are less likely to transfer from a community college to a four-year institution (Wang, Wickersham, & Sun, 2017).

Interestingly enough, students who do transfer, do not seem to struggle to obtain a degree because of lack of academic preparation or the vocational focus of community college – rather the struggle appears to be due to the loss of credits (Jenkins & Fink, 2015; Monaghan & Attewell, 2014). The more credits that are lost in the transfer process, the less likely it is the student will graduate. Although cumulative GPA's were about the same as students attending a four-year university, community college students tend to take more remedial coursework than their counterparts, mostly in math, are more likely to have “stopped out” or interrupted their education, have about 8 fewer credits, and are more likely to withdraw from or fail a class (Monaghan & Attewell, 2014).

Theoretical Perspective

There is no shortage of theories related to student departure. As mentioned earlier, there are many different reasons students choose to depart, and typically, it is rare for only one reason to cause early departure – it is usually a combination of factors. For this study, I chose to establish the foundation of this research on three theoretical frameworks that were behavioral in nature, in part because choosing to participate in the CPI program was an active choice made by the student. The theories covered here have been widely tested and cited in retention studies even today. Each theory contributes something unique and different from the others, yet they have enough of a basis of similarity that they work well when incorporated together. Finally, I superimpose the theories of active and experiential learning over the top each of the student retention theories to help explain why I believe the CPI program can work as a retention tool.

Tinto's Theory of Student Integration. Tinto's (1987, 1993) theory of student integration is the most widely tested model of student departure decisions. Tinto's core constructs are academic and social integration of students. Academic and social integration shape both goal commitment (commitment to completing college) and institutional commitment (commitment to graduating from the institution). Academic integration relates to grade performance as well as the student's intellectual development. Social integration relates to connection with peers and faculty.

Tinto's model is longitudinal in nature, and indicates the pre-entry characteristics of students, such as family background, parental educational levels, individual values, levels of commitment to graduation, and secondary school experiences, can influence the initial decision to enroll in the institution, as well as the decision to remain enrolled. These pre-entry characteristics can also yield clues as to the level of social and academic integration a student may experience. The greater the social and academic integration of students, the greater the likelihood of persistence (Tinto, 1987, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979a, 1979b, 1979c; Mannan, 2007).

Tinto believes that having the correct "match" between a student and the institution, in terms of the student's own motivation and ability and the characteristics of the institution in terms of academic and social offerings. The greater the student's goal commitment or institutional commitment, the less likely that a student will depart (Tinto 1987, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979a, 1979b, 1979c; Stoecker et al., 1988). Other researchers, such as Ishitani (2006) provide some support for this – he found students who did not have an expectation of graduation were more likely to dropout than students who did expect to graduate. Key to Tinto's theory is a behavioral aspect – students must choose to be involved academically and socially.

However, Tinto (1982) went on to say factors which impact early departure decisions, could vary significantly from those that impact departure decisions in later years.

Results from a 2007 study “validate the construct of the Tinto model, which suggests the compensatory relationship between the academic and social integration” (Mannan, 2007, p. 154), as did studies by Pascarella and Terenzini (1979a, 1979b). This means students who have greater academic integration can compensate for having less social integration and students with greater social integration can compensate for having less academic integration, and remain enrolled.

Tinto discusses integration for both academic and social realms in the context of a student belief system – do students believe they are part of the academic and social systems of their university? Faculty and staff certainly play a role in developing this belief system, but only within the context that these interactions help to shape the individuals view that the institution is committed to his or her wellbeing (Milem & Berger, 1997).

Tinto also notes social integration occurs best when students are able to adapt to the dominant culture on campus. This is actually a three-stage process: separation, integration, and incorporation. Separation is the ability of students to separate themselves from the customs and norms of their home. This can be difficult for some students, especially students for whom family and cultural traditions are vitally important (Garcia, 2010; Terenzini et. al, 1994). Transition, the second stage, occurs when students have separated from prior norms, but have not yet fully adapted to the college environment. Finally, incorporation occurs when students do adopt the norms and patterns of behavior in their campus (Milem & Berger, 1997).

This ability to adapt essentially comes back to the student/institution “match.” Does the student fit in well with the dominant culture on campus? If not, the student may have a more difficult time becoming socially integrated on campus. This is supported by Chapman and

Pascarella (1983) who found students who differ from the dominant clientele of the campus struggle to engage socially. Attinasi (1989) argues that to combat this, colleges and universities should attempt to broaden cultural offerings on campus so that students from a variety of backgrounds can fit in and feel comfortable at the institution, thus increasing social integration, and in turn, persistence. Students who lack social integration on campus are more likely to drop out of college (Astin, 1982; Garcia, 2010; Tinto, 1987, 1993), however, social interaction can be costly, in terms of both time and money, which puts first generation students, commuter students, those who have to work full-time or have family obligations they must attend to, at a disadvantage.

Student patterns for integration differ between institutional types, even after student pre-entry characteristics are controlled (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983). Additionally, Chapman and Pascarella (1983) found that retention for colleges varied across institution type – with four year liberal arts campuses enjoying the highest levels of academic integration and the lowest levels of dropout, whereas four year commuter institutions and two year colleges are the least academically integrated, and have the highest dropout rate. Students who perceive their college is committed to their welfare and wellbeing, also contributes to social integration (Braxton et al., 2000; Milem & Berger, 1997).

The majority of studies reviewing Tinto's model have been largely in support of the predictive nature of the model, as well as the core constructs of academic and social integration (Stoecker et al., 1988). However, Tinto's theory of student integration is not without critics. Other researchers say certain components of the theory lack internal consistency, and the theory has support only in certain settings (Braxton, 2000). Other researcher's state empirical tests only provided robust support for five of the original 13 propositions initially proposed by Tinto, and

felt that Tinto did not adequately explain social integration, and called for theory elaboration (Berger & Braxton, 1998).

Integration to the dominant culture also is an area of criticism in Tinto's theory. Attinasi (1989) finds that students integrate into college campuses because they learn to navigate the social, physical, and cognitive geographies of their campus communities, often by finding a smaller community within the larger one. These students may develop several communities to meet their specific needs. Minority students can feel as though they belong to the campus community without conforming to the values and norms of the dominant peer group on campus (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Perhaps the strongest critique of Tinto comes from Tierney (1999), when he states Tinto's theory of integration essentially amounts to "cultural suicide" for students not of the dominant peer culture. Tierney (1992) also takes exception with the "rite of passage" aspects Tinto promotes in terms of social integration. Tierney does not agree with the assumption of a "uniform set of values" in an institution, nor that it is the responsibility of the individual to comply with or adapt to this system. Tierney (1992) believes that rituals cannot be considered in the absence of cultural context.

Tierney goes on to indicate that Tinto's theory essentially ignores the history of oppression and discrimination (Tierney, 1999). Instead, Tierney believes students should be able to celebrate their culture, rather than reject it. In his 1992 work, Tierney offers an alternative model – one in which universities are conceived of as "multicultural entities where difference is highlighted and celebrated" (Tierney, 1992, p. 604). This offers multiple interpretations of culture on a campus, which is more reflective of our modern-day college student makeup.

Melguizo (2011) also agrees that Tinto's theory is not well suited to the analysis of minority student retention.

Academic integration did not predict institutional commitment per the Tinto model, but social integration did, according to Milem and Berger (1997). They found in their study social integration was a positive predictor of institutional commitment, which lends credence to Pascarella and Terenzini (1979a, 1979b) and Mannan (2007) who found greater academic or social integration could compensate for the other and still yield retention of students.

Later, Berger and Milem (1999) advocated for the identification of sources that affect both social and academic integration. They go on to say their findings do not support the integration process advocated by Tinto. Instead, Berger and Milem (1999) argue students who successfully integrate into the social and academic structures of the university do so because of their personal background, rather than in spite of it. Berger and Braxton (1998) explored the role of organizational attributes and the ways in which they influence social integration. Their findings indicated race played an important part of the organizational attributes, and that organizational attributes are components of social integration.

Similar to Attinasi (1989), Cabrera et al. (1992) believe that Tinto's theory of student integration does not adequately explore the external factors responsible for shaping student preferences and perceptions, such as culture. However, Cabrera et al. (1992) did find that Tinto's model was useful when analyzing the role of "significant others," finances, as well as "getting ready" behaviors for students. They also found that nine of thirteen structural relationships were statistically significant in their study, and they discovered one direct effect, not hypothesized in the original model.

While Tinto acknowledges that finances are an important component in the development of educational goals, and the selection of an institution, Cabrera et al. (1992) criticize that Tinto's model is silent about student finances once the decision to enroll occurs. Tinto (1987) states that finances do play a role in student departure decisions, but Tinto feels that finances are more of an indirect, than a direct factor for student departure, and further, Tinto believes that students make college decisions based on their financial situation as they are selecting a college. However, Tinto (1987) does acknowledge that a change in financial status affects student departure decisions, but believes students are willing to take on debt to complete a degree program if necessary, if they are committed to graduation.

Hurtado and Carter (1997) note that Tinto did acknowledge separation might be different for adult students or students of other ethnic groups in his 1993 revision, but they question whether or not separation from student's communities even occurs for many college students today. For some students, maintaining family connections and having their support is among the most important aspects of a successful transition to college. Further, racial tensions on campus can complicate integration for minority students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

A final criticism of Tinto is that this theory broadly defines academic and social integration, does not provide reliable or valid instruments with which to measure these two indices, and fails to explain exactly how academic and social integration occur (Melguizo, 2011). By focusing on what happens within the institution, this theory in large part ignores or overlooks the other factors that affect student departure, such as economics, social situations, political challenges, as well as various technological and global factors (Melguizo, 2011). These external factors could themselves contribute to the level of academic and social integration students

achieve. The student integration theory set forth by Tinto enables an institution to critically examine and modify policies and practices, which may help to increase student retention.

Bean's Theory of Turnover. Another prominent retention scholar, Bean (1980), studied attrition from the standpoint of organizational or job satisfaction, and compares student attrition to turnover in organizations, indicating the reasons for leaving higher education may be similar to those reasons employees leave their organizations. Employees leave their place of employment for many different reasons, including satisfaction with pay. Bean posits a student's level of satisfaction with their institution, as well as the availability of other options, contributes to a student's decision to remain enrolled, seek enrollment at a more prestigious school, or stop attending altogether. The key aspect of Bean's theory is that multiple aspects or factors cause students to leave – not just one.

Bean's model for student attrition focuses on student satisfaction, institutional commitment, organizational determinants, and background variables. Bean's models deals with the interaction of attitudes and behaviors of students. Bean stresses that the intent of a student to stay or leave the institution (an attitude) will drive the behavior of the student. These attitudes, Bean found, were good predictors of student departure decisions.

Both Bean and Tinto also agree the “match” between a student and the institution is critical for persistence. Attrition is due to a “mismatch” between a student's overall “fit” for an institution (Singell & Waddell, 2010). However, Bean's model differs from Tinto's in that Bean focuses on the role external factors play on the departure decision whereas Tinto focuses on academic and social integration as primary influences of a departure decision.

One of the variables Bean uses is the concept of pay – that workers often leave their organization due to dissatisfaction with pay. Because college is not a situation in which students

are paid, Bean posits that we can substitute other measures for pay, such as GPA. Further, the perception of the quality of the institution acts as a substitute for pay, as students may expect institutional quality to affect their future earning potential, as well as their personal development during college. Tinto (1982) also states the finances in higher education function much like wages in the private sector, and states that this could be an acceptable model for analysis.

Bean acknowledges that other factors contribute towards both behaviors and attitudes of students. Like Tinto, Bean acknowledges departure decisions happen over time, and are complex, not simple decisions, as did Pascarella and Terenzini (1979a, 1979b, 1979c). Similarly, Bean and Tinto believed satisfaction with the institution would lead to increased institutional commitment, which leads to retention.

“In one circumstance or another, all of the independent variables in the path model may play an important part in a student’s decision to drop out of school,” (Bean, 1982, p. 318). Bean is acknowledging the decision to dropout is complex, and influenced by many different factors. Berger and Milem (1999) support this when they say departure decisions are the result of a cycle in which student behaviors as well as student perceptions work together and are continually modifying the other.

Researchers have not found consistent results when empirically testing Bean’s theory of student attrition. Cabrera et al. (1992) found only six of fifteen structural paths as hypothesized in Bean’s student attrition model were statistically significant, and their study found several significant effects that were not predicted by the model.

Other researchers argue that attrition may in fact be analogous with higher education in general, and may be in line with broad social interests (Singell & Waddell, 2010). Some students may be better suited to attending two-year institutions, or not attending higher education at all.

Students that recognize this fact early in the process may save themselves significant debt and opportunity cost.

Astin's Theory of Involvement. Astin (1999) describes student involvement as “the amount of physical and psychological energy a student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 518). Astin (1999), similar to Tinto and Bean, goes on to say involvement is behavioral in nature, rather than a feeling or thought. However, several researchers have cautioned that there is a significant difference between perceptual and behavioral measures – they measure different types of data (Astin, 1975; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Further, perceptions modify behaviors, and in turn, behaviors can modify perceptions (Walsh, 1973 as quoted in Milem & Berger, 1997).

Astin believes student time may be the greatest institutional resource available. Students today are not just attending school, they are often balancing work and family commitments as well as social activities and study sessions. The more outside obligations a student has, the less time the student has to devote to being a student involved in academic pursuits. Astin notes students will spend varying amounts of time and energy on different “objects.” Involvement helps to influence student commitment to the institution, which in turn, influences incorporation into the academic and social structures of the college (Milem & Berger, 1997).

Astin (1993) found academic involvement was not limited to the classroom. Other activities, like study abroad programs, internships, cooperative learning, and attending workshops on campus also contributed towards increasing academic involvement. Astin posits student learning is greatest when there is active participation by the student (1999). Attinasi (1989) also believes persistence is an active process – however, he is careful to point out this persistence behavior occurs within the individual student's everyday world, is influenced by

culture, and the student's worldview. These ideas link well with the theory of active learning, as well as several components of the CPI program.

Astin also studied the effect of faculty-student interaction in terms of retention. Astin (1999) indicated student-faculty interaction contributed to greater student satisfaction with the institution, in fact, this factor was the leading cause of student satisfaction when compared to any other institutional factor. Recent studies have found similar results, as Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) found that frequent course-related student-faculty interactions positively relate to student engagement, and this finding is especially true for campuses in which active and collaborative learning techniques are used.

Peer group effects, however, were the most powerful source of influence for undergraduates in terms of both academic and personal development (Astin, 1993). This finding is consistent with Tinto (1993) as well. Astin found that students, in general, changed values and behaviors to align with the dominant orientation of the peer group. The peer groups accounted for differences in sex and in race, as Astin (1993) discovered White students and African-American students differed on interpretation politically. Berger and Milem (1999) state student involvement has great benefits for students in underrepresented groups, and they support using Astin's (1984) theory as a supporting theory to help Tinto's (1993) theory of student interaction.

Active & Experiential Learning Theory. Active learning is defined as, "the process of making students the center of their learning" and as the opportunity to "encourage students to use their college years to learn the skills and attitudes needed to succeed in life, not just acquire factual information" (Warren, 1997). Active learning positively correlates with social integration (Braxton et al., 2000; Braxton et al., 2008), and experiential learning is shown to correlate to student involvement (Winsett et al., 2018), relating these theories to Tinto and Astin. Practices

that contribute to active learning in the classroom encourage students to interact, which may increase the development of peer-groups and friendships (Braxton et al., 2008).

Experiential learning, much like active learning, has a focus on the student as an individual, and the direct involvement of the student in the learning process. Experiential learning has included “group discussion, group projects, and group work conducted during the course” (Winsett, Foster, Dearing & Burch, 2016). Many people associate the term experiential learning with the outdoor adventure education field, though many other disciplines have adopted some of its practices (Isaak, Devine, Gervick & Gottschall, 2018). While experiential learning activities defined above, such as group discussions can occur within the classroom, experiential learning is more often activities occurring outside the classroom, like internships, field experience, service learning, and research projects (Tiessen, 2018). Experiential learning, like active learning, contributes to personal growth and greater cognitive understanding of academic concepts.

Active learning engages the student in the learning process according to Bonwell and Sutherland (1996). Active learning can include discussion, debates, role-playing, questions asked during class or on tests, as well as group work, and higher order thinking (Braxton et al., 2000). Bonwell and Eison (1991) state that it is activity that “involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing” (p. 2). Further, “students are simply more likely to internalize, understand, and remember material learned through active engagement in the learning process” (p. 3) and “students learn best when their intellectual engagement is high” (Bonwell & Sutherland, 1996, p. 4). Experiential learning also involves students in the learning process, and is a way for students to make meaning of academic concepts based on their own direct experiences (Itin, 1999).

A recommendation to increase first year student retention is to create opportunities for student engagement, both in and out of the classroom. This helps to develop skills, attitudes, and behaviors that are in line with the outcomes desired from higher learning opportunities (Reason et al., 2006). Further, they go on to say out-of-class activities are one of three venues in which students are able to increase their academic competence. These data points are the basis for my belief that the CPI program, with its emphasis on employing students in their major field of study, allows students to experience and work through complex problems related to their studies. I believe this increases student academic competence because it allows students to extend classroom learning under the tutelage of a mentor in their field.

“Pedagogical practices that encourage students to engage in doing and thinking during class, as opposed to passively listening influences students’ belief about how much their institution cares about their success” (Braxton et al., 2008, p. 80). They go on to say students who perceive their institution cares about their well-being and success have higher levels of social integration, which is consistent with Tinto’s findings as well.

In active learning, students essentially become primarily responsible for learning facts, so class time is spent working on other issues (Warren, 1997). Warren posits that successful individuals are able to communicate, have interpersonal skills, can listen, write well, are able to speak well, function independently, and have the political skills and autonomy to continue to teach oneself throughout his or her career. Active learning allows students to gain these skills (Warren, 1997). Additionally, active learning places emphasis on experiential and collaborative learning, relying less on the lecture format, requiring students to be more interactive in the learning process (Crosling et al., 2009).

Active learning, like experiential learning, can occur both inside and outside the classroom (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Crosling et al., 2009). Activities that continue the constructs and frameworks learned in the classroom help students to further understand and grasp the core concepts of the material. One example provided of active learning is the case study, in which students explore issues others have already faced – and raise a variety of complex issues within a given context. Case studies can be effective for learning at the undergraduate level when structured appropriately (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). Case studies allow students to interact and wrestle with difficult problems that have no “right” answer in a safe environment. Experiential learning allows students to learn through a process of trial and error, and is one of the most powerful teaching tools available (McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006, as quoted in Winsett et al., 2018).

I argue the CPI program at ISU is one example of a program that combines active and experiential learning that occurs outside the classroom, as it is essentially a simulation of what students will experience in their field or profession once they have graduated. I believe the CPI program contributes greatly to active and experiential learning, and in turn, deeper and broader learning of their subject. Student out-of-class interaction with faculty members has a consistent impact on the acquisition and mastery of course materials – it reinforces lessons learned in formal class time (Reason et al., 2006). Further, the CPI program provides an opportunity to network and develop a relationship with an individual in their field; someone who can provide opportunities for direct, hands-on tasks that will improve skills, lead to increased knowledge, as well as valuable connections in the field (Talbert, 2012). Talbert goes on to say mentors are able to motivate undergraduates to complete their degree programs, and are highly significant to the educational outcomes of students. Active learning continues outside of the classroom in a CPI

role because students are able to apply classroom knowledge to their work, due to the linkage to their field of study. Reinforcement of learning occurs through the student's experiential learning, creating a continuous feedback loop of the two theories. Because of these similarities, for the purpose of the current study, active and experiential learning are synonymous.

It is important to note active and experiential learning are separate and distinct from academic integration. Academic integration is a core construct of Tinto's theory, and is essentially how a student perceives their personal academic and intellectual development, whereas active learning is intended to enhance and increase a student's knowledge of course material (Braxton et al., 2000), and experiential learning is focused on students making meaning based on their own experience (Itin, 1999). However, studies have noted that active learning does contribute towards the social integration of a student (Braxton et al., 2000; Braxton et al., 2008), and experiential learning contributes to student involvement (Winsett et al., 2016).

Active learning affects social integration, institutional commitment, and student departure decisions (Braxton et al., 2000; Crosling et al., 2009). In their study, Braxton et al. (2000) found that class discussion and higher order thinking activities have a positive impact on social integration for students. Class discussions also positively affect the subsequent institutional commitment of students, and higher order thinking activities have an influence on both a student's intent to return to college, as well as their institutional commitment. They conclude their study provided some support for active learning contributing to student departure decisions, and posit that faculty behaviors in the classroom, as well as active learning may provide an empirical source of information on student departure decisions. One study found a way to increase first-year student retention was to allow them opportunities to engage in and develop advanced cognitive activities, including synthesis, analysis, and applying judgement to various

situations (Reason et al., 2006). These are all active learning traits, and the CPI program provides opportunities for students to experience these kinds of situations.

Other research has shown that activities outside the classroom contribute toward integration on campus. When students transition to college, the activities they participate in, both in and outside the classroom, shape and influence the ways in which students learn and grow in the classroom (Terenzini et al., 1994). Experiential learning encourages student interactions with each other, and using knowledge from multiple subjects to enhance the applicability of interdisciplinary learning to problems (Wurdinger & Allison, 2018). Experiential learning experiences assist students as they develop soft-skills, such as establishing a professional identity, professional thinking and demeanor, problem solving, and decision-making. In addition, students learn communication, project and time management, as well as how to interact professionally with others (Holmes & Sullivan, 2018).

The theoretical frameworks of Tinto, Bean, and Astin, used congruently with the theories of active and experiential learning provide the basis for my hypothesis that the CPI program at ISU may contribute to retention of students with characteristics that may contribute to early departure because of the unique program components in the CPI program. Again, the design of the CPI program was not to assist with retention. However, the structure of the program aligns with many aspects known to increase retention. Some of these components are full time enrollment, close connection with a faculty member or mentor, a job on campus, financial remuneration, a connection to future earnings potential due to work experience to supplement the degree upon graduation, active learning, and increased academic/social integration. Further, Holmes and Sullivan, (2018) state, “experiential learning seems to create a win-win environment as students gain valuable work-based skills and organizations benefit from the work that students

do with their experiential learning projects” (p. 86). Additionally, “...greater consideration of employment opportunities that foster partnerships between the institution and the community may benefit the university, community and students” (Fede et al., 2018, p. 107).

Based on the literature review, I have discovered there are a number of factors research has shown which affects student departure decisions. These factors are different for each student, and the effect of what is happening in their lives at different times will affect their retention decisions. The presence of one or even many of these factors does not guarantee a negative result, just as the absence of such factors does not guarantee a positive result.

Significance of the Study

None of the studies reviewed explored the idea of student retention by examining a program that combined an active learning aspect, coupled with faculty mentoring, and the financial and social/academic components of a job on campus as the CPI program does. Few studies focused on a qualitative approach to provide insights to the problem of student departure. During the literature review, I noted the vast majority of retention studies were quantitative in nature. Very few focused on qualitative components. Further, no study attempted to understand the ways in which a program, such as the CPI program at ISU, could contribute to our understanding of the ways in which programs on campus can link active/experiential learning outside of the classroom, employment on campus, and faculty mentoring to increase retention of students who may depart prior to graduation. The study aims to fill the gap in the literature by understanding student persistence while participating in the CPI program. Further, the qualitative aspect of the study will provide greater clarity about student perceptions of the program, and the ways in which this program contributed towards their decision to remain enrolled.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Methodology

This chapter provides an overview of the methodological process employed to conduct this study, including the research instruments, procedures, and data analysis. The current study is a qualitative study of persistence of full-time undergraduate students who have participated in the CPI program at ISU, and may have characteristics that may make it more likely they would experience early departure. I plan to examine how the CPI program incorporates with and expands upon ideas related to active and experiential learning, and how these strategies might contribute to increased retention. Braxton et al., (2000) studied active learning and its impact on student departure decisions. They recommended future studies on different types of institutions, particularly commuter institutions, due to fewer opportunities for social interaction. ISU is not a full-fledged commuter campus, but the components of active learning I observe in the CPI program may yield important insights to programs that help to increase retention. “A more comprehensive understanding of the persistence process can be achieved when combining the two major theories of college persistence” (Cabrera et al., 1992, p. 160).

The General Perspective

The current study attempted to discern whether participation in the CPI program contributed to retention of students who might otherwise dropout. Though not designed to increase retention, the CPI program has elements research has shown that lead to retention, such as faculty-student interaction, full time enrollment, active learning outside of the classroom, a job on campus, as well meeting the financial needs of a student, as the positions are paid. Additionally, consistent with Bean’s (1980) theory of student attrition, the opportunity to

develop real-world work experience may contribute to a student's perception of value for future employment earnings, creating yet another incentive to remain enrolled.

The Research Context

Idaho State University (ISU) is a public, regional university in southeast Idaho, founded in 1901, with four locations throughout the state: the main campus is located in Pocatello, and satellite campuses are located in Meridian, Twin Falls, and Idaho Falls. ISU is a Carnegie-classified doctoral research and teaching university, acting as the lead institution in the state for the health professions. ISU serves approximately 12,643 students, and offers 250 programs. ISU is one of only six institutions in the nation that offer degree programs ranging from certificates to doctorate degrees. The student body is 55% female, and 45% male, with students from 40 states, and 58 countries. The size of ISU provides a 14:1 student to teacher ratio. Tuition is relatively low, at \$7,166 annually for Idaho residents for the FY 18-19 school year, and \$22,940 annually for non-residents (retrieved from <https://www.isu.edu/about/> 1-16-19).

Pocatello has a population of about 55,000, and a median age of 31.4. The median household income for 2016 is just over \$41,000, and a poverty rate of 21.1%, which is significantly higher than the national average of 14%. The largest demographic living in poverty are males and females aged 18-24. Pocatello is predominately White, at 85.5%, and the largest minority group is Hispanic, at 8.47%. The largest industries in Pocatello are educational services, health care, and retail trade (data retrieved from <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/pocatello-id/> on 1-16-19).

This data provides a demographic backdrop for the area of the study. This study builds on extant research, and coupled with the personal experiences of CPI students, contributes to the knowledge of the field. "Research designed to identify institutional correlates of student

persistence should be guided by theory, should employ a longitudinal design, and should assess the influence of various dimensions of the college experience above and beyond the influence of pre-enrollment student characteristics” (Braxton, Duster, & Pascarella, 1988, p. 263). Based on this, this project uses Tinto’s (1987, 1993) theory of student integration, Bean’s (1980) theory of student attrition, as well as Astin’s (1999) theory of involvement as its theoretical and analytical framework. Tinto, Astin and Bean’s theories have their basis in an underlying assumption that student *behaviors* increase retention. Berger and Milem’s (1999) model using this framework found it was effective for a combined model of student persistence, because of the emphasis on student behaviors. They argue behaviors and perceptions work together to continually modify the other as students become more or less integrated to the institution.

The CPI program connects students with faculty members, as well as providing a job on-campus (in some situations, the job is off-campus). Researchers have called for studies to incorporate campus-based employment that is not federal work-study funding, into student departure studies (Desjardins et al., 2002). Further, the creation of a smaller, well-defined peer group may also contribute towards greater retention (Singell & Waddell, 2010). The CPI program fits this profile very well.

Cabrera et al. (1992) found much overlap between the theories of Tinto and Bean, but concluded Tinto’s theory of student integration to be more robust than Bean’s theory of student attrition. They found that Bean’s theory accounted for more variance in intent to persist than Tinto – a nod to the impact of external factors. Cabrera et al. (1992) concluded both theories are appropriate models to use when trying to understand student departure decisions. My analysis is that all three theories intersect, and have commonality, especially when related to behavioral aspects of the theories.

A summation of the research context is as follows:

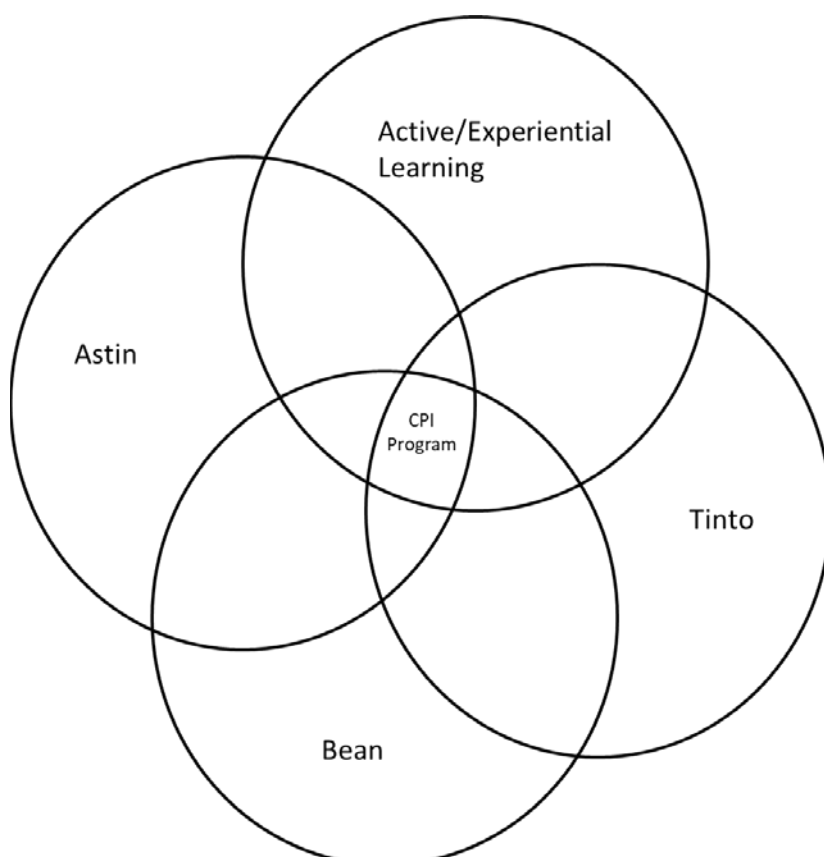


Figure 3.1 Intersection of retention theories and the CPI program.

The Research Participants

ISU is an institution of low admissions selectivity—it effectively functions as an open-access institution. Ishitani (2006) found, “nonselectivity in admission had significant effects on attrition over time” (p. 876). Institutions similar to ISU that serve students who are likely to have background characteristics that can contribute to early departure may be interested in programs like CPI that could be implemented to assist students in degree completion.

The current study focused on whether or not the CPI program affects retention of undergraduate students who may be more likely to dropout due to background characteristics. Student participants were current undergraduate CPI students in the 2017-2018 academic year. Collection of participant demographic information as part of the interview process allowed me to

determine how many of the students in the sample had three or more characteristics that indicated a higher likelihood of early departure. The CPI program has a reputation across campus for attracting the best and brightest students at ISU—students who may not be on the margins, or those who would depart early. This research attempted to identify whether or not the CPI program is assisting the institution in retention of students who might not otherwise depart (Bean, 1982).

Instruments Used in Data Collection

The qualitative interview protocol was developed to determine whether existing literature findings were still valid (such as student behaviors, institutional fit, a feeling of belonging or “fitting in,” concepts of academic and social integration, and the influence of background variables, and significant others) on decisions to remain enrolled. From there, the qualitative interview went on to ask about family support, and to determine student’s perspectives and experiences in the CPI program. Details about their own experience working as a CPI, the experience each CPI had with their mentor, their feelings about whether or not the program should be a paid or volunteer experience, and whether or not they would recommend the program to future students were also key. Finally, the interview concluded by giving students the opportunity to share the primary reason they chose to remain enrolled, and to offer any suggestions to improve the CPI program.

A demographics sheet (Appendix D), gathered background information to identify students with characteristics that may have put them at higher risk of early departure. From there, students participated in a semi-structured interview, in which they described their background, family support, experience as a CPI student, the experience they had with their mentor, as well as other questions related to the foundational student departure theories. Appendix A, details the

interview protocol, and the linkage of the interview questions to the foundational literature is in Appendix B.

Procedures Used

The primary technique was in-depth, semi-structured, in-person interviews (Seidman, 1998) which were conducted with CPI students still enrolled at ISU and participating in the CPI program, via a purposive sampling method (Cresswell, 2014). The interviews attempted to discern the student's perspective about the CPI program, and its impact on their decision to stay enrolled at ISU. The interview included open-ended questions, broadly structured to allow students to explain their experience of college and the CPI program. The structure of the questions allowed students to respond without being lead to a particular answer. The content of the questions had their basis in the theories covered in the literature review. The questions allowed students to elaborate on their personal motivations to stay enrolled at ISU. At times, I modified the initial interview questions based on student responses, and I utilized follow up questions to probe for deeper responses when appropriate.

Participants received an informed consent document, shown in Appendix B, to review and sign before the interview commenced. Students received a number at the time of their interview, to preserve anonymity. Prior to beginning the interview, participants had the opportunity to consent to a recording of the interview to allow verbatim transcription.

I located participants by obtaining an email address for all CPI students, and supervisors (mentors) who participated in the CPI program during the FY 17-18 year. Using this data, I sent an email to each participating CPI student and supervisor, asking students to consider participating, and asking supervisors to encourage their CPI students to participate. Forty-three

interviews took place during March and April 2018 after receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Data Analysis. The theoretical framework discussed earlier also served as the initial analytical framework for coding student interviews. I approached the coding for this study first as initial coding (Saldaña, 2016, p. 115) – breaking the qualitative data down into discrete parts (each question asked in the interview was analyzed on its own initially). Additionally, hypothesis coding was used (Saldaña, 2016, p. 171). Hypothesis coding is used when the researchers have developed a prediction about what will be found in the data prior to data collection. I did expect to see certain responses from participants related to their decision to stay in school because of the extensive study on student departure and background characteristics that may affect early departure. The literature review essentially acted as the framework through which this project was developed. Additionally, I believed the CPI program operated at an intersection between active learning and experiential learning, combining the concepts in such a way that reinforce classroom concepts through the CPI work experience, and vice versa. My observation indicated this is a recursive process, and students enhanced their learning by the combination of active classroom learning and experiential work. This process provided a broad overview from which I could stand back and determine the overall direction the study should take.

Initial coding is ideally suited to transcribed qualitative data, as my study was. Then, analysis began for these discrete parts to compare for various similarities and differences between the units. Simultaneously, I also employed descriptive coding, also known as “topic coding” in the literature. Descriptive coding is a good method for beginning researchers, which I am, and because my study had verbatim transcripts from which to begin the coding process. Descriptive coding essentially provides a word or phrase to describe the overall topic in a given

passage of qualitative data (Saldaña, 2016, p. 102). From there, I applied concept coding to the descriptive words and phrases identified through descriptive coding to shape and define the initial themes. Saldaña (2016) calls concept coding analytic “lumping” that ultimately created a “bigger picture” for the data (p. 120). Then, evaluation coding examined the recommendations students provided for program improvements at the end of the interview. Evaluation coding guided policy and program development recommendations in relation to program effectiveness.

For the secondary round of coding, I used pattern coding in order to condense the data into few units and to develop the major themes from the data (Saldaña, 2016, p. 236). Additionally, axial coding, itself an extension of initial coding, linked the various categories together, and determined the relationship, if any, between them (Saldaña, 2016, p. 244).

There are some criticisms of coding as a research tool. Some critiques relate to the methodology of coding, others are more philosophical in nature. Critics of coding indicate the process of coding itself is reductionist, tries to be objective, distances the researcher from the data, is “dangerous”, “violent”, or “destructive”, and is considered by some to be an outdated method of data analysis (Saldaña, 2016, p. 40-41).

However, coding can assign rich and symbolic meaning to the data, and allows researchers to take a significant amount of data and reduce it into something useable, and allows meaning to be made of the experiences that participants have entrusted to the researcher. Identified patterns serve as “trustworthy evidence” to support our findings, as they demonstrate the importance of the lived experiences of our participants (Saldaña, 2016, p. 6). Handled appropriately, and with significant emphasis on honoring the meaning shared by the participant, coding qualitative research can yield important results, which contribute to our understanding of the subject matter.

Validity and Reliability. The current study is a single institution study, and while limiting the generalizability of this study beyond the scope of this campus, it does increase the internal validity of the study (Ancis et al., 2000). Reliability relates to the quality of the procedures utilized to collect data, and ensures that other researchers, using similar methods, would be able to replicate or have findings that would be comparable to those found in this study. To ensure both validity and reliability, multiple researchers reviewed the transcripts to validate, confirm, and achieve consensus on the themes and major findings (Vogt, Vogt, Gardner, & Haeffele, 2014). Further, triangulation occurred through the review of various CPI documents, such as the CPI handbook, to validate and support various things discussed by the CPI participants during the interview process.

Research Permission and Ethical Considerations. I exercised care at every step in the study to ensure ethical treatment of students participating in the study. Students who participated in the qualitative interview were volunteers, and interviews commenced only with the informed consent of the individuals. Participants were provided with an informed consent form, apprising students of their rights, specifically, that their participation in the study was voluntary and the participant could cease the interview at any time, or decline to answer any question. I also informed participants that their responses were confidential, and would never be part of any institutional record related to the student. Provision for the protection of participant anonymity occurs by assigning participants a number, rather than using their name. In the final report, no identifying features were included. It is not possible to trace individual responses back to students.

Data Security. A locked file cabinet, in a locked office within a locked office suite protect the data in hard-copy form. I will ensure the secure destruction of this hard-copy data,

after the requisite holding period, via a secure shredding service. Electronic files are maintained in a cloud server, which is password protected and encrypted. Electronic file destruction will be the responsibility of the researcher after an appropriate period.

The Role of the Researcher. I closely interacted with students in the qualitative interviews of the study. During the data collection procedure, I worked to establish a comfortable environment in which participants felt comfortable sharing personal details of their decision to remain enrolled.

I will note that I provide financial oversight for the CPI program, and have considerable knowledge of the workings of the program. This exposure to the program can introduce bias. The chair of my dissertation committee acted as a second coder to ensure that this bias did not affect results and interpretations of the data, as well as acting as an audit feature to ensure data analysis and themes were valid and accurately represented.

Summary of Methodology

In this qualitative research study, my goal was to determine whether the CPI program at ISU contributed to a student's decision to remain enrolled. A key component of this understanding is the discovery of whether or not the CPI program contributed to retention of students with characteristics that may indicate a higher likelihood of drop out. The utilization of the qualitative study data accurately portrayed and aided in the development of a deep understanding related to student perceptions about the CPI program.

Data derived from student interviews was coded using established coding techniques, with an emphasis on honoring the experience the student shared, not attempting to fit student responses into the existing literature. After the initial review, sorting of data occurred based on each participant response to each question to identify themes related to each interview question.

A table was created that took the summarized responses by question in column 1, refined and distilled these experiences into major themes with reviewer commentary, and finally in the third column, provided a final identification of major themes, as well as unique or interesting experiences, and specific ideas that were contrary to the established themes. A secondary coder reviewed findings for accuracy and confirmed major themes identified.

Chapter 4: Analysis and Results

This chapter will provide a brief overview of the problem, discuss the methods of analysis and results of the study, and identify the major themes that emerged from the analysis. Throughout this discussion, I will demonstrate the connection to the literature, and finally, I will discuss the results and findings of the study.

Student retention is a problem faced by universities around the world. Attempts to solve student retention have proven to be successful in some aspects, but have not completely solved the overall problem of early student departure. Research tells us that student departure is a result of multiple factors, rarely just one, which complicates efforts to identify and address reasons for student departure. Some argue that student departure is an indication that higher education is working as it should. Perhaps student withdrawal is a function of the rigor of a given program; that some level of early student departure is healthy and expected. Supporting this is the fact that despite investments of billions of dollars over decades, student departure rates have remained surprisingly stable (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Given that universities are increasingly dependent on new enrollment and retention of current students, and the funding each brings, it remains a problem worth investigating.

Connection to the Literature

The literature of student retention and early departure goes back approximately one hundred years, but modern day work in the field began in the 1980's with the emergence of the theories put forth by Tinto's (1987, 1993) theory of student integration, Bean's (1980) theory of turnover, and Astin's (1999) theory of involvement. Background variables, such as SES, financial aid/having a job on campus, first-generation status, GPA, student-faculty interaction, race/ethnicity/culture, international status, sex, attending part-time, non-traditional student status,

remedial coursework, parental (mother's) education level, and transfer-student status, have all been shown through research to have an impact on a student's decision to remain enrolled.

Significance of Study

This study is significant because a single program cannot completely address student retention needs. The purpose of the CPI program is to assist students with job placement after graduation by combining work experience and a degree. While not a retention based program, the CPI program has many components that research has shown to increase retention of students. This program is worth analyzing to determine whether it has played a role in retaining students who might otherwise depart. Additionally, other non-selective or open admission institutions may wish to implement a program similar to the CPI program to help retain students who may be more likely to stop-out or dropout.

Research Questions

The research questions were designed to determine how much of the existing literature still applied, and then to determine student's experiences in the CPI program itself. Finally, the interview concluded with students describing the primary motivator that kept them enrolled in school.

The research questions are as follows:

1. What are student perceptions of the CPI program, including their personal CPI work experience, and their experience with their CPI mentor?
2. Would CPI participants interviewed recommend the program to future students, and if so, why?

3. Do students feel the CPI program is a primary reason for retention, or were other factors, such as cultural influences, or the influences of “significant others” more of a factor?
4. To what degree do current CPI student experiences support the existing literature in regards to characteristics identified by major student departure theories?

Process of Analysis

According to Cresswell and Poth (2018), data analysis is a spiral process in which data is first collected, then managed and organized, read through to find emergent ideas, and finally, reviewed again to describe and classify data into themes. From there, the researcher interprets, represents, visualizes, and then reports their findings (Cresswell & Poth, 2018, p. 186). The point is for qualitative data analysis, the analysis does not happen a single time; it occurs repeatedly to ensure thorough and complete understanding of the data. Importantly, Saldaña (2016) points out the process of coding is not limited to labeling, it is, in effect, linking the data to the overall ideas your research has discovered, and then, this process is recursive, it links your ideas back to the original data (p. 9). Coding itself is not useful until the synthesis of data results in meaningful insights.

With the work of Cresswell and Poth (2018) and Saldana (2016) forming the foundation of my analytical process, once transcripts were obtained, I read each transcript thoroughly to get a sense of each participant, and what significant data points stood out for the individual, making notes about what made them unique. Once this was completed, I relied upon the initial coding protocol, (Appendix B), to identify findings I would have expected based on my a priori analysis of the literature. To begin the secondary process of identifying themes for each question, I copied and pasted pertinent portions of the participant transcripts into a table, identifying each

participant's response to each question. Because of this process, as unique ideas and central tendencies emerged, the coding protocol was refined.

From there, I created a new table, with three columns, based on Saldaña's pre-coding process (2016, p. 21). The first column was the summarized or distilled version from the primary transcript response. The second column identified the reoccurring words, phrases, ideas, or concepts identified, as well as ideas that stood alone, or were contrary to the literature. I also added my impressions or overall thoughts about that particular question after reviewing all of the participant responses. The third column was the final amalgamation of themes developed for each response to the question. Finally, ideas that diverged from the pattern of themes that developed were critically re-examined, to force a reevaluation of the very patterns I had just developed. Were these exceptions to the rule or something more?

Creswell (2014) recommends the researcher keep in mind the focus of the research must be on the meaning the participant ascribes to their experience, not the meaning the researcher might have, or the meaning that prior literature might support (p. 186). To this end, I reviewed the data multiple times, from several different perspectives, in order to revisit ideas and make new connections, as well as to reduce and distill the ideas shared into themes. Again, Creswell (2014) advised building themes from the bottom up – with the ideas shaping the themes becoming more abstract as the analysis proceeds, until a comprehensive set of themes has emerged (p. 186). This required sifting through the raw data to determine what was significant versus what was not, identifying patterns, emerging ideas, and identifying stand-alone concepts that were too valuable to ignore. In particular, I dedicated time to actively reviewing the data to see if there were specific experiences that contradicted the prior literature, and seeking out

student experiences that were unusual, unique or different from other student experiences as an important part of the coding effort.

In recognition of the potential biases I may have as the researcher, a secondary coder was involved with this study. This individual had access to the original recordings, transcripts, the first reduction of data, and the table that distilled the summarized data into themes by interview question. The secondary coder reviewed the final three-column table document for accuracy, as well as for additional insights, perspectives, observations, and items of significance. The secondary coder's limited knowledge of the CPI program would not introduce the same biases or interpretations to the data that I, as someone involved in the administration of the program might bring.

After thorough review by both coders, preliminary themes were developed for each of the interview questions, and those themes were then aggregated to prepare the results of the study overall, as well as to contribute to the identification of recommendations for the program. Consolidation and finalization of the themes occurred as the process of analysis continued, with adjustment to themes occurring within the analysis to better present the findings. Interwoven throughout the discussion is a summary of how the findings supported or diverged from the existing literature.

Results

Before getting into the details of the findings by theme, Table 4.1 presents a summary of the background characteristics of the 40 valid participants. It cannot be stressed enough that every student involved in this study, and every student in the CPI program is an individual, with unique background characteristics and traits that made their experience exclusively their own. This is why the qualitative nature of this study is important – it allows the exploration of how

individual students and their background characteristics affect their decision to remain enrolled. This descriptive data of their personal experience would be invisible in a quantitative study. For example, quantitative data would tell us that in aggregate, students experiencing homelessness are likely to drop out of school due to their hardship. The qualitative data in this study, however, explores that a student experiencing homelessness while participating in the CPI program has remained enrolled. Quantitative statistics tell one part of the story, the story of the group at large, while qualitative data derived from unique student experiences tell a more complete picture of the experience of the individual.

Table 4.1

Background Characteristic Data for Study Participants

Background Characteristic	Females		Males	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Low Income	11	15	7	7
Receive Financial Aid	17	9	11	3
Job on Campus	26	0	14	0
First Generation Student	8	18	3	11
International Student	2	24	2	12
Part-Time Attendance ^a	3	23	3	11
Non-Traditional Student ^b	6	20	5	9
Work Full-Time	2	24	3	11
Work Part-Time	24	2	11	3
Remedial Course Work	4	22	2	12
Transfer Student	7	19	3	11
High School GPA lower than 2.0	0	26	0	14
College GPA lower than 2.0	0	26	0	14
Race/Ethnicity ^c	7	19	2	12
Mother's Education Level Less Than College	8	18	3	11

Note. All background characteristic data provided by students was self-reported. ^a Part-time attendance means the student attended part time at any point in their college career. CPI participants are required to enroll full-time. ^b Students self-identified as non-traditional, but the demographics form noted being an adult learner or having children would be considered non-traditional. ^c Race/Ethnicity data were reported with a write in response. For simplicity, a yes response means the student responded their race was other than White, a no response is the race listed as White. Races reported as other than white were Hispanic (4 females, 2 males), Asian (1 female, 0 males), Native American Indian (1 female, 0 males), African (1 female, 0 males).

Themes

Participants responded differently from each other to each question asked, because they were sharing their personal experience. Some participants were more emotional or passionate about some questions versus others. Other participants elaborated in detail about their personal experience, or their backgrounds, or even frustrations with systemic issues in higher education not related to the subject. Still other students answered questions in limited detail, even with follow up questions. I attempted to discern where the bulk of information came from in their particular story, and honor their experience by accurately recording and reporting their experience, as part of the data analysis process. Student responses about their CPI experience were overwhelmingly positive, though there were students whose experiences were either not what they expected, or negative in some way. Students were enthusiastic, even eager, to discuss their particular experiences. Students appeared to take pride in what they had accomplished.

The overarching themes identified in this study are: people, finances, experiences, skills and knowledge, and a soft introduction to the world. This study did not have a focus on policy, but student responses about their experiences require a discussion of various policy implications; this will occur in Chapter 5. I will outline my findings from the study as they relate to each theme, and will draw connections to literature throughout that discussion.

People

The primary theme woven consistently throughout each individual's responses to multiple questions was the importance of people. People affected student's decisions to remain enrolled in several different ways and at multiple points in their educational journey. Families and significant others, mentors, faculty and staff at the university, and the "group within a group" (Attinasi, 1989) students found, had an impact on the student's in this survey. This closely aligns

with existing literature in multiple ways. I will discuss findings related to people in the major categories of families and significant others, CPI mentors, faculty at large and other staff, and finally the groups within groups that students identified with. The ways in which these people had an impact on students' lives differed, but it was evident that people, not just the CPI program in particular, had a significant impact on the decision to remain enrolled.

Families & Significant Others. Support from family and friends is positively associated with the decision to persist (Cabrera et al., 1990; Terenzini et al., 1994). The influence of parents on their children's lives, whether good or ill, was weft through the responses in this study. One student said, "Thank God for Mom's" when asked about why he was still in school. Another participant referenced that his Dad was the reason he went back to school, because of his Dad's cancer diagnosis. The student wanted to honor his father's wish that at least one of his children would be a college graduate. This student was a non-traditional student; an adult learner who came to ISU to honor this wish for his father. Another student spoke about the lengths his mother went to in order to keep him in college. He spoke about how she was very creative, and explored various financial options to ensure his ability to get into and stay in college, despite extremely limited resources. Repeatedly, participants referenced that college attendance was an expectation, was valued in their home, that they wanted to make their parents proud, or that they did not want to disappoint their parents.

Many students discussed the impact of the support they received from their parents. Some shared the reason they were still in school was due to the support they received from their parents. Some married students shared the support of their spouse was essential to their academic success, while others detailed that their marriages experienced significant strain while being a college student. One particular participant detailed that she had to spend a lot of time studying to

do well in her classes. Her husband wanted to go out and have fun, and she was unable to join him due to the need to study. This misalignment of personal priorities caused discord in the marriage.

Students reported varying levels of parental support for college. There was a significant range of responses in terms of the financial support received from families related to college attendance. Some students discussed families that had established a college savings fund when they were born, and parents were paying for the entirety of their education so that the student could focus solely on their studies. At the other extreme were parents who were unable, or unwilling, to pay for college. Some students referenced parents who were on disability as the only source of income, and the inability for them to assist financially, but referenced instead tremendous emotional support for their students to go to college. The importance of financial support from parents is germane to family support, but a further discussion of the importance of finances will commence in the finances theme.

It was much the same related to emotional or other types of support, with some parents being very involved and emotionally and academically supportive, including their physical presence for important events. This sentiment of support echoed frequently when participants related the types of support they received from other people influential in their lives, like teachers, counselors, or friends. Still others referenced the support and reinforcement they received from the faculty or staff mentors that were in their lives and the day-to-day “checking in” by these individuals to ensure they were well.

While many participants referred to tremendous support, one participant shared her parents contributed to a toxic, abusive, and emotionally damaging environment. This participant planned to transfer to another campus in the fall of 2018, not because of any dissatisfaction with

ISU, but to escape what she considered a damaging emotional situation at home. She realized that this transfer would cost her more money, as she would be responsible for paying for living expenses she did not have to pay for while living at home and attending ISU, but felt strongly enough that she needed to get out of her current situation that this was a preferable choice.

Attinasi (1989) found that for Mexican-American students, having an expectation for college attendance by parents contributed to attendance. Many students in this study, including several Mexican American participants referenced an expectation of their family to attend college when asked, though at least one Mexican American student shared that her parents were not initially supportive of her decision to attend college. Attinasi (1989) found the “significant other” influence was especially high for Mexican American students, and they attend college and stay in college because of the impact of significant others in their lives that encourage them to stay in college.

I found support for Attinasi’s work with one participant in particular. During her interview, she referenced the support of several other “significant other” mentors on campus, including her CPI mentor, student government advisors, and a first year experience advisor she met while taking a tour of ISU, who constantly followed up with her, and encouraged her to keep going. This participant’s individual experience demonstrates that while parental support and encouragement is important, other significant others can influence and impact students’ decisions to remain enrolled once they are on campus. Families and significant others were an important and influential aspect of a student’s college journey. From financial to emotional support, as well as physical presence, academic assistance, guidance, and parental expectations, families and significant others were a prominent feature in this research.

CPI Mentors. The large majority of mentor/mentee relationships formed in the CPI program appear to be sound, encouraging, helpful, and motivational. The importance of the mentor in the CPI experience cannot be understated. The initial themes that emerged related to CPI mentors included care, relationship, pushing, recommendations, and jobs. CPI students, with few exceptions, felt close to, and developed a meaningful relationship with their mentor. Students reporting feeling “pushed” in a positive way, to do more, achieve more, and to be more than they thought they could be. Students also reported mentors serving as references for jobs or for graduate school, and encouraging them to apply for jobs or other internships to further their career goals. The mentors, in many respects, served as a “significant other” as defined by Attinasi (1989).

Students described that mentors checked in on them, to see how they were doing in general, not just on the job. They also shared that their mentors reduced hours as necessary at mid-terms and finals and that their mentors were observing and adjusting the workload as necessary. It was clear to students that mentors believed that school was the number one priority, and the work was second, something that several students referenced and appreciated. Mentors asked about students’ overall well-being – ensuring that they ate well, and had other support. A few students reported having dinner with their mentor’s families outside of school.

Mentors provided positive and constructive criticism, were engaging, asked the students questions, were available to answer student questions, and gave creative control over projects to the students. One student noted that the mentor provided advice about jobs and about life. Other mentors helped students to prepare for interviews, helped them to obtain full time jobs, and noted an overall positive environment.

While most CPI's reported daily contact with their mentor, at least a few felt their mentor was difficult to find, or hard to contact, or that the mentor did not do anything with the student. A few students noted that their mentor was largely absent – and they felt they had to do the work all alone. In those cases, the CPI participant reported a “task-based” experience, not necessarily a mentorship. Monitoring, quickly addressing, and following up on such experiences to minimize their occurrence should be a primary focus of the CPI program to ensure positive outcomes.

CPI mentors played a pivotal role for students involved in the CPI program. The participants mentioned their mentors nearly as often as they mentioned family members, indicating a significant connection with their students. Mentors were not just simply there to provide a job for the students—students reported feeling a deep, close, and personal connection to their mentor. This relationship considered the student as a whole person, and did not focus exclusively on the educational experience.

These findings very much support the prior literature analysis, in which multiple researchers emphasized the importance of student-faculty involvement, and its impact on retention. Berger and Milem (1999) and Tinto (1993) found that student-faculty interaction was critical to student persistence. Research also say few college experiences were as impactful to student retention as the student-faculty connection (Astin, 1999; Reason et al., 2006). Pascarella and Terenzini (1976, 1979a, 1979b, and 1979c) found that faculty interaction increased both social and academic integration – increasing the odds of student retention on two fronts. They also found that faculty interaction is especially beneficial to freshmen whose families have low levels of formal education. Students who interact with faculty are more likely to have a sense of belonging than student who do not interact with faculty (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

The findings in this study very much lined up with and supported the findings in the literature related to the importance of a quality connection to faculty. The CPI program connected students with a mentor, and based on students' responses, as well as prior literature support, we can conclude that the CPI program connects students to a primary factor known to increase retention.

Faculty and Other Staff. Multiple researchers, including Berger and Milem (1999), and Tinto (1987, 1993) found that interaction with both faculty and students were critical factors for student persistence. In fact, Reason et al. (2006) found faculty-student interactions are one of the strongest links to student persistence (p. 151). Student descriptions of their experiences with their faculty members ranged from very close, to very distant, though the majority described their experience with their faculty member in very positive terms.

Validating interactions with faculty members are likely to increase a students' commitment to the completion of a college degree (Terenzini et al., 1994). Students who reported talking with faculty frequently noted a higher sense of belonging (in their third year) as compared to students who interacted with faculty less frequently (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). The CPI program keeps students involved with faculty on a weekly, if not daily basis. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) found that students who interact informally with professors are more motivated and interested in the learning process. One participant spoke about having dinner at a faculty members' house, and another referenced interacting with his mentor's family.

Astin (1993) found faculty had the second largest effect on student's undergraduate development. Faculty impact the perception of quality of the institution at large. When asked about their perception of the quality of ISU, participants frequently referenced accreditation, research, and faculty as descriptors regarding the quality of ISU. Faculty also play a role in the

student's selection of a major (Astin, 1993). Faculty certainly provided guidance, and especially those in CPI positions reference their faculty explaining what they can expect from a career in their chosen field. Other students report getting guidance about shifting, or changing majors from faculty, or from their CPI experience. Students reported faculty being incredibly accommodating when students experienced significant life events, such as the birth of a child, or when a student became homeless.

Other staff members, in addition to faculty, played pivotal roles to the students in this study. One participant referenced an advisor as being especially important to her. This participant indicated that this advisor checked in with her frequently, had a similar background and nationality as she did, and generally made her feel that she could be successful in college, even without "having all the answers." She reported the advisor as being the one to help her realize that making mistakes was part of the process. She also related that in the times she struggled the most, the advisor would seem to check in on her.

Other students referenced the experiences they had with various other individuals on campus, such as the registrar's office, and the ways in which those offices had an impact on their progression, and their perception of ISU. Not all of the experiences were positive, which lead to some frustrations. One participant shared that they were completing a double major, and had declared the double major in the fall semester prior to the current spring semester. This student planned to graduate in the spring with the double major. However, the student was surprised and frustrated when they learned that they had to complete 21 credits in the spring semester in order to graduate with a double major. In order to get a double major, a student must complete the requirements for each degree, and then complete an additional 32 credits. The student was frustrated that this was not communicated to them, and that the advisors they spoke to were

unaware of this requirement. After researching, the student shared the only place this information was located was in the catalog. The student only became aware of the requirement when they applied for graduation, leading to a spring semester that would require 21 credits for graduation. Better communication between departments, and education for academic advisors about unique situations like double majors, could assist in a situation like this.

Faculty and staff at the institution also affect a student's decision to remain enrolled. Close, positive experiences lead to a greater sense of satisfaction and connection to the university. Alternatively, negative experiences can also have an impact. It is important for faculty and staff at the university to remain student-centered when developing policies, and flexible enough to recognize unique student circumstances that warrant deviation from policy when necessary.

Finding a Group within a Group. Interactions with fellow students are also significant and increase retention by creating social integration (Tinto, 1987, 1993), as well as a feeling of belonging. The majority of students stated they felt they “fit in” on campus. Some referenced feeling a better fit at one campus versus another, others found smaller groups within a group, as referenced by Attinasi (1989), such as Greek life, or specific clubs, or even their program of study that met their needs. A few students who felt they did not fit in, referenced this being a personal choice, or stated they were introverts, and this suited them better than participation in social activities. Students who identify as introverted rather than extroverted is another example of why qualitative research is so important. Students who are introverts will not enjoy, or gain a sense of connection to the university through social interactions, despite what quantitative data tells us. Qualitative data helps to inform the research to present a more accurate picture of what students may want or need as they navigate college.

Students in minority groups can report feeling excluded, or experiencing racial conflict on campus, which can make them feel unwelcome or unsafe. They may also feel pressure to conform to the dominant culture on campus, or a perception of being treated less equitably by faculty and staff (Ancis et al., 2000; Williams & Ferrari, 2015). However, minority and international student participants in this study did not report feeling this way about ISU.

One international student, reported experiencing racial discrimination as she worked over the summer in Maryland, but did not experience this on campus as ISU. When asked for more detail, the participant, who is from Nepal, shared that she felt she experienced racism when she worked in Maryland with American and Mexican people. She shared that she felt people were talking about her because they would talk and then look at her. She also shared that she was working with cash, and made mistakes, which made the owner frustrated with her, and lead to him scolding her. Because of these experiences, she quit after a month. While not a direct correlation to a student's decision to leave school, this international student felt intimidated enough to quit a job. While the experience she related may not seem to have a lot of hard evidence, as her interpretation of racism was based solely on her feelings and interpretations of what she thought was occurring, not something that was directly said to her, nevertheless, it was significant enough to her that she felt she had to quit her job. Her experience at ISU has been positive, and she specifically referenced that there were a significant number of Nepalese students on campus, as well as an active Nepalese club, and this made her feel at home. The data yielded from this student experience helps us to understand that international students may interpret small gestures or things deemed insignificant in our culture as threatening, intimidating, or insulting.

Berger and Milem (1999) found students whose beliefs and behaviors were most in-line with the dominant culture on campus were most likely to persist, and recommended that the campus environment provide opportunities to reflect the values and customs of a variety of students, instead of just the dominant peer group. The student from Nepal clearly indicated that she felt comfortable because of fellow Nepalese students, and the Nepalese club on campus that helped to create that community. Based on other student responses, the presence of other cultures and acceptance of other customs appears to be present at ISU. Research conducted by Johnson et al. (2007) state that the sense of belonging predicts student success when the student feels they are part of a supporting and affirming community. The vast majority of student participants reported feeling as though they fit in and belonged at ISU. This supports Tierney's (1999) work, in which he believes students should be able to celebrate their culture, rather having an expectation that they reject their home culture to conform to the dominant culture on campus.

Other Students. Student experiences with social integration (Braxton et al., 2008; Tinto 1987, 1993) came up as students discussed their interaction with social events on campus. Study participants reported being quite involved in a variety of social activities on campus. They also reported that participation in these activities began to wane as they progressed in their studies, due to the number of hours of study required, or as they moved off campus and were not involved in the day-to-day life of campus. This supports the findings of Pascarella et al., (2004) who found that living off campus reduces the opportunities to be involved.

An interesting and unexpected finding in the study was that bingo was a much-loved activity on the ISU campus; many students referenced this particular activity as one they looked forward to, and tried not to miss. Other students reported having social interaction with their own select group of friends, rather than social activities coordinated with ISU as a whole. Students

also referenced having a connection to students living on their floor in the dorms, or finding a study group within their program. Still other students, mostly commuter students, shared that they did not have the time for social activities. We must recognize the ways in which students connect to others and the campus varies, and not all students want to participate in activities with a large group. Many students prefer to have a few close friends, and this meets their need for social connection.

While being connected on campus matters, getting students to persist to critical mass is important also. Students who have come too far may not be willing to miss the ability to graduate (Duarte et al., 2014). If we connect the idea of social integration helping to getting students to the “critical mass” point at which they feel they have come too far to quit, we have an argument for social activities drawing students in during the first few years, and programs of study and faculty influence keeping them in the latter half. Therefore, student connections to each other and social activities still play an important role in the decision to persist.

As I have described, people in many forms play a role in student persistence. Family, faculty, mentors, other students, and significant others all contribute to the support system a student can draw on when experiencing difficult times, uncertainty, or the need for guidance for their future. People are what ultimately make programs successful in retaining students. Based on student responses, the people involved in the CPI program, specifically mentors, appear to be dedicated to their students, and provide meaningful experiences. Students at ISU appear to take advantage of the social opportunities available to them on campus, and are adept at developing appropriate peer groups. Finally, faculty and other support staff also contribute to students overall well-being by checking in, and making adjustments as necessary to accommodate student needs.

Finances

Finances were another significant source of robust responses with participants in a number of different ways. This discussion was not limited to just the current financial situation of the student or their family. Interestingly, students were reflective about the finances of their parents, as well as focused about their own plans for their future financial outlook. Again, background characteristics and experiences shaped responses, and there was a significant range in current financial realities for students, in large part, based on the ability and willingness of the family to assist the student financially.

Some students described parents saving for college since they were born, and parents who wanted their student to focus exclusively on school, and not worry about having a job. Others reported parents providing as much support as they could, but many students indicated their families simply could not contribute, as they were on disability, or limited incomes. One student referenced parents who made too much money for him to qualify for aid, but who also believed school was entirely his responsibility, and would not help beyond assisting with groceries occasionally. The most desperate financial situation came from a student who was a single mother who became homeless after the death of her grandmother. She, however, had one of the most determined outlooks. She said, “I’m barely, barely scraping by, but I’m still here.” Some student participants exhibited a deep desire to help pay for college, because they were grateful for what their parents were doing to help, but they wanted to have skin in the game as well. These students referenced the CPI program as being the way they were able to assist with paying for college, or for living expenses.

Participants in the study had a focus on more than just the here and now when it came to their finances, though certainly the present financial situation of many was challenging. Several

students were reflective about finances, including their parent's finances, as well as policy implications, such as financial aid policies. Students mentioned that they were at college because they did not want to be like their parents, living paycheck to paycheck. This was a significant motivator for them to persist to graduation. One student in particular was angry that his parent's income level did not qualify him for any aid, but his parents would not support him either. He reported that he actually got married for money (to establish independence from parental income) and was frustrated that the financial aid system makes assumptions about parental ability and/or willingness to help pay for college that are not supported in every case. A few other students talked about being very poor, referencing disability payments as the only income, yet the simultaneous encouragement of their parent for them to get into and graduate from college. When asked why they stayed in college to completion (or planned to), many students were future focused, and referenced wanting to have a job that paid enough for them to live well. A handful of students stated they wanted to have jobs they enjoyed, as they recognized they would be working for a large portion of their life.

While students were both reflective of their parental financial situation, and looking ahead to their own future, recall from Chapter 3 that 45% of the students in this study are from a low SES background, and that the rate of poverty in Pocatello is significantly higher than that of the nation. In Pocatello, the largest demographic in poverty are men and women aged 18-24. Financial difficulties are a daily reality for college students – it is not an academic exercise – it is the very real decision making process in which students must decide whether to buy a textbook or groceries, or to pay for childcare or electricity, water, and heat. This reality was certainly present when discussing with participants whether the CPI program should be a paid or unpaid internship.

I asked students if they would be interested in participating in the CPI program if it were not a paid position. Half, or 50% of students immediately responded that no, they would not be interested in the CPI program if it were not a paid position. Students referenced that the CPI program pay was helping them to meet basic needs, such as rent, groceries, gas, and school supplies. Another 25% of students said even without pay, they would still pursue the CPI program, citing that they felt the experience alone was worth the investment of time and effort. A final 25% of students had mixed responses – they felt the experience was very valuable, but recognized they could not afford to have such an experience if they had to contribute 20 hours per week as a CPI, and then find time to work enough hours to provide for their basic needs.

Additionally, an interesting finding was that a few students said that what kept them in school was the burden of student loans. Loans payments enter deferred status while students remain in school; students appeared to recognize that dropping out without completing their degree and having to pay back a student loan would be a bigger burden if they did not have a well-paying job to help pay back those loans. The burdens of student loans are widely discussed, but the literature has not yet examined student loans as a potential motivating factor to stay enrolled.

Student experiences related to their finances also supported prior literature findings. The financial situation of a student can pose a real barrier to attendance and retention (Yorke & Thomas, 2003). Another study found that financial aid would act as a deterrent to transfer and increased student retention and persistence (Singell & Waddell, 2010). The CPI program appeared to provide financial assistance to students because it was a paid position. Another research study found that the ability to pay for school has a direct effect on persistence (Cabrera et al., 1990). Working full time was a predictor of early departure, whereas part time work

mediated some risk for attrition (Martinez et al., 1992). Finally, Ishtani (2006) stated that students with work-study jobs were less likely to drop out in year one than students without work-study jobs. The CPI program is not a work-study program, but it has similarities, in that students receive pay, the work is on campus, and gives students time to think about school while they work.

A CPI student who worked the fall and spring semesters, 17 weeks each, or 34 weeks per year at 20 hours per week and \$9.00 per hour would gross \$6,120. The cost of tuition in FY 17-18 was \$7,166 annually for in-state residents. A student who limited their work to just the weeks school was in session for the fall and spring semesters, would be able to cover approximately 85% of the tuition costs. Students would need to work 40 weeks per year, at 20 hours per week to cover the full costs of tuition. Students are able to work during breaks and over the summer, so it is possible that a CPI student could cover the entire cost of their tuition through their work in this program. This is a significant financial benefit to students. It especially helps students who do not qualify for need-based financial aid, but who still need assistance to pay for school. Meeting student financial needs is another connection to a factor known to increase retention that the CPI program is providing for students.

Experiences

Student experiences in the CPI program were unique – no two experiences were alike. The development of each CPI experience requires a direct nexus to the student's major field of study. Students reported a wide variety of tasks connected to their majors in their CPI role. In large part, the job duties were significant. Every student participant in this study reported they would recommend the CPI program to a future student, primarily because students felt the experience and preparation for a future job were valuable. They also reported the CPI experience

was helpful because it worked around the student's school schedule, and provided an opportunity to "try on" a career to see how it really fit. Several students reported changing majors; others slightly shifted or refined their original career trajectory because of their CPI experience. One student declared the CPI experience was "too good to be true." Other students indicated the CPI program "helped me dramatically in my studies and knowledge about concepts." The experience, combined with the mentorship they received, lead students to state they would recommend the program to future students. Many students referenced recruiting students to replace them in their CPI position, as they were graduating, or referring friends on campus to pursue the program.

Student job duties. As mentioned above, student job duties varied between positions because no two internships are alike. The development of the job duties in each CPI position occurs in conjunction with the CPI student and their mentor. What sets the CPI program apart from other programs like work study, is the CPI experience requires students and their mentor to identify learning objectives connected to the major field of study as well as their planned future career field. Students spent a lot of time during the interview process detailing the job duties they were responsible for in their internship. A major focus of the CPI program is that students are not assigned administrative, clerical, or other menial tasks. The job duties they are assigned should be meaningful duties that allow them to learn and practice their craft. I will share some of the job duties related to me by CPI students.

Several students were research assistants, learning how to work with, categorize, clean, organize, and analyze data. These students also had the opportunity to present and write up findings from their data. One student was able to travel to Alaska with a faculty member to conduct research in the field. Some research assistant students were able to present the findings, along with their faculty mentor at international conferences. Students worked in labs, and learned

lab protocols, others worked in the animal care facility. One student worked in a nuclear reactor, and another developed recommendations for how to re-invest ten million dollars for the ISU treasury. One student had the opportunity to work in the sequencing of DNA, while another studied paleoclimatology using lake sediments and stable isotopes. A teaching major placed in a middle school had the opportunity to work with three different teachers and implement teaching techniques learned in classes. A dental hygiene major was able to work in the ISU dental clinics in both Pocatello and Meridian, working on sterilization, x-rays, patient contact, and software systems. An IT student worked to lay cables and install hardware. A marketing student was able to develop marketing videos for ISU – learning how to customize the message to the target audience. Another marketing student worked in two different off-campus businesses developing marketing plans. Students were assistant athletic trainers, nutritionists, undergraduate teaching assistants, worked in local banks reviewing and analyzing documents for loan origination, as well as working in the office of the president, determining which records needed to be retained, and which should be destroyed. These were all positive experiences for the students.

One student did not have a very positive experience as a CPI intern. The placement for this was with an off-campus partner. The student hoped to make connections with future potential employers as part of her experience. The student had an opportunity to develop a major event, when a permanent employee quit. She was responsible for the conception of the type of event, connecting with and finding the keynote speaker, inviting the target audience, all of the details necessary to host a major event, and finally, to running the event itself. However, the student felt marginalized when the student overheard the CEO of the organization referring to her as “cheap labor,” and further, felt pushed out when a new permanent employee was hired, and wanted to take the event in a different direction, undoing the work this student had spent

months on. Again, the program should attempt to minimize negative student experiences as much as possible, but the student said she did not regret the experience, and she had learned a lot.

Overall, students reported the significance of their work connected to their major, and provided a meaningful experience. Several reported the hands-on experience was better than learning in class. Students discussed being able to apply classroom concepts in a real-world situation was helpful to them. Several students reported working as a CPI changed their mind about what they wanted to do. One student, assigned to a bank off campus, reported that she was now considering banking as a potential career – she had never considered that before. Another student, working in disability services, reported that she was now pursuing teaching as a result of the experience she had working with students in terms of assisting them with their educational needs. Still another reporting changing her plan to teach at the elementary level to middle school level because of her CPI placement. Finally, a student placed in a psychology lab changed her mind about being a psychologist. This student reported that she loved the classes, but realized through her CPI work that she did not love the actual work, and, therefore, changed her major because of the CPI experience.

Background experiences. The demographics of the student participants indicated that the students come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Participants ranged in age from 18 to over 60. Students were married, single, or navigating dating relationships. Some participants had children, while others did not. Those with children also had a range of experience, with some managing infants, others toddlers or school age children, teens, or even adult children.

This study focused on identifying whether the CPI program contributed to retention of students with characteristics that may indicate early departure. I was surprised to discover 80%

of the students in my study had three or more characteristics that would indicate a higher likelihood of early departure. Specifically, 45% of participants reported a low-income background, and 70% of students received some form of financial aid. First generation students were 27.5% of the sample and 27.5% of participants listed their mother's education level as limited to high school or below. In terms of ethnicity, 22.5% reported their race as non-white, and 10% of the sample were international students. At 65%, women were represented at a higher rate than men. Non-traditional students, identified as adult learners, or students with children were 27.5% of the sample. While all of the student participants work at least part time, 12.5% of students work full time. In terms of remedial coursework, 15% of students reported taking remedial coursework at some point in their educational journey, and 25% of the students were transfer students. No students reported a GPA lower than 2.0 in either high school or college, which meant that none of the students in the study had early departure characteristics related to GPA. This was the only characteristic associated with potential early departure that was not present in the study participants. In fact, while self-reported, only three students reported a GPA of less than 3.0 in high school, and seven reported a GPA of less than 3.0 in college. Student participants represented every individual college within ISU and the major course of study varied widely among the participants. In summary, a wide variety of life experiences appear in the study, resulting in data that was rich, meaningful, and certainly not homogenous.

Students reported they chose to attend ISU because of the people, their personal financial situation, the reputation of the institution, and the influence of various significant others, convenience, and the various amenities offered at ISU. Bean (1980) found that GPA was another indicator of college persistence. The CPI program requires a minimum cumulative GPA of 2.0 or above to participate in the program. One research study found that students with a GPA of less

than 2.0 graduated at a 9% rate, compared to students above a 3.0, who graduated at a rate of 63% (Hosch, 2008). Self-reported GPA's on the demographics sheet did not indicate a GPA lower than 2.0, and, as CPI participants they would not be able to continue in the program with a cumulative GPA below 2.0. As such, none of the students in the sample cumulative GPA's fell below a 2.0. Twenty-nine of the forty CPI students interviewed reported GPA in excess of 3.0. Additionally, Desjardins et al. (2002) found that good grades reduce stop out and increase the chances for on-time graduation, though that effect decreases over time. A participant alluded to their 4.0 GPA as being a motivating factor in their decision to stay enrolled. The requirement of having a GPA above 2.0 is another connection to a known factor that increases retention that the CPI program provides.

The unique culture each student has grown up in is another characteristic of background that is not easily measured or quantified, but contributes significantly to the student background. Students were not specifically asked to describe their home culture, but several students alluded to home culture when answering other questions, and several international students were included in the sample population. The concept of separation (Tinto, 1987, 1993) came up with only one participant. This participant discussed that she sometimes struggled with the dichotomy between her Mexican-American heritage and traditional values, and her experience as an American college student—sometimes she did not feel that she belonged in either culture.

Additionally, her family was not initially supportive of her college attendance; in fact, they encouraged her to get married and follow what they considered a more traditional path, rather than pursue her education. Nevertheless, she persisted, and at the time of the interview was about thirty days away from graduation in May 2018. When talking about her experience, she indicated that “we” had accomplished the graduation, including her entire family in the

accomplishment, despite their initial lack of support. When asked about this, she indicated that in her culture, accomplishments such as this are collective, rather than individual. However, she also referenced how her parents had changed because of her experience; how they became more accepting, and they acknowledged how different the world was from their personal experiences. In many ways, this student did break from her family traditions just by choosing to attend college (Tinto, 1987, 1993). However, the student was also able to change the perceptions of her family, and they adapted their worldview because of her experience.

Another female international student from Africa referenced that her father was not initially supportive of her plans to attend college in the United States. However, he did pay for college and become supportive as time progressed. Bista and Foster (2011) found international students have language, cultural, or personal barriers that can complicate their path to degree completion, but the international students participating in the CPI study did not reference these difficulties. Recall that 10% of the sample in this study were international students, but all appeared to have adapted and adjusted well to their college life. O'Keefe (2013) recommended that faculty be intentional about reaching out to international students, to help establish a connection to the student. It appears the CPI program provides a conduit for this connection, by allowing faculty to connect with international students through a job.

Non-traditional students were also present in the sample. Prior research indicates that non-traditional students are balancing work and school, parenting and study time (Casstevens et al., 2012). This was certainly true of study participants, who had multiple and competing demands on their time, focus, and resources. Students shared they were married, had children, were single parents, were older students, and were caregivers for elderly grandparents. However, additional complexities and challenges were present, including depression (for individuals, as

well as their children), abusive or disruptive home lives, divorce of parents, and death of family members, extreme poverty, and homelessness.

A faculty member approached one non-traditional student participant about accepting a CPI position. Initially, the student hesitated to do so, because she felt overwhelmed with her current course load, as well as being a mother to four children. Additionally, her spouse was also in school at the same time that she was. After talking to her professor more about the position, the student decided it was an opportunity worth pursuing, and she decided to move forward with the program. Relating her experience, she shared that the experience was hard, as she expected it would be, but it was also good in the ways that her faculty member had originally described. The student was left feeling ambiguous about her experience, because while her experience with the work was positive, she did not feel that her supervisor was as accessible as she would have liked. More support in this situation could have created a better outcome.

Non-traditional students shared other challenges they experienced while in the program. Some non-traditional students discussed getting married while in school, having multiple children throughout their educational journey, or having a newborn due the week of final exams. Another CPI participant was planning to pursue law school as an adult learner in her sixties – her children were grown up, and she wanted to make a dream come true for herself. One participant shared that she was a mother to a severely depressed teenage son. She found that her coursework was helping her to cope with the reality of his diagnosis, as well as the knowledge she needed to gain access to the services he needed, but nonetheless, this dynamic added a layer of complexity to her college experience; one that was incredibly fraught with emotion and worry. A different participant, a young single mother, had experienced the death of her grandmother, whom she had been living with rent-free, and was now homeless, with a 2-year-old son. Non-traditional

students face unique situations, which have a tremendous impact on the mental load these students are carrying, as they pursue education, a job, and caring for the needs of their families.

When discussing their situations, students often reporting having faculty members who were very willing to work with them about re-arranging final exam times, or arranging alternate due dates when necessary. Research tells us only about 33% of students with children obtained a degree within 6 years (Gault et al., 2014), tend to be disproportionately female, (Huelsman & Engle, 2013), and that they spend in excess of 30 hours per week on care for their children (Gault et al., 2014). My study found that about 80% of participants self-reported graduation within six years of beginning their education, so CPI students with children appear to be beating those odds. Interestingly, the participants that had children were both male and female in this study; it was not predominantly women with children in this population.

The sum of our experiences makes up the whole. Experiences matter—both those that came before, and those that occur during the college experience. Students respond to situations differently because of their background and current circumstances. Background characteristics do have an impact on how students adapt to school, and how they learn to navigate their day-to-day lives, but equally important are the current concerns students deal with on a daily basis, such as managing care for children, providing a safe place for them to live, or navigating the early years of marriage and parenthood.

Prior research tells us some background characteristics, like race, low SES, and low parental education level indicate a higher likelihood of departure and some factors, like connection with a faculty member, a job on campus, and meeting financial needs, increase the likelihood of retention. In this study, 80% of students had three or more characteristics that increased the likelihood of early departure; however, 80% also self-reported graduation within

six years of beginning college. It appears the factors that increase the likelihood of retention that are present in the CPI program are having a mitigating effect, and assisting students with persistence to graduation.

Skills & Knowledge

The skills and knowledge that students' brought with them as they began their college journey, as well as the skills and knowledge developed as they proceeded through their years of study played an important role in this study. One first generation student shared that getting into college was not very hard, but knowing what to do once they enrolled was more difficult. Another student discussed the struggle of identifying what the "end game" was, and wishing they had been able to understand that concept sooner. CPI students discussed that their CPI position often connected concepts they were learning in class, or made it easier to understand increasingly complex topics. Finally, students discussed what they learned while being a CPI student, and how that has affected their future.

The hard skills and technical job duties performed by CPI students were described in detail earlier in this chapter and do not need to be repeated. Those job duties were significant, technical, and required increasingly responsible application of skills and knowledge. When asked about the most important thing they learned as a CPI, almost every student referenced soft skills, such as communication, professionalism, the ability to be flexible at work, how to work in a team, how to be organized, and how to manage time. This was their response even immediately after describing all of the highly technical, significant, and important tasks assigned to them. Clearly, students valued these soft skills. Networking was also a significant point raised, as was the connection to what they learned in class, how to work well with others, and career exploration. Communication was important, and students shared they learned how to

communicate, and when to communicate. A student shared that she was very outspoken, and had always freely spoken her mind. Through her CPI experience, she learned that it is not always appropriate to share every thought you have about a given situation.

Connection to classroom learning. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) found on-campus work increased academic performance. A few students spoke about how they felt their CPI position helped to connect the learning they had in class in a tangible and real-world way. Others stated that because they had experienced things as a CPI, when it came time to cover the material in class, they were better prepared to handle the subject, and could cover it in greater depth. Another student stated that he learned more from the CPI position than he did in class. He felt in many ways that in-class course material was outdated, or not significant, but as a CPI, he was able to learn what was happening in the field in a current and real-time way. He had the opportunity to put concepts in action, and immediately see the results, and make adjustments to refine the process. These experiences shared by students provide support that the CPI program is providing a nexus for the connection between active and experiential learning, and how those two concepts contribute to greater academic engagement. The opportunity for the application of classroom learning in an experiential way promotes a recursive learning environment, in which each builds upon the other.

Knowledge acquisition is a very common expectation for students when they attend college. Of course, how much knowledge they gain depends largely upon how much effort and time they are willing to put into their studies. Skills may be viewed as a derivative of knowledge, as though those will automatically be gained with book learning. In order for knowledge and skill to develop, students must be able to apply learning, and practice those skills.

Students described their CPI experience as an opportunity to gain knowledge and to refine skills at the same time, in a safe environment.

Active and experiential learning are concepts shown to increase student engagement, involvement, and retention (Braxton et al., 2000; Braxton et al., 2008; Winsett et al., 2018). Further, Astin (1999) stated that learning is not limited to the classroom. When coupled with classroom learning, faculty student interaction has an impact on student engagement (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). The CPI program appears to bridge classroom learning and experiential job learning in one program, with the faculty-student connection at the center of this bridge. Prior research provides support that this concept works well in the CPI program to increase student engagement and retention.

Soft Introduction to the World

An interesting theme that emerged in the study was that the CPI program acted as a soft introduction to the world. This was because the CPI opportunity allowed students, in many ways, to “test drive” the career field they were studying to see if it was a good fit for them. It also allowed them an opportunity make mistakes in a place where the stakes were not so high, and where mistakes can become a learning experience. The program provided a chance to practice being professionals, to learn how to interact with colleagues and other professionals and develop soft skills. Additionally, referencing severe anxiety issues, one student described her CPI experience as an opportunity to learn to “put my stuff on a shelf” for a while and do her job. Finally, student respondents enthusiastically described their ability to build their networks as part of their experience, citing introductions with faculty members at conferences, letters of reference from their CPI mentor for graduate school or for full time jobs, and the ability to publish. All of

these combined provided a softer entrance to the world, and an opportunity to refine and develop skills that will ease their way into their professional lives.

The CPI experience helped students to identify whether or not their career choice was the right one for them, in some cases, cementing that career path, in others, providing valuable information that this career was not what they wanted after all. It was an opportunity to test-drive their chosen field, and allowed students to make adjustments while still in school, rather than discovering after years of work and the investment of thousands of dollars that this was not the right career for them. Some students, because of their experience, began to consider a career field they had never considered before. This additional exposure allowed students to get to know their strengths and weaknesses, and where they fit in terms of skills and abilities.

They also had the opportunity to practice being a professional. Students received exposure to the language, rules, protocols, and expectations of their industry. Some had the opportunity to practice in a clinical setting. One student referenced how much she learned just by being in proximity to faculty members, and overhearing their day-to-day conversations. Another student learned about office politics, and yet another referenced learning the importance of etiquette in a professional environment. A student learned that policies and procedures matter, and stated she had not realized that before this experience. Students mentioned that their mentors provided constructive criticism, and corrected them when necessary. Others discussed that to some degree, there was an expectation that mistakes would occur and this was not a catastrophe, as it might be in an actual first job. Each of these skills are vitally important to success, yet often are not part of classroom material. Common feedback from industry is that graduates perform poorly in professional settings due to a lack of skill in problem solving and communication (Bonwell & Sutherland, 1996). Because of this, Bonwell and Sutherland (1996) advocate for

teaching students both cognitive and professional skills to enhance and build upon course content and discipline-specific knowledge. Based on the responses from students, the CPI program appears to be filling this gap, and may be meeting a real need for both employers and our graduates.

In addition to professional skills, networking was especially valuable to students. They shared that they had opportunities to connect with other influential people in their field through research, presentations at conferences, or just having a close relationship with a leader in their field. Having a mentor to discuss problems or situations with can make a tremendous difference to a young professional just starting their career, or seeking recommendations for graduate school.

The CPI program has allowed students many different types of opportunities, but also a place to transition from the role of student to the role of professional or practitioner. This transition is not always smooth or seamless, and young graduates can often make major missteps inadvertently when first starting out, as most college courses do not cover these types of skills. Based on student responses, the CPI program appears to fill this gap, providing an opportunity to start that transition while in college, and allow time for skill development in the areas of professionalism, communication, and time management.

Conclusion

Based on the responses received from the participants, it is clear the CPI program has had a significant impact on many of the student's lives in terms of professional development, learning, knowledge and skill development, and providing a connection to a mentor on campus. Additionally, students' reference the program assisting with career exploration, obtaining soft skills necessary for success in permanent job placement, financial support to meet basic needs,

and the establishment of a core network that can be relied upon. Students did not reference the CPI program as the sole reason they remained enrolled in college, or persisted until graduation. However the data clearly show that the components of the program, such as strong connection to a mentor, required full time enrollment, minimum GPA requirements, remuneration for their work, and connection to coursework clearly confirm what previous research has shown about retaining students.

The CPI program requirements, such as working part-time, working with a faculty mentor, the connection to the student's field of study (academic integration), a minimum GPA requirement, and the financial assistance it provides to students are factors known to increase retention. The study found that 80% of the students involved in the study had background characteristics that would indicate a higher likelihood of early departure. Yet 80% of the students in this study are also graduating within six years of starting college. It seems that the CPI program may be contributing to increased retention by connecting students with factors known to increase retention. Student responses and prior literature indicate that two of these factors, the connection with faculty, and the financial remuneration were strong factors in their decision to remain enrolled. A third major piece was the academic integration students experienced as a result of the CPI job duties building up and expanding their knowledge in their field of study. While not stated as the reason students remained enrolled, it is clear the CPI program is providing a pathway to increase the likelihood of retention, even with the presence of characteristics that can increase the likelihood of early departure.

Chapter 5: Conclusions, Discussion, and Implications

This chapter provides a summary of the study, including the problem, the methodology, and the findings from the study. Following the summary, I will apply the theories of Bean (1980), Astin (1999), and Tinto (1987, 1993) and indicate the ways in which the study supported or contradicted these major theories. I will also discuss the impact of the variables that have historically indicated students may be at higher risk for early departure, and how those variables played out in this study. Finally, I will conclude by discussing the significance of this study, and its contribution to the field, as well as providing some recommendations for the CPI program to improve, based on student responses.

Statement of the Problem

Student retention is a pervasive problem worldwide. It is not unique to any one type of college or university, though schools experience early student departure at different rates, depending upon their admissions selectivity. Particularly, in the State of Idaho, the SBOE would like at least 60% of adults between the ages of 25 and 34 to have a post-secondary degree or certificate by 2020 (Corbin, 2016). However, a solution to student retention is not suited to a one-size fits all approach. Students depart for a variety of reasons, not just one. Further, students may or may not share the reasons they are departing, or may provide an answer that details only one reason they are leaving. This alone makes this a complex problem to address. Additionally, colleges and universities are required to report retention, graduation, and other figures to government agencies, and these figures can impact the funding universities receive. It is in the best interest of colleges and universities to address early student departure, but it is difficult to put a single program in place that can address multiple factors, unique to each student, at once. To put a program in place that would be able to meet the needs of each student would require an

investment in labor that is beyond the reach of most colleges and universities, who experience pressing needs for resource allocation in multiple areas, not just student retention.

As is the case so often, institutions have to determine how best to utilize scarce resources to get the best outcome based on a limited investment. Programs attempt to reach as broad an audience as possible, with programs to assist students such as academic advising, financial aid, tutoring, or bridge programs. These tools, however, require action from the students to seek out these services, and not every student is comfortable doing so. Other schools employ early intervention based on data analytics and reach out to students who may be struggling. However, even proactive interventions with students cannot compel a student to seek help if the student is not interested in assistance. These intercessions, however well thought-out, will never be able to address the needs of every individual student. No single solution has proved to be a panacea to solve this vexing problem.

Review of Methodology

The primary purpose of the CPI program is to provide a combination of work experience and a degree to make ISU graduates who participated in this program more desirable candidates for employment after graduation. Many of the components of the CPI program address factors that research has shown can reduce early departure, such as requiring full-time attendance, a close relationship with a faculty member or campus mentor, working on campus, limited hours per week, and pay for work completed. Based on this early data, my hypothesis was the CPI program could in fact, be a program that contributed to retention, especially for students with a higher risk profile for stop-out or dropout.

To address the hypothesis, I designed a qualitative study to hear from students what their perspectives about the program were, and whether the program was a factor in their retention

decisions. To begin the study, I obtained the email address of CPI students in the program in fiscal year 2017-2018, and asked them to participate in a study about the CPI program. Students were not aware that the focus of the study was on retention decisions. Additionally, I obtained a list of the supervisors of CPI students, and emailed them as well, asking them to encourage their students to consider participating in the study. In total, I conducted 43 interviews, and 40 of the interviews were valid. The study focused on the experience of undergraduates; two of the 43 interviews were graduate students, and a final interviewee was not a CPI participant.

The first round of analysis of student interview responses was through the lens of prior research, to determine where the data converged and diverged. Next, I considered the unique experiences of students, as well as data that were outliers of the trends identified in the study. Finally, I created a data table with three columns. The first column was a summarization of the responses to each interview question; the second was a summary of the reoccurring words, phrases, ideas, and researcher observations. The final column was the first attempt to distill the responses into themes. The utilization of two researchers ensured that findings were accurate, and no bias was present in the results. A recursive and reiterative process for data analysis also assisted to ensure accurate and valid findings.

Summary of the Results

The primary themes that emerged from this study were people, finances, experiences, skills and knowledge, and a soft introduction to the world. The importance of the individual, and various policy implications also came up in the results. While no students actually reported that the CPI program itself was the primary reason they remained enrolled, it was clear that components of the CPI program connected students with factors studies show increase retention, such as a faculty connection, working part time, payment for their work, and connecting their

classroom learning to their job, increasing academic integration. Students referenced other factors as their primary motivation for remaining enrolled – such as a personal goal to graduate, parental support and family expectations, and the desire to have a well-paying job. These reasons lined up very closely with existing research, with a few exceptions. The closest any student came to identifying the CPI program as the primary reason for staying enrolled was a student who described the program as “too good to be true.” However, what I found is the CPI program is important to students, and meets many of their needs, which provide a stable foundation on which students can launch or maintain their college career. In short, the CPI program acts as a locus of intersection for factors known to be important to increasing retention.

Students discussed that people were a primary reason they remained enrolled. Parental support, faculty support, mentors, significant others, friends, and other campus staff all contributed to remaining enrolled. Parental expectations of college attendance, the value a family places on education and the support of parents, both financially and emotionally, were strong drivers of a student’s decision to remain enrolled. Students referenced that the support they received from and the relationships they developed with their faculty members were also a primary factor in the decision to remain enrolled. Students reported faculty members “pushing” them to do more than they thought they could do, increasing their confidence in their own abilities. Finally, others on campus, such as support staff, or staff in departments such as the registrar or the scholarships office do have an impact on students. It is important that supporting departments have accurate information to share with students so that they do not experience delays in graduation.

The experiences of individual students were also a significant finding, both those experiences that occur before college and those that take place as part of the student’s college

experience. Students shared the experience they gained as a CPI student was very valuable to them. Some students shared they would pursue a CPI experience even without pay, because they felt the experience was integral to future success. Other students shared they felt the experience they earned was important, but they would not be able to afford to participate if the internship was not paid, because they needed the funds to provide for their basic expenses.

Students gained both skills and knowledge because of their CPI experience. They had the opportunity to put into practice concepts learned in the classroom, and experiences as a CPI contributed to greater learning in classes – creating a recursive process that built upon itself. I liken this to a hybrid active learning/experiential process. It is certain that CPI students experienced an increase in the skills and knowledge because of their participation in the CPI program.

Based on student responses, it is also clear that students place a high value on the soft skills they learned. Further, research shows that employers are often not satisfied with the college graduates who fill entry-level career jobs. Bonwell & Sutherland, (1996) found that graduates often perform poorly due to lack of skills with problem solving and communication. They advocate for teaching both cognitive and professional skills that build upon course content and discipline specific content. The CPI program fills this gap, and provides opportunities for CPI students to gain and refine important soft skills that are very important in terms of success. One student grasped this concept when they shared it is not always the most qualified person who gets a job, rather, the person who best fits in a given situation is likely to get the job. Students frequently discussed their mastery of skills like teamwork and learning to work in stressful situations, as well as how to respond to office politics with professional etiquette.

Individual student responses varied significantly, and emphasized that students experience college through a lens that is unique to their own circumstances, background, beliefs, and challenges. This represents a continual challenge for administrators who attempt to create policies and programs to meet student needs, which are varied, and continually morphing as new generations enter college. The need for financial support was consistently brought up throughout the study. Research tells us the financial difficulties of students are a “significant barrier to retention” (Yorke & Thomas, 2003). Half of the participants indicated they would not be able to “afford” to participate in the CPI program if it was not paid, highlighting an important inequality that exists in the current college climate – those students who have greater financial resources are better equipped to take advantage of opportunities like internships that are unpaid. While students were quick to point out the perception of value of the experience they would get in the CPI program, they also had financial realities, which students must address.

Students reported the CPI program was significant and helped them to meet basic needs because of the pay. Students also discussed the experience they gained while working as a CPI assisted them as they considered their future career field. Some students switched majors, or refined their career path because of their CPI experience. Students also reported very positive and close relationships with their faculty or staff mentor. These mentors did more than teach them about their job, they provided guidance, advice, the opportunity to fail and learn, a chance to apply classroom learning in real-life situations, as well as the opportunity to refine soft-skills, such as communication, teamwork, and time management. Further, CPI students reported networking being another strong benefit of the program.

Discussion of the Results

In many cases, the responses from students lined up very well with what previous research has shown about student retention. Many students indicated the presence of the significant other in their lives as a reason for staying in school until completion. Students remain very concerned about finances, especially how they will afford necessities such as rent, groceries, and gas. Students also reported that goal commitment, or the desire to complete college as a primary motivator to persist to graduation. None of the students in this survey reported institutional commitment as a primary reason for completion of the college degree.

An underpinning of the three major theories referenced in this study, including Astin (1999), Bean (1980), and Tinto (1987, 1993) is the concept that student behaviors drive persistence. Participants chose to be involved in the CPI program, and through this choice, the program connected students to the institution through faculty, their program of study, their mentor, and in some cases, their peers. Students make a choice to participate in a program like the CPI program, which requires a significant time commitment. Students acknowledged the time commitment was a significant part of the program. The time commitment for this program is one of the big reasons why it was important to participants that the CPI program remain paid. Some students would not be able to afford to participate in a program like this if they had to commit to 20 hours per week, and still work to provide for their financial support.

Students were not directly or specifically asked about to describe their academic and social development. Rather, details about these items emerged as students described their college experiences. In terms of academic development, Stoecker et al. (1988) stated “....college major seemed to exert significant effects on persistence through its impact on both academic and social integration” (p.208). I found this to be true. Students often spoke about being closer to fellow

students in their program, or staying in school because they were interested in what they were learning. Other students referenced being close to professors, or receiving support from their professors, which helped them through difficult times in their studies.

You will recall that academic integration also aligns with personal growth and development as students' progress through college. The CPI program allows CPI jobs to continue into the next year, but tasks must become increasingly complex. Several participants discussed they were excited about the tasks getting more interesting as they progressed. Other students were excited that they could connect the skills they were learning in class to what they were doing as a CPI, assisting in the development of their academic prowess.

Social development was discussed when students were asked to describe their social activities on campus. Students reported they felt welcomed and they "fit in" on campus, though they described the amount of time they had to participate in social activities waned as they progressed in their studies. Students also referenced finding a study group, or spending more time with fellow students in their program of study.

Research tells us that first generation students face greater academic and social challenges than do their peers (Martinez et al., 2009; Tinto, 1987, 1993). In terms of first generation status, 27.5% of the qualitative sample were first generation students. When asked about their experience being the first person in their family to go to college, students spoke about significant parental support, familial expectation of college attendance, the current American cultural assumption of college attendance, and that education was valued in their homes. College was for many, the default course of action. I mentioned earlier that the CPI program has a reputation on campus for attracting the best and brightest students on campus, and perhaps more motivated students than average. This could explain why these students had a perception that

college was going to be part of their future, and may not be indicative of other first generation students.

Several first generation participants related that at times, they struggled, but not with getting into college. Getting information about how to apply to college, and information about resources that help with college is more prevalent than in the past. Students shared they were well aware of this information. One participant struggled with what to do once they got to college; especially how to think about how to connect the initial steps they took as a freshman into a successful college career as a sophomore, junior, and senior. A different first generation participant reported having no difficulty navigating getting in to college, in large part because the student was a student athlete, and coaches recruited the student for athletic programs. However, even despite the relatively intense oversight provided for student athletes regarding their academic progression, once at college, the student sometimes struggled to identify the path to graduation. This was partially because the student's parents had never attended college and could not provide advice or recommendations on how best to proceed. Based on these findings, additional resources may need to be allocated towards helping students identify and understand the connections between their early college decisions and how that will impact graduation, or to help students "map" out the entire four years of their college career, early on in the process. This may assist students with making such connections.

Elkins et al. (2000) discussed the need for first-generation students to "break" with their family traditions. One participant in particular, discussed her struggles with her Mexican American family and their lack of support for her college attendance. She shared that her family would have preferred her to get married, as was traditional for their culture. However, she did "break" with tradition, and graduated in May 2018. She also related that her parents experienced

a “break” in tradition themselves, by seeing her success in college, and became supportive of her as she progressed.

Cabrera et al. (1992) found student satisfaction with financial support had a direct effect on noncognitive components of academic integration, and financial aid had a direct effect on a student’s decision to persist, and Singell and Waddell (2010) found that financial aid was important in retention. Many students, when referencing the pay they received from the CPI program indicated it was meeting their day-to-day basic needs, such as rent, groceries, utilities, and gas. The CPI program for some was in addition to the financial aid they received, or other parental support, but for others, this was the primary, or even the only source of income.

Work-study has been shown in several studies to increase retention (Ishtani, 2006; Martinez et al., 2009), and CPI is similar to work-study in several regards. First, that work is on-campus (some are off-campus, however), and work is flexible, designed to work around the students’ school schedule. Where CPI differs, however, is that CPI is assigning students to work in their planned career field, and the focus of student work is not on administrative or clerical tasks. Rather, the development of CPI job duties occurs in conjunction with the CPI student and their mentor to align with the student’s career goals. One study found that work-study students were 81% more likely to graduate on time (in 4 years) than students who did not receive work-study aid in the first year of attendance (Martinez et al., 2009). Additionally, they found that part-time jobs are beneficial to students, as they provide opportunities to gain valuable work experience, and can enhance student abilities and interests. We see very similar results demonstrated in this study, as 80% of the students interviewed self-reported graduating within 6 years. Several students indicated that they either changed their major, or pursued a different type of work within their major because of the work experience they had as a CPI student.

Astin (1999) states that having a job reduces the time a student has available to be “involved” in campus life, however, when students work on campus, they have greater access to other students, and/or faculty members on campus. As a result of working on campus, students have a greater understanding of what services are available, and are better able to access those services when they are in need of availing themselves of a service. Finally, Astin (1993) stated that financial compensation could sometimes create a connection to, and loyalty to the college itself. One participant in particular, spoke about plans to donate in the future to the university, specifically to support the CPI program because it meant so much to him.

Significance of the Study and Its Relationship to Previous Research

Research has demonstrated that students choose to remain at their institution for several reasons, two primary among them are goal commitment and institutional commitment. The theory is that students who have a goal to graduate college are more committed to staying enrolled. Likewise, those that have a goal of graduating from a specific institution are likely to remain enrolled until graduation. Goal commitment as defined by Tinto, (1988, 1993), is the student’s commitment to graduating from college. This certainly came up with several students, though many of them referenced this as “stubbornness.” The concept of institutional commitment (Tinto, 1988, 1993) did not really show up in my interviews – I did not hear students talking about their dream to graduate from ISU. This finding was not surprising, as ISU is a non-selective, regional institution, primarily serving southeast Idaho. ISU is a quality institution, and students’ perception of ISU were that it was high quality in terms of faculty, research productivity, and accreditation, but also shared that sometimes ISU is seen as “grade 13,” or the option you take if you are not accepted into your school of choice. This perception is

problematic, and ISU needs to work on its image within the town to make ISU an institution perceived as a great option for anyone.

Institutional Commitment – Bean (1980) found that institutional commitment was the most important variable related to dropout, for both men and women. However, when participants shared why they stayed in college, or what motivated them to complete college, institutional commitment did not show up in the responses. Other factors were more prominent, such as it being a personal goal, desire to have a well-paying job, family expectations, or recognizing that a bachelors' degree is equivalent to a high-school diploma. Not one respondent stated they wanted to earn a degree from ISU as the reason for staying enrolled.

Tinto's (1987, 1993) theory of student integration has two primary components: academic and social integration. These components increase goal commitment - the commitment to completing college in general, as well as institutional commitment - the commitment to graduating from this particular institution. Academic integration relates to both grade performance as well as intellectual development of the student, while social integration is the connection developed with faculty and students on campus. The greater the academic and social integration a student experiences, the more likely they are to persist to graduation (Mannan, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979a, 1979b, 1979c; Tinto, 1987, 1993). Tinto's theory discusses the various background, or pre-entry characteristics that may influence the decision to enroll, and stay enrolled, such as family background, parental educational levels, individual values, level of commitment to graduation, and secondary school experience. A key driver in Tinto's theory is behavior. Students must choose to stay involved academically and socially. However, Tinto does note the factors that influence departure decisions change over time. Additionally, students with

greater academic integration than social integration, and vice versa, can compensate for less integration in the other area, and still be successful.

Some research has indicated that the educational aspirations of low-income students are lower than the aspirations of their higher SES peers (Bailey et al., 2005; Martinez et al., 2009). Additionally, research tells us that only 60% of low-income students will earn a bachelor's degree, while more than 80% of high-income students will attain a degree (Bailey et al., 2005). However, in my study, a significant number of participants, 18 out of 40, or 45%, reported coming from a low SES background, yet they seemed to aspire to the completion of the undergraduate degree at a similar rate to that of their peers whose background was in a higher SES bracket. Granted, most of these students were also very close to graduation, and my study did not focus exclusively on educational aspirations. Further, my study was limited to CPI participants, and connecting this back to the behavioral aspect that is a significant underpinning to all three of the major theories that provide the foundation for this research, perhaps students in the CPI program have different behaviors than students with low SES that are not participating in the program.

Bean's (1980) theory of turnover compares student attrition as akin to an employee leaving a place of work, and theorizes that student reasons for departure could be similar to the reasons employees leave their workplace, such as satisfaction with pay, and alternative options. Bean states multiple reasons drive a student to depart. This model focuses on student satisfaction, institutional commitment, organizational determinants, and background variables. Specifically, this theory finds the interaction between attitudes and behaviors of students. If a student intends to stay at the institution, they will.

In several cases, I found this theory to be accurate in the study. A few students had experience with other institutions, yet remained at ISU. The first student had been accepted to the University of Oregon, but opted to remain enrolled at ISU. The second student had transferred to ISU from Montana State University. Both students will be graduating from ISU in May of 2018. The decisions they made about ISU drove their behaviors to stay enrolled here, or to transfer to ISU.

Bean felt that the perception of quality was a key factor in student's decision to remain enrolled. When asked about their perception of the quality of ISU, the vast majority of students felt that ISU was a good quality school. To qualify that, however, many students indicated that they had nothing to compare ISU to, however, several students either had transferred into ISU from another college, or had been accepted into other universities, or had toured several other colleges before making their decision to attend.

Astin's (1999) theory of involvement states student involvement is "the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 518). Astin, like Bean and Tinto, agree that involvement is behavioral. Astin notes student time is a resource, and the more outside obligations the student has, the less time students have to devote to academic pursuits. Finally, Astin also notes students tend to change behaviors to align with the dominant orientation of their peer group.

O'Keefe (2013) stated technology that allows students to access class remotely, such as on-line classes, or distance learning, felt less of a connection to campus. I found this to be true. One student in particular referenced that she did not spend a lot of time on the Pocatello campus, and did not feel as though she belonged. However, then she referenced that she did have to take

some classes on campus, and had to do group work, and she found a group within her classes, and they made a connection. She felt more connected to the campus at that time.

Singell and Waddell (2010) discuss the importance of meeting student's financial needs. Student responses supported the need to have the CPI program remain as a paid internship. Many students indicated they would not participate in the program if the CPI position was not paid, or if they did participate, it would be significantly fewer hours per week. Many students referenced that they needed this money for rent, groceries, and other living expenses. However, many other students indicated they valued the experience more than the money, and would have pursued the experience even if not paid. However, it is clear the CPI program is assisting students with meeting their financial needs.

This brings home the point that not every student can "afford" to earn experience in college due to various demands in their lives. A few students noted that the pay was adequate, but others noted that students they knew could not "afford" to take on a CPI position because they earned higher wages elsewhere on campus, or in the community. Some students mentioned they would still be interested in a CPI position if it were unpaid, but they would not be able to work as many hours. Having the position be paid up to 20 hours per week allowed them to focus on the position they were in, contributing enough time to make the experience meaningful, while still assisting them with meeting their basic needs.

Finally, I would like to discuss the importance of the connection to faculty. The literature review indicated that student learning and persistence are positively linked to faculty interaction (Reason et al., 2006). Additionally, we know that student-faculty interactions increased both academic and social integration, which lead to increased retention, (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1976, 1979a, 1979b, 1979c). The results of this study confirmed the importance of faculty-

student interaction. Students talked about the importance of their mentor almost as much as they discussed family support. This is a clear indication that the connection that students experience with their faculty member remains a significant driver of student retention, and programs that provide a nexus for this connection to occur are likely to have an impact on the retention decisions of those students.

Policy Implications

Policy implications and recommendations were not the focus of this study. However, student experiences shared with me as part of the research indicate connections to many different higher education policies that affect student outcomes. Dual credit programs, transfer policies, financial aid policies, as well as the idea of whether internships ought to be paid are all present in student responses. Additionally, the idea that active or experiential learning should be present or required in curriculum appears when we examine the positive experiences students shared about being able to connect classroom learning with experiential activities. The prevalence of so many things related to higher education policy warranted a discussion. I will spend just a few paragraphs sharing student responses to dual credit, transfer, financial aid, and active/experiential learning pedagogy policies.

Dual Credit. Many of the students who participated in the survey reported graduating in as few as 3 years, due to coming into the institution with many credits earned because of participation in dual-credit programs. The demographics show that about 80% of the sample self-reported expected graduation within 6 years. Attribution of this graduation rate solely to the CPI program would be disingenuous, as it is likely that dual credit coursework likely contributed to this. Dual credit coursework may be assisting with reducing a student's time to completion, aiding them in completing faster, or allowing them the opportunity to take fewer credits each

semester and still graduate in four years. The ability to take fewer credits each semester may allow students more time to participate in meaningful activities such as the CPI program that round out their skill sets.

Transfer Students. One quarter of students who participated in this study self-identified as a transfer student, as shown in Table 4.1. Transfer students appeared to be pleased with their decision to transfer. One student stated that when they talk to transfer students from other schools, they seem to indicate that ISU professors are harder (more rigorous) than professors at their previous colleges. Another student referenced transferring to ISU for financial reasons – it was more cost effective to attend ISU than his previous institution. Another student transferred to ISU from another Idaho school because she could obtain a bachelor’s degree, rather than just an associate’s degree in her field. She felt this was a significant benefit to her future career.

At least one participant referenced difficulty in getting all of the credits transferred to ISU, increasing the amount of time and money necessary to complete the bachelor’s degree. Several international students who came to ISU to attend graduate school had to attend another year of undergraduate studies first, as ISU did not recognize their three-year bachelor degree from their home country. In Chapter 2, I discussed that students who transfer struggle to graduate because of the loss of credits that occurs when they transfer, rather than a lack of academic preparation (Jenkins & Fink, 2015; Monaghan & Attewell, 2014). The more credits that are lost in the transfer process, the less likely it is the student will graduate.

Reciprocal agreements between schools, which allow credits earned at a different institution to transfer seamlessly along with the student, are great in theory, but in reality are fraught with various issues. Institutions believe that their 101 course is somehow better or more rigorous than that of the institution in the next town or state. While maintaining high quality

standards and appropriate classroom rigor is important, and essential in some cases due to accreditation requirements, students who transfer often experience a penalty for the decision to attend a different school.

According to a press release issued in January of 2018, the Idaho State Board of Education is mandating a common course numbering system for 43 general education requirement courses by the fall of 2019 in order to aid students with transfers between institutions within the state, as well as to increase understanding of which courses meet graduation requirements. (Retrieved from <https://boardofed.idaho.gov/resources/board-to-establish-policy-for-common-course-numbering-at-all-idaho-public-higher-education-institutions/> on 1-26-19). Only 43 courses within the state of Idaho will be required to follow this common numbering system, so this will not resolve the problem entirely, though it is at least a recognition of, and an attempt to solve the difficulties students face when transferring between institutions and losing credits already earned. Idaho is not one of the largest states in the nation, nor is it one of the larger state educational systems, yet note that this common course-numbering endeavor was announced a year and a half prior to its implementation, which gives an indication of the amount of effort required to make these changes. The loss of credits upon transfer to a different institution is a weighty matter to students, and can make a tremendous impact on their ability to persist to graduation.

Payment for Internships. In this study, the fact that students received remuneration for their work was very motivating to the students. Students felt they should do their best work, because there was pay involved. Some students mentioned taking it more seriously than just a work-study type of position. Pay was definitely important to a student who was taking 19 credits per semester – she had no other time to find another job. Another student referenced that the

opportunity alone was worth it – the pay was just a bonus. Like so many other things, this question really identified the gap that exists between students who have financial support from parents or other sources, and those that are supporting themselves, and truly cannot “afford” to have certain experiences. Tinto (1982) acknowledged his model did not place enough of an emphasis on the importance or significance of the financial situations students face. Tinto said finances were just one factor in the decision making process, but those from low SES backgrounds might be more affected. Ability to pay was found to directly affect persistence (Cabrera et al., 1990). Students referenced repeatedly how important it was that CPI positions have payment attached to the opportunity, and how this helped them to meet their basic needs.

Adding another layer of complexity to this topic, international students face many barriers to academic success, and often finances are a significant reason. International students are not eligible for financial aid on campus, and are limited in the number of hours they can work, and they must work on campus. The CPI program is able to provide international students an opportunity to work on campus for 19 hours per week. O’Keefe (2013) found international students might not feel as confident approaching faculty as other students. However, the CPI program provides regular, reoccurring contact with a faculty member or campus mentor. The international student participants I interviewed did not report having difficulty managing their campus relationships. In fact, their experience was overwhelmingly positive.

Financial Aid. Financial aid is probably one of the more significant higher education policies. With scarce resources, institutions must create rules, and essentially, tiers by which to distribute the aid in as equitable a manner as possible, in the hopes that the distribution will keep students enrolled to graduation. However, student responses in this study indicated that financial aid policies simply do not recognize all of the needs that exist. A definition of “need” can vary

significantly between one student to the next, depending upon the unique family circumstances. One student reported significant frustration at the financial aid system, which caused him to take drastic action. Because financial aid policies considered him dependent upon his parent's income, he did not qualify for financial aid. However, his parents refused to pay for college, believing the expense of college to be the responsibility of the student. This left the student with few options other than loans to obtain his education. This student chose to get married to gain independence from his parental income in order to be able to access financial aid of some sort.

Financial aid policies highlight some important inequalities that policies simply cannot account for unless financial aid were to be decided on a case-by-case basis, which is impractical due to the volume of students that need aid. The consideration of individual circumstances is not possible in many situations due to the volume of applications. Further, for all policies, to some degree at least, arbitrary lines must be drawn somewhere.

Incorporation of Active Learning or Experiential Learning into the Curriculum.

Active learning makes students the center of their learning (Warren, 1997). Experiential learning is a holistic approach, centered on experience (Seaman, Brown, & Quay, 2017) and is a combination of both thinking and experimentation with various concepts (Wurdinger & Allison, 2017). Students participating in the CPI program noted that they were able to connect the learning in the classroom in their CPI role, or that they were better prepared to handle their classroom learning because of the experience they had working as a CPI. This supports Bonwell and Eison, (1991), who state, active learning “involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing” (p. 2). Active learning is correlated with social integration (Braxton et al., 2000; Braxton et al., 2008). Active learning also engages the student in the learning process (Bonwell & Sutherland, 1996). Experiential learning allows students the

opportunity to test skills and put classroom learning in action, and learn from mistakes made. Students in the CPI program, when relating their day-to-day job duties discussed how their work tasks related to their field of study. Job duties that expand upon the constructs and frameworks taught in the classroom provide opportunities to deepen and expand student understanding of those concepts.

There have been many attempts to require active/experiential learning techniques in the classroom, but faculty often resist such policies. This resistance most often relates to class size, class structure, and lack of time to cover the entire curriculum (Wurdinger & Allison, 2017). Yet, studies show such techniques are effective at increasing student engagement, involvement, and interest. However, despite such studies, because of academic freedom, many institutions are loathe to dictate to faculty how they must conduct their classrooms.

Implications and Recommendations for the CPI program

The CPI program played a significant role in the lives of the study participants. However, the students did have recommendations for the program itself, and what changes they believed would improve the experience for future students. Some students felt the CPI program was widely advertised and available, while others felt the program advertisement needed to be broader and directed to students. The CPI program could consider making a greater effort to reach out to students to make them aware of the availability of the program by utilizing posters, or asking faculty to discuss the program in class.

Other students shared that an increase in the maximum number of hours available for students to work each week would be a benefit. During the research interview process, the CPI program limited student hours to 20 per week. Effective July 1, 2018, the CPI program increased the number of hours to a maximum of 25 hours per week. Students had mixed reviews on the

hours limit. Some students appreciated having a hard cap on the hours worked, indicating that it helped them to prioritize, and meet other obligations. Other students, especially those solely responsible for their finances, stated that they simply needed more hours to make ends meet. The CPI office appears to have attempted to strike a balance with the increase to 25 hours per week.

Students also advocated for a raise in pay, especially since CPI duties become increasingly responsible if the student stays in the same position. The current pay structure offers \$9 per hour for undergraduates, \$10 per hour for graduates, and \$13 per hour for doctoral students. However, students can become a CPI as early as their freshman year in college. The potential to work for four years in a job with no possibility to increase pay, even though duties are required to be more complex is something that warrants further consideration.

An additional recommendation for the program relates to communication. Some students felt that the communication between departments about CPI was difficult to navigate, and delayed the start of their employment. One particular student was not sure if the problem was with the college he was working in, or if it was with the CPI office, or the human resources department, but the result was frustration and a perception that the program was not as effective as it could be in terms of communication. Clear delineation of expectations for the paperwork processing could assist with ensuring a quick and seamless process for students.

Future Research

Future research on the CPI program at ISU should include a quantitative analysis that compares retention rates of students participating in the CPI program with the ISU student body at large. An additional analysis should compare CPI participants with three or more characteristics that place them at higher risk for early departure and CPI students who lack those characteristics. Finally, we should compare CPI students with three or more characteristics for

early departure to ISU students who do not participate in the CPI program and who have three or more characteristics that place them at risk for early departure. These comparisons will allow a more comprehensive view of the problem, and will be able to better answer the question if it is the CPI program, or some other variable that is leading to increased retention in the CPI program.

Additionally, research on faculty perceptions of the CPI program would also yield important findings to determine whether the CPI program is similarly beneficial to faculty. Additionally, a longitudinal study about the retention rates of students who participated in the CPI program over time would also yield important insights, as would a follow up study on CPI participants who have graduated and started their careers. A study such as this would allow us to understand their career trajectory, and determine if the work experience they received as an undergraduate contributed to faster career progression. Additionally, researchers should explore the intersection of dual-credit programs, transfer students from community colleges, and programs such as the CPI program to determine their efficacy and long-term contributions to graduation and retention rates for students.

Many studies have focused on the burdens of student loans, but we have never examined student loans as a potential motivating factor for students to stay enrolled. More than one student in this study shared this concept with me. Students are acutely aware of the need to graduate college so that they can afford to pay back their students loans. They also appear to have a firm grasp that stopping out or dropping out without a degree will make the repayment process much harder, if they are unable to get a well-paying job. Tinto (1982) concluded that students are more willing to take on the financial burden of college if their experience is a positive one. Perhaps there is a connection at the intersection of student loans, decisions to remain enrolled, and

student experiences at their particular institution. Future research could consider exploring student loans as a motivational incentive to complete a college degree.

Conclusion

Colleges and universities continue to contend with how best to solve or address the issue of early departure for students. While some argue that attrition is an indication that college programs are rigorous, the fact remains that universities are ever more dependent upon student enrollment and the tuition dollars they bring in each year. Study of this problem has been ongoing for more than 100 years, but while administrators have implemented multiple solutions, no single solution has proved to be a panacea for this problem.

Many different factors come into play when students make their departure decisions. Students leave for many reasons, and previous research has identified many characteristics that increase the likelihood of early departure. However, the vast majority of these studies focused on quantitative data, and neglect to focus on the individual. Additionally, many studies in existence examine programs specifically focused on increasing retention. My research focused on examining the Career Path Internship program at ISU, and determining whether or not this program contributed towards increasing retention of students who had characteristics research has shown may increase the likelihood of early departure.

The data gathered indicated that people and the support they provided, whether family, significant others, faculty, or other individuals on campus were the most significant reason students expressed for staying enrolled. A strong connection with a faculty mentor was also a significant finding. Students shared that the experience they had working as a CPI student provided them with good working experience, an opportunity to develop soft skills, and a way to practice being a professional, providing a soft entry to the real world. Through this research, data

has shown that the CPI program is incredibly meaningful to students. The program provides an opportunity to connect ideas and skills learned in class in an active and experiential learning environment. Additionally, for many of the participants, it creates a deep relationship with the faculty mentor the student works with. Further, this program is providing an avenue to gain valuable real-world experience, connected to their major, but also assists students in meeting their basic financial needs.

Various policy implications resulted from the study, such as how to address dual credit, transfer, and financial aid policies. Additionally, expanding the research to include a qualitative component, as well as faculty perceptions will likely yield additional insights to the efficacy of the problem of student retention. The CPI program at ISU appears to be a unique program that is meeting the needs of the students it serves. Approximately 80% of participants self-reported a graduation date within 6 year of beginning college. The CPI program appears to be contributing to keeping students in school, even those with characteristics research has shown to contribute to early departure by connecting students with factors known to increase retention, such as part time work, connection with a faculty mentor, financial remuneration, and minimum GPA for participation in the program. With such promising initial results, further research on this program could yield important insights into the issue of early departure.

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Appendix A

1. Tell me about the reason(s) you decided to attend ISU?
2. Tell me where you are at in terms of progression to graduation?
3. How many years overall will it take you to graduate?
4. What kind of student were you in high school?
5. Are you the first person in your family to go to college?
6. What type of support has your family provided to you as you have been a student at ISU?
7. How did you find out about the CPI program?
8. What has been your experience in the CPI program?
9. Tell me about your experience working with a CPI mentor/faculty member?
10. How important has it been to you that the CPI position is a paid position?
11. Would you have been interested in the opportunity if the position was more of a traditional unpaid position?
12. What do you feel is the most significant thing you have learned while being a CPI?
13. Would you recommend the CPI program to a future student? Why or why not?
14. Have you experienced any life-changes during your tenure at ISU, such as getting married or divorced, a significant breakup, a medical situation for yourself, having a baby, serving a mission, or having a parent become ill?
15. Have those experiences impacted your college education?
16. Tell me your perceptions of the quality of ISU?
17. How well do you feel you “fit in” to the culture at ISU?
18. Do you participate in social activities? How often? How many per week?
19. What prevents you from participating in social activities?

20. Are there any other significant experiences you have had in your personal life or at ISU that have contributed to your decision to remain enrolled at ISU?
21. Other comments or things the student wanted to share, including recommendations for program improvement.

Appendix B

INITIAL CODING STRATEGY – BASED ON LITERATURE

Category	Tinto	Astin	Bean	Active Learning
Decision to stay enrolled at ISU	Academic/Social Integration, goal commitment to graduating/obtaining a degree; commitment to graduating from ISU	Peer Group Influences Physical and psychological energy devoted to school. What behaviors have contributed to the decision to remain enrolled?	Perception of Quality/Lack of other Options Does the student have “intent” to graduate from ISU, or does the student plan to transfer?	Did classroom experiences contribute to the decision to stay enrolled at ISU? Did classroom experiences connect students to peers or faculty in a meaningful way?
Faculty Interaction	Do students feel the faculty care about their well-being and success? Did the student develop a close relationship with one or more faculty members? Did students seek out faculty assistance?	How do student-faculty interaction contribute to retention? Is it the primary, or a major cause of student satisfaction?	Does interaction with faculty lead to an increase in the perception of value at ISU? Do CPI experiences with mentors/faculty lead to a desire to stay at ISU?	Did faculty provide opportunities for hands-on learning? Did the CPI program provide opportunities for hands-on learning?
Peer Interaction	Were students part of the dominant culture on campus? What aspect of	Did peer interaction contribute to a	Did experiences with peers contribute either positively or negatively	Did instructors provide opportunities for

	peer involvement was stronger – academic or social? Were cultural issues at play – did students feel they were welcomed on campus or were they not included?	sense of belonging? Were peer groups the most influential source of the decision to stay enrolled?	to a decision to remain enrolled at ISU? (Employees sometimes leave their boss or co-workers, rather than the job)	student-peer interaction in assignments (group work, presentations, debates, etc).
Student/Institution “Match”	Why did students initially select ISU? What has kept them here?	Student time is the greatest institutional resource. Do students have enough time to study, recreate, socialize, work and complete homework? How are the balancing the demands?	How satisfied is the student with ISU in terms of quality? What external qualities might contribute to a mismatch? What is the Student’s GPA? (PAY) Does the student have a commitment to graduate from ISU?	Did students feel their experiences in the classroom contributed to their expected outcome? Was it better or worse than anticipated? Does it make students more or less committed to ISU as an institution? Did students gain communication, interpersonal skills, writing/speaking skills during their class time?
CPI Experiences	Did this assist with connected academically	Did CPI connect you to peers or	Did participation in CPI contribute towards a	Did CPI experiences assist you with

	or socially?	mentors? Does having a job on campus connect you with a mentor, or resources on campus?	perception of value of the education at CPI currently, or potential earnings in the future?	development of academic confidence in your major? Did it allow you to practice concepts in a way that was meaningful and helpful to your learning? Did students gain communication, interpersonal skills, writing/speaking skills during CPI work?
Family background and background characteristics	What type of support did you receive from your family? Was it difficult to “separate” from your family of origin?	Do outside family obligations contribute to success or failure in college? Children, marriage, parents, the need to work? All of these “objects” reduce the amount of time students have to	What background variables may have contributed to enrollment/retention decision? Expectation to attend college? Intent to go to college? Ability to pay?	Are students comfortable speaking in public? Do students prefer to work alone, rather than in a group? Do students have appropriate social skills to participate?

		pursue their studies.		
Cultural Cues	<p>Did students feel they had to conform to the primary culture on campus in order to be accepted?</p> <p>Did they feel pressure to behave, act, dress, or speak a certain way?</p> <p>If yes, were those changes due to scientific/industry standards, or faculty bias?</p>	<p>Persistence decisions are influenced by culture, and by a students' worldview.</p> <p>Did peer relationships help aid in the transition to college?</p>		
Finances	<p>How much of a factor were finances in your decision to attend ISU?</p> <p>What role did having a CPI job on campus play as part of your decision to stay enrolled?</p> <p>Would you remain at ISU if you were not employed as a CPI?</p> <p>Would you seek employment off campus?</p>	<p>Does the financial reward of being a CPI alleviate the burden of financial concerns?</p> <p>Does participating in CPI enhance student learning in that a different job, one not related to the student major, is not necessary?</p>	<p>How much of a contribution does the CPI job have on the decision to remain enrolled at ISU?</p> <p>If circumstances changed, and students were not paid, would they find value in the CPI program? In Attending ISU?</p>	

Academic Development and Social	Do students feel they have developed intellectually while at ISU? What has caused this development?			<p>Did students get to experience higher- order thinking activities in class or as a CPI?</p> <p>Does the experience of being a CPI include the opportunity to apply independent judgment and accept consequences for those decisions?</p>
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Appendix C

Dear Participant:

We are asking you to take part in an interview being given to individuals who participate in the Career Path Internship (CPI) program at Idaho State University (ISU). The purpose of this interview is to gain insight into individual's perceptions of the CPI program at ISU. The interview will ask questions about your CPI experience at ISU, as well as reasons why you decided to attend ISU, and what kind of experiences you have had during your time at ISU. It is our hope that information from this survey will contribute to a better understanding of individual's perceptions of the CPI program.

Your responses to the survey will be anonymous. Your name will not be collected or appear anywhere on the survey and complete privacy will be guaranteed.

Participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. There is no reward for participating or consequence for not participating.

For further information regarding this research please contact Staci Phelan at (208)282-4369, email: phelstac@isu.edu, or Dr. Richard Wagoner at (208) 282-3259, email: wagorich@isu.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant you may contact the Idaho State University Institutional Review Board at (208)282-2179, or humsubj@isu.edu.

There are two copies of this letter. After signing them, keep one copy for your records and return the other one. Thank you in advance for your cooperation and support.

Please indicate your agreement to participate by signing below.

I am 18 years or older and have read and understood this consent form and agree to participate.

Signature: _____

Name: _____ (Please Print)

Date: _____

Appendix D
CPI STUDY

Participant # _____

Circle all that apply.

Low-Income Status (Family or Individual)

Receive Financial Aid

Have a Job on Campus

First Generation Student (both parents did not graduate from college)

International Student

Part-Time Student (now or at any time as an undergraduate)

Non-Traditional Student (Adult learner, do you have children)

Work Full-Time

Work Part-Time

Did you have to take remedial coursework in college? YES NO

Were you a transfer student to ISU from another institution? YES NO

Fill in the Blanks:

High School GPA _____

College GPA _____

Race/Ethnicity _____

Gender _____

Highest level of education for your mother _____

Major: _____ Minor: _____

What College is your Major in? _____