

Student Success at Mid-Atlantic Community College

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Community College Student Success at Mid-Atlantic Community College

Executive Summary

According to multiple studies, the lack of community college student success in many forms is a significant problem for many colleges and universities (Braxton et al., 2004; Braxton et al., 2000; Tinto, 1986, 1993). Data suggests the problem is most significant in the country's community colleges, where persistence and retention rates have remained low for decades (NSCRC, 2021). The causal forces of low persistence and retention rates differ (Braxton et al., 1997; Hart, 2017; Tinto, 1993). To address student persistence and retention issues, community colleges across the country have implemented different types of student support strategies to increase student success (Askelson et al., 2020; Bailey et al., 2015; Brint, 2003).

I use a pseudonym for the client organization for this Capstone study, Mid-Atlantic Community College (MACC). MACC's Office of Research and Assessment (ORA), also a pseudonym, is this project's primary stakeholder. The ORA is interested in better understanding the experiences of MACC students to inform improvements to student support and programs aimed at increasing student success.

To better understand the problem of practice, I developed three research questions. Research question 1 investigates how students access and use MACC's resources that support student success. Research question 2 documents students' recommendations to improve MACC's resources, and research question 3 describes student narratives surrounding their successes and challenges in their community college experience. To answer these questions, I conducted and analyzed 14 in-depth interviews with eight MACC students.

Research question one produced three findings. **Finding 1:** Each student is accessing a fraction of MACC's resources. The two main reasons for not accessing them are that they do not

feel they need them or perceive them as inconvenient or inconducive to their lives. A tertiary and less significant reason is they do not know about them. **Finding 2:** Of MACC's substantial resources, the Transfer Student Alliance Program (TSP), Academic Advising, Student to Student Tutoring, and Disability Support Services were the programs most often mentioned by this project's students. **Finding 3:** Academic Advisors and Student to Student Tutoring received mixed reviews.

Research question two produced three findings. **Finding 1:** Students do not have many recommendations for improving support. They are mostly aware that MACC has many resources designed to help them succeed, but they choose not to use them. Therefore, the findings in this paper are based on a few student experiences and are not generalizable to MACC's student population. **Finding 2:** Students must advocate for themselves to receive their Disability Support Services, and sometimes professors' initial reaction is to resist the students' requests. **Finding 3:** Two students recommended improving the performance of academic advisors. One student recommended improving the performance of tutors.

Research question three produced five findings. **Finding 1:** Many narratives surrounding success are the same narratives surrounding challenges. Professors, family, faith, friends, and strangers often propel students to success and make persisting more challenging. **Finding 2:** A narrative of success identified by the two more experienced students is that MACC courses are easier than four-year university courses. **Finding 3:** Mental health was a significant challenge for the interviewed students. Past and present mental health challenges impacted these students' decisions to persist or depart. **Finding 4:** When deciding whether to persist or depart, the importance of academic integration and goal commitment outweighed social integration and course load for these students. Students reported that social integration

was low before COVID but worsened when many classes transitioned online. Students performed worse academically in these online classes, yet every student but one persisted.

Finding 5: Goal commitment was the most significant factor students considered when choosing to persist or depart. Even in the face of academic failure, narratives around these students' goals pushed them to persist. Goals were most evident to experienced students. Most new students admitted being unsure of their goals, and their goals changed during their MACC experience.

From these 11 findings, I provide the following four recommendations to ORA.

Recommendation 1 is for MACC to focus on its bright spots (Heath, 2010). AACC should highlight and communicate the critical practices of high-performing and impactful professors, academic advisors, and tutors that best support student success. Doing so can foster a shared understanding across the MACC community.

Recommendation 2 is for MACC to devote attention to improving or expanding the Transfer Student Alliance (TSA) Program, where students circumvent the tedious four-year university admissions process by meeting agreed upon prerequisites. Before going to MACC, many students did not qualify or could not get into the programs TSA makes possible. The more TSA programs MACC has, the more attractive opportunities it will provide to its diverse community. New TSA opportunities would likely contribute to MACC students' institutional commitment knowing doors previously closed to them have the potential to be opened.

Recommendation 3 is for MACC to look for ways to leverage the community in treating the mental health of its students. Mental health issues came up in all but one of the student interviews. I recommend that MACC prioritize supporting student mental health and engage a

task force to investigate and develop a comprehensive approach to ensuring that students have access to mental health support.

Recommendation 4 is to conduct additional mixed-methods research at community colleges to further understand student experiences after leaving the community college setting. For example, one such study can explore how effectively MACC courses prepare students for upper-level courses relative to the same classes at four-year universities. This study would be an opportunity to assess student success after students depart MACC. In Glynn's (2019) study of more than two million students, the author reported community college students persist at an equal or higher rate than students who transfer from high school or other four-year universities. Community college persistence implies better academic integration in those community college students. TSA is an excellent program to leverage to conduct this research. Conducting this type of research may reveal if MACC professors are teaching the same material more effectively or if MACC students are struggling in advanced four-year university courses because of the lack of rigor in MACC courses.

Introduction to Community College Student Success

This paper focuses on Student Success at Mid-Atlantic Community College (MACC), a pseudonym used per the college's Institutional Review Board policy. The paper starts broadly by reviewing the challenges at community colleges around the country and then narrows its focus to MACC. Community Colleges play an important role in socio-economic mobility (Goldrick-Rap, 2010), so substantial research reveals factors predictive of student success. Much of this research is quantitative and highlights the factors that impact student success but does not capture the intricacies of individual student experiences behind the data. Considering the research suggesting emotions move people to accomplish goals (Heath, 2010), this paper explores these personal and emotional stories through a qualitative approach. The lessons learned from these stories are summarized in this paper's findings and recommendations section and intended to inform MACC's student success efforts.

Stakeholders

I did this project under the cognizance of the Associate Vice President for Research and Assessment, a pseudonym, at MACC. She leads the Office of Research and Assessment (ORA), also a pseudonym, from which I received some of the statistics I use to inform my qualitative approach in this paper. According to their website, ORA (2022) delivers accessible, accurate, timely, reliable and equity-minded research of facts, trends, and issues affecting MACC. ORA is my primary stakeholder. To ORA, I am eternally grateful.

In June, ORA hosts an annual research symposium where faculty attend for professional development and present a range of topics that include assessment, research, college resources, high impact practices, data governance, accessibility, equity, and more. I presented my research design at the 2021 research symposium and will present my findings and recommendations at the

2022 research symposium. Therefore, the faculty who attend the research symposium are secondary stakeholders.

Tertiary stakeholders are the students, faculty, staff, and community in and around MACC, who may be impacted by any changes that result from my findings and recommendations. This project is multifaceted and complex and seeks to answer research questions designed to inform MACC's efforts to accomplish its mission. I ultimately chose to do a purely qualitative project, hoping I could, at a minimum, positively impact the students with whom I interacted. The positive impact they had on me was a pleasant surprise. I will forever be thankful to the students who generously donated their time during a pandemic despite having many competing personal and academic requirements.

Introduction to Mid-Atlantic Community College

Leadership and Demographics

MACC was founded in the Mid-Atlantic in 1961 and is led by a President who has three vice presidents for learning, support services, and resources management. They are a highly ranked and nationally recognized community college. It is a sizeable single-campus community college with more than 7,500 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) students. They have a diverse student body, with 55% of its students being Caucasian, 17% Black or African American, 9% Hispanic or Latino, 5% Asian, and 14% other or multiracial. MACC's July 2020 research brief revealed Black/African Americans, specifically men of color, struggle to persist to graduation at MACC, as summarized in Table 1 below. It also showed progress at MACC. The share of Black/African American graduates increased from 14.2% to 15.4%, and Hispanic/Latino increased from 5.6% to 8.1%. However, when compared to MACC's demographics, there is still more to be done to get to equity.

Table 1

2020 Cohort Demographics and Graduation Rates

Race	College Demographic	Graduation Rate
White	55%	60%
Black	17%	15.4%
Latino	9%	8.1%

Note. From ORA's July 2020 research brief.

The campus community is 40 percent men and 60 percent women. The average age of students is 26 (MACC website).

Tuition Costs

Annual in-state tuition costs at MACC without scholarships or financial assistance are about \$4000. In-state tuition for four-year universities in MACC's state is approximately \$12,000. Two years at MACC followed by two years at four-year universities in the state saves students about \$16,000 compared to attending a four-year university for four years (MACC website). Students who attend MACC could save thousands of dollars while improving their chances of getting into top universities in the state by taking advantage of programs like the Transfer Student Alliance (TSA). I will talk about TSA later in this paper.

Students' Plans

According to MACC's New Student Entry Survey conducted in the Fall of 2020, 42.6% plan to complete an associate degree and then transfer, while only 10.9% plan to go directly to the workforce. 16% plan on transferring before degree completion, 16.8% are unsure of their goals, and 13.7% are in certificate programs or taking courses for personal enrichment. The vast

variation in these students' goals helps reveal the massive challenge its leaders carry to accommodate them and help them find their way.

Retention Rates

The June 2020 version of MACC's research brief revealed their retention rate was 69% for full-time students taking 15 or more credits and 53% for part-time students taking less than 15 credits. Many more students at MACC attend part-time than full-time. In the 2019 Cohort, for example, only 471 students took 15 or more credits, and 1494 students took less than 15 credits. Another key factor revealed by this research brief is first-semester GPA. 27.4% of students with less than 1.0 GPA were retained, 54.2% of students with a 1.00 to 1.99 GPA were retained, and 68.5% of students with a 2.00 to 2.99 were retained. Retention of students with a GPA above 3.00 exceeded 70%.

Student Resources

MACC has many student resources they summarize on their student resources webpage. The webpage separates MACC's resources into seven categories: academic services, student records, career and community services, disability support, health and personal counseling, student achievement and success, and technology. Their academic services include tutoring opportunities, an impressive library, and testing and assessment services. Moreover, MACC has transfer services that help students plan their education beyond MACC, adult basic skills for students older than 18 who do not have a high school diploma and desire to get a GED, and English language learning opportunities. The student records website makes it easy for students to obtain academic records, change their program or major, update their information, and perform other administrative actions. Their career and community services include career counseling, internships, service-learning, and community service. Disability Support Services

allow students to receive accommodations for documented disabilities. Their health and personal counseling include a health and wellness center that supports sexual violence prevention and awareness, substance use prevention and education, tobacco prevention and cessation, on-campus counseling services, emergency financial and mental health support, and engagement coaching. Their Student Achievement and Success section links to the Student Achievement and Success Program, summer transition programs such as a three-week program designed to prepare students for the transition to college called the bridge to success, Black Male Initiative, and support for military and veterans. Technology assists students with accessing resources from home since MACC is a commuter college with no dorms or living spaces on campus. During the Pandemic, the college permanently closed its childcare center.

In addition to its many student resources, the college also has many job training, certificate, and enrichment programs for students who do not desire to obtain an associate or bachelor's degree. There is job training or certifications across 12 industries. A few of these industries are business, casino and gaming, computers and technology, construction and skilled trades, health and medical, and veterinary assisting.

Area of Inquiry

Amid the pandemic, enrollment in college after high school graduation declined. The January 2021 MACC Research Brief revealed that, according to the National Student Clearinghouse, the number of graduates who went to college immediately following high school in 2020 dropped by 21.7 percent. The same research brief revealed enrollment at MACC decreased by 8 percent. If enrollment continues to decline, retention, which is one of several forms of student success I look at throughout this paper, increases in importance. "Given the enrollment of high school graduates, institutions look to increase the adult student population and

to improve retention and graduation rates in order to decrease the loss of tuition revenue” (MACC Research Brief, 2021).

I will define several forms of student success later in this paper, but much of my paper focuses on retention because of its growing importance for students, communities, and MACC. In this paper, I have already revealed course load and academic performance are two factors that contribute to retention. The problem of practice this paper addresses is there is more to learn about MACC students’ decision to persist or depart. This study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of MACC students’ decision-making process through analyzing individual student narratives to understand why students are retained, persist toward their goals, or depart. By doing so, I hope to uncover stories that will assist MACC in its student success efforts.

Literature Review

There are five categories into which I separate my literature review. Why community college student success matters, a summary of the problem, strategies that effectively facilitate student success, the importance of dialogue to student success, and conceptual frameworks that help define the critical factors behind student success. Before I proceed, I must explain student success and other vital terms in Community College retention literature. For this paper, I will utilize the summary of terms articulated by Hirschy et al. (2011):

Retention focuses on the institution’s intent to keep students enrolled from one term of study to the next. *Persistence* [a form of student success] refers to students maintaining or completing their enrollment at any post-secondary institution, not just at a specific college. Phrased differently, institutions *retain*, and students *persist* (Hagedorn, 2005). *Completion* [another form of student success] focuses on students’ attainment of a degree or other credential, whereas *stopout* can refer to formal or informal withdrawal,

withdrawal with the intent of re-enrolling at a later time, or a decision not to re-enroll.

Dropout can also refer to formal or informal withdrawal and reflects a situation when a student perceives his or her leaving the institution as a failure (Tinto, 1993). In contrast, *success* hinges on the achievement of an educational goal (Braxton, 2003, p. 301).

In 1993, Tinto defined dropout with the negative connotation of perceived failure.

Braxton reviewed Tinto's 1993 *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* in 2019. In his review, Braxton (2019) said, "This book has made some noteworthy contributions, such as Tinto's contention that scholars and practitioners should use the word *departure* rather than *drop out* to characterize students who leave their initial college or university of enrollment." I will use the terms interchangeably in this paper. It is important to note students who drop out or depart college are *not* failures. The perception of failure after a student departs is a burden a departing student carries, which is why departure is such a noteworthy contribution.

Why Community College Student Success Matters

The reasons why community college students make the decisions they make are complicated. Making sense of them, though, can dramatically improve the quality of the students' lives, the success of the U.S. economy, and the strength of the nation's communities. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020) data showed program completion at community colleges and four-year universities can significantly impact people's standard of living. The unemployment rate for students with an associate degree in 2020 was 7.1%, while those with some college but no degree was 8.3%. Among the employed, those with an associate degree made a median income of \$938 a week. Those with some college but no degree earned a median income of \$877 a week. For those who completed their bachelor's degree, the unemployment rate dropped

to 5.5%, and the median income jumped to \$1305 a week. These differences translate to significant increases in quality of life personally and economically for graduates and more significant tax revenues at the local, state, and federal levels. Income is only one of many predictive factors of individual life satisfaction (Vemuri et al., 2011). Still, those with higher incomes have more favorable choices, while those with lower incomes often feel trapped. Choe (2008), for example, found that income inequality had “strong and robust” impacts on burglary and robbery but not overall violent and property crime. In Sander’s (2005) book, *Youth Crime and Youth Culture in the Inner City*, when he explored why youth commit burglary and robbery, he found, “Most of them said they had committed robberies and burglaries with the sole intention of getting money” (p. 48). He said the typical response was ‘I needed the money’ (p. 48). The word ‘need’ is important because it communicates a perceived lack of choice. The significant income increase of a bachelor’s degree may give them that choice. Community Colleges, like MACC, aim to put students on a path that leads to success and better outcomes.

Summary of the Problem

Walker and Tietjen-Smith (2009) found retention in community colleges differ by urbanization and, consistent with MACC’s findings of their full-time and part-time students, depended on students' course load. Regardless of urbanization, Walker and Tietjen (2009) found full-time students who attend community college are significantly more likely to be retained than students who attend community college part-time. Their paper's highest average retention rate was amongst full-time students attending suburban community colleges. It was only 59.07 percent, revealing most community college students do not persist. In their paper, the average retention rate of part-time students attending suburban community colleges was only 41.55%, 17.52% less than students attending full time.

The First Lady, Dr. Jill Jacobs-Biden, completed her dissertation in 2006 titled *Student Retention at the Community College*. She explored retention and student success challenges at Delaware Technical and Community College. Jacobs-Biden looked at students' academic, psychological, social, and physical needs. Jacobs-Biden highlighted the significant challenges community colleges and their students faced that were not typical of students in other types of colleges and universities. In her paper, she cited Noel-Levitz's (2006) work that community colleges' need for health services was greater than other colleges. Moreover, community college students were more likely than their four-year university counterparts to have a family, children, mental health issues, physiological issues, financial issues, and a full-time job.

Hart (2019) also examined "the conditions and constraints under which students endeavor to succeed in the community college." Hart (2019) used a qualitative research method via semi-structured interviews. She argued that uncertainty or precarity of community college institutions interacted with precarity in community college students' lives, often causing students to either stopout or dropout (p. 2). From the perspective of institutional precarity, she referred to Tinto's (1975) work that highlighted the importance of social and academic systems inside the community colleges and presented empirical evidence revealing a causal link between institutional deficiencies and dropout rates. Like Jacobs-Biden (2007), Hart (2019) reported that community college students' precarity was significant and resulted in students engaging in security work, a term she got from Cooper (2014). According to Hart, security work is "the economic and emotional work done to maintain financial stability and manage the emotional burden of uncertainty about the future." Moreover, she referenced Goldrick et al. (2015), who found that half of community college students struggle with food and housing insecurity and family issues referenced in Matus-Grossman and Gooden (2002). Terriquez and Gurantz (2014)

found a combination of these issues caused students to stop out intending to return, but often they did not. Hart (2019) also shed some light on one reason why some students do not attend full-time. One 22-year-old student described prioritizing work even though she would prefer to focus only on school: “Work kind of comes first, which is awful because I really would love to be a full-time student and just not have to work at all, because I actually really love school” (p. 15). This student’s statement is one example of the valuable insights that can come from qualitative interviews.

Student Success Strategies

There is no shortage of recommended solutions for community colleges' challenges regarding retaining their students. There is also no shortage of recommended strategies to help colleges navigate the obstacles to improve retention. Despite these strategies, two-year college student retention and persistence rates have changed little over the last decade (NSCRC, 2021).

Academic Advisors and Guided Pathways

Bailey et al. (2015) argued in their book *Redesigning America’s Community Colleges* for a fundamental redesign from a cafeteria model where students are expected to pick from an enormous menu of choices and navigate through to completion with few interventions to a guided pathways model that helps regularly guide students through well-structured programs that help them incrementally grow without the overwhelming effects of the cafeteria model. In the Guided Pathways Model, academic advisors play a critical role as they regularly check in with the student to ensure they are on the right path to accomplish their goals. Although “no rigorous research to date has been conducted on whether whole-college guided pathways reform improves student outcomes... a number of studies indicate that early enrollment in a program of study, and

higher levels of structure and support, lead to higher rates of completion” (Bailey et al., 2015, p. 4).

College Structure

Brint (2003) recommended community colleges be split into three parts: “one modeled on private sector vocational training, another organized as two-year branches of four-year institutions, and a third as a community center for courses of avocational interests.” Mckinney et al. (2018) recommended policies to disincentivize withdrawing unnecessarily from courses. MACC’s structure is consistent with these recommendations. In the student resources section of the paper, I mentioned that MACC has opportunities for students to pursue an associate degree and then transfer to a four-year university, pursue certificates for vocational training, or take courses for personal enrichment. AACC also disincentivizes withdrawing from courses by disqualifying students from financial aid until they complete a certain percentage of their classes.

Support to High-Risk Student Populations

Choy (2002, as cited in Schreiner et al., 2011), defined high-risk students as “those students whose academic preparation, prior school performance, or personal characteristics may contribute to academic failure or early departure from college.” The studies of high-risk students have significantly narrowed its population. They include students of color at primarily white institutions (PWI) (Brooms, 2017, 2018; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Torres, 2003) and part-time students with low GPAs or poor academic performance (Braxton et al., 2014; Tinto, 1975; Walker & Tietjen-Smith, 2009). They also include students who struggle socio-economically, such as single parents and students who grew up in poverty (Nielson, 2016; Tinto, 1975) and students who are first to attend post-secondary education (Schreiner et al., 2011).

Resources to support high-risk students exist at the state, federal, and individual institution levels. Community Colleges are funded at the state level and largely target high-risk students, hence their low retention and persistence rates. At the Federal level, there is the Pell Grant that, according to studentaid.gov as of 2022, provides a grant as high as \$6,895 a year to qualifying low-income students, which is enough to cover MACC's full tuition.

Black males in PWIs are particularly high-risk students. Many institutions have established Black Male Initiative (BMI) programs to address their challenges. According to Brooms (2018a), "BMI-type programs have been found to aid in students' sense of belonging on campus through increasing their sociocultural capital, providing academic and social support, and creating space for Black male peer bonding (Barker & Avery, 2012; Brooms, 2017, 2018b; Brooms et al., 2015; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Zell, 2011)."

Askelson et al. (2020) advocated for the Expectant and Parenting Students (EPS) program that provides financial support and works with student schedules if the student is expecting a child. Reynolds et al. (2011) found that for every dollar invested in Child-Parent Center early childhood interventions, returns were between \$2.11 and \$10.83, making childcare support almost always worth the investment.

Student Narratives

Nielsen (2016), using a qualitative approach, interviewed 23 poor and working-class young adult women four times. He captured how working-class women meet their goals, the causes for women failing to meet their goals, and the importance of narratives (p. 142-143). Nielsen (2016) defined narratives as cultural understandings, institutional knowledge, and personal biography. Narratives are important because they form a story that contributes to students' decision to persist or drop out. By speaking with students, Nielsen (2016) argued

institutions can help students redevelop narratives of ambition from narratives of failure. Narratives of failure are “deeply pathological” and therefore particularly harmful and are often reinforced by society perceiving these individuals as failures. Institutions, such as MACC, may help students regain narrative agency where students progress toward “who they believe they ‘really’ are” (Nielsen, 2016, p. 143). He also follows Alexander’s et al. (2008) suggestion that a student’s life outside of college is an essential factor in student success because of the narratives that come out of their experiences with “family, welfare, work, immigration, and criminal justice” (p. 144). Community colleges, he argued, are set up well to bring people together to help motivate narratives of ambition, upward mobility, and beating odds stacked against them. His findings reveal I need to find these narratives in interviews and how they contribute to MACC students’ decision to persist or depart. In combination with the Guided Pathways Model, the insights gained from the narrative assessments can assist MACC leaders in reshaping narratives of failure into narratives of ambition.

Urias et al. (2016), drawing on the tenants of phenomenology (Moustaka, 1994), interviewed 15 men of color who had successfully transferred from community colleges to four-year universities in California. The tenants of phenomenology focus on meaning-making under a certain set of conditions (Urias et al., 2016 p. 26). After interviewing these men, they used a rigorous three-phase coding process introduced by Charmaz (2006). The three steps were initial, focused, and theoretical coding. In initial coding, they assigned keywords or phrases that emerged from their data. They transitioned to focused coding once the incidents began to cluster, and they were able to narrow their focus to the most conceptually rich categories. In theoretical coding, they focused on and identified the relationships and interactions in the emerging categories (Urias et al., 2016 p. 27-28). This coding process resulted in three thematic

categories, discussed more in the following paragraphs. They summarize these categories as people, not programs, make the difference; I am my brother's keeper; and Life at the Big U.

When Urias et al. (2016) said people, not programs make the difference, they meant positive relationships convince more students to persist than do great classes or programs. Many students in their research expressed that when they wanted to give up, they had people around them who helped pick them up emotionally and academically. Many students reported that it made a difference in their persistence. I am my brother's keeper is similar, but it is explicitly related to positive peer influence. Urias et al. (2016) found that positive male peer influence was especially important to their participant's persistence, especially post-transfer to a four-year university. Life at the Big U highlighted the challenge of that transfer. Many of their participants stated they had trouble finding a sense of belonging due to the individualistic and competitive nature of the universities they transferred to. Despite these Big U challenges, Urias et al. reported the men in their study "continuously found resources, peers, faculty, and programs that supported their success as transfer students."

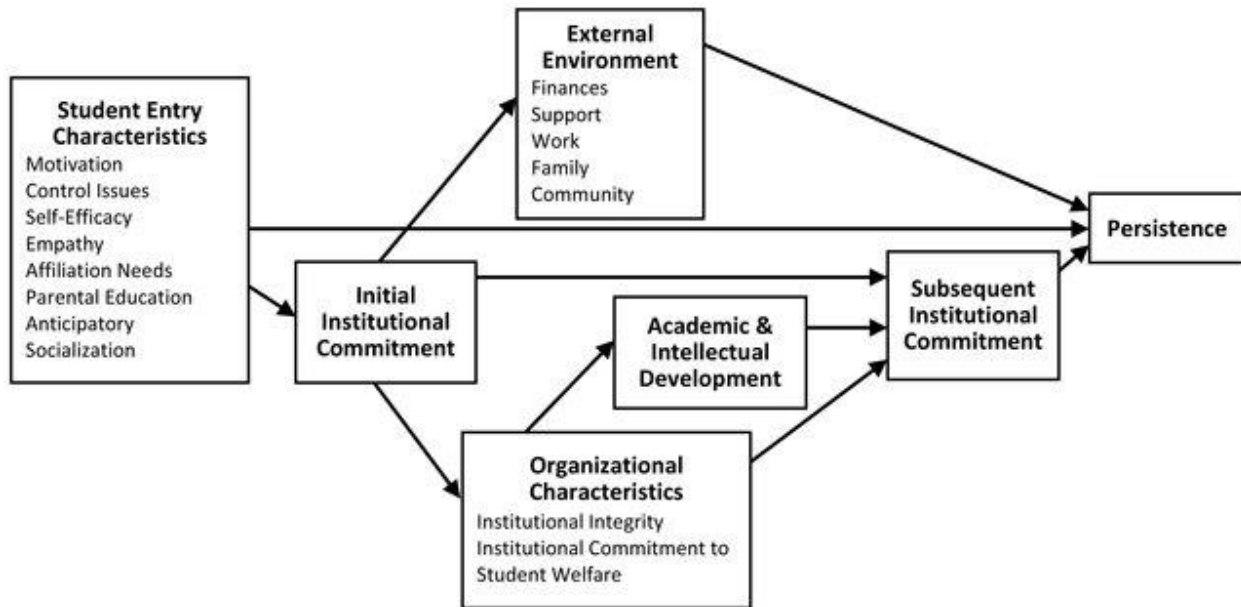
The stories that emerged from Urias et al.'s (2016) analysis are moving. The first thematic contains stories of professors going above and beyond by following up with struggling students, counselors helping students overcome low self-esteem, and a professor with cancer who modeled persistence by continuing to teach until he passed away. These stories are powerful and capturing them is crucial. That is what this paper seeks to achieve.

Conceptual Frameworks

Like student success strategies surrounding colleges' resources, many conceptual frameworks seek to explain students' decisions surrounding persistence and departure. Harper's (2010) Antideficit Achievement Framework studies students of color in STEM.

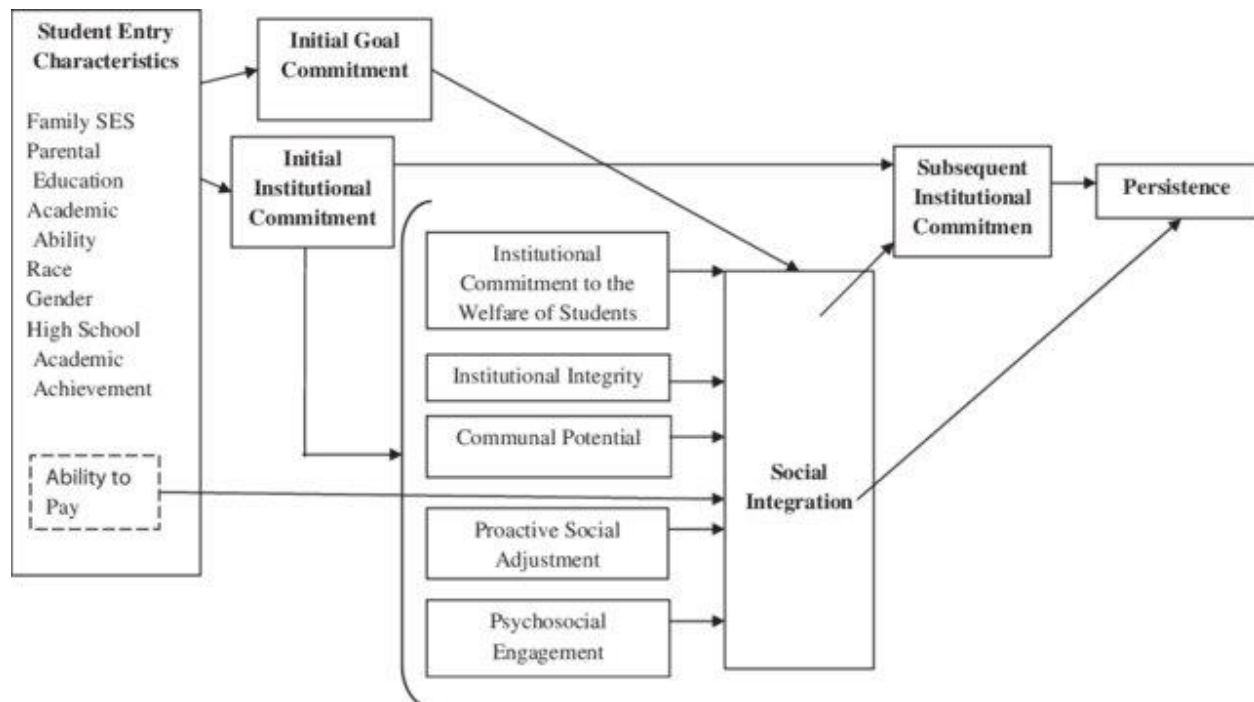
Theory of student Persistence in Commuter Colleges and Universities

Figure 1



Theory for Student Persistence in Residential Colleges and Universities

Figure 2



Note. From *Rethinking college student retention* by Braxton, Doyle, Hartley, Hirschy, Jones, & McLendon. (2014). San Francisco, CA: Wiley.

Baker et al. (2020) adapted Braxton et al.'s (2014) and Braxton et al.'s (2004) commuter and residential college persistence frameworks (See figures 1 and 2). Braxton et al. cite Tinto's (1975) dropout decision framework, which I will describe in depth in the next section of this paper, and retain most of Tinto's factors. Despite the controversy surrounding Tinto (1975) conducting most of his research at predominantly white and four-year institutions, the efficacy of Tinto's (1975) model led me to use it as a guide while analyzing the interviews in this paper.

There are more similarities in the residential and commuter persistence models than differences. One similarity is student entry characteristics contain essential predictive factors in students' persistence regardless of what type of college they go to. According to both models, these student entry characteristics contribute to institutional commitment that changes over time. The factors that significantly impact the change in institutional commitment over time are where these frameworks differ. For commuter colleges, like community colleges, the external environment plays a more significant role than in residential colleges because commuter college students live off campus while residential college students live on campus. The commuter college model reveals that academic and intellectual development are more important to commuter college students than residential college students. Conversely, comparing these models reveals social integration is more important to residential college students than to commuter college students when students contemplate whether to persist or depart. I will discuss academic and social integration in more depth when explaining Tinto's (1975) Framework and elaborate on the debate regarding how significant social integration is to commuter and community college students when deciding whether to persist.

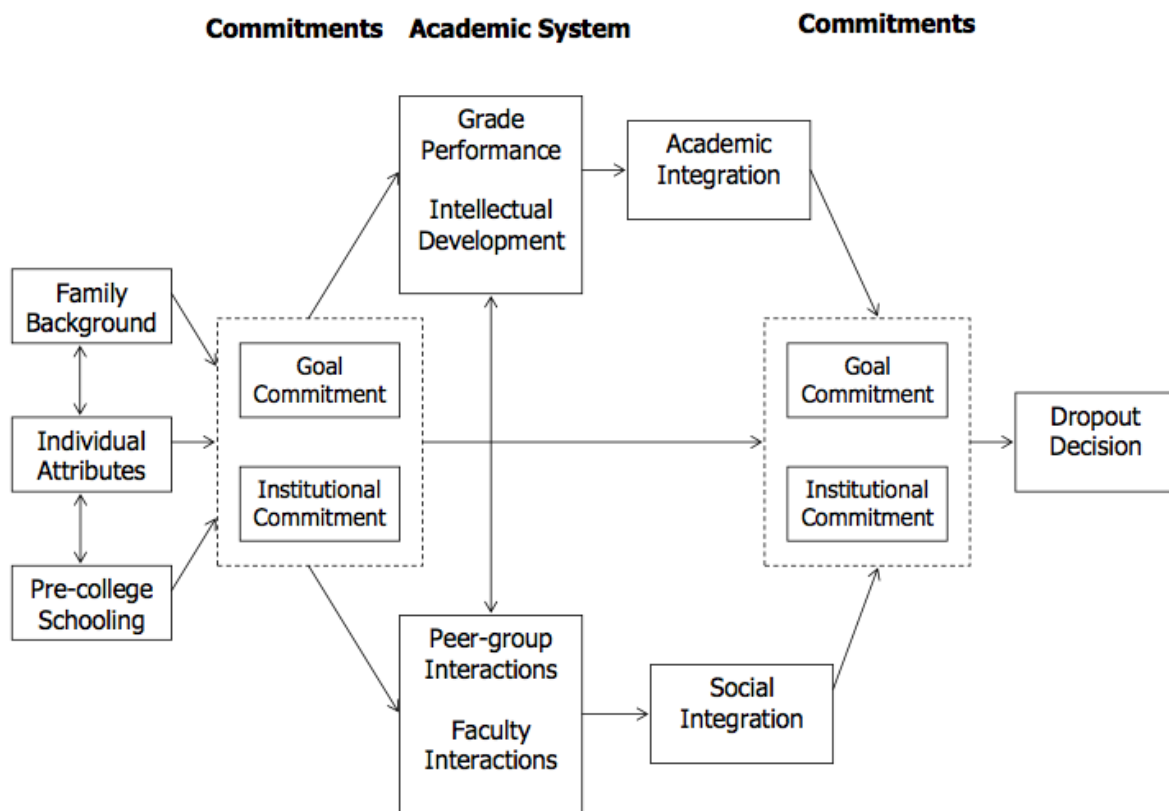
In *Rethinking College Retention*, Braxton et al. (2014) explained their frameworks above. However, they did not explain why they removed goal commitment from the commuter

college framework. I decided to use Tinto's (1975) conceptual framework over Braxton et al. (2004, 2014, 2020) for commuter colleges because of Tinto's focus on goal commitment. Goal commitment is predictive of academic integration, and academic integration also facilitates goal commitment, which is predictive of persistence in Tinto's (1975) model. Since academic integration is more predictive of persistence for commuter college students, goal commitment may be more predictive of persistence in commuter college students.

Tinto's Framework

Tinto's (1975) dropout decision framework asserts students' decision to drop out or persist is a function of upbringing, goal commitment, institutional commitment, social integration, academic integration, and how far into the program the student persists. His model suggests that if any of the factors are sufficient, a student may decide to persist, but they may drop out if any factor is significantly insufficient. For example, students doing well academically may persist even when socially doing poorly and students committed to their institution and integrated socially may persist even when performing poorly academically. The more academically and socially integrated students are, the more likely they are to persist, but conversely, if either is significantly insufficient, the result may be to depart. This model suggests colleges and universities have a menu of choices to help different people succeed differently, with the goal being academic and healthy social integration. Academic and social integration are essential to Tinto's model (See figure 3) because they are the two broad categories colleges and universities influence over time. Both have varying forms. The subsections below will describe more details on each of these factors.

Figure 3



Note. From Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research by Tinto (1975). *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), 89–125.

Family Background, Individual Attributes, and Pre-college Schooling

According to Tinto’s (1975) conceptual framework, several individual characteristics are predictive of dropping out. Most of these characteristics remain in newer conceptual frameworks as well. Examples of family background that are predictive of a student’s dropout decision include socioeconomic status, quality of relationships within the family, whether the parents of students attained a college degree, and parents' expectations of their children. Examples of individual characteristics include individual ability as measured by standardized tests or demonstrated in high school grade performance, attitudinal differences, and commitment to

education. Also, students who lack flexibility when confronted with change are less likely to persist. Tinto (1975) said little about mental health except for a footnote on page 101: "it is necessary to point out the existence of a substantial amount of research directed toward the effect of an individual's mental health upon performance and persistence in college." Sex was also predictive in Tinto's conceptual framework, with men more likely to persist than women. According to nces.ed.gov, males are more likely to drop out now than females. In 2019, the male dropout rate was six percent, and the female dropout rate was slightly above four percent (nces.ed.gov). Pre-college schooling includes high school GPA and class rankings. In his paper, Tinto (1975) highlighted that "there is simply too little information regarding the relationship between race and dropout from higher education. It is clear race is an independent predictor of dropout (independent of both ability and social status), but it is unclear in which ways this aggregate relationship occurs" (p. 119). We now know more about that relationship, and newer conceptual frameworks discuss it in greater detail.

Goal and Institutional Commitment

After accounting for individual ability, goal commitment is the most influential factor in students' decision to persist or drop out (Tinto, 1975). The more comprehensive the goal, the more it contributes to a student's decision to persist. For example, if a student's goal is to solely pass a class, her goal will likely have a small impact on her decision to persist or depart. However, if the student has an elaborate and long-term goal, their goal will strongly impact their decision to persist or depart. An example of an elaborate goal would be, after completing the class, obtaining a bachelor's degree and master's degree, and then working at a technology firm where she can use the lessons learned from her degree. Factors critical to institutional

commitment include “its resources, facilities, structural arrangements, and composition of its members” (Tinto, 1975).

Academic Integration

The subcomponents of academic integration are grade performance and intellectual development. Tinto and Cullen (1973) pointed out numerous studies that reveal grade performance is the most important factor in continuation in college (Ammons, 1971; Astin, 1972; Blanchfield, 1971; Coker, 1968; Grief, 1970; Jaffe & Adams, 1970; Kamens, 1971; Mock and Yonge, 1969), which is consistent with MACC’s statistics. The other form of academic integration is intellectual development. Students who view college as a period of opportunity for intellectual growth are more likely to persist (Bayer, 1968) than those unable to do so (Sarnoff & Raphael, 1955).

Social Integration

The forms of social integration are peer-group associations, extracurricular activities, faculty associations, and institutional commitment. Tinto and Cullen (1973) revealed “peer group associations (friendship support) appear to be the most directly related to individual social integration, while peer-group, extracurricular, and faculty interactions appear to be of roughly equal importance in developing commitments to the institution.”

Dropout Decision

Tinto (1975) suggested the decision to dropout or persist is related to optimization. Optimization is when people make an optimal choice depending on their constraints and the satisfaction they get from their decisions. The optimal choice is when a person receives maximum satisfaction from their limited resources. Tinto builds on the work of Durkheim’s

(1961) Theory of Suicide, where he argues the decision to commit suicide largely stems from a failure to integrate into society.

Tinto (1975) differentiated between academic dismissal and voluntary withdrawal. The former usually comes from insufficient academic integration, the latter often because of inadequate social integration. One of his significant findings is poor academic performance, especially grade performance, is more predictive of dropping out than poor social integration, which is consistent with MACC's findings in their June research brief mentioned above. His meta-analysis revealed those dismissed usually come from lower-status and, therefore, lower ability circumstances, while those who voluntarily withdraw are more often high achieving and from upper classes. He highlighted that these findings help explain the poor retention at two-year colleges, where economically struggling individuals are more likely to attend.

Controversial Topics of Tinto's Framework

There is disagreement about whether this framework is useful for the community college context because most community college students are considered nontraditional (Hirschy et al., 2011). Karp et al. (2010) argued it does. As described previously, Community College students face many challenges traditional students typically do not. One of the implications of this is students at community colleges often do not and cannot integrate socially like conventional students do; therefore, Tinto's Framework, which stresses social integration, does not apply to community college students. Karp et al. (2010) argued that is not the case because many community colleges have addressed that concern by implementing structural opportunities to socially integrate.

Karp et al. (2010) interviewed 44 students to investigate the social integration of two community colleges in the Northeast. Their findings provided evidence Tinto's framework does

apply to community colleges. Thirty-one students stated they felt a sense of belonging, leaving only 13 students who did not. The persistence rate of those who belonged was 90%; the persistence rate of those who did not was under 70%.

Consistent with Urias et al. (2016), an additional finding from Karp et al. (2010) was the importance of information networks where students can get information from fellow students, instructors, and counselors. Of their sample, 27 students reported participating in an information network, and 17 reported not. The more meaningful these relationships, the more beneficial they were. They found that one meaningful, deep relationship can significantly enhance persistence. This meaningful relationship can be with fellow students, instructors, or counselors. Like Jacobs-Biden (2007), Karp et al. (2010) also found that College 101 or a Student Success course at a community college can help facilitate information networks.

The most critical finding in Karp et al. (2010) was that information networks were more likely to be formed in the classroom than in other extracurricular activities, such as clubs, and stressed the importance of interaction, such as breakout groups in the classroom. If community college professors and instructors elect to lecture and do not give students time to interact, the outcome will likely be students who are not socially integrated and therefore are less likely to persist. Tinto's framework presents academic and social integration as separate and distinct. Karp et al. stated that they are not separate and distinct for community college students and call to reconceptualize the model for community colleges, so the two forms of integration are combined instead of separate. They suggest academic integration is more predictive of social integration than social integration is predictive of academic integration, but they function together in community colleges. These findings indicate that one potentially beneficial practice

for community college instructors would be facilitating interaction between students in the classroom to enhance social and academic integration.

Research Questions

To better understand student success and departure at MACC, I will seek to answer three broad research questions:

RQ1. How are students accessing and using MACC's resources designed to support student success?

RQ2. What recommendations do students have to improve the support?

RQ3. What are MACC students' prevailing narratives for their successes and challenges in community college?

Research Design

The overall research design began with a literature review and research design that I developed during the Summer of 2020 and presented to the MACC faculty in June 2020 during their research symposium. At the beginning of the Fall 2021 semester, I recruited the participants and did initial interviews. At the end of the semester, I conducted a second interview to follow up on the student's experiences and decisions during the Fall 2021 semester. After the interviews were complete, I coded and analyzed the interviews, developed the students' narratives, created a concise matrix (see Appendix F), then analyzed the products to come to the findings and recommendations in this paper. I explain each portion of the research design further in the subsections below.

Participant Recruitment

During the research symposium, I informed the faculty I would contact them in the Fall of 2021 via email to schedule a time to visit their class and recruit student participants. This

strategy did not work as intended, and I could not secure any classroom recruitment visits (see Appendix C for the email to faculty). After requesting advice from the ORA on how I could get on campus to recruit participants, they sent me a student sample file that MACC pulled for my study. The sample included 994 students stratified and randomly selected to ensure representativeness of the student body. The roster included demographic variables such as age, race, and academic program in which they were enrolled. Before receiving the roster, I turned to Facebook to solicit interviews. Three of the eight students I interviewed came from the community Facebook inquiry.

Using the roster ORA sent me on 1 September, I emailed 11 black males on 2 September 2021 (Appendix D) to get interviews with the population MACC is most interested in, but none responded. On 3 September, after narrowing the roster to students pursuing an associate's degree, I sent another email to 673 students (Appendix E). Nine students responded to the larger email, but I could only schedule interviews with five of the nine. Therefore, the sample size was a total of eight students. For confidentiality purposes, I used the following pseudonyms: Charlie, Adaku, Katlyn, Jennifer, Manson, Leonardo, and Kadie.

Data Collection

To document student experiences over a semester, I designed the study to include an interview at the semester's beginning and end. The qualitative analysis in this paper consists of 14 interviews where I asked the questions listed in Appendix A. The questions were broad and designed to explore the students' overall experience at MACC without narrowing the scope to any one resource or challenge. By asking open-ended questions, I hoped to observe trends volunteered by students and not created by me. The questions asked about students' overall experience at MACC, goals, the support they intended to use to accomplish those goals, how

likely they believed they were to achieve their goals and their overall personal story. Before each interview, students completed a consent form (Appendix B).

I designed an excel sheet to keep track of the interviews. Five of the students conducted the initial interviews virtually on Microsoft Teams, and three elected to do the interviews in person. Of the three completed in-person, two were in restaurants, and one was in a student's house with their mother present. I recorded interviews using the chat to text application, Otter ai. The students elected to conduct three follow-up interviews in restaurants, and three elected to do the follow-up interviews on Microsoft Teams. Before the follow-up interviews, I listened to the initial interviews to help refresh my memory and follow up on key parts of the students' narratives from their initial interviews.

Data Analysis

After I completed the 14 interviews, but before I analyzed them, I deductively developed an initial set of codes to document student characteristics and capture essential aspects of Tinto's framework (see Figure 4). The columns were the students' names, and the rows were categories designed to answer my research questions and demographic information. The rows were labeled: Student Success Resources Mentioned, Resources Mentioned Positively, Resources Mentioned Negatively, Prevailing Narratives of Success, Prevailing Challenges, Social Integration Narratives, Academic Integration Narratives, Security Work Narratives, Dropout/Stopout/Persist, which I recorded on the follow-up interview, Gender, Race, Family Status, program student was pursuing, student's year of high school graduation and full-time/part-time which referred to the amount of time the student was attending Mid-Atlantic Community College.

Figure 4

	Katlyn A	Katlyn B
Student Success Resources Mentioned		
Positive		
Negative		
Prevailing Narratives of Success		
Prevailing Challenges		
Social Integration		
Academic Integration		
Security Work		
Dropout/Stopout/Persist		

Note. This is an example of the initial coding scheme.

I analyzed the data by re-listening to the interviews and periodically pausing to place information I felt was relevant to the categories on the spreadsheet. After I transcribed every interview onto the spreadsheet, I analyzed the narratives and themes by looking across the matrix and drafted initial findings and recommendations that I amended after developing the student narratives.

After I completed the initial coding and analysis, I listened to the interviews again to draft the students' narratives using Tinto's (1975) Framework as a guide. The product of this effort is below in the Student Narratives section of this paper. See appendix F for the concise matrix. The concise matrix was created by re-reading each student narrative and filling in similar summaries for each category of Tinto's (1975) Framework. Creating these narratives and concise matrix allowed me to reassess my initial findings and recommendations by looking

vertically and then across the concise matrix. The additional perspective resulted in several modifications to the findings and recommendations presented in this paper.

Student Narratives

Katlyn

Family Background, Individual Attributes, and Pre-college Schooling

Katlyn reported struggling with depression, anxiety, and ADHD her whole life. These mental health challenges made her feel stupid, and she reported not knowing how or when to ask for help. When Katlyn realized she needed help, it was often too late to receive it. Her parents divorced when she was seven, so Katlyn was raised by her mother, a social worker. When talking about the divorce with her therapist, she said she felt like everybody had emotionally abandoned her and that she “sucked everything in.” She believed sucking everything in had been a significant part of her anxiety. Her mother insisted she attend therapy after the divorce and has kept her in therapy ever since. Katlyn reported struggling with procrastination and motivation, which was part of the reason why it took her nearly seven years to complete a two-year program. It was her mother who pushed Katlyn to go back. She said, “I almost feel [my mom] is more determined than me for me to finish college.”

Goal and Institutional Commitment

Unsure of what she wanted to do, Katlyn started with Transfer Studies and transitioned to social work. Her goal was to move out of her mother’s house so she could have her own place with pets. Although the persistence of part-time students is lower than full-time students, Katlyn did so to pace herself. Because of her ADHD, she received Disability Support Services (DSS) and reported the school knew nothing about her depression. In both interviews, she was nervous about her transfer to the in-state university because the courses were rumored to be more

rigorous and the DSS services less effective than MACC. Katlyn also had positive reviews of DSS but said they “don’t really have all the options to help you.” She also reported DSS could do better helping some professors understand disabilities but admitted that might be too far a stretch due to how complex every mental health case can be.

Academic Integration

Grade Performance: The 2021 Fall semester was her second semester taking 12 credits. The first time she took 12 credits was in 2015, when she began her journey. She messed up so severely academically the first two semesters that MACC placed her on financial aid probation until the Fall of 2021. Since then, she refrained from taking 12 credits to avoid repeating her earlier mistakes. She appeared to pace herself well because she reported mainly getting As and Bs in her courses. This semester she got two As and two Cs, earning a 3.0.

Intellectual Development: She took a year off after having a terrible first semester. While gone, she missed “actually thinking about things.” She felt that a mixture of her medication and experience at MACC helped her learn to cope with her crippling anxiety. The anxiety was still present, but not to the extent it was when she began her journey.

Social Integration

Peer-group Interactions: In our first interview, she reported not feeling socially integrated. She said one of her coping mechanisms was to make a friend in the class and help them succeed. However, she often never talked to them again after completing the course. She also reported that the college had opportunities to “be part of the college,” but she didn’t attend them because they were inconvenient or she was unable to participate. As a member of the LGBTQ community, socially integrating with others in the LGBTQ community was important to her. In our second interview, she said the key to her success was forming a relationship with

another student in the LGBTQ community who took excellent notes in biology and shared his notes with her. Katlyn was the only student who reported socially integrating into her two in-person classes. She was also the only student this semester who took in-person courses. In one of her classes, Katlyn reported only socially integrating at the very end when they did a group project and finally spoke with a student and discovered she had a fantastic sense of humor. The other peer interaction was with a biology tutor, but she reported the tutor did not remember how to help her.

Faculty Interactions: Katlyn's experience with professors was overall positive. She felt the college went "above and beyond to try and help students." Her reviews of professors were mixed from the perspective of DSS and relaying of information and reported, "I think that they (MACC) need a little help hiring the right Professor sometimes because some professors just aren't meant for teaching." One example issue she raised was one professor extended the amount of time students were allowed to take a test. When Katlyn attempted to get time and a half based on the new amount of time given to the students, the professor resisted and said the time and a half was based on the original time, not the modified time. According to Katlyn, un-understanding professors were the exception at MACC, not the rule. Overall, she said professors were understanding and patient with disabilities and the procrastination that is often the product of the disabilities. She also understood that when teachers allow students to catch up after procrastinating, that "means teachers have to do more work at the end of the semester, and that sucks." The most problematic group of professors, according to Katlyn, was adjunct professors who were unfamiliar with the profession of teaching. Before this semester, she reported getting two Cs after her first semester, and in both of those classes, she struggled with the professors. "So that's a huge point; the professor 100% makes the class." Katlyn reported that her Spanish

professor virtually chatted with her despite Spanish being a completely online class. She spoke highly of her professor's ability to teach and be patient. She also reported one of her professors was "a bit of a mess." One complaint about DSS is Katlyn had to email teachers every time she wanted time and a half for tests. She pointed out the irony of "me having to remind people to give me accommodations for something that makes it hard for me to remember." She said her math and science teachers were particularly hard to work with because they tended to interrupt and not let her finish her questions, so they often went unanswered.

Dropout Decision

She finished her Social Work associate degree this semester and transferred to an in-state university under the TSA program. Katlyn persisted despite running into many challenges this semester. In the beginning of the semester, she failed to pay a bill on time and was therefore unable to participate in her classes for the first week while she straightened the billing situation out. She eventually caught up but then got a sinus infection that took her out of class for an entire week. When she recovered from that, her mother tested positive for COVID. To avoid getting COVID, Katlyn house-sat and stayed at two friends' houses until it was safe for Katlyn to return home. Katlyn reported that three of her four professors understood her challenges, with only one not allowing her to turn in work late or redo tests. She said her teachers were vital to her success.

Work

She worked for the public school system for three years doing Individual Education Programs but quit before this final 12-credit semester. When asked why she worked, Katlyn said she didn't have an option and did not know what she would do this semester without a job to pay for her car payments and gas.

Adaku***Family Background, Individual Attributes, and Pre-college Schooling***

Adaku was born in Nigeria, and her father came to the U.S. on a work Visa when she was a child. Adaku and her five siblings remained in Nigeria with her mother while their father prepared a home for Adaku and her siblings. As the family navigated the immigration process, Adaku's siblings departed Nigeria to live with her father. Adaku, being the youngest, was the last, and she joined her father and siblings in the United States when she was 16 in 2016. Although she did ok academically in high school, she struggled to fit in culturally. She missed the close-knit community she left behind in Nigeria. She felt supported in her faith as a Muslim, and most of her social interactions occurred outside of college.

Goal and Institutional Commitment

Unsure of what she wanted to do and concerned about how expensive college was, she decided to go to MACC. Learning about MACC's top-notch nursing program and lured by the attractive job and wage prospects, she decided nursing could be a good fit for her and what she wanted out of life. However, after struggling academically in the science curriculum, she switched to Computer Information Systems. Her goal is to get a master's degree.

Academic Integration

Grade Performance: She got As and Bs in her first year of classes and started her second year with a 3.4 GPA. Although she began her second year on a high note, she struggled with the core science curriculum required of nursing students. Despite her best efforts, her GPA dropped from 3.4 to 2.0. After her poor performance, she spoke with her academic advisor, and they decided Adaku should switch to Computer Information Systems. Computer Information Systems was a good fit for Adaku, and she got a 4.0 in the Fall 2021 semester taking three

demanding courses even though they were online. When asked about the key to her success, she said she looked up study methods on YouTube and discovered how to do active recall with flashcards.

Intellectual Development: Adaku didn't feel she had the skills to go to college because she didn't feel she was good with people. She reported that MACC helped as she interacted with faculty, the Student Success and Achievement Program (SASP), and performed well academically.

Social Integration

Peer-group Interactions: Although she said she tried to be social, she struggled with social anxiety. Her only friends at MACC were friends she met in high school.

Faculty Interactions: She interacted with faculty in the SASP program and with her academic advisor. Instead of dropping out when she did poorly in the nursing science curriculum, her advisor helped Adaku look for a program aligned with her strengths. Adaku reported her advisor was her most helpful resource. In our second interview, Adaku mentioned that her professors had office hours that were helpful to her because they allowed her to ask questions in an all-online environment.

Dropout Decision

She has one semester left and is already accepted through the Transfer Student Alliance program to a four-year university. A small amount of support from the faculty helped Adaku refocus her efforts on her goal of getting a degree in a field with outstanding and lucrative job prospects.

Work

She worked as a cashier for extra money as she continued to live with her father while attending MACC.

Charlie***Family Background, Individual Attributes, and Pre-college Schooling***

Charlie's parents divorced when he was nine years old in 2010, and for three years, he was the subject of a difficult custody battle. Charlie's father, who he is no longer in contact with, had addiction issues. He reported the divorce was the most traumatic experience of his life and wondered if his parents could have fought harder to make it work. "The mindset I came out of [the divorce with] was if it doesn't work, you give up. So that's been something that I've constantly had to overcome." He struggled academically as a child and was concerned that he would not graduate from high school. Wrestling helped motivate him to pass, but even considering how much he loved to wrestle and his excellent wrestling coach, he barely got through high school. An unhealthy romantic relationship in high school also haunted him. After they separated, he reported he felt lost and, at one point, thought he was demon-possessed. He reported rededicating himself to his Christian faith saved his life. "Apart from my faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, I would give up. I would give up totally." He reported not caring about his future in high school and not thinking about college. He even went so far as to say he did not want to go to college. He took one major lesson from wrestling: "regardless of my failure, I need to keep going. I need to keep moving." He also spoke about his time as a camp counselor, where he mentors individuals through a team-building exercise. "It doesn't matter how unathletic these kids are; if they don't give up, they're going to get through it."

Goal and Institutional Commitment

Charlie was unsure of what he wanted to do after graduating from high school, but he knew his mother wanted him to attend college. He reported his main goal for going to college was to honor his mother. As a talented wrestler and fit male, Charlie started his journey at MACC pursuing an exercise science associate degree. However, he decided it was too narrow a field with poor job prospects and switched to business. After a conversation with his uncle about how his cousin enjoyed the nursing program at the Virginia Military Institute, Charlie changed his major again to nursing. After “utterly failing” biology, a requirement for the nursing program, he switched back to business which was the start of the Fall 2021 semester. His professional goal, which did not require an associate degree, was to join the electrical union. Charlie reported the institution’s online course picking was helpful to him.

Academic Integration

Grade Performance: When he got to the nursing program’s science curriculum, he, in his words, utterly failed. Despite the failures in previous semesters, he still started the Fall 2021 semester. This semester he departed after the pile of work he had to do became too much for him to handle. When I asked Charlie why he did not do well in school, Charlie blamed his poor work ethic.

Intellectual Development: He said he enjoys school. Although his grades and performance do not reflect, he reported learning a lot from his professors and courses at MACC. He reiterated that his work ethic makes him say, “meh, I can probably put this to the side.” He said structure is what he needs to excel but explained, “every time I go to Panera, I hit a wall on my brain, and I just fall apart.”

Social Integration

Peer-group Interactions: He said he found it helpful to get a friend and “do school together.” He said he is unable to do schoolwork alone. He used to go to the library and work around other people, which was helpful, but the pandemic took that away. When asked if he interacts with fellow students, he answered, “oh no, not at all. It’s kind of like a running joke that it’s socially dead.” Most acquaintances he knew, he knew from high school. “I never really had the time to take advantage of the opportunities” structurally provided by MACC to integrate with peers.

Faculty Interactions: He said, “one of my favorite things about the community college has been my professors... Having your professor treating you like a human being is so much different than high school where you feel subordinate to listen, or whatever.” His English professor significantly impacted him because of his unorthodox teaching and leadership style. “He really challenged me and was like, ‘you’re a person who stands at a decision or stands at a fork in the road and doesn’t make a decision.’ I’d never been called out like that. It helped me make decisions. It really helped me not only in college but also in my life.” He reported his professors were phenomenal, and a few made a significant impact on his life by being professionally and brutally honest with him. When asked about programs that helped him at MACC, he answered, “I really haven’t launched into the depths of their programs. I know they have like a huge opportunity for all sorts of programs.” Charlie said he only met with academic advisors twice when he switched to nursing and initially signed up for classes. Initially, the advisor said, “here’s what you can look for if you don’t really know, I can help you pick, but I can’t really help you much after that.” This semester, his only interaction with online teachers was via email from the professor to the students.

Dropout Decision

He departed. It was a significant two-and-a-half-year fight for Charlie. Despite no social integration and extremely poor academic integration at MACC, Charlie reported refusing to quit even after it was clear he would not pass. After failing the nursing program, he switched back to business again this semester to persist but could not. Charlie procrastinated with schoolwork until it piled up to the point where his position in school became untenable. Charlie told me he may have misinterpreted what his mother wanted during our second interview. After discussing his plan to depart with his mother, he reported that she said, “whatever you’re going to do, you need to be faithful, and you need to do it well.”

After he departed, he applied to a union position at an HVAC company with on-the-job apprenticeship training. The HVAC company president told him, “You can be making \$300,000 in five years or lose \$120,000 going to school.” When asked if he had any advice for MACC, he said, “my one complaint is all the assignments were due on the weekend. For a professional procrastinator like myself, it’s super easy to just say, ‘I’ll do it on the weekend.’ But when you have a stack of assignments that are enough to scroll, it’s definitely overwhelming. My recommendation would be to spread the work out.” He distracted himself by keeping himself busy with part-time jobs, a girlfriend, significant bible study, and friends. He described the experience. “We were almost halfway, I hadn’t done any of the work that week, and I told myself I’d do it on the weekend. It turned out I worked on Friday and then had to work the entire weekend at the camp. I had way too much work due to do in one weekend, whether I was working or not, and I was so stressed out. I’m not really being a benefit to the school or my professors. I’m not benefitting myself by doing this continuously.” He asked his pastor for advice and told his pastor he had an opportunity to go to the trade union. His pastor said, “you

can always go back to college.” He closed with this: “It was a great community college, and a part of me thinks they would have a great standing even amongst four-year universities. The things I’ve gained from MACC have been super helpful even now, looking into trades. They’re doing their job well. The only thing I would have desired was a better relationship with professors, and I think having the online distance is difficult.”

Work

Charlie was a part-time camp counselor and part-time general laborer at a nursery. He said, “I choose to work because if I don’t, I have no money, and I also don’t want to mooch off my mom.” He said in his initial interview that without the work, “it tends to be fairly empty because it’s a lot of sitting in my room by myself.”

Angela

Family Background, Individual Attributes, and Pre-college Schooling

Angela earned a bachelor's degree in math and a master's degree in special education several years ago. She was a mother of five kids, ages seven to 22, and still married to her husband, who worked full-time. Angela reported being a rule follower, so college was a natural progression of following the rules. She did well academically and socially in college. However, although Angela enjoyed teaching, she did not like the politics in education and decided to go back to school to become a certified public accountant. She had already completed her associate degree in accounting in the Spring and was in her final semester at MACC to complete her last two classes. After finishing the prerequisite courses, she planned to take the Certified Public Accounting (CPA) Exam. Therefore, she came into the semester 100% confident she would persist and get one step closer to her goal of becoming a CPA. She reported that MACC courses were much easier than her four-year university and master's degree courses and made even

easier by the maturity associated with aging. She attended in-person classes during the first semester and a half of her associate degree program. “Then everything went online, and that was rough because no one knew what was going on.” She signed up for three classes, with economics as her third choice. They had to cancel the other two courses because not enough students signed up for them, so she took economics.

Goal and Institutional Commitment

Angela was fixated on her goal to become a CPA and said, “I persist for my end goal. When I finished my associate in accounting last semester, I said I was done. So, [before] I never said my end goal was to take the CPA exam. I have to take these two classes to be allowed to sit for the CPA exam, so now that’s my ultimate goal.” She attempted to use the daycare services on campus but could not. Although she said it was hard for her to remember, she thought childcare was income-based, and her husband made too much money for her to meet the income criteria. She said MACC had an excellent accounting program and some great professors. “I think the more upper level you get, the quality professor goes down. They adjunct, they have experience, but they’re not teachers.” When asked what advice she would give the President, she said, “at some point, we’ve got to get back to normal. We’ve got to go back to the classroom because I don’t feel like the knowledge I gained from the online classes with people who don’t teach is adequate knowledge for me to go on and proceed.” She spoke highly of some of her professors who refused to do purely online courses. “I had several professors with fully online classes, but they said, ‘No, we’ve got to meet.’ And so, they set up outside of their other classes that were scheduled to meet.” In our second interview, she said procrastination was not in her nature. “Sometimes, I persist to my detriment.”

Academic Integration

Grade Performance: Before this semester, she had completed an associate degree in accounting and never received below an A in a MACC course. The courses she took this semester were entirely online, and she said the only way she learned the material was by reading the book. In our second interview, she reported getting her first MACC B. A B might as well be an F for Angela; she reported being disappointed.

Intellectual Development: She said the tutoring other students helped her reinforce what she learned in class, especially when classes went online. Because of the tutoring, she did a lot of research outside the class that she would not have done if she was just a student. “With classes online, I don’t think I got the education I need to take the CPA exam and do well.”

Social Integration

Peer-group Interactions: Angela reported being social in her undergraduate program but said, “now that I’m in community college, I have more responsibilities, I have a full-time job, I don’t have a social life at all.” She also reported the class she got a B in started at around 15 students and dropped to five. Regarding her tutoring experience, she reported the tutoring was mainly professional. She did not form relationships even though she tutored several individuals on Zoom over several semesters. She pointed out that I began my project during a pandemic when many in-person courses moved online, “so the social is going to be very different than if you did it two or three years ago.”

Faculty Interactions: In our first interview, she had positive reviews of the professors. She said, “I think I developed relationships with some professors because you’re constantly reaching out to them if you need help.” The only exception was adjunct professors who were skilled and knowledgeable in their subject matter but not in the profession of teaching. “Some

people are good at relaying knowledge, but some people are not.” In our second interview, she revealed there was almost no interaction with her professors. “Not even email. He emailed a couple of class things, but there was never any teaching from him. So essentially, I read the book, did the assignments in the book, and took tests from the book. It was rough.” When referring to the economics course she took and got an A in, she said there was no interaction with that teacher, either, and reported she did not learn nearly as much as she could have with professor interaction. Throughout her MACC experience, she said she got to know her professors and interacted with them for instructions and help. That interaction, a form of social integration, helped her succeed in her previous classes. When that was gone in these online courses, it negatively impacted her.

Dropout Decision

She had no social integration and poor academic integration this semester, yet she persisted. She thought about quitting. “I wasn’t going to take these last two classes, and I thought to myself, ‘I don’t really need them.’ But because I was determined, I wanted to finish.” After discovering she would not get an A, she thought, “is it worth it?” Especially because she had all As before this class. The 4.0 caused her to be motivated by grades when before she was not.

Work

The four semesters before this semester, she did not work full time. Her mother-in-law watched her son, who wasn’t in school yet, while Angela was in school. She started working full-time halfway through last semester and reported that it was challenging juggling work, family, and school. She also tutored last semester, but not this semester. “I did not have as much time this semester with my kids as I would have liked.” She felt that studying took time

away from her family and would use her son's football practices as a time to study to avoid being absent while home with her family.

Jennifer

Family Background, Individual Attributes, and Pre-college Schooling

Jennifer recently completed her bachelor's degree in Kinesiology at a prominent in-state university. She reported struggling with depression and being diagnosed with bipolar type II at 17. Her parents are still married, and Jennifer said she was close to her mother, a therapist. Jennifer's journey has been challenging. In high school, her mom decided to admit her to two mental health institutions for a short time. During her first year at the in-state four-year university, she went to a Mental Health Institution in New Mexico for a month. She found a medication regimen that helped in New Mexico, although she reported continuing to struggle with depressive episodes.

Her college journey did not start at MACC. She went to a university in another state originally. She attempted to join a sorority when she arrived and was not accepted. In a desperate dash to find friends, she panicked and started partying, heavily drinking every night, and not doing any schoolwork. She began failing her courses, and when administrators attempted to address her deficiencies, she "exploded" and was expelled less than a month into the semester. She explained, "the depressive episodes were so bad; I just shut down." Fortunately, MACC had courses that started later in the Fall, and when she returned home, she was able to enroll in courses at MACC.

After graduating from MACC, her experience at the in-state four-year university did not go smoothly at first, either. She explained, "It took the first semester; I wasn't well adjusted enough. I was also having mental health issues, so that wasn't great." She explained that once

she got accommodations for her ADHD and started taking ADHD medicine, she began to get better. “It was definitely a struggle finding the right medication, and there’s been a lot of ups and downs.”

Her experience in a sorority at the in-state university was also fraught because she felt she put in a lot of work that her friends didn’t recognize, and she never got a leadership position. She said she remained in the sorority because most of her friends were in the sorority, even though the sorority was a source of distress.

She also reported being a spiritual person. “I’m very into meditation and assess my beliefs carrying me through, so meditation is a go-to for me.” Exercise also helps her get through her depressive lows. She said there is a history of mental health issues in her family. Her mom’s mom had bipolar, and her mom’s dad was an alcoholic and burned their house down on accident in his sleep. Then her mom’s mom had strokes and was in bed all the time, so Jennifer’s mom had to raise herself. Jennifer sees a therapist regularly outside of MACC.

Goal and Institutional Commitment

Jennifer enrolled in the TSA program that allowed her to take her transfer studies associate degree and transfer to the in-state university. At the four-year university, she received DSS, such as extra time on tests, being allowed to take her tests separately from other students and taking a lesser course load while still being considered a full-time student. “The reason that was important was I did join a sorority at [the four-year university], and if I wasn’t a full-time student, I wouldn’t have been able to be a part of it.” When I asked what disabilities she received support for, she wasn’t sure. “My mom kind of set it up.” She believed she only received support for ADHD and not bipolar. Despite receiving DSS services at the in-state university, she received two Cs and reported that the four-year university’s courses were more

rigorous than MACC's. When I asked what programs at MACC would help her succeed in her goals, she said, "I haven't even tried to look into whether MACC has any resources that would ultimately help me or prepare me for grad school." She reported getting the most helpful resources outside of MACC.

She had a strong background in working with people with disabilities. She started in high school. One of her aunts was a social worker at a special needs school, and Jennifer needed things to add to her resume to apply for college, so she volunteered at the special needs school and discovered it was her calling. "So, everything like OT is the end goal. I know I have to get there somehow." She also worked at an autism waiver agency after returning from Georgia, and it inspired her. "So OT has always been the goal. I'm very determined to get there because I want to work with people with disabilities. I think it's the perfect career for me." She said her commitment to her goal fueled her persistence.

Academic Integration

Grade Performance: She reported her lack of social integration helped her focus on her schoolwork. She excelled at MACC before going to the in-state university without needing Disability Support Services. The two Cs she got at the in-state university brought her back to MACC because she did not qualify for entry-level occupational therapy doctorates with those Cs. At MACC, without DSS support, she got one A and one B. She said, "I'll be honest; at MACC, the courses are a lot easier than at the in-state university."

Intellectual Development: Like Angela and Katlyn, she reported that MACC's courses were easier than courses at four-year universities. She reported relying on her mother heavily in our second interview. "I think there's a time when I need to grow up a little bit and kind of find

my footing. I need to find it in myself to push myself. I know it will be tough, but I think it will be worth it.” Education is helping her get closer to that goal.

Social Integration

Peer-group Interactions: When asked why she excelled at MACC and not at the out-of-state university, she said, “I had no social life here. When I came back to school, all my friends were away at college. I had my mom, and that was pretty much it. I had nothing to do but study all day.” She explained, “It’s a lot different because it is a community college, and you’re not living on campus.” When I asked her for more detail, she said, “Okay, I didn’t have no friends here. Some of my friends from high school went to MACC, too, and I had a few classes with them. So, it was nice to have people I knew in my classes.” In our second interview, she said, “I lone wolfed it the whole semester.” Like Angela, she reported her class started with 15 students and ended at about eight. “There was this one guy at my table I talked to, but then he disappeared. He was like me; he graduated from college, had just one class to take, and wanted to go to PT school. I don’t know what happened.”

Faculty Interactions: She spoke highly of many of her professors but reported professors were “hit and miss” based on conversations with her fellow students. “Like mine was awesome. I got lucky. I happened to know he was already awesome, so I picked him again. But when I would go to the science tutoring center to look at the models or whatever, there was always someone else in there complaining about their professors. Especially people who adjunct or whatever.” She recommended screening the adjunct professors better. She told one story she got from her friend, who said there was a significant language barrier and the adjunct professor was never available for questions, so her friend dropped the class. “I’ve never had problems

with my professors, though. I go on rate my professor and do research first. I did that for my statistics class.”

Like Charlie, she reported a poor experience with her academic advisor. “I was always on the right track to go to the in-state university, but I remember I didn’t get in right away because I didn’t know I had to take certain classes before I was going to be allowed in. So, the advisors at MACC aren’t the best. I’ve had friends that didn’t get into schools because their advisors didn’t tell them stuff. I probably went to an advisor one time, and that was it.” In our second interview, she said great things about her anatomy professor, who gave her an extension on her final because she had a panic attack. “I told him what was going on, and he was very understanding.” She attended a hybrid class and reported a much better experience than those who went to all online courses. The lectures were recorded so students could watch them at their leisure. One downside was when she watched the lectures on her own time, she often pushed them off to the last possible day. In our second interview, when asked about the keys to her success, she said, “my professor made everything very clear and concise, and if you had any questions, he would go above and beyond to answer them.”

Dropout Decision

She reported her most prominent barrier to success was her lack of belief in herself to do things and how she thought and felt. She explained one time when “I was having a bad day, and I was like ‘I can’t do this, I can’t do this, I can’t do this.’ I was like, ‘mom, I can’t do this.’ She said, ‘just do it. I know you can get it done.’ And I did it.” She also explained that she told herself, “I’m not going to get into these (doctorate/masters programs) places, which I don’t think is true. It’s like a constant war up here. Can I do something, or can I not?” In her second interview in December, she revealed she had a rough start because she worked full time. She

thought about quitting school but knew she would have to wait again until the following year to get closer to her goal if she did. She eventually quit her job.

After she quit, her mom told her that “sometimes when you have more time, it’s just more time to waste.” She revealed, “toward the end of the semester, I really started gearing up and putting in more time and spending less social time. Me and my boyfriend usually spend time together every day, but I started telling him, ‘No, I need to study today.’” She also reported making flashcards on Quizlet helped her. Also, in our second interview, she revealed she got into a big fight where her mom, who was normally a source of strength, told Jennifer she would never be able to succeed in grad school. “That kind of killed my confidence,” she said. She also revealed when she gets into a depressive episode, Jennifer lashes out at those she loves. Although Jennifer reported doubting her abilities, six months after our second interview, she posted on Facebook that an occupational therapy program accepted her.

Work

During our first interview, Jennifer worked full-time in a research lab at the in-state university she graduated from. After she graduated, she moved back in with her parents with the plan to work in the research lab, improve the two Cs she got at the in-state university, then start a master’s or doctorate in OT. In our second interview, Jennifer discussed juggling her course, work, and interviews for doctoral/master's OT programs. She ended up resigning from her job on good terms from the in-state university because she did not feel it was a good fit for multiple reasons and started working part-time at a physical therapy office as an aid. She said the job was more relaxing and suited her better.

Kadie***Family Background, Individual Attributes, and Pre-college Schooling***

Kadie's parents were born in Sierra Leone, met in Germany, and emigrated to the United States in 2000. Both of Kadie's parents grew up modestly in Sierra Leone, and as I sat at Kadie's dinner table in their small townhome, I noticed they continued to live modestly. However, Kadie's mother is a registered nurse, and her father has two full-time jobs. He owns an insurance company and works full-time at Nestle. Kadie said she thinks her parents work so hard to "give us the life they didn't really have." Kadie's goal was to become an attorney to provide for her parents, so they do not have to work so hard.

Kadie said a significant defining moment in her life was the passing away of her grandmother. She spoke fondly of how generous, loving, and strong her grandmother was, and although she passed away three years ago, Kadie still teared up thinking of her. Kadie honors her grandmother's memory with her drive. Kadie was a self-driven and independent woman. Traits she claimed to learn from her mother and grandmother.

Her mom was also a source of strength. "My mom is very independent, and I noticed that about her growing up. She does stuff by herself. Like while my dad was at work, she'll be juggling us and then working until the morning or until nighttime." Kadie said her family was very close and said one of her favorite memories is when her whole family went to her graduation.

In our first interview, she mentioned how God gave her wisdom and understanding in tough times. She grew up as a Christian on her mother's side and Muslim on her father's side but infrequently went to church.

Goal and Institutional Commitment

She felt like she started late because she took a semester off and only took one class the second semester, and now is attending full time. She wants to get an associate's and bachelor's degree in paralegal and then go to law school. She was confident she could accomplish that goal without support. She said, "I don't need any of my resources. I like to do it on my own unless it gets to the point where I would need it. So just looking at them (her hard-working parents), I don't want them to work so hard for too long. I want everything to be done so my parents can relax after a certain point. That's my main goal." She said the key to her success is grit. Distractions, like social media on her phone, are a challenge, but she believes she will persevere despite those challenges. "I don't change my plan." She was determined to accomplish her goals.

Academic Integration

Grade Performance: Kadie was content with her grade performance. She said, "my brain is always what I need it to be, so I can get an A or a B. So, I don't really need help." She had a 3.0 during the first interview. She got an A and a C this semester, so she maintained her 3.0.

Intellectual Development: She claimed her inspiration for becoming an attorney came from her favorite television shows. She reported wanting to develop into the characters she looked up to on television.

Social Integration

Peer-group Interactions: She did not interact with friends at MACC, mainly because all her classes were online. The friends she did mention attended other colleges or had other professional pursuits. All her friends were from middle school or high school. "I'm just there

for college. I don't like to mix my group." Like Jennifer, she said, "I limited hanging out with my friends. I was still working. So, it was just mainly work and school." Next semester she said she would pursue using a math tutor.

Faculty Interactions: She said she often meets with her academic advisor virtually. "She's very helpful. I really like her. So we talk a lot. I shoot her an email; she'll schedule an appointment with me, and we'll just meet. We'll talk about everything, and we'll go over my courses and everything, and she'll give me resources as well, which I use the ones she gives me. She knows what she's talking about." She said she liked her teachers even though the classes were online. She also reported she easily got distracted in online courses. She mostly communicated with her teachers via email, and one of her teachers had an online lecture every Tuesday from seven to eight. She also said the homework assignments in her paralegal class were challenging, and she sometimes had trouble reaching her teacher for help.

Dropout Decision

Kadie persisted in her program at MACC and intends to finish her last semester and transfer to a state university in the Mid-Atlantic in the Fall of 2022.

Work

She worked full-time at a Childtime to provide for herself while living with her parents and attending MACC. When asked why she works full time, she said, "it's five of us between me and my siblings, and I like getting my own stuff, so I don't always have to worry and depend on my parents. I like to have my own money, so I can help support my three younger brothers. I just like to help my parents. That's my main thing." She reported her job is a significant distraction because she's teaching. "So, while I'm also learning, I'm teaching other kids as well. It gets tough." Going forward, she's transitioning to part-time work and full-time school. Before

working at Childtime, her job, which was also a childcare/education business, would not work with her schedule for her to go to school, so Kadie didn't go to school full-time.

Leonardo

Family Background, Individual Attributes, and Pre-college Schooling

Leonardo grew up in a loving family, and both of his parents were still married at the time of our interview. He reported his parents regularly pushed him to do better growing up when he would prefer to play video games and be lazy. In middle school, his parents' work caused them to move from New York when Leonardo was 12 or 13, which was a difficult transition for Leonardo. He struggled with mental health in High School and was starving himself to stay thin. A pivotal moment in his life was, during poor mental health in High School, he met the musical theater teacher at his high school who encouraged him to join musical theater as an elective. Leonardo discovered it was a new passion on top of video games that improved his mental health. His creative writing teacher and classes to do with creativity helped shape him.

Goal and Institutional Commitment

He didn't know what he wanted to do yet, which is part of the reason he went to MACC. He reported thinking about mental health while in his computer science courses, and therefore going from computer science to psychology was a natural transition for him. Before making that transition, he researched and discovered a TSA program to the in-state university for psychology. That helped him decide to make the transition. He would like to become a psychiatrist because "they make so much money." He said he thinks there is about a 75% chance of becoming a psychiatrist someday. He is concerned about how much money becoming a psychiatrist will cost.

Academic Integration

Grade Performance: Leonardo went to MACC because he was conscientious of the cost of college, and he was unsure what he wanted to do professionally. Due to his passion for creativity and video games, he began pursuing a computer science program at MACC. Leonardo struggled with the math curriculum in the program, though, and switched to psychology in 2021. Even though he reported often playing video games during class, he earned a 3.0 online. I could not schedule a follow-up interview with him to see how he did academically in the Fall 2021 semester.

Intellectual Development: Leonardo reported that although online courses seemed attractive at first, he discovered that they were harmful to his intellectual development. He said, “I actually got into college last year during the whole Corona thing, so we had to be online, which seemed very attractive. You know it can be chill, you can also be really lazy with it. Later into the year, I got more distracted. It was hard to stay focused on my computer. Now that we’re back in person, I feel so much better. I’ve actually stayed focused.” He admitted later he had a lot of games on his computer and would play them during online classes. He also gets distracted by social media on his phone.

Social Integration

Peer-group Interactions: He reported a few of his friends from high school also went to MACC. He also made two friends from a mutual connection and a friend in biology, although he did not interact with his friends while online. Although he had not taken advantage of tutors in the past, he was thinking about using tutoring in the Fall of 2021.

Faculty Interactions: Raphael reported not taking advantage of office hours provided by his teachers. He reported experiencing challenges communicating with instructors in an

online environment, noting, “If I had to ask a teacher something [online], it was kind of hard to do.” When I asked if his teachers had office hours, he answered “yes.” When I asked him if he took advantage of them, he said “no.”

Dropout Decision

I could not schedule a follow-up interview to see how his semester went. He was the only student who reported being both socially and academically integrated. The only challenge he felt he had was his motivation.

Work

Leonardo lived at home and did not work in the Fall 2021 semester.

Manson

Family Background, Individual Attributes, and Pre-college Schooling

Manson’s mother raised him after his father and mother divorced when Manson was four. Manson reported his father’s toxicity and friends who were unkind to him contributed to his depression in middle and high school, but he is now taking antidepressants that help. Manson is an artist and reported wanting to spread a message through his art. He said in 7th grade, his art teacher and fellow students were impressed with an art piece he drew, and it helped him realize he wanted to pursue art professionally. Social interactions can be challenging for him because Manson has Asperger’s Syndrome. He struggled academically until the 11th or 12th grade but reported improving dramatically. He enjoys Live Action Role Playing (LARPing).

Goal and Institutional Commitment

Manson was the only student who was aggressive in learning about the student supports MACC offers. It was evident in the interview that MACC has a solid student orientation that talks about clubs, disability support services, personal counselors on staff, and more. Manson

planned on aggressively attempting to find clubs and be as social as possible. Manson is pursuing a graphic design associate degree and hopes to transfer to an in-state college of art, part of the Transfer Student Alliance Program, to eventually get a master's degree.

Academic Integration

Grade Performance: This was his first semester, and I could not schedule a second interview to see how he did. He was concerned about one online course that gives the students the book and everything to do, and then he will be on his own to do it. He described being nervous about the lack of structure.

Intellectual Development: Manson had a narrative of constantly improving. For example, he reported he would work on being more organized at MACC and hoped to continue the upward trajectory of academic improvement he experienced during his last two years of high school.

Social Integration

Peer-group Interactions: When asked what he thinks his most significant barrier is to success, he answered “social interactions. I find it difficult to find the proper friends or find the proper networking to get to people to help my dreams come true. That’s the difficult part for me.” He reported having three high school friends who attend MACC with him.

Faculty Interactions: Comparing to middle and high school teachers, he said, “Teachers are a lot more liberating and a whole lot better in spite of the work being more heavy on. It seems like college teachers are actually passionate about making people learn.”

Dropout Decision

I could not schedule a follow-up interview with Manson to see how the semester went. However, I did Facebook chat with his mom, who revealed he was on winter break, which implied he persisted from the Fall semester to the Spring semester.

Work

Manson was not working at the time of our interview.

Findings

RQ1: How are students accessing and using MACC's resources?

Finding 1: Each student is accessing a fraction of MACC's resources. The two main reasons for not accessing them are because they feel they do not need them or perceive them as inconvenient or inconducive to their lives. A tertiary and less significant reason is they do not know about them.

No resource was so popular that every student mentioned it, and many students refrained from using the college's resources at all. Kadie, for example, said, "[the resources] are there, but if we're being honest, I don't need any of my resources. I like to do it on my own." Similarly, Jennifer did not use Disability Support Services (DSS) at MACC because she did well in MACC courses and did not need them. When Jennifer transferred to the in-state university, Jennifer took advantage of DSS. Kadie and Jennifer are examples of how students avoid using resources they do not need.

Charlie and Katlyn revealed many students know that MACC has a plethora of programs designed to help them, but they are not willing to spend the time to research or go to them because they are inconvenient or inconducive to their lives. In our initial interview, Katlyn said, "the college has opportunities, but I don't attend them because the opportunities are

inconvenient. Charlie similarly said, “I really haven’t launched into the depths of their programs. I know they have a huge opportunity for all sorts of programs.”

Some students are not participating in their programs because they do not know about them. For example, I asked Leonardo if he had heard of the Student Achievement and Success Program (SASP), and he said he had not. However, I believe it is equally as likely that if he had attended the student orientation, Leonardo had at least heard about SASP and forgotten about it. When I spoke to Manson, he mentioned taking notes during the student orientation program. Although he did not necessarily remember specifics about MACC’s resources, he at least knew they existed after recently attending student orientation. This point leads me to believe that the lack of participation is more a function of choice than knowledge. Even though students chose to use a fraction of MACC’s available resources, there were several resources several students mentioned. I talk about them in finding 2.

Finding 2: Of MACC’s substantial resources, the Transfer Student Alliance Program (TSP), Academic Advising, Student to Student Tutoring, and Disability Support Services were the programs most often mentioned by this project’s students.

Five students (Katlyn, Adaku, Jennifer, Leonardo, and Manson) benefitted from TSA, and Jennifer had already completed her bachelor’s degree in kinesiology after successfully transferring via the TSA program. This program makes the transition to four-year universities in the Mid-Atlantic seamless if students meet specific prerequisites. Academic advisors played a crucial role in this program because students must take the correct classes to qualify. TSA was the program most often volunteered and mentioned by students I interviewed. Kadie, who did not mention the program, could benefit from it. Her goal was to transfer to an in-state university to pursue a Juris Doctorate. There was not a pre-law TSA agreement with the university she

desired to attend, so she must navigate admissions by herself. Four students mentioned their academic advisors. Two reported they were helpful, and two said they were not. I discuss the mixed reviews in finding 3.

Three of the students mentioned tutoring services. When she retook statistics, Angela participated as a tutor and reported it helped reinforce what she learned in class. Katlyn participated in the tutoring labs to keep her from procrastinating, and Kadie said she planned on using tutors in her math classes in the Spring of 2022. Student-to-student tutors are an opportunity to socially integrate with peers while improving academic performance. They also allow professors to delegate responsibility to high-performing students. Student tutors also received mixed reviews discussed in the following finding.

Katlyn, Manson, and Jennifer mentioned Disability Support Services. Time and a half and taking tests separate from a class, when relevant, were the most common supports mentioned at MACC. Jennifer was allowed to take fewer courses at the in-state university and still be considered a full-time student. For all three who mentioned them, the support was for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), although they struggled with other mental health issues in addition to their ADHD. One common diagnosis was depression, and no student reported receiving support specifically for depression. Manson was the only one who mentioned a psychologist on campus. After my interview with him, I discovered that MACC has three full-time personal counselors. With more than 7500 FTE students, either demand for counseling services exceeds the supply of counselors, or the counselors are a relatively well-kept secret. Jennifer and Katlyn saw personal counselors off-campus.

I discussed the Student Achievement and Success Program (SASP) with two students, but only one of the students took advantage of the scholarship and support it offered. Raphael was

unfamiliar with it. Adaku informed me her academic advisor recommended her for SASP, which allows her to borrow books, benefit from other students' experiences, and gives her access to a network of individuals who ask about how her classes are going and if she needs help.

Finding 3: Academic Advisors and Student to Student Tutoring received mixed reviews.

Student reviews of academic advisors were mixed. Charlie and Jennifer reported their academic advisors did not help them much. Jennifer explained, "Academic Advisors aren't the best. I didn't get in [to the in-state university under the TSA] right away because I didn't know I had to take certain classes. I've had friends that didn't get into schools because their advisors didn't tell them stuff." However, Adaku and Kadie reported their academic advisors were helpful and let them know their options to remain qualified for the transfer program. One of the ways students' academic advising experience differed is how many times students met with them. Both Jennifer and Charlie stated they only met with an advisor once or twice at the beginning of their journey. Adaku and Kadie said they sometimes met with them multiple times a semester to benefit from their excellent support.

When referring to the biology tutors, Katlyn said, "half aren't even good at biology. They just did biology ten years ago. Then you come in, and they're like, 'I'll try.' I'm like, I don't need to try. I need to succeed." Katlyn's critique reveals at least some tutors are not qualified to tutor. Contrasted with Angela's experience of tutoring being helpful to her shows there is some benefit to tutoring. Angela reported preparing for her tutoring sessions, which helped her tremendously in her online statistics class because she would not have prepared so deeply if it were not for her tutoring another student. Katlyn's comments suggest not every tutor prepares so diligently.

RQ2: What recommendations do students have to improve support?

Finding 1: Students do not have many recommendations for improving support. While most students understand that MACC has many resources designed to help them succeed, they choose not to use them.

According to the preceding section, students choose not to access MACC's resources for several reasons and have little to say about improving them. Three students recommended screening adjunct professors better to ensure they are professional educators. One student suggested that support for students with disabilities be automatized and that professors receive additional training on how to support students with disabilities.

Finding 2: Students must advocate for themselves to receive their Disability Support Services, and sometimes professors' initial reaction is to resist the students' requests.

Katlyn spoke passionately about this recommendation when she pointed out the irony of "me having to remind people to give me accommodations for something that makes it hard for me to remember." Katlyn clarified that many professors were understanding and quick to accommodate, but the ones who were not caused Katlyn severe anxiety and distress. She said she understood being accommodating means professors have more work to do later in the semester and therefore recommended that MACC investigate ways to make the support more automatic. As we will see later in this paper, Katlyn's understanding professors propelled her to success after a seven-year battle to complete her associate degree.

Finding 3: Two students recommended improving the performance of academic advisors. One student recommended improving the performance of tutors.

The variation in experiences with academic advisors may suggest expectations of academic advisors are unclear and those unclear expectations negatively impact their

performance. Charlie said, “The only time I met with an advisor was when I initially signed up for classes. She was like, ‘here’s what you can look for; if you don’t really know, I can help you pick, but I can’t really help you much after that.’ I think I met with an advisor one other time.”

It is unclear if the expectation for advisors is to help students pick classes to stay on track or if academic advising is designed to be more like the Guided Pathways Model (Bailey et al., 2015) referred to earlier in this paper. Similarly, it is unclear what the expectations of tutors are. Are tutors expected to know all the content, do their best like Katlyn’s biology tutor, or be prepared for tutoring sessions like Angela?

RQ3: What are MACC students’ prevailing narratives for their successes and challenges in community college?

Finding 1: Many narratives surrounding success are the same narratives surrounding challenges. These narratives can be summarized as professors, family, faith, friends, and strangers.

Professors and success. All students interviewed reported professors as central to their success. Katlyn summarized professors' importance by saying, “A Professor 100% makes the class.” How they make a class varies. Students described professors making a significant difference by understanding students' challenges and treating students like adults. Katlyn highlighted that one of her favorite professors was “more personable than most teachers. She’s a lot more understanding. You can tell that she listens and comprehends what she’s talking to you about.” Angela told a story about a professor who insisted on doing her classes synchronously despite the administration's reluctance. Manson said the teachers were “liberating.” Every student I interviewed, including the one who departed, spoke highly of at least one professor at MACC and how they contributed to a positive educational experience and their success.

Professors and challenges. The alternative perspective to Katlyn’s “a professor 100% makes a class” statement is a professor can ruin a class, too, and they do. Katlyn said, “Some professors aren’t meant for teaching.” Angela, the individual with a bachelor’s degree in math and a master’s degree in education, said, “the more upper level you get, the worse the professor. They adjunct, they have experience, but they’re not teachers.” Jennifer said, “professors are hit or miss. Mine was awesome, so I picked him again, but when I would go to the science center to look at models, there was always someone complaining about their professor. Especially the people who adjunct or whatever.” Charlie said, “I would have desired a better relationship with professors. I think having the online distance is difficult.” These individuals had great things to say about some professors and concerns about others.

The two students with bachelor’s degrees specifically expressed concerns about adjunct professors. Adjunct professors, who often teach upper-level classes, have more complex content to cover, contributing to the perception they cannot teach, not because they cannot, but because the students fail to understand. However, there is likely some truth in their comments where adjuncts are unfamiliar with new and improved ways to help students learn, such as structured interactive lectures and flipped classrooms (Prabhu & Jyothi, 2022). Adjuncts, who are experts in their field but not in teaching, likely rely primarily on lectures because that is the way they learned in college.

Family, faith, friends, strangers, and success. When describing what factors contributed to their success, all students mentioned their family’s role. Kadie desired to provide for her parents so they did not have to work so hard. Charlie wanted to honor his mother. Katlyn and Jennifer’s mothers were anchors in their lives, but they expressed a desire to move out and be independent. Angela was the only mother and wife of the eight students interviewed,

and therefore school was something she struggled to balance with work and family. Adaku reported her family shaped who she was as an individual, and Manson was close to his mother, who divorced her husband when Manson was four. Leonardo mentioned his parents the least, except for how hard they work. The family dynamics alone were complex. Manson, Charlie, and Katlyn's mothers raised them. Adaku lived with her father while her mother remained in Nigeria, and Angela was older and therefore married with children. Thus, there were only three students whose parents were still married. Out of the six students without a bachelor's degree, three were raised by single mothers who reported having fathers with abusive addiction issues. Their mothers were a significant source of strength and a narrative for success.

Faith was a narrative of success for Charlie, Adaku, and Kadie, while Jennifer reported being a spiritual person. Of the four, Charlie was most committed to his religion because the church camp he worked at on the weekends provided his lodging. Charlie was a Christian, Adaku a Muslim, and Kadie reported being both Muslim and Christian, with Islam coming from her father and Christianity from her mother. Jennifer's spirituality included meditation which she said was good for her.

For this paper, friends and strangers are relationships with individuals outside of those made at MACC. As Alexander et al. (2008) reported, friends and strangers are a vital narrative of success for community college students because they do not meet many at college. Manson's narrative of success that shaped him came from 7th grade and high school. Amid depression, he impressed his art teacher and peers with an art project. This art project encouraged him to pursue graphic design at MACC to tell a story with his art in his style. Adaku said she looks for encouraging YouTube videos with a story of students who prevail under challenging circumstances. Jennifer explained how working at an Autism Waiver Agency convinced her to

pursue a Doctorate of Occupational Therapy. These are all stories of others impacting these students' lives and helping them answer the question, "who is it I am becoming?"

Family, faith, friends, strangers, and challenges. Family, faith, and friends were also prevailing challenges for the students. For Katlyn, her family got COVID, forcing her to move between friends' houses to avoid getting sick. Angela juggled family and work with school and often felt her kids suffered from her professional pursuits. Jennifer's mother, who typically was a source of strength and support, told Jennifer there was no way she would be successful at graduate school. Charlie's living conditions allowed him to easily be distracted by friends who lived with him at the church camp, while Kadie said her success was made possible by spending less time with friends. These are significant trade-offs MACC students face. They had to choose between time spent with family, faith, friends, and schoolwork. Charlie chose friends and did not persist. The rest chose schoolwork and did persist by sacrificing time spent with the people they love. This finding highlights the variability of student experiences while also narrowing the factors that community college leaders can explore when students go from doing well to doing poorly.

Finding 2: A narrative of success identified by the two more experienced students is that MACC courses are easier than four-year university courses.

Angela and Jennifer already had bachelor's degrees, and Katlyn began her transition to the in-state university. Both students who had bachelor's degrees reported that MACC classes were easier than four-year university classes. Jennifer's class this semester was a class she got a C in at the in-state university; she got a B at MACC. Moreover, Jennifer required extra time on tests at the in-state university but not on MACC tests. This perception has significant but unknown implications. On the optimistic side, assuming the same content between classes,

perhaps MACC teachers are teaching the content better, creating a more straightforward course taught in a way students can understand. On the pessimistic side, students who transfer from MACC to a four-year university may be set up for failure when they hit mid-level courses for which they are inadequately prepared. Glynn (2019) suggested the latter is not the case. Her study of more than two million students reported community college students persist at an equal or higher rate than students who transfer from high school or other four-year universities. A comment by Katlyn in her follow-up interview suggested the former. “I feel like MACC, as far as trying to improve themselves and listening to the students, is 1000 times better than what I’ve seen in the past month [from the in-state university].” I recommend that MACC conduct more research about content, perceived ease, and student success of transfer students. MACC’s students and the TSA program make a future study plausible and beneficial for MACC and the universities to which students transfer.

Finding 3: A narrative surrounding students’ challenges is mental health. Past and present mental health challenges impacted these students’ decisions to persist or depart.

Mental health was the most common theme in prevailing challenges. The product of those with mental health challenges, at least in the case of Katlyn, Charlie, and Jennifer, was procrastination. Katlyn and Jennifer developed strategies to deal with their procrastination. Katlyn by leaning on others, Jennifer by staying away from others. Despite speaking with me about his plan for avoiding procrastination, Charlie did not execute the plan. His decision to depart was rooted in the stress the pile of unfinished work caused him. Charlie was also the only one of the three who did not mention a mental health diagnosis and did not receive accommodations. However, he did note a difficult time in his life when he thought he was demon-possessed. Charlie said, “without my faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, I would give up.”

He reported his faith helped him persevere in life. College is not for everybody, so departing is not necessarily bad. However, if students depart because of undiagnosed and untreated mental health issues, they are not reaching their full potential. Mental health and how schools accommodate it are part of many students' decision to persist or depart. Mental health is an essential individual attribute that requires more attention so MACC and schools like it can adjust and help students with diagnosed and undiagnosed mental health issues.

Finding 4: When deciding whether to persist or depart, the importance of academic integration and goal commitment outweighed social integration and course load for these students. Students reported that social integration was low before COVID but worsened when many classes transitioned online. Students performed worse academically in these online classes as well, yet every student but one persisted. This persistence led to finding 5.

Academic Integration. Of the six students I was able to reinterview, five persisted. The students who persisted did so while earning a 3.0 or above. Katlyn got two A's and 2 C's, and Angela got an A, and a B. Angela thought about quitting when she realized there was no way to earn an A in auditing. The B she received this semester was her first MACC B and is, therefore, a blemish on what used to be a 4.0 transcript. Adaku got three A's, and Jennifer earned an A and a B in her courses. Therefore, Jennifer accomplished her goal of getting a good enough grade to apply to occupational therapy universities.

Goal Commitment. Goal commitment was an essential factor in these students' decision to persist. Katlyn and Angela, for example, persisted with little to no social or academic integration because they were focused more on their goal than their grades. Consistent with Tinto's (1975) findings, academic integration is more critical to MACC students than social

integration since Tinto ties goal commitment to academic integration. I will discuss goal commitment in more depth in finding 5.

Social Integration. In her follow-up interview, only one of the eight students, Katlyn, shared examples of social integration. In Katlyn's initial interview, she said, "The college has opportunities [to integrate socially], but I don't attend them because the opportunities are inconvenient." Manson mentioned associating himself with "a lot of clubs," but I could not schedule a follow-up interview to ask about his experience in those clubs. Generally, the students I spoke to, regardless of where they were in their educational journey, did not socially integrate at Mid-Atlantic Community College.

Often, the answer to whether they felt socially integrated was not just no, but a resounding no. Adaku said, "No, no, no. I mean, I try to." Charlie said, "Oh no, not at all. It's a running joke that it's socially dead." Having both attended four-year universities, Angela and Jennifer contrasted social life at four-year Universities with MACC. "When I was an undergrad, I was [social]," reported Angela, "I mean, it's very different because now I have children, I'm married... Now that I'm in community college, I don't have a social life." Jennifer said, "it's a lot different because it is a community college, and you're not living on campus."

Katlyn was an exception to Charlie's socially dead running joke. In her follow-up interview, she said, "I actually managed to make a lot of friends this semester. They were from my two in-person classes. One friend [in biology] gave me his notes, and it probably helped me pass because I wasn't able to keep up." She also told a story about a friend she met in her final project of an art class where her friend's personality "came out." As Karp et al. (2010) revealed in their paper, these projects appear to be an excellent opportunity for professors at MACC to improve social integration.

Persistence. Every student who persisted had a 3.0 or above and a solid goal to which they were committed. Four of the five students who persisted reported poor social integration, and all five who persisted attended part-time. The conglomeration of these facts reveals academic performance and goal commitment outweighed social integration and course load in these students' decision to persist or depart.

All students participated in at least one online class this semester. Charlie and Angela reported almost no communication with their professors and said they learned solely from a book because there was no asynchronous or synchronous content. Kadie had positive reviews of her online professors, but one of her classes met synchronously once a week, revealing even a small amount of interaction with professors can make a significant difference. With professors being such an integral part of the MACC experience, the online classes where no interaction with professors took place had negative reviews. Angela attributed her B to her professor's lack of interaction.

In her first interview, Angela spoke fondly about her in-person experiences with her professors at MACC. "I think I developed relationships with some of the professors because you're constantly reaching out to them if you need help." She said one of her teachers was phenomenal in person but struggled to teach and develop relationships with students online. Although students reported minimal social integration at MACC in person, they reported it was even worse online. At least with in-person classes, students said they often developed relationships with their professors. Online, students reported not even knowing what their professors looked like. At best, students in online courses only interacted with their professors via email. Even the emails were infrequent and often only from the professor to the student.

Finding 5: Goal commitment was the most significant factor students considered when choosing to persist or depart. Even in the face of academic failure, narratives around these students' goals pushed them to persist. Goals were most apparent to experienced students. Most new students admitted being unsure of their goals, and their goals changed during their MACC experience.

Charlie's story is a potent example of this finding. He took courses in the Fall of 2021 despite having two Fs on his transcript. Despite failing those courses and not performing well in several others, he returned to MACC for a third year. He did so because his goal was to honor his mother.

Charlie presented a narrative of persevering in his interviews, saying, "regardless of my failure, I need to keep going. I need to keep moving." It was only after he modified his goal and decided to move in a different direction that he finally departed. Before moving in another direction, though, he spoke to his mother, who clarified that she wanted him to do whatever he did well and remain faithful. After he established he could meet his goal of honoring his mother and still depart, he did so. Without his mother's blessing, he'd likely have several more Fs on his transcript.

In our initial interview, Katlyn reported poor social integration and a history of poor academic integration. She stopped out after struggling academically in her first semester, and it took her a year to recover and return. Her goal of moving out of her house and getting her own pets persuaded her to go back. Her poor academic performance did haunt her and caused her to take a smaller course load for the remainder of her journey to perform better academically. Katlyn's story exemplifies how academic integration and goal commitment are more predictive of persistence than social integration and course load.

Angela admitted to persisting at her peril and thought about withdrawing from her Auditing course when she discovered there was no way for her to get an A. What kept her from dropping out was her goal of taking the Certified Public Accounting (CPA) exam. Jennifer also thought about dropping out of her course as full-time work and part-time school got stressful. She said what kept her going was her goal. If she had dropped out, she would have had to wait a whole semester to get closer to her goal.

Angela and Jennifer went to MACC for a specific purpose. Angela's goal was to qualify to take the CPA exam, and Jennifer's goal was to meet the prerequisites to pursue a master's degree or entry-level doctorate in occupational therapy. Both were convinced and committed to accomplishing their goals in my interviews with them.

Of the six students who did not have a bachelor's degree, four said they were unsure of what they wanted to do when they began taking courses at MACC. Katlyn, Adaku, Charlie, and Leonardo started by pursuing an associate degree in one program and switching to another. Switching programs was their way of exploring and finding the right goal for their ability and passions. Only two of the six students without a bachelor's degree claimed to know what they wanted to pursue when they got to MACC. Manson, who is pursuing graphic design, and Kadie, who intends to become an attorney.

Security Work

My literature review led me to believe students would be focused on maintaining financial security, but this was not a driving issue for the students interviewed for this study. Katlyn, Manson, and Raphael did not work this semester to focus on school. Katlyn expressed she was nervous about paying her bills without an income but received financial aid to help her survive. Angela, Jennifer, and Kadie were working full-time during their initial interview.

Jennifer quit her full-time job at the research lab and got a new part-time one at a physical therapy office. Charlie worked two part-time jobs as a general laborer and camp counselor, and Adaku worked part-time as a cashier. Apart from Angela, all students lived with their parents, so security work was not as prevalent as if I had interviewed other older students like Angela. Although Katlyn, Kadie, Adaku, and Charlie expressed monetary concerns, they did not show Hart's (2009) prevalence of security work I expected to see in these community college students. With rent covered by their parents, these students had a safety net to choose whether they wanted to work.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Focus on MACC's Bright Spots

MACC is doing a lot right. Even in this study that interviewed eight very different part-time students in a pandemic and primarily online environment, all but one of them persisted from one semester to the next. I recommend that MACC identify practices of high-performing and effective professors, advisors, and tutors and highlight the impact of these practices to support student success. These high-performing and effective professors are examples of what Heath and Heath (2010) called "bright spots" in their book *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*.

Professors

Many professors are making a difference and understand the challenges their students face, and they adjust due dates and give students opportunities to catch up when they fall behind. They also engage with their students in meaningful ways. Those professors are bright spots in the organization, and students mentioned several of them by name during their interviews. MACC undoubtedly has many.

Adjunct professors can potentially benefit from the practices of bright spots. Although they are subject matter experts with impeccable credentials and are passionate about teaching others, they may not be familiar with the lessons learned by professional educators in the education sector over the last decade. With professors being such an essential part of the community college experience, MACC can improve the student experience by sharing the latest and most significant discoveries in the teaching profession with adjuncts. This sharing of pedagogical innovation should be a departmental-level effort because different strategies work differently depending on the discipline. I recommend a recurring summer event where professors come together in small groups to discuss how they can engage their students' curiosity with active learning and team exercises or how they can flip their classroom. The bright spots should lead these small groups to make meaningful and lasting changes.

Another potential dark area is online classes, where most interaction occurs solely through email. Charlie's "online distance is difficult" and Angela's "we've got to get back to the classroom" are two examples. Their comments are consistent with the findings of Braxton et al. (2000) that class discussions, defined as intellectually stimulating discussions, effective answering of questions from professors, and professors encouraging students to participate, significantly contributed to social integration, institutional commitment, and student persistence. These interactions with peers and professors are essential, especially to community college students who otherwise have very little academic or social interaction outside the classroom. Moreover, small group projects, debates, and other classroom activities go a long way if worked into a curriculum. Lectures, on the other hand, probably help a minority of students.

Academic Advisors

Another opportunity to benefit from bright spots is in academic advising. The reviews of academic advisors were mixed. For example, when speaking with Charlie and Jennifer, it was clear that many academic advisors believe their role is to show students how to pick classes and stay on track. After that, many advisors feel their value is minimal. When speaking to these students, though, I learned their goals are potent motivators for them. I also discovered these early years at community college are years of discovery. Adaku changed her major from nursing to information systems. Charlie started with exercise science, changed to business, then to nursing, then switched back to business again before departing. Leonardo discovered computer science was not for him and changed to psychology. Per Bailey et al.'s (2015) Guided Pathways Model, advisors help students find their place in the workforce or a four-year college through this discovery period. They must revisit these students' goals and help them find college resources and courses that will get them closer to each student's changing definition of success. Students only desire to use the resources they need, so academic advisors have the vital role of introducing resources to students when they need them. Academic advisors must meet with the students regularly throughout every semester and understand the available courses and resources that can help students. Findings from this study indicate that not all advisors are meeting regularly with their students. The ones who are not can benefit from the bright spots that are helping students navigate this period in their lives.

Tutors

Tutoring is an excellent opportunity for tutors to refresh content they previously learned and for teachers to delegate responsibility to tutors to free time to develop more interactive classroom experiences. Findings from this study indicate there was variation in the quality of

tutors. Putting talented bright spots like Angela in charge of newer or less qualified tutors could minimize poor tutoring experiences while increasing institutional commitment and intellectual growth predictive of retention of community college students (Braxton et al., 2004, 2014, 2020). It may also make preparation for tutoring sessions less labor-intensive if the tutors periodically get together to discuss the content, so they become more collectively prepared.

Recommendation 2: Focus on the Transfer Student Alliance (TSA) Program

Of all the programs mentioned by students, TSA was the program mentioned by the most and appeared to be the most beneficial. Students must meet prerequisites for programs like SASP and BMI, so they are advantageous to a small niche of students who need them. TSA is open to all students who wish to transfer to a four-year university, and students are taking advantage of it in mass. Therefore, this program is worth expanding, either in terms of quantity or quality, in case students want to pursue professional opportunities more prevalent in other states or prestigious programs in other states to bring skills back to MACC's state. Expanding this program can improve institutional commitment while helping students achieve their goals and become who they desire to be.

Recommendation 3: Focus on Mental Health and Leveraging the Community.

If I were to pick one issue that would keep me up at night if I was a leader at Mid-Atlantic Community College, it would not be retention rates, grades, or even the lack of social integration. The defining issue for me would be students' mental health and helping them identify and develop treatment plans to improve their mental health and harmful habits (i.e., procrastination) that may manifest if untreated. In this study, I asked no questions about mental health specifically. Still, three students spoke in-depth about their diagnoses and two about periods in their life where they experienced severe depression. One student began crying in the

interview as she recalled how much her grandmother, who passed away in 2019, meant to her. One student spoke about significant social anxiety she continues to wrestle with. There was only one student where mental health was never a topic of the interview, Angela, who was the oldest, married, and a mother. There is a significant opportunity to impact students here by leveraging the counselors in the school and surrounding community to help students find the direction they desire to move in life.

Recommendation 4: Conduct additional mixed-methods research at community colleges and continue to improve data collection methods such as surveys.

For example, TSA is an excellent program to leverage to conduct research into the finding that community college courses are much easier than four-year university courses. Performing this type of research may reveal if MACC professors are teaching the same material more effectively or if MACC students are struggling in advanced four-year university courses because of the lack of rigor in MACC courses.

Another opportunity, especially with the excellent student data ORA has on their student population, is to conduct mixed methods research on part-time students with low GPAs. MACC will likely find many students in this vulnerable population are students of color and single parents facing significant tradeoffs and challenges. These students will probably be challenging to reach, so the research design will require the researcher to have a plan for child-care or to meet individuals at inconvenient locations. The data, especially the qualitative data, will be valuable to MACC and likely generalizable to other similar community colleges.

ORA should continue to reassess its surveys to ensure they provide the college with an accurate picture of its student population. For example, finding five of research question three revealed four of the six students pursuing their initial associate degree started their journey

unsure if the program they were in was right for them. These numbers suggest that ORA statistics may be misleading because far more students are pursuing an associate degree with the plan to transfer while also being unsure of their goals. It may be beneficial for MACC to make that an option in their student entry survey.

Limitations of Analysis

Due to recruitment challenges related to COVID, I was only able to interview eight students when I had hoped to interview 10 to 15. Moreover, I was unable to interview a black male, which meant I could not speak to them about the Black Male Initiative or collect data on their experience. The small sample size and absence of black males in the sample are two examples of how the participants in the study were not representative of the MACC student population. Therefore, the findings from this study are not generalizable to the MACC student experience.

The persistence rate of the sample of students in this study was high. It is possible that the students who agreed to participate were not struggling as much as other students because they felt they could handle participating in this study in addition to school, work, and their other responsibilities. Perhaps students willing to volunteer to be interviewed by a stranger are more likely to succeed than those who do not; therefore, the high persistence rate of this paper is likely a coincidence. The high persistence rate of volunteers and underrepresentation of students who struggle more than others is a continuation of a problem highlighted in a cross-case analysis by Davies et al. (2011). Their article highlights, “The dominant culture lens leaves many citizens on these “egalitarian” campuses pushed to the outside.” Students pushed to the outside are harder to reach.

I must be honest about the possibility my biases influenced both the findings and recommendations in this paper. Biases are born of experience, though, and I have a lot of experience as a leader in the Marine Corps, an Economics Instructor at the Naval Academy, a father of three, a husband of 18 years, and a 39-year-old life-long learner from humble beginnings. That is the lens I analyzed this data through, which is vital information for readers.

Conclusion

There is a surplus of research on community college student success and achievement, but persistence and retention in community colleges around the country have changed little despite this research (NSCRC, 2021). Interviewing these eight students revealed to me why that is. Every student's journey is different, and every individual must find the path suitable for them. Doing so involves a complex cocktail of interactions and trade-offs, making it almost impossible to design a program capable of helping even most students. Using in-depth narrative analysis of interview data allowed me to deeply consider stories to understand the nuances that embody students' community college experience. These stories led to the four conclusions below.

One, the professor 100% makes the class at MACC, and therefore professors collectively make the MACC experience. The interactions professors have with students and students have with other students can be equally as powerful, and those interactions are at least as important as a course's content. Often, if community college professors don't facilitate student-to-student interactions in class, they will not happen outside of class (Karp et al., 2010). Leonardo pointed that out to me when he said, "I like in-person school better because you can make friends that could help you study." Creating an environment where learning and relationships form promises the most significant impact on MACC students.

Two, treating mental health challenges, both temporary and permanent, will significantly impact students whether they persist or depart. Mental health is often invisible and only discovered through relationships, so improving relationships in the classroom can help here. A priority of MACC should be putting a task force together to find ways to support students' mental health either on or off-campus. Leveraging the resources in the community may relieve some of the burdens currently on the Health and Wellness Center at MACC.

Three, TSA is impactful. It represents open doors previously closed with significant cost savings. Expanding the quantity or quality of the TSA may help students make and stick to personal goals. With goals being a powerful part of the community college success narrative, the resources MACC devotes to this program would be used well. As revealed earlier in this paper, 16.8% of students are unsure of their goals. Giving students more attractive options, in combination with effective academic advising, may help some of those students find their calling.

Four, there is a lot of room for additional research at MACC. Research on student success at a four-year institution after graduating from MACC would provide further insight into student success after MACC. Studies to understand the challenges facing part-time students with lower GPAs would also provide additional information on how MACC can best support vulnerable student populations, including part-time students, students with low grade point averages, single parent students, and male students of color.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

First Interview with Students

1. How would you describe your experience at MACC so far? I will use the parroting technique for short responses. For example, if they say “great,” I will respond with a questioning tone, “great?”
2. What are your goals while at MACC and beyond?
3. What support do you plan to use to accomplish those goals?
 - a. If currently using: Can you describe your experience with <insert program>. For example, what has been most helpful to you? Do you have any recommendations for improvement?
 - b. If not currently using, I’m going to ask question 4, and if unaware of programs, I’m going to inform them of available support.
4. What support at MACC are you aware of that can help you accomplish those goals?
5. How likely do you think you are to accomplish your goals?
 - a. What do you think your most significant challenge will be while working toward your goals?
 - b. What do you think will be most helpful in assisting you in accomplishing your goals?
6. Tell me the story of your life up until now.

Second Interview with Students

1. How has your semester been? Again, parroting technique.
2. Are you closer to the goals mentioned in our first interview?
 - a. If yes, what factors contributed to your success?

- b. If not, what challenges made it difficult for you to get closer to your goal?
3. How have the student success programs impacted your success? Do you have any recommendations for helping you or students like you in the future?
4. What are your plans for the spring semester?

In our first interview, you told me your life story from your perspective. What updates would you make to it now?

Appendix B: Consent Form

I volunteer to participate in a capstone project conducted by Mr. Michael T. Martin from Vanderbilt University. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about how individual stories of students contribute to their decision to persist in college or not. I will be one of approximately 20 people being interviewed for this research.

1. My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If I decline to participate or withdraw from the study, no one on my campus will be told.
2. If I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.
3. Participation involves being interviewed by Mr. Martin from Vanderbilt University. The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview will be recorded to assist Mr. Martin in Qualitative analysis, but I have the right to ask not to be recorded, at which time Mr. Martin will take notes during the interview.
4. I understand that Mr. Martin will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.
 - 4a. I wish to be identified as _____ in the paper.
5. Faculty and administrators from my campus will neither be present at the interview nor have access to raw notes or transcripts. This precaution will prevent my individual comments from having any negative repercussions.
6. I understand that this project has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), Vanderbilt University. Mr. Martin has also received an IRB exemption from Mid-Atlantic Community College (MACC). For questions regarding my rights as a research subject, I can contact the MACC ORA at 410-777-2622 or ORAirb@MACC.edu.
7. I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this project.
8. By my signature below, I am certifying that I am at least 18 years old.
9. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

Signature _____
 Printed Name _____

Date _____
 Phone Number _____

Signature of Mr. Martin _____

For further information, please contact: Mr. Michael T. Martin at 443-254-0636 or Michael.T.Martin@vanderbilt.edu.

Appendix C: Email to Faculty

Subject: Research Time!

Good Afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you all for attending my presentation in the beginning of summer. I hope everyone feels recharged and is as excited as I am for the fall semester to start. As a reminder, I plan to solicit volunteers for interviews in the beginning of the semester. I will be on leave from my job for the first week of classes, so I am entirely available to you and your students. If you're willing to support me, please send me an email with your class day, time, and online or in person location. I know time is valuable, and class time is especially scarce, so I will keep my solicitation to five minutes.

Thank you again for your support; it means the world to me.

V/R

Michael T. Martin, Major, USMC
Adjutant, Headquarters and Support Battalion, Headquarters Marine Corps
Doctor of Education Candidate, Vanderbilt University

Appendix D: Original Email to Male Students of Color

Subject: Doctoral Project Interview

Good Morning Gentlemen,

My name is Michael Martin, and I received your names and emails from the Vice President of ORA at MACC. Bottom line up front, I would like to interview you about your journey to and experience at MACC in support of my doctoral capstone project. If you're interested, please reply to this email, and feel free to ask questions or voice concerns. We can do the interviews virtually or in person. If we do them in person, you can pick the restaurant of your choice, and I can buy you breakfast, lunch, or dinner on one of the weekends.

I look forward to hearing back from you.

V/R

Michael T. Martin, Major, USMC
Adjutant, H&S Battalion, Headquarters Marine Corps
Doctor of Education Candidate, Vanderbilt University

Appendix E: Email to Larger Group of Students

Subject: Your Story

Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen:

If you're receiving this email (via the BCC line for your privacy) you're currently pursuing a certificate or associates at MACC and living in Anne Arundel County, and I'm hoping to interview you to capture your story and pull lessons out of it for my Doctor of Education capstone project. Although MACC asked that I not incentivize interviews with gift cards, I can treat you to a meal or coffee. I can also do interviews virtually.

Part of my research is collecting data via surveys less and talking to people more. It's well out of my comfort zone, as I consider myself an introvert, but exiting our comfort zone is how we get better.

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

V/R

Michael T. Martin, Major, USMC
Adjutant, H&S Bn, Headquarters Marine Corps
Doctor of Education Candidate, Vanderbilt University

Appendix F: Concise Matrix

	Family Background	Goal	Individual Attributes	Student status	Academic Integration	Social Integration	Dropout decision	Key school supports
Katlyn	Divorced parents, Supportive mother.	Unsure when she started. Social work masters now	ADHD, Depression, mental health challenges. LGBTQ Community. Empowered by the presence of others who help with procrastination	12-Credits; 2 in-person and 2 online	Varied by semester, but averaged 3.0	Poor peer social integration in initial interview. Positive peer integration in follow up interview and mixed faculty relationships	Persisted despite challenges	Disability Support services, TSA Understanding professors Used biology tutor
Adaku	Adaku joined her father in the U.S in 2016. Her mom remains in Nigeria.	Unsure when she started. Started with nursing, struggled in science, switched to computer science.	Self-reported social anxiety. Looks to Youtube for guidance	9 credits online	Good start; struggled in science courses of nursing program. GPA range from 2.0 to 3.4 before this semester. 4.0 this semester	Most meaningful relationships were outside of the college. Positive interactions with SASP and her academic advisor	Persisted. Accepted to University	Academic advisor. TSA. Professor office hours. SASP
Charlie	Divorced Parents	Unsure when he started. Started with exercise science, switched to business, then to nursing and failed science, then back to business	“Never give up” mentality. Devote Christian. No self-reported mental health, but a self-reported poor work ethic. Struggles with procrastination. Also said he's empowered by others. Desired to join electrical union	12-credits all online. 2 of the 4 were on a delayed start	Poor. This is his third year. Two “Fs” on his transcript. Failing classes this semester.	“Socially dead.” One of his favorite things about the college experience was his professors. However that was bad this semester with all online courses.	Dropped out. The fact he started is surprising with 2 difficult years preceding this one.	Academic advisor unhelpful. Online course picking. Professors.
Angela	Married with five kids	CPA. “I persist for my end goal”	Tendency to persist at her own detriment. Rule follower. Bachelor in math, Master in Special Education.	6 credits. 2 online courses	Received her first community college “B.” Reported thinking about quitting due to the blemish on her perfect GPA.	“I don't have a social life.” She enjoyed tutoring, and said before the Pandemic she had positive relationships with professors.	Complete	Mixed reviews of professors. Participated as a tutor. Classes easier than at 4-year university
Jennifer	Parents are still married, but she isn't close with her father. Mother is a sources of strength	Getting into Ph.D. Occupational Therapy Program	Bachelor's in kinesiology. Bipolar 2, ADHD. She's fit and spiritual, using both to help her through bouts of depression.	6 credits. 2 hybrid courses	1 “A” and 1 “B”	Reported her lack of social integration fueled her academic success.	Accepted to Occupational Therapy Masters program at Towson	Poor reviews of her academic advisor. TSA Program. MACC courses easier than four-year university's.

			Procrastination could be a problem					Mixed reviews of professors
Kadie	Parents immigrated to U.S. in 2000. Both married and hard working.	Finish paralegal associate. Become an attorney to provide for her family	Independent. No reported mental health issues.	2 Online Classes	1 "A" 1 "C." Consistent with her 3.0	No peer interactions in her online course. She reported limiting her time with friends helped her succeed. Liked her teachers even though courses were online. One teacher had an online lecture.	Retained and finishing her final semester	Positive reviews of her academic advisor. "I like to do it on my own unless it gets to the point where I need it." Will use a math tutor next semester.
Leonardo	Parents still married and encouraging Leonardo to succeed.	Unsure of what he wanted to do when he originally went to MACC. Started in computer science, didn't like the math, and switched to psychology. He would like to eventually become a psychiatrist	Self-reported lazy person. Struggled with mental health in High School, but explained the mental health issues are in the past. Enjoys video games, theater, and being creative.	Unknown.	He had a 3.0 going into the semester. I was unable to interview him a second time, so I am not sure how he did this semester.	He went to MACC with a few friends from high school and met other friends through mutual friends. However, after COVID, he stopped interacting with friends. Found it difficult to get ahold of professors in an online environment.	Unknown	TSA program.
Manson	Parents divorced.	Depression in middle and high school but taking anti-depressants that help. Has Asperger's Syndrome	Graphic design associate degree with plan to transfer to College of Art under the TSA program.	Unknown.	Unknown. This was his first semester, and I was unable to schedule a follow up interview	Nervous about social interactions. Finding supportive friends to help him continue to grow. Although he was just starting the semester, he said the professors were "passionate about making people learn."	Unknown, but his mother said he was on winter break when I reached out for a second interview, which implies he completed the semester and intended to go back to school in the spring.	TSA program. Reported there was an excellent orientation that he took notes in. Intended to be involved in clubs.