

Overview of Meeds College

History

Meeds College¹ is a highly selective, four-year private liberal arts college located in the heart of Memphis. The college has been described as “the garden in the city.” *Princeton Review’s* 1995 college guide named Meeds as the most beautiful college in America noting its richly-wooded and landscaped campus grounds as well as the Collegiate Gothic style which is represented throughout the architecture of the school buildings. The latest example is the 136,000 square-foot Paul Barret, Jr. Library, which was completed in 2005. The college cites an operating budget of \$58 million dollars with an endowment of \$230 million dollars; this calculates to an endowment per student of \$136,500 and a per student expenditure of \$34,421 (Meeds College, 2010a).

The origins of Meeds College dates back to 1837 with the founding of Clarksville Academy. The Presbyterian Church took control of the school in 1855, an affiliation that continues to this day. Originally all male, the school became co-educational in 1916. Despite a distinguished faculty that included Joseph R. Wilson, the father of Woodrow Wilson, the college did not thrive in Clarksville. Charles E. Diehl, president from 1917 to 1949, brought the college to its new 100-acre campus in Memphis in 1925. At that time, it was named Southwestern at Memphis, a name tied to the college’s location in the southwest region of the Southern Presbyterian Church. The school was renamed Meeds College in 1984 in honor of Peyton Nalle Meeds, a longtime professor at the college and Diehl’s immediate successor as president (Nelson, 1996).

During his tenure as president, Diehl instituted the three practices that essentially distinguished the college in national educational circles; his first innovation was the consistent use of the Gothic style of architecture throughout Meeds’ buildings. The second innovation was an honor system that placed responsibility for the integrity of students’ academic and personal conduct in the students themselves. Diehl’s third innovation was a twelve-credit course titled *The Search for Values in the Light of Western History and Religion*, which leads students through the history, philosophy, religion, politics and literature of the West in a discussion-intensive, primary text-centered format. (Van West, Lester, Binnicker, & Owens, 1998).

Academics

Meeds bases its academic program on four components: the Foundation program, major concentration, elective courses, and participation in co-curricular activities. In 1984, the board of trustees committed itself to making Meeds one of the finest liberal arts colleges in the nation. The board’s commitment was supported by initiatives in areas such as scholarships for students, faculty recruitment, new facilities, and fundraising. In 1990, *U.S. News and World Report* identified Meeds as first on the list of “up-and-coming” national liberal arts colleges in the judgment of college presidents and deans. In the wake of Meeds’ effort to achieve excellence and renown, the size and selectivity of the Meeds student body has grown over time (Nelson,

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1996). Admission to Meeds has become increasingly competitive; fewer than 42% of applicants are admitted each year. First-year students entering Meeds in Fall 2009 were academically strong, with 81% in the top quarter of their graduating class and nearly three in four with a high school grade point average above 3.5 (Meeds College, 2010b).

With the exception of a small masters program in accounting, every Meeds student is an undergraduate. Popular baccalaureate degree offerings include those in the social sciences, biological/life science, history, and business/marketing. There are 24 departmental and 8 interdisciplinary majors along with 35 minors. The student-to-faculty ratio at Meeds is 10 to 1 with the average class size being 13; approximately 97% of faculty members possess a doctoral degree. Nearly half of the Meeds student body (40%) participates in academic internships at 100 local, national and international employers (Meeds College, 2010a). Meeds offers unique programs and personalized counseling for students who plan to pursue advanced degrees. Designated faculty members guide students through applications for major postgraduate scholarships. Others provide mentoring for students entering programs in law, medicine, ministry, and others. Meeds students enjoy an exceptionally high rate of acceptance into graduate and professional programs with an acceptance rate at twice the national average to medical school and an over 95% admittance rate to business, divinity and law schools (Meeds College, 2010c).

In 1950, the Bellingrath-Morse Foundation created a deed of trust establishing provisions for the annual distribution of money to five beneficiaries. Southwestern at Memphis (Meeds) was included among those receiving funds. Meeds was named a 40% beneficiary, by far the largest of the five. Each of the foundation's three college beneficiaries were required to meet a special curriculum provision in order to receive their share: "every regularly enrolled student for a bachelor's degree shall be required to take a sound and comprehensive course in the Holy Bible of six (6) semester hours during the first academic year and at least six (6) semester hours in one other academic year." In order for Meeds to maintain its receipt of the foundation's financial support, it must mandate that students complete two years of course work in the Bible and Bible-related material. Each entering Meeds student is required to choose either the *Search* program, a four-semester interdisciplinary course that combines elements of the Bible with other aspects of Western culture, or the *Life* program which consists of four one-semester classes chosen from mainly religious studies courses. The *Search* program meets the requirements of the Bellingrath-Morse Foundation stipulation by devoting much of its first year to the Hebrew scriptures and early Christian writings and the greater part of the core readings for its second year to Jewish and Christian theological and ecclesiastical texts (Nelson, 1996).

In the fall of 2007, the Foundations curriculum, an academic curriculum that established a new approach to the study of liberal arts and sciences at the College, was fully implemented. Students entering Meeds in the 2007-2008 academic year or later pursue their entire undergraduate education within this framework. The Foundations curriculum was adopted by the faculty in order to achieve the following goals:

- To assist students to understand the goals of a liberal education and to take greater responsibility for their education;

- To provide a more transparent and streamlined curriculum by framing the general degree requirements in terms of skills and content areas;
- To bring greater focus to the course students take and to recognize that their activities inside and outside the classroom should be mutually informative and energizing;
- To create the opportunity to offer more courses reflective of the scholarly interest of the faculty and to develop innovative courses that respond to the developing currents in contemporary thought; and,
- To establish four courses as the standard load per semester in order to allow for a more focused educational experience for all students.

The goal of the Foundations Curriculum is to enhance the way in which the four components of the Meeds education work together and establish a framework for liberal education and life-long learning (Trustees of Meeds College, 2009).

Students consistently single out the century-old honor system as the best aspect of life at Meeds (Van West, C., Lester, C., Binnicker, M., & Owens, A., 1998). Among other things, the Honor Code provides students with the option of taking closed book final exams within the privacy of their rooms (Nelson, 1996). Every entering student at Meeds is expected at the time of matriculation to sign a pledge promising to uphold the Meeds Honor System which reads: “As a member of the Meeds community, I pledge I will not lie, cheat or steal, and that I will report any such violation that I may witness” (Meeds College, 2010d). The Honor Code is interpreted and implemented by the Honor Council, which is composed of 17 elected Meeds student representatives (Trustees of Meeds College, 2009).

The Meeds curriculum includes a requirement that students participate in activities that broaden the connection between classroom experiences and the greater world at large. The Meeds Vision reinforces community engagement stating that the College “aspires to graduate students with a lifelong passion for learning...and the ability to translate academic study and personal concern into effective leadership and action in their communities and the world.” According to Meeds, “learning is a life-long pursuit” (Meeds College, 2003). The College aspires to “combine the best of the classroom and the outside world, involving our students in the larger Meeds and Memphis communities through a variety of intellectual, service, social and cultural opportunities” (Meeds College, 2010d). To that end, the College notes four strategic imperatives in its vision:

Student Access – To attract and retain a talented diverse student body and engage these students in a challenging, inclusive and culturally broadening college experience.

Student Learning – To ensure our faculty and staff have the talent, the time and the resources to inspire and involve our students in meaningful study, research and service.

Student Engagement – To enhance student opportunities for learning in Memphis.

Student Inspiration – To provide a residential place of learning that inspires integrity and high achievement through its beauty, its emphasis on values, its Presbyterian history, and its heritage as a leader in the liberal arts and sciences (Meeds College, 2003).

Demographic Profile

Meeds enrolls 1,685 students from 46 states, the District of Columbia, and international students from 15 countries. Approximately 58% of the students are women; 42% are men. Students of color make up 24% of the entering class with 38 African Americans, 49 Asian students, 10 Hispanic students, and 9 other minorities. The 2009-2010 cost of attending Meeds for residential students is \$42,024; for commuter students it is \$33,710. Nearly 85% of students receive financial aid; the average need-based package was \$30,629 and the average merit-based award was more than \$13,475. The median family income of students receiving need-based aid is just under \$79,000. More than 80% of Meeds students receive some form of financial assistance (fellowships/scholarships, grants, loans, work-study). The total assistance to first-year students from all sources equals almost \$20 million per year (Meeds College, 2010a).

Of the total number of 431 first-year students, 18 were the valedictorians or salutatorians of their class, 53% ranked in the top 10% of their class, and 73% had a grade point average between 3.5 and 4.0. The composite standardized test scores for the class are impressive; the middle 50% range of SAT scores is 1210 to 1370 and the ACT middle 50% range is 26 to 30. In terms of extracurricular activities, 21 students were presidents of their student governments or senior class, 15 were student government or senior class presidents, 15 were president or vice-president of the National Honor Society, 88 were president of at least one high-school club or organization and 97 were captains of a varsity athletic team (Meeds College, 2010b).

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in 2006 identified Meeds as one of 62 colleges and universities in the U.S. who met its standards for both Curricular Engagement and Outreach and Partnerships. The Carnegie Foundation describes the classification as a “significant affirmation of the importance of community engagement in the agenda of higher education.” Approximately 80% of Meeds students participate in some form of community service by the time that they graduate. Meeds is well known for student involvement in service projects within the Memphis community. To help students find their niche at Meeds, the SACK Fair is held at the beginning of each fall term to introduce them to the campus organizations and service opportunities in Memphis (Meeds College, 2010e).

Orientation

Orientation at Meeds, called Open Meeds, is a summer program with two sessions held in June and two sessions held in July. Each session is two days in length and all first-time Meeds students are required to attend (Meeds College, (2010f). Online registration for orientation begins in March of each year with date assignments granted on a first-come, first-served basis. However, international students participate in a subsequent special orientation sponsored by the Meeds International Program Office. The College’s director of New Student Programs is responsible for the coordination and management of Open Meeds. The Director also works with first-year students who may be in need of support due to an academic or personal situation and administers the Meeds first-year mentoring program (Meeds College, 2010f). During orientation, students work with a faculty advisor to develop a fall academic course schedule request, learn about life at the College by meeting students, faculty, and staff, and reside in campus housing overnight (Meeds College, 2010f). First-year students are also provided the

opportunity to explore and register for Meeds' learning communities that are designed to integrate academic and residential life.

Greek Life

Fraternities and sororities at Meeds are non-residential. Approximately 50% of Meeds students are members of the 10 social Greek lettered organizations (Gideon, Hayse, & Wiley, II, 2009). The Interfraternity and Pan-Hellenic Council fall recruitment at Meeds takes place during the first two weeks of the fall semester; some chapters also conduct spring recruitment (Meeds College, 2010g). Fraternity and sorority programs include organized study hours, tutoring, educational incentives and major mentors for selecting classes. Members of Greek organizations readily access peer networks of friends who know how to use campus resources like the Barret library, writing center, computer labs, and the "tree" – the Meeds web-based registration system. In addition, fraternity and sorority members are involved in many other student organizations and hold leadership positions on campus. Chapters regularly raise money and awareness for philanthropic agencies (Meeds College, 2010g). Although one-half of Meeds students belong to Greek organizations, the College notes that most fraternity and sorority parties and activities are open to all non-Greek Meeds students (Meeds College, 2010g).

Capstone Project

In 2008-2009, Meeds College solicited assistance from a Vanderbilt University Ed.D. capstone team to determine how Greek affiliation enhanced or detracted from desired institutional outcomes. In the project, a stark difference was found in the graduation rate between Greek and non-Greek students. Overall, students in the entering first-year cohorts from 1999 through 2004 graduated at a rate of 76.2%; however Greek students graduated at a rate of 90.0%, compared to 62.6% for their non-Greek peers, a difference of more than 27 points (Gideon, Hayse, & Wiley II, 2009). In addition, Greek students reported higher levels of growth in "interpersonal and practical competencies" than did independents, although unaffiliated students were academically better prepared entering the College (Gideon, Hayse, & Wiley II, 2009).

The team hypothesized that the difference in the persistence of the two groups related to their status as joiners and non-joiners, with joiners having a greater likelihood of persisting. In their report, the team made three recommendations that informed the focus of this capstone project:

1. Administrators at Meeds should sponsor a thorough qualitative investigation into the effects of Greek life at the College.
2. Administrators at Meeds should undertake further study to better understand the extent to which Greek life pervades student life on the Meeds campus.
3. Administrators at Meeds should conduct a careful and thorough examination of the social engagement possibilities for Independent students.

In undertaking these recommendations, this capstone team broadened the research focus beyond the Greek/non-Greek paradigm in order to determine the effects of membership (or non-

membership) in other high commitment groups. This focus on high commitment groups, rather than Greek organizations only, was urged by Meeds officials, who felt that there were other groups on campus that were analogous to Greek organizations in terms of the commitment level required of members. After deliberation, this team concluded that athletics was such a group, given the demands of practices and games. Therefore, we included varsity student-athletes in our analysis of Joiners.

High commitment groups are organizations that require a significant level of student involvement based upon the elements that comprise Kuh's (1995) "involvement principle." Kuh (2007) theorized that when students are responsible for tasks that require daily decisions over an extended period, they become invested in the activity that deepens their commitment to the college and to their studies. According to Kuh (1995), members of athletic teams, fraternities and sororities tend to graduate at higher rates, in part because of the momentum of their group, but also as a result of belonging to something larger than themselves that propels them forward.

Historically, athletics and Greek life are recognized co-curricular activities dating back to the early days of American higher education (Moore, Lovell, McGann, & Wyrick, 1998). As a result, these two involvement areas have seen significant levels of participation impacting a large number of undergraduate students. Moore et al (1998) noted that athletics and Greek life were important because they encompassed the quality of the undergraduate co-curricular experience and represented a significant portion of the extracurricular activity found on college campuses nationwide.

A third group of students – Aspiring Non-Joiners – was also identified. Aspiring Non-Joiners are students who unsuccessfully sought membership in a high-commitment group. Given that the largest amount of attrition at Meeds occurs between the first and sophomore years, this team will focus on the relevant experiences of students in those classes.

Conceptual Basis

The conceptual basis of this report are theories of student departure devised by Tinto (1975; 1987) and Braxton, Hirschy & Johnson (2004), particularly as they relate to the social integration of students. These theories inform the manner in which this team addressed the project questions. This section will discuss those theories in detail.

Student Departure

Entering college can be a stressful experience for new students. Tinto (1988) described the experience as creating a "sense of loss and bewilderment, if not desolation" (p. 444). This stress can have deleterious effects on a student's chances of persistence (Tinto, 1988). The identification of factors that contribute to student persistence and, conversely, departure has been the focus of many empirical studies. Two early works by Astin (1975) and Tinto (1975) provided a formal foundation for future retention studies at U.S. colleges and universities. Astin (1975) studied how institutional and student characteristics affected retention. Tinto (1975) developed a theoretical model that coalesced around students' commitment to their institutions, their degree aspirations, and their ability to integrate academically and socially on their campuses

(Reason, 2009). More recently, Braxton (2000) offered that research around college student departure was dormant in the 1990s, primarily due to the widespread acceptance of Tinto's (1975; 1987) model. Braxton (2000) suggested that more research was needed to "reinvigorate scholarly inquiry on the departure puzzle" (p. 3).

The interest in the student departure phenomenon relates to the enduring nature of higher education attrition and the ramifications thereof (Tierney, 1992, Tinto, 1982). These ramifications are institutional in nature (e.g. lost revenue) as well as societal (e.g. diminished human capital) (Tierney, 1992). Viewing the departure phenomenon through an economic lens, Leppel (2002) highlighted gender differences in student persistence. Of course, Meeds College's motivations for engaging this research team on the issue of student departure are principally due to the institutional effects of the relative high attrition rates of its non-Greek students.

Numerous studies have tied student peer culture to student persistence (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004; Christie & Dinham, 1991; Kuh, 1995; Renn & Arnold, 2003; Thomas, 2000; Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1997). In fact, peers have been cited as being the most important influence on college students (Thomas, 2000, p. 591). Peer culture embodies "the forces and processes that shape individual and collective life on campus in terms of identity, group membership, acceptable discourse, and desirable behaviors." (Renn & Arnold, 2003, p. 262). It takes the form of formal and informal groups into which students seek affiliation and acceptance (Renn & Arnold, 2003, p. 262). Greek-letter organizations and athletic teams are examples of formal peer groups (Renn & Arnold, 2003, Tinto, 1988). Informal peer groups are formed in various settings, including in the classroom and residence halls (Renn & Arnold, 2003). Peer culture can detract from academic performance, particularly when the ethos of the culture is one of anti-intellectualism (Renn & Arnold, 2003; Tinto, 1975). However, a common finding is that affiliation with a peer group "provides a major link to the social and academic systems of the college" (Tinto, 1975, p. 109), thereby fostering persistence.

The extent of a student's peer network has been cited as a measure of a student's level of social integration (Renn & Arnold, 2003; Thomas, 2000). Specifically, students who are able to move among different peer groups are more integrated into the social system of the college (Renn & Arnold, 2003; Thomas, 2000). Renn & Arnold (2003) termed this concept centrality. The authors explained the effects of peer culture by placing the student at the center of a system of concentric rings that represented different environments within which the student must operate (Renn & Arnold, 2003). The most immediate environment is called a microsystem and is comprised of the residence hall, organizational or athletic team affiliations, and other settings where peer groups are formed (Renn & Arnold, 2003). Centrality is manifested by the "ease with which students can move from one peer microsystem to another" (Renn & Arnold, 2003, p. 271). Logically, centrality and the benefits thereof compound when students possessing high-levels of the construct form peer relationships with similarly integrated students (Thomas, 2000).

In addition to peer group affiliations, the relationships that students are able to foster with faculty members are important to social integration and persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Pascarella, Terenzini & Wolfle, 1986; Tinto, 1982; Tinto 1997). Sidle and Reynolds (2009) offered that students who enrolled in first-year experience courses had higher rates of retention after their freshmen year. Tinto (1997) identified the classroom as a focal point of

academic and social integration: “[F]or new students in particular, engagement in the community of the classroom becomes a gateway for subsequent student involvement in the academic and social communities of the college generally” (Tinto, 1997, p. 616). Tinto (1982) also noted that informal contacts between students and faculty “appear to be essential components in the process of social and intellectual development of individuals and in the rewards they seek in entering higher education” (p. 697). Braxton, Milem and Sullivan (2000) identified the teaching methods of faculty members as affecting social integration and persistence.

This report is undergirded by the theory of student departure developed by Braxton, Hirschy & Johnson (2004). In order to fully understand this theory, a discussion of Tinto’s work is necessary.

Tinto’s Interactionalist Theory

Tinto (1975) developed his interactionalist theory of student departure in response to what he saw as two “major shortcomings” in persistence research: the lack of a clear definition of departure and the absence of a model that explained the process of student departure, rather than merely describing it (p. 89). Tinto (1975) defined student departure as:

A longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person's experiences in those systems...continually modify his goal and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of dropout. (p. 94)

He moored his interactionalist theory in Durkheim’s theory of suicide. Specifically, he likened student departure to suicide, positing that “When one views the college as a social system with its own value and social structures, one can treat dropout from that social system in a manner analogous to that of suicide in the wider society” (Tinto, 1975, p. 91). Put simply, a student’s decision to depart from her institution is analogous to a decision to end (or depart) one’s own life; both are the result of insufficient integration within the larger social system (Christie & Dinham, 1991; Tinto, 1975).

Tinto (1975) argued that developing an explanatory model of student departure required accounting for the background characteristics and motivations of individual students. These characteristics and motivations influence a student’s initial commitment to her institution. Examples of relevant background characteristics are socioeconomic status, previous academic preparation, gender, race, and ethnicity (Pascarella, Terenzini & Wolfle, 1986; Thomas, 2000; Tinto, 1975). Motivation can be typified as educational expectations and career plans (Pascarella, Terenzini & Wolfle, 1986; Thomas, 2000; Tinto, 1975). Motivation can also be born of initial institutional commitment (Pascarella, Terenzini & Wolfle, 1986; Thomas, 2000; Tinto, 1975). Additionally, the theory dictates that institutional commitment is a fluid concept, with a student’s subsequent commitment being influenced by her interaction with the academic and social systems within her institution (Christie, 1991, Tinto 1975). Subsequent commitment is important because it influences chances of institutional suicide—or departure (Christie, 1991; Tinto 1975).

In describing the environments with which students interact, Tinto (1975) theorized that institutions consist of academic and social systems. A student's engagement with the academic system can be measured in terms of grade point average (the assessment of the student by the institution) and her own perceptions of intellectual development (the assessment of the institution by the student) (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Tinto 1975). Engagement with the social system can be assessed based on the student's peer groups, participation in extracurricular activities, and interactions with faculty and staff (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Tinto 1975).

Ultimately, the extent of engagement in either the academic or social system reflects "degrees of congruency" between the system and the student (Tinto, 1975, p. 107). For instance, the higher the levels of congruency between the student's academic values and the institution's academic environment, the higher the student's academic integration. Social integration, on the other hand, depends less on "mainstream" congruence with the institution and more on the ability of the student to find "sufficient friendship support", even if it is only among a small subset of the student population (Tinto, 1975, p. 107). The theory posits that the two systems are complementary—a high level of engagement in one system can supplement low levels of engagement in the other (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Tinto, 1975). For example, strong grades and satiated intellectual development could result in high levels of subsequent institutional commitment, even if a student has failed to foster meaningful social relationships. The opposite could be true as well, although as Tinto (1975) noted, failure to meet grade thresholds may result in academic dismissal or forced departure. In extending his theory regarding the complementary nature of academic and social integration, Tinto (1997) argued that "for new students in particular, engagement in the community of the classroom becomes a gateway for subsequent student involvement in the academic and social communities of the college generally" (p. 616).

Early in a student's college career, social integration tends to be more important than academic integration (Tinto, 1997). As Tinto (1997) explained: "[M]eeting people and making friends during the first-year of college is a major preoccupation of student life, especially among younger students who have yet to establish families or acquire significant work obligations" (p. 609). According to Tinto (1988; 1997), the first six months are particularly important to fostering persistence. In expounding on his interactionist theory, Tinto (1988) derived three stages of student persistence. The stages are based on Van Gennep's conception of rites of passage and represent stages "through which new students must typically pass during the course of their college careers" (Tinto, 1997, p. 439). In brief, the three stages are as follows:

- Separation: involves the student separating from past associations
- Transition: involves the student beginning to interact with members of the college community
- Incorporation: involves the student adapting to new interactions and becoming a competent, participative member of the college community (Tinto, 1997).

Social interactions are the primary means by which students successfully pass through each stage (Tinto, 1997). Failure to establish sufficient social relationships leads to isolation, which increases chances of departure (Tinto, 1997).

Tinto's interactionalist theory has formed the basis of much research into student persistence and departure. It has been characterized as "near-paradigmatic" due to its prominence (Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson, 1997; Braxton & Lien 2000). However with this prominence has come scrutiny, even criticism. For example, Tierney (1992) criticized the theory as being insufficiently sensitive to individual differences. Specifically, "[a] model of integration that never questions who is to be integrated and how it is to be done assumes an individualist stance of human nature and rejects differences based on categories such as class, race, and gender" (Tierney, 1992, p. 611).

Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson's Revision

For Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson (1997), this scrutiny spawned a revision of the theory. Embedded in Tinto's interactionalist theory are 13 testable propositions (Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson, 1997). Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson (1997) subjected each of the propositions to empirical assessment by calculating the percentage of previously conducted tests that had provided statistically significant support for each proposition. Propositions that were affirmed by 66 percent or more of tests were considered strongly supported; propositions with affirmation in the 34-65 percent range were considered moderately supported; propositions with affirmation of 33 percent or less were considered weakly supported (Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson, 1997). A minimum of three usable tests was required for a proposition to qualify for a determinate assessment (Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson, 1997). Lastly, the propositions were assessed on three levels: aggregate, by institution type, and by student race or ethnicity (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004). The institution type assessment is most relevant to this report.

Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson (1997) sought to test the propositions within the context of the following types of institutions: liberal arts colleges, residential institutions, commuter institutions, and two-year colleges. Due to the absence of usable tests, no assessment of Tinto's propositions could be made in the context of liberal arts colleges (Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson, 1997). This deficiency was important to this research team when considering the propriety of using the revised theory as a fundamental basis of this report. Meeds, of course, is a liberal arts college. However, the team is satisfied that the residential nature of Meeds allows us to view the revised theory in the residential institution context.

Under empirical testing, only five of the 13 testable propositions put forth in Tinto's theory earned strong support for residential institutions (Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson, 1997). Surprisingly, academic integration, a central focus of Tinto's theory, only received modest empirical support. In fact, academic integration only received strong support in the context of commuter institutions (Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson, 1997). Braxton & Lien (2000) theorized that difficulty in defining academic integration and flaws in Tinto's conceptualization of the construct (particularly his analogy to Durkheim's theory of suicide) could explain the paucity of support.

Rather than abandon Tinto's (1975; 1987) theory altogether, Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson (1997) used four of the five strongly supported propositions as the basis of their revised theory. These four propositions were chosen based on their logical connectedness. They are as follows:

- Characteristics of the entering student influence his or her level of initial commitment to the institution;
- A student's level of initial institutional commitment is positively associated with his or her level of subsequent commitment;
- A student's level of social integration is positively associated with his or her subsequent commitment to the institution; and,
- A student's level of subsequent institutional commitment is positively associated with his or her likelihood of persisting to graduation (Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson, 1997).

If these four propositions form the skeleton of the revised theory, its flesh is its focus on factors that influence social integration. Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson (1997) see social integration as a critical factor in determining chances of persistence at a residential institution. The more socially integrated a student becomes at his or her institution the more likely he or she is to persist.

According to Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon (2004), the following five factors act as influencers on social integration:

- Commitment of the Institution to Student Welfare: The greater the perceived commitment, the greater the level of social integration.
- Communal Potential: The greater the perceived communal potential, the greater the level of social integration.
- Institutional Integrity: The greater the perceived institutional integrity, the greater the level of social integration.
- Proactive Social Adjustment: The greater a student's use of proactive adjustment, the greater the level of social integration.
- Psychosocial Engagement: The greater the level of energy expended in social interactions, the greater the level of social integration.

Each of these influencers is influenced by economic, organizational, psychological, and sociological factors (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004). Given their central relevance to the revised theory, a detailed discussion of the five influencers follows:

Commitment of the Institution to Student Welfare. According to Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon (2004), “[t]his construct manifests itself as an institution’s abiding concern for the growth and development of its students” (p. 22). Factors such as equal treatment of students by the institution and the overall value an institution places on its students as individuals and within groups are important. The teaching methods of faculty also influence this construct, with active learning methods being cited as contributing to perceptions that the institution is committed to student learning (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004; Braxton, Milem & Sullivan, 2000). Fundamentally, this construct reflects a student’s perceptions of the institution’s organizational culture (Hirschy, 2004).

Communal Potential. According to Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon (2004), “[t]he extent to which a student believes that a subgroup of students exists within the college community with which that students shares similar values, beliefs, and goals” (p. 23). Anticipation of membership is important, and these memberships can emerge from residence halls and peer

groups (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004; Christie & Dinham, 1991; Renn & Arnold, 2003; Thomas, 2000). Institutions can foster relationships through the use of academic and social programming (Hirschy, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977; Pascarella, Terenzini & Wolfle, 1986; Tinto, 1982). This construct reflects a student's perceptions of his peers and the potential for relationships therewith (Hirschy, 2004).

Institutional Integrity. This influencer represents “the extent to which a college or university is true to its espoused mission and goals” (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004, p. 24). The construct is based on the concept of “institutional ethos” as espoused by Kuh (1995). Institutional ethos is “a belief system widely shared by faculty, students, and administrators that imposes a coherence on experience” (Kuh, 1995, p. 142). This coherence, in turn, fosters student integration. Trust is an important component of this perceptual construct (Hirschy, 2004). If a student believes he can trust his institution to remain true to its stated principles, he is likely to view the integrity of the institution highly—and social integration is fostered. The actions, real and perceived, of administrators, faculty, and staff are important in influencing students' perceptions of this influencer. It is worth noting that in a later study, Hirschy (2004) failed to find a direct relationship between institutional integrity and social integration.

Proactive Social Adjustment. This influencer “refers to a student's tendency to adjust in a proactive manner to the demands and pressures of social interaction in a college or university” (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004, p. 24). Central to this construct are a desire for social stimulation on the part of the student and a willingness to “meet the social challenges” of finding that stimulation (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004, p. 25). Anticipatory socialization is a common manifestation of this influencer. The student who seeks to anticipate through emulation the “norms, attitudes, values, and behaviors” of their institution will be more successful at social adjustment than the student who does not engage in this behavior (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004, p. 25). Proactive social adjustment can be fostered by the institution through the use of academic and social programming, including orientation activities (Hirschy, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977; Pascarella, Terenzini & Wolfle, 1986; Tinto, 1982).

Psychosocial Engagement. This influencer represents the amount of time and energy a student expends engaging in social activities (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004). Effort, both mental and physical, is central to this construct. The student who makes the effort to meet people and take part in extracurricular activities will experience greater social integration than the student who avoids such activities. This influencer is akin to what Kuh (1995) characterizes as the “involvement principle” (p. 125). According to Kuh (1995), the quantitative and qualitative components of involvement dictate the benefits of such involvement. For example, coordinating a campus-wide event could bestow greater benefits upon a student than merely attending the event—due to the greater level of involvement required of the former (Kuh, 1995). External circumstances such as family or off-campus work commitments can hinder psychosocial engagement and social engagement (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004; Christie & Dinham, 1991; Kuh, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977; Tinto, 1975).

In summary, the theory developed by Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon (2004) could be expressed as follows:

A student enters college with certain characteristics, including the ability to pay. These characteristics affect his level of initial institutional commitment. The student's level of initial commitment, in turn, influences his perceptions of the institution, particularly as it relates to its commitment to student welfare, its integrity, and the opportunities presented by the institution for the student to find some semblance of community. Initial commitment also influences the level to which a student proactively adjusts to student life and the effort he expends engaging in social interactions within the institution. The more favorable a student's perceptions of institutional commitment, institutional integrity, and potential for communal interaction and the more effort a student expends adjusting socially and engaging in social interactions, the higher the student's level of social integration and the greater his chances of subsequent commitment, persistence, and eventually completion.

Methodology

The research literature on college departure and student integration theory frames our research questions about the impact that involvement in high commitment organizations has on students' experiences and social integration during their first two years at Meeds College. While a significant amount of quantitative research has been done on the impact of student engagement and social adjustment on college persistence (Astin, 1977; 1993; Astin et al, 1987), little is known about *how* and *why* students' experiences impact their level of integration and satisfaction with their institutions that, in turn, may affect their decision to depart. Even less is known about the impact that institutional commitment and integrity have on the student experience. These factors directly shaped the design of the Meeds College capstone project.

This capstone project employed qualitative research methods in order to examine the differences in experiences among students who were involved in high commitment groups at Meeds College and those who were not. Student interviews constituted the type of qualitative method used. Particular attention was paid to how these experiences impacted students' social integration and perceptions of the College. Qualitative study designs are particularly useful as they address why phenomena occur and assist researchers in understanding the nuances of people and their environments (Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). In addition, qualitative designs are often used when researchers need to view paradigms through a specific social context while exploring on-going processes within that context (Patton, 2002). These designs can involve multiple data sources, including interviews, observations, and documents (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The connection between student involvement in high commitment groups and their social integration with peers and the campus environ is a complicated one that lends itself to the richness and flexibility of a qualitative study.

Data Collection

The project focused on first-year and sophomore students at Meeds College. These two classes were selected given that a disproportionate number of students depart between their first and second years (Levitz et al, 1999). The team secured lists of potential interview subjects from

the College’s Office of Information Services. Given our research questions and foci, one list consisted of first-year and sophomore students who fell into one of two categories: Joiner or Non-Joiner (NJ). Through the assistance of the Office of Information Services, a second list acquired from the College’s Athletic Department and Greek advisor provided names of Aspiring Non-Joiners (ANJ). For the purposes of this project, ‘Joiner’ refers to a student who is a member of a Greek chapter, varsity athletic team, or both; ‘Non-Joiner’ refers to a student who chose not to pursue membership in a Greek chapter or to join a varsity athletic team; and ‘Aspiring Non-Joiner’ refers to a student who attempted to join a Greek chapter and/or varsity athletic team but was either unsuccessful in attaining membership or chose to cease pursuit prior to attaining membership. The generated lists included students’ name, class year, and email address. The data were exported into an Excel file where students were randomly selected through a process of assigning each one a unique number and employing the software’s “rand” function.

In the 2008 and 2009 entering classes, Meeds College has enrolled 856 students. Women accounted for 479 students (56.4%) and men accounted for 371 students (43.6%), while six students’ gender were unknown. In total, 361 Joiners, 473 Non-Joiners, and 22 Aspiring Non-Joiners were found across the first-year and sophomore classes. The College is a predominantly white institution, and this fact was reflected in the race/ethnicity of the two classes; 70.5% of students self identified as White Non-Hispanic, 9.6% as Asian/Pacific Islander, 8.0% as Black Non-Hispanic, 7.6% unknown, and 2.5% as Hispanic.

Table 1: 2008 & 2009 Entering Cohort Demographic Information

Student Type	N (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Amer. Indian/ AK Nat. (%)	Asian / Pacific Islander (%)	Black Non-Hispanic (%)	Hispanic (%)	White Non-Hispanic (%)
Joiner	361 (42.2)	179 (49.6)	182 (50.4)	4 (1.1)	5 (1.4)	13 (3.6%)	9 (2.5)	301 (83.4)
NJ	473 (55.2)	289 (61.1)	181 (38.3)	3 (0.6)	76 (16.1)	53 (11.2)	10 (2.1)	290 (61.3)
ANJ	22 (2.6)	12 (54.5)	9 (40.9)	0 (0.0)	1 (4.5)	2 (9.1)	3 (13.6)	13 (59.1)
Total*	856	480	372	7	82	68	22	604

*gender unknown for four students; race/ethnicity unknown for 65 students

The Capstone team randomly selected students in the Joiner and Non-Joiner categories, and contacted all of the Aspiring Non-Joiners it was provided, seeking their participation in an individual interview. In total, 249 students were contacted: 168 joiners, 64 Non-Joiners, and 22 Aspiring Non-Joiners. Approximately ten days before the interviews, an invitation letter (Appendix A) was sent via email asking students to respond with their interest in participating and, if affirmative, their availability. The team followed up with non-responsive students via email and, in some cases, by telephone. For students’ convenience, interviews were conducted at The Paul Barrett, Jr. Library on the Meeds campus, which is a central gathering place to meet and study. Each team member was assigned primary responsibility for interviewing a category of students; Todd Adams interviewed Aspiring Non-Joiners, Donna Ashford interviewed Non-Joiners, and Aaron Taylor interviewed Joiners. As an incentive, interview subjects were

provided \$5 gift cards to the campus coffee shop, Common Ground, as nominal remuneration for their participation.

On November 12-13, 2009, project team members interviewed Meeds College students who were enrolled full-time and were in either their first-year or sophomore year (Table 2). An informed consent letter was shared with each student prior to the interview (Appendix B) According to the Office of Information Services, 96% of first-year students live on campus, while 76% of all undergraduates are in College owned, operated, or affiliated housing (Meeds College, 2010g). At Meeds, 45% of men and 53% of women participate in Greek life by joining either a fraternity or sorority; in total, the campus is home to 10 Greek-letter organizations (Meeds College Office of Information Services, 2010). The 25 students who were interviewed for this project reflected these figures. Among these students, all but one lived on campus, and

Table 2: Student Interviewee Demographic Information

Name ²	Category	Gender /Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Class	Fin Aid	Greek/ Athlete	Job/On Campus	SES
Aaron	Non-Joiner	M / 20	Caucasian	Soph	Y	N / N	Y / Y	Middle
Ben	Non-Joiner	M / 19	Caucasian	Soph	Y	N / N	Y / Y	Middle
Beth	Joiner	F / 18	Caucasian	FY	Y	N / Y	Y / Y	Middle
Caleb	Aspiring	M / 18	Afr Amer	FY	Y	N / N	Y / Y	Middle
Carl	Non-Joiner	M / 18	Caucasian	FY	N	N / N	N / N	Upper
Charles	Non-Joiner	M / 19	Afr Amer	Soph	Y	N / N	N / N	Middle
Francis	Joiner	F / 19	Caucasian	Soph	N	Y / N	N / N	Upper
Greg	Aspiring	M / 19	Latino	Soph	N	N / N	Y / Y	Upper
Jill	Non-Joiner	F / 19	Afr Amer	FY	Y	N / N	Y / Y	Middle
Karna	Non-Joiner	M / 18	Asian (Int.)	FY	N	N / N	Y / Y	Upper
Kate	Joiner	F / 19	Caucasian	Soph	Y	Y / N	Y / Y	Middle
Kevin	Joiner	M / 19	Caucasian	Soph	Y	Y / N	Y / Y	Middle
Kim	Joiner	F / 19	Caucasian	Soph	Y	Y / N	N / N	Upper
Lucy	Aspiring	F / 19	Caucasian	FY	Y	N / N	Y / Y	Lower
Mala	Non-Joiner	F / 19	Asian	Soph	Y	N / N	Y / N	Lower
Mary	Aspiring	F / 19	Caucasian	Soph	Y	N / N	Y / Y	Middle
Matt	Aspiring	M / 19	Caucasian	FY	N	N / N	Y / Y	Upper
Ming	Non-Joiner	F / 19	Asian	FY	Y	N / N	N / N	Middle
Nicole	Joiner	F / 19	Caucasian	Soph	Y	Y / N	N / N	Middle
Paul	Aspiring	M / 18	Caucasian	FY	N	N / N	N / N	Upper
Sue	Non-Joiner	F / 19	Caucasian	Soph	N	N / N	Y / Y	Middle
Tara	Joiner	F / 18	Caucasian	FY	Y	N / Y	Y / Y	Middle
Tom	Non-Joiner	M / 18	Caucasian	FY	Y	N / N	N / N	Lower
Tracy	Joiner	F / 18	Caucasian	FY	N	Y / N	N / N	Middle
Zian	Non-Joiner	M / 19	Asian (Int.)	FY	N	N / N	Y / Y	Middle

² Pseudonyms

six of the eight Joiners were Greek affiliated. Twelve (12) interviewees were in the first semester of their first year at Meeds and 13 were sophomores. Just over half (13) of the interviewees indicated that Meeds was their first choice among the institutions they had considered, which is on par with the 57% of the College's students who responded similarly (Meeds College Office of Information Services, 2010). The gender split was nearly even with 12 men and 13 women completing interviews, which closely reflected the overall undergraduate study body's 43% men and 57% women.

Among the 25 interviewees, eight were Joiners, 11 were Non-Joiners, and six were Aspiring Non-Joiners. The Joiners with whom we spoke were over-represented by females at 87.5%, as only one Joiner interviewee was male; the overall Joiner cohort is nearly evenly split at 49.6% female and 50.4% male. The Non-Joiner interviewees were predominantly males at 63.6%, which is a much higher percentage than the 38.3% of male NJs overall. Two out of three Aspiring Non-Joiners interviewees were males, while the overall ANJ male cohort was 40.9%.

Students were asked to complete a pre-interview questionnaire (Appendix B), which asked respondents to identify their age, class year, high school type (public/private), Greek affiliation, athletic participation, family socioeconomic status (SES), parental education level, and work status. The qualitative data gathered through the interviews allowed the project team to augment previously collected quantitative data and better identify themes related to students' experiences and social integration during their first two years. Particular attention was paid to issues of academic preparedness and students' knowledge and understanding of campus services, as well as the five influencers of integration as identified by Braxton et al (2004): commitment of the institution to student welfare (CSW), communal potential (CP), institutional integrity (I), proactive social adjustment (PSA), and psychosocial engagement (PE).

Project Questions

The project examines the differences in experiences among Meeds College students who join high commitment organizations, students who attempt to join but are unsuccessful in their efforts, and students who choose not to pursue membership in these organizations. In consultation with Meeds College administrators in the Office of Information Services, the Capstone team specifically designed its project around the following questions:

1. Are there differences in the entering characteristics of Joiners, Non-Joiners and Aspiring Non-Joiners?
 - a. Do non-joiners and aspiring non-joiners enter with a lower ability to pay Meeds' tuition and fees than joiners?
 - b. Do non-joiners and aspiring non-joiners enter with lower pre-college academic preparation than joiners?
2. Are there differences in the levels of social integration among Joiners, Non-Joiners, and Aspiring Non-Joiners?
 - a. Do non-joiners and aspiring non-joiners harbor lower perceptions of Meeds' commitment to students than joiners?

- b. Do non-joiners and aspiring non-joiners view the communal potential at Meeds less favorably than joiners?
- c. Do non-joiners and aspiring non-joiners view Meeds' integrity less favorably than joiners?
- d. Do non-joiners and aspiring non-joiners spend less energy engaging in social interactions and activities than joiners?

Data Analysis Plan

With the data collected, the Capstone team conducted analyses that linked its research strategy with its conceptual framework and research questions. The conceptual framework undergirded the research questions and included the themes of entering characteristics and institutional influencers of social integration. The interview protocol (Appendix C) was directly informed by these themes, allowing for the straightforward and seamless creation of a template for data analysis. In analyzing the data, the team reviewed notes and recorded tapes of on-site interviews with first-year and sophomore students; one student was interviewed via telephone, as was Marcus Langford, Meeds College director of New Student Programs.

Our plan for data analysis included the creation of a level one matrix (Appendix D) for each student interview. Following this process, a level two matrix for each category of students – Joiner, Non-Joiner, and Aspiring Non-Joiner – was created that codified patterns that were observed across students, including divergent examples. These matrices allowed for a clear and concise representation of the qualitative data collected and provided an illustrative mechanism for sharing assessments and key comments of participants.

Specifically the level one matrix for students was constructed using the aforementioned themes from our interview protocol. Within the theme of entering characteristics, two areas of focus were identified: academic preparation and student background. Within the theme of institutional influencers of social integration, five areas of focus were identified: commitment to student welfare, communal potential, institutional integrity, proactive social adjustment, and psychosocial engagement. The last two areas, proactive social adjustment and psychosocial engagement, were combined to support research question 2d and simplify reporting.

Findings

Project Question 1

The Meeds College Office of Information Services (2010) provided the capstone team with a dataset of entering undergraduate student cohorts from 2008 and 2009. This dataset included campus affiliations (Greek/athlete), financial aid information (gross family need), and indicators of academic preparation (standardized test scores). In the first-year and sophomore classes, Meeds College enrolled 856 students. Of these students, 361 were classified as Joiners, 473 as Non-Joiners, and 22 as Aspiring Non-Joiners.

After consulting with the Office of Information Services, the capstone team used 2009-2010 financial aid data – specifically gross family need– as a proxy for a student’s ability to pay. Gross family need is the difference between total cost (tuition and fees) and expected family contribution. Nominal differences existed among the three groups in their gross family need (Table 3). Joiners had a gross family need of \$14,027, compared to \$12,140 for NJs and \$14,116 among ANJs. In total, 45 percent of Joiners had some level of gross family need, compared to 42 percent for NJs and 41 percent for ANJs. Of these students, the average need was \$31,066 for Joiners, \$28,979 for NJs, and \$34,507 for ANJs (Table 3).

Pre-college academic preparation was similar across the three groups (Table 3). ACT composite scores and SAT verbal, math and writing scores were used as proxies for academic preparation. Meeds officials encouraged this decision, as standardized test scores are a highly correlated and objective measure of students’ academic success. Average ACT scores for all three groups were similar—each being about 28. Specifically, Joiners averaged 27.79, while NJs averaged 28.17 and ANJs averaged 28.06. On the SAT, ANJs had the highest average scores on the verbal and math sections. NJs had the highest average writing score. Joiners did not earn the highest average scores on any section of the SAT or on the ACT composite.

Table 3: Cohort Ability to Pay & Academic Preparation

Student Type (n)	Avg. family need: all students	Students w/ family need (%)	Avg. family need: students with need	Avg. ACT composite	Avg. SAT verbal	Avg. SAT math	Avg. SAT writing
Joiner (361)	\$14,027	163 (45.2)	\$31,066	27.79	622.74	617.02	612.18
NJ (475)	\$12,140	199 (41.9)	\$28,979	28.17	634.48	639.37	631.11
ANJ (22)	\$14,116	9 (40.9)	\$34,507	28.06	646.67	645.83	612.73

Of the 25 students who were interviewed, eight were classified as Joiners, 11 were Non-Joiners, and six were Aspiring Non-Joiners. The average gross family need among these students was not representative of the overall cohorts. Average gross family need among interviewed Joiners was lower than the overall cohort, and the averages for interviewed NJs and ANJs were higher than overall (Table 4). These disparities resulted from students with need being underrepresented among Joiners and overrepresented among NJs and ANJs (Table 4). When only those students with need were considered, the average need of each group of interviewed students was higher than the overall average.

Similarly, academic preparation of the interviewees was dissimilar to the levels of their respective Joiner, NJ and ANJ cohorts (Table 4). Interviewed Joiners and ANJs scored markedly higher in all measured ACT and SAT scores than did their respective cohorts overall. Conversely, interviewed NJs scored lower in all test score categories than did NJs overall.

Table 4: Interviewee Ability to Pay & Academic Preparation

Student Type (n)	Avg. family need: all students	Students w/ family need (%)	Avg. family need: students with need	Avg. ACT composite	Avg. SAT verbal	Avg. SAT math	Avg. SAT writing
Joiner (8)	\$9,763	2 (25.0)	\$39,051	28.83	678.33	628.33	618.0
NJ (11)	\$19,873	6 (54.5)	\$36,435	26.56	580.0	629.0	592.0
ANJ (6)	\$31,888	5 (83.3)	\$38,266	29.75	664.0	712.0	642.0

Project Question 2

COMMITMENT OF THE INSTITUTION TO STUDENT WELFARE

Joiners

In general, Joiners possessed favorable perceptions of Meeds's commitment to the welfare of its students. Faculty members played a prominent role in shaping these perceptions. According to Kate, a sophomore and sorority member:

All of the professors I've encountered have been genuinely interested in their students. This environment of wanting to better everyone...I feel is really positive about Meeds.

The use of active learning methods by professors helped foster favorable perceptions of an institution's commitment to the welfare of its students and, according to most Joiners, professors encouraged student participation in their classes. In describing the prevalence of active learning methods in her classes, Kim, a sophomore and sorority member, commented:

That's very common, especially in the humanities courses. [Professors] facilitate a lot of discussion and participation because they want to make sure you understand things on more than just a concrete level. In the sciences...participation extends from just participating in class to actively going and [meeting with professors] and making sure that everything is well understood.

Tracy, a first-year student and member of a sorority, described an environment where student participation is tied to grades and thereby made a priority:

I feel like [participation] is stressed more than anything else. Especially in my language class, my French class, participation is a higher percentage than anything else...[Professors] definitely do encourage it. My poli-sci teacher is very big on [participation]. You gotta open your mouth to get a decent grade. Which I like. I definitely feel like Meeds is a big proponent of participation, which is good. Get to hear from a lot of different people.

Joiners asserted that Meeds faculty members are accessible outside of class for discussion about class material and other topics. Tara, a first-year student and member of an athletic team, remarked, “[a]ll of [my professors] are very approachable and very easy to [talk to]. Everybody checks their email all the time.” Kate talked about receiving fellowships applications and notices about graduate school fairs from her professors. Tracy stated that she babysits for her professors. From the perspectives of these students, Meeds faculty possessed the abiding concern for student welfare on which this influencer is premised.

Among Joiners, Meeds’s commitment to its students transcended faculty. Campus staff members were also cited as being helpful and pleasant, ensuring that students felt valued by the institution—another tenet of this influencer. Kate stated:

They’re extremely helpful. I feel like they understand that we’re college students, and sometimes you forget which form, sometimes you are running to class and you just have to drop it off. I feel like they are very understanding.

Beth, a first-year student and member of an athletic team, recounted the following experience:

One example of how nice everybody is... the first time I did laundry in my dorm...I came back late at night, and I totally forgot about it, and my laundry was folded. I was kind of freaked out, and I asked my RA about it, and she was like “Sometimes our house mom just does that for us.” I was just like, “Oh my gosh!” So they’re so nice.

Nicole, a sophomore and member of a sorority, marveled at how staff members in the campus eatery know her name and recognize her “weird laugh”. Tracy described a favorable experience dealing with nursing staff. Kate shared the following about the counseling center:

[T]hey are such a huge asset to the school. I think a lot of Meeds students are really stressed, so there’s some who unfortunately don’t know how to really deal with it. They’re just such a beneficial office. One of my good friends had a friend from home was killed last year. She went to grief counseling with the counseling center and they really help her. I just feel like they are probably the one student service office I can point to and say, I can see the affect they’ve had on the student body.

A few Joiners identified campus security as being helpful and accessible. According to Beth:

[C]ampus security is great. They’re always really, really nice, and they definitely make you feel better. Sometimes you just see a golf cart rolling by, and it’s a security guy, and they just stop to talk to you. If it’s late at night, they’ll ask if you’re ok, so that’s really nice.

Non-joiners

On the whole, NJs expressed affirmative views regarding Meeds's commitment to the welfare of its students. For these students knowing that faculty valued them mattered immensely. A great deal of the emphasis was placed on the welcoming attitude and accessibility of Meeds faculty members. Carl, a first-year student, stated:

All of the professors are willing to help me out if I have any problems. I have had email correspondence with my Psychology professor several times just saying, okay, these are my grades so far. How can you help me? And he's been more than willing to just sit down with me.

Many of the Non-Joiners commented on the remarkably relaxed nature of the student-professor relationship. Aaron, a first-year student, remarked:

We have pretty close relationships with our professors, some more than others, since we have small class sizes. We have a really laid-back kind of relationship with the professors.

Non-Joiners found that, on most occasions, Meeds professors encouraged active participation. In many classes, the level of demonstrated student participation is employed as a metric for assigning a percentage of the final grade. Jill, a first-year student, commented:

In the classroom the professors are very discussion-based so that they get to know you; how your opinions are formed. I believe in all of my classes this semester a percentage of your grade was for participation.

Several Non-Joiners noted that the requirement to "speak up" in class resulted in unexpected collateral benefits. The following comment by Ming, a first-year student, spoke to the concern for student growth and development that active learning methods often evince:

I think it is really important for me to learn to jump into the conversation and talk within a group. I think sometimes I feel like when you meet someone you expect that they are going to talk to you first, but that is not a realistic situation. You have to tell people what you are thinking and let people know who you are. Talking first, it is really important for me. It has made me more assertive in all areas of my life.

Non-Joiners also conveyed favorable experiences interacting with Meeds staff as further proof of its commitment to the welfare of its students. According to Jill:

All campus staff are friendly. I go to the Lynx Lair (campus dining facility) to eat – all of the people know you by name. Personally, I have a lady named [redacted] and she is so sweet and motherly. She'll always bring in home-cooked meals and pies. She is really sweet.

Tom, a first-year student, described an incident when his car broke down “in the middle of nowhere” and Campus Safety picked him up and took his car to the repair shop.

The majority of Non-Joiners viewed Meeds as providing a high level of support to students not involved in high commitment groups such as Athletics or Greek life. Moreover, they noted that Meeds treated all students fairly— a tenet of the commitment of the institution to the welfare of its students. According to Carl, a freshman NJ:

I don't see anyone getting special treatment. Which is definitely a good thing. When I went to high school, our football players were our gods. I mean, we stopped class to have pep rallies, which was ridiculous! To finally be here where everything is just as important as the next thing, it's good.

Aspiring Non-joiners

Like their peers, Aspiring Non-Joiners held Meeds faculty and staff in high regard. However, most ANJs shared perceptions of preferential treatment given to athletes and members of Greek organizations.

ANJs noted that faculty and staff were important resources for them in transitioning to college life. They listed professors, academic advisors, residential life staff, and other university personnel as people who positively impacted their college experience.

Matt, a first-year student, was impressed by the nature of his relationship with faculty:

It's a good relationship. I don't have any problems sending an email if I have a question about something or staying after class to talk to them, to ask them questions. It's still a formal relationship since they're a professor, but I'm not intimidated by them at all. And I'm not scared to ask them for help.

Paul, a first-year student, noted how his relationship with professors differed from what he was accustomed in high school. He offered: “Probably the closest relationship I've had to a teacher in my schooling history [has been at Meeds].” Paul found that good courses were predicated on student-faculty interaction.

Caleb concurred, noting: “I'd say my teachers, especially, are a lot closer than I would have thought for a college student.” Because faculty members get to know their students well, Caleb remarked that he feels “more comfortable around my teachers.” Mary, a sophomore student, found her Chemistry professor to be helpful as she navigated her first year on campus. She described her relationship with him as one of both teacher and mentor, providing guidance on how to prepare for all of her courses. Greg, a sophomore ANJ, stated that his professors and advisor have provided him with a strong foundation for academic success at Meeds by “steering me in the right direction.”

According to Aspiring Non-Joiners, class participation is an important aspect of the learning environment at Meeds. They almost unanimously noted the value placed on participation by their faculty members. According to Matt:

[Class participation] is very encouraged. In most of my classes...you get some sort of grade based on how often you contributed to class discussions [and] raise your hand in class to answer questions.

Caleb agreed, and noted that one faculty member had a particular way to ensure participation:

One [professor] in particular...requires students to have a certain amount of activity per class. At different class times, she assigns different people who she thinks haven't been speaking as much to be the main speakers of the day, of the class. She actively gets everyone involved.

Lucy offered one caveat by stating that classroom participation "really depends which class."

Beyond their relationships with faculty, ANJs discussed the attention paid to them by others at the institution, reflecting the high value placed on students. Mary, a sophomore, noted how Meeds administrators support and encourage student interests. She is also impressed by how many staff members have gotten to know her. Caleb, a first-year student, offered: "All student services seem to be very open to people just coming in, stopping by to discuss whatever they need, especially the Campus Safety. The Health Center also, they're very helpful." Mary identified her two work-study supervisors as being supportive. Greg, a sophomore, mentioned one staff member who has been a resource by sharing her time and giving advice:

I feel like I can tell her things that I probably couldn't tell others. Without parents here, she's somebody to complain to, to sort of whine to, that listens very well.

In general, Aspiring Non-Joiners perceived little or no difference in the ways that Meeds treats Greeks and athletes from other students. When questioned about whether differences existed, Matt, a first-year student, noted: "For Greeks, I don't think so. I think they say if you want to do that and, that's your decision, you're still going to be expected to be a normal student." He went on to say, "I think all of the students, no matter what organization they're involved in, are treated very equally. Everyone's given the same opportunities."

Mary appreciated the "open" nature of the College. In her eyes, Meeds has created a level playing field for students regardless of their affiliations:

I think [Meeds is] doing quite a bit. I mean having fraternity parties open and having swaps open after a certain time, you know. I mean being Greek or being Independent, it really doesn't matter. It is not really a big deal.

However, most Aspiring Non-Joiners noted that Meeds confers special treatment upon certain groups of students, thus potentially harming perceptions of its commitment to student welfare.

Greg cited that some school-sanctioned events are only open to Greek students. Even though Matt perceived no special treatment towards Greeks, he noticed perks given to athletes:

They get a little better treatment. I wouldn't say better; they just get a little different treatment. There's something called the Athletic Meal Plan where, if you're an athlete, you can get a little more food than a normal person.

Lucy, a first-year ANJ, agreed that athletes are treated differently: "The school works harder to get them there, the school works harder to keep them here, financially and, you know, with the happiness level." Yet she continued by stating, "I hate to say it, but if the sports teams are doing well, it's a good year for the school."

Lucy noted the challenge faced by Independent students to be noticed on campus and summed up her perspective about Meeds' environment for non-Greek, non-athlete students by stating:

I feel like a lot of the independents, you have to find something to stand out in, be it a club or activity, to actually get recognized by the administrators as, you know, not just another random student.

COMMUNAL POTENTIAL

Joiners

At Meeds, Joiners described an environment that is close-knit, supportive, and welcoming. A primary theme that emerged from the interviews was the prominent role of Greek life in creating opportunities for communal interaction. Greek life was characterized as providing students with opportunities to gauge whether a community of peers existed in which they could establish membership. Kate described the role of Greek life thus:

I feel like we definitely have an environment that is overall supportive of Greek life. I just feel like Greek organizations have been a really large part of Meeds history...I think that Meeds just kind of views Greek life as a way to get involved, which I think is true. I've gotten involved in a lot of other stuff through my sorority. My community service has really increased since last year. So I feel like the larger community definitely sees it as a way of getting to know people. A lot of girls go through rush just to try to make friends. That's the best place, when you have 200 girls going through something together, you can definitely make some friends. There's someone there who understands.

Kim observed that increased communal opportunities were afforded members of Greek organizations:

It's just another support system and a way to get involved with activities that maybe you wouldn't be able to get involved with if you were Independent.

Some Joiners stated that they did not initially plan to join a Greek organization prior to enrolling at Meeds, but they were eventually motivated to join for the sense of community offered in a fraternity or sorority. Francis, a sophomore and member of a sorority, asserted:

I originally wasn't really planning to [join a sorority], but actually my mom encouraged me to, because she had been in a sorority. She encouraged me to at least go through the rush process and see what it felt like just to kind of meet people. And I ended up meeting a lot of really nice girls through that, and felt that it would be a nice way to expand my social circle.

Kate had an atypical experience in that she declined membership to a sorority her first year, but then decided to join during her sophomore year. The following is her explanation of that experience and her thought process:

I had never really thought I was going to join a sorority. I rushed freshman year, I received a bid to a house and decided it wasn't really for me so I spent freshman year Independent. Then over the summer, I was just kind of like, you know, I want to have formals and swaps and sisterhood events. And I feel like a lot of my friends were Greek freshman year so I saw it from their perspective, and I was like, maybe this is something I am missing out on. So I rushed this year, and I joined a house. It really has been better than I could have expected. It's just like a lot of the cheesy movie things about sisterhood and stuff, but I feel like it really has made my experience at Meeds so far this semester a lot better.

Many Joiners stressed, however, that while Greek life is prominent, it is not exclusive. Parties are open to non-Greeks, and many stated that they have close friends who are non-Greek. The following is according to Beth:

I think that I was a little nervous about the Greek life thing, because I was pretty sure that I wasn't going to join a sorority...because of that unfair stereotype of sororities and exclusiveness. But the way it is here is so great, because whenever there's parties or...movies or organized get-togethers, they're always open to the whole campus. They're not exclusive. So I think that's the overall atmosphere of all the kids at Meeds. It's not exclusive, and people are pretty welcoming and open to new things. I think it's great for the most part.

Even with an "open" atmosphere, nearly all Joiners cited Greek organizations as identifiable cliques on campus. According to Tracy:

As far as girls go...being in a sorority, I can definitely see the cliques of the Greek life. But I mean, not necessarily pertaining to me. I feel like I know a lot of other girls in the other ones, and girls who aren't in them, but at the same time, I don't call them to go to lunch, kind of thing. It is very much kind of separated by who's in what group, according to sororities, I think. But that is not to say that people aren't open to mingling and meeting other people, but just from this first

semester, I feel like we've spent so much time during rush, and being initiated, it's like you're bound to cling to those girls. We haven't necessarily had the opportunity to get close with other ones because we are in meetings and because of that, we as freshmen naturally just say let's hang out all the time because that's just easiest. It's the easiest to just be with people you recognize.

Other groups, including athletes, were cited as identifiable cliques as well. However, Francis stated:

I wouldn't say there are really any distinct cliques. Certainly people find their solid group of friends that they mostly hang out with, but I wouldn't say we have just the jocks who hang out together, or the theatre kids, or anything like that.

Institutional policies can influence communal potential, and in the views of Joiners, Meeds plays a major role in this regard. In addition to Greek life, Joiners cited a range of formal opportunities to assess communal potential. Many Joiners mentioned the SACK Fair that takes place early in the school year as being an effective means of gaining awareness about the wide range of student organizations. Tara stated:

I feel like there are organizations for anything and everything that you want to do. There are constantly just posters and emails. We get weekly announcements about all kind of events that are going on. All the things that I've been to, it's extremely open and welcome. We have the SACK Fair at the beginning of the year, and that was completely overwhelming with the amount of stuff that was available. It's not competitive within the groups either. There's multiple religious organizations, and we don't care which one you pick. We'll tell you about this one or that one, or work it in, whatever it is you want to do. Even if there is not something for you, one of the girls in one of my classes is starting something new. She was signing a petition for it.

We have Welcome Week for the incoming freshman class before any upperclassmen get there, and they're kind of assimilated into Meeds. They get to know their class first before they're overwhelmed with three other classes on campus. We always have...events throughout the year for students, like camping or going to a baseball game in St. Louis, and things like that. I feel like [Meeds provides] us with a large amount of opportunity to do things outside of the classroom, especially within the community at Memphis. We have a really good community service program, things like that.

Non-joiners

Non-Joiners generally held favorable perceptions of the communal potential at Meeds. Friendly and open were common descriptors of the student environment. According to Karna, a first-year NJ:

The student environment at Meeds has been great so far. Everybody's really helpful. It's like a small family. I think the reason why I chose Meeds, because everybody's so nice and respects small community, that is why so many people prefer a liberal arts college over big public universities—a really small community and brotherhood. People will always help you out.

Charles added that “everyone seems to have their own niche and what they want to do; everyone seems very down to earth.” Aaron found campus life to be active and exhilarating “especially during the Greek scene, even though I'm not a member.”

Conversely, Tom expressed mixed feelings about the Meeds student environment:

There is some pretentiousness here. This is a really upper-class school and some of the people come from higher class families and are a little bit more gifted than others. Some people like me got scholarships to come in here and are a little bit more humble.

Additionally Jill, who is African American, described feelings of cultural dissonance:

You can feel the racial tension here – it is very apparent. When my roommate and I were walking through the common room at the bottom of our dormitory, the conversation stopped. It just got quiet and everyone looked up and then looked back down.

However, she further observed:

A lot of people are really active, and it helps you break down racial barriers. You go to the gym and you see Blacks and Whites and Asians all playing intramurals and laughing together. You see them walking away together and they're all joking or whatever and they've made that bond because of being teammates on the court. I think it's a good way to get to know people.

Many NJs cited extracurricular activities, such as intramural sports, as a means to foster positive, interactive relationships, thus improving communal potential. Ben noted that Meeds does not restrict membership in campus groups, even those based on ethnicity, and this policy promotes an inclusive student body.

Ming, an international student, suggested that communal potential is limited for international students. She stated that while Meeds provided targeted support and assistance to its international population, the institution could do more to assist with cultural assimilation and acclimation:

We have like 20 international students just from China. For a school as small as Meeds that is a big amount of people. Most students from China, if they just came, they need time to really get into their life here. I think Meeds is doing something about this, but not so much. [Chinese students] don't speak English

back in China. The food here is different. Meeds does a lot of stuff to help Chinese student acclimate, but it would be helpful if they did even more.

As a group, Non-Joiners were in consensus that identifiable cliques exist among the Meeds student body. According to Karna:

You can find your clique right away. There are all sorts of students. I think you see mostly the Asian people hanging out with each other. You see European students hanging out. Sometimes you see a lot of, I would say, the gay community, they hang out together. But mostly it's by nationality. You see a lot of Chinese students hanging out together, European students.

Charles identified international students, Greeks and athletes as predominant cliques, and theorized that cliques are reflections of the commonalities among clique members. For example, according to Charles, "athletes are in a clique because they have a bond in the same struggle."

Sue discounted the existence of significant cliques at Meeds. Tom surmised that cliques do not erect insurmountable barriers among students, stating that "Meeds has such a small student body that most students [end up] hanging out together."

Non-joiners proffered many reasons for foregoing the communal benefits of membership in a Greek organization or on an athletic team. Komal explained:

Being committed to such groups is kind of expensive. If you join a sorority, I think you have to pay about seven or eight hundred dollars a semester or a year, I'm not sure. But whatever it is, I really don't have that kind of money to throw around. And then, party while you're throwing around all that money, you know, that's something really, really rich kids do. I need to focus more on academics than pay to party. I still have my fun...it's not like I don't have my fun, without being in a sorority. You can still have the same level of fun without shelling out about a thousand dollars a semester.

Tom particularly cited negative perceptions of Greek campus life:

Just didn't – I didn't have any interest in [Greek life]. Some of the parties are all right, but I don't know. I guess I had just not had a good perception of it from TV and stuff like that. My perception is that they drink all the time; it's what I heard.

Ming stated that the two most influential factors resulting in her lack of pursuit of membership in a high commitment group centered on her cultural interests and lack of available time:

I am more into Chinese stuff. My background is kind of different and I might go back to Beijing for a job so I am focusing more on my college background. I don't have that much time for those things.

Karna stated “I think there are so many other issues I have to tackle before becoming a part of an organization where you really have to devote your time.” Aaron mentioned that fraternity rush period happened so early in the semester that he did not have adequate time to make a decision:

I thought about it very briefly during Welcome Week. I think the biggest thing my freshman year was that it (rush) happened so quickly, probably within the first week or two of class, they were already in the later stages of recruitment. It just happened so fast.

However, some Non-Joiners indicated that they gave serious consideration to joining a high commitment group, before declining to pursue membership. Sue shared a negative experience of her sister’s that influenced her decision not to seek membership in sorority. Jill and Charles opted not to pursue Greek organization membership because historically Black fraternities and sororities are not active on the Meeds campus. This absence of such organization limits communal opportunities for black students.

Aspiring Non-joiners

Aspiring Non-Joiners found, to varying degrees, other students with whom they could connect. Nearly all ANJs noted the importance of meeting students who shared similar values and had similar interests as their own, and many shared that they expected to have a close community of friends.

Mary felt that the academic culture contributed to the formation of a strong campus community:

Here I feel like everybody comes from different backgrounds and like different social situations, but everybody here is united by the fact that we’re all just a bunch of geeks.

Paul has observed a “very tight community, where everyone was going to be impacted by each other.” Further, he has found that “almost everybody is interacting with everyone else.” According to Caleb, “[e]veryone here is open towards one another. Most people you’ll find are very friendly. You can always just talk to someone.” Matt felt fortunate to have met “a group of kids that I would like to hang out with.” Lucy, however, felt Meeds’s sense of community was lacking. Specifically, she stated: “I think I expected...the community itself to be way more engaging than it is.”

Participating in clubs, activities and programs proved beneficial to many ANJs. Caleb noted that peer interaction was central to his acclimation: “Being able to participate in all those things, like extracurricular activities, clubs, groups, different things Meeds has presented me, has been wonderful.” Lucy agreed that extracurricular outlets are important to building relationships with peers:

You do want to get involved in those extracurriculars, because otherwise I feel like you wouldn’t meet anyone. That’s one of the best parts about it is that you

get to meet other types of students, and you get to feel like, okay, I've accomplished something.

According to Caleb, involvement opportunities abound on campus, thus assisting students with like interests to connect. Specifically, Caleb and Greg asserted that Independent students have many involvement options at the College, if they are willing to pursue them. Yet Lucy found that getting involved on campus did not come as easily as suggested by Caleb and Greg, or perhaps by the College. Lucy offered: “[Y]ou kind of have to find which opportunities you want to take. They don't just present themselves to you.”

Most of the Aspiring Non-Joiners observed the presence of cliques at the College. To this point, Greg described the student environment at Meeds as “pretty distinct”. Greek students were mentioned frequently as being “clique-ish.” When asked about campus cliques, Lucy responded without hesitation, “Definitely Greek life.” Matt and Gregory offered similar perspectives. Paul stated that cultural Greek organizations were especially cloistered:

I think there is a really big clique of African-Americans. The Black fraternities and sororities that really separate themselves off from the rest of campus. I think it's those non-traditional fraternities and sororities that have kind of put themselves into a completely different section.

In a few cases, the ANJs mentioned athletic teams as cliques. Lucy offered: “Sports cliques [exist]. Most of the sports students hang out with each other.” Matt concurred, stating: “A lot of athletes hang out together” as did Greg, noting: “You see baseball players hang out with baseball players, football players hang out with football players.”

Caleb found cliques to be rather ubiquitous, offering that campus residences play a role in establishing cliques. Matt's observations were similar:

I hang out mostly with people on my hall. Not sure if that's a clique, however. We're all a lot different, but we all do hang out together. Some of us are Greek and some of us aren't. Some of us are athletes, and some of us aren't.

In addition, Matt suggested that the cliques at Meeds might merely be an extension of the high school environment he and his classmates recently departed. Mary concurred, although she noted a distinction at the college level: “I guess the same [cliques] as in high school except a bit more spread out between people.” However, Mary suggested that cliques were not the norm at Meeds:

I mean loads of my friends are Independents, but loads of my friends are Greek, too, you know so it doesn't really matter. It's not like they just hang out. I mean there are those people that are like ‘I only want to hang out with my Tri Delta sisters or my Omega Phi sisters, but there's loads of people who are like ‘I don't care.’ That's the majority: I feel that the cliques are the exception here.

Mary offered that Independent students could participate in Greek activities, a point on which Matt agreed. Yet Paul, a first-year ANJ, felt that non-Greek students were at a social disadvantage as compared to members of fraternities and sororities. He noted that while the College provides social outlets for all students, they are not well publicized or attended:

There's a couple of, well, they bring in bands every once in a while, but they really don't advertise it, so I think that really hinders the progress of making Independents more equivalent to what the Greeks are.

Paul continued by stating that Meeds could do more in support of its Independent students:

I think that our school doesn't do enough big open things for everybody. We have a couple of, you know, school sponsored parties off campus, but...it's [only] once a semester.

INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRITY

Joiners

Most Joiners stated that, as applicants, they were attracted to Meeds's reputation as an academically rigorous institution offering a small, supportive environment in which to learn and develop. These tended to be the principles that influenced Joiners' expectations of Meeds. All Joiners stated that their expectations of Meeds have been met or exceeded. Such perceptions resonate with the meaning of institutional integrity.

Beth described how an open house she attended helped shape her perceptions of Meeds and, since that time, how her experiences have aligned:

My expectations were pretty high, only because I liked it so much the first time I came. The first time I came was November of my senior year. It was an open house. And everyone was so welcoming, and that's when I knew that I wanted to come to Meeds. I expected to feel welcome and comfortable, and I think that they've pretty much been met. I love the Meeds campus, and just the feeling you get from it, and the sense of community. That's definitely...not failed me.

Kate discussed her academic expectations of Meeds:

I feel like I had really high expectations of Meeds, specifically academic-wise. Because it's really known for getting students into grad school and providing them with good programs, and I was really excited about that. For the most part, that's been my experience here. All of the professors I've encountered have been genuinely interested in their students. This environment of wanting to better everyone, that, I feel is really positive about Meeds and it's true.

Institutional rules and regulations also influence perceptions relating to institutional

integrity. A prominent theme among Joiners was the role of the Honor Code in fostering trust among the students. Kim reflected on the effect that the Honor Code has on the student environment:

The student environment is very friendly. Everyone really gets along, and I think we're all really trusting of each other, especially with our Honor Code and whatnot.

Kate credited the Honor Code with fostering a “support system” at the College:

I just feel like there really is a support system at Meeds that is based on our Honor Code. Because you can trust each other. And I feel like that's what really makes it different here. If you go to a state school or something... we genuinely trust each other. I don't know everyone at this school, but I trust them, because we all agreed to this Honor Code.

Non-joiners

Non-Joiners voiced almost universally favorable impressions of Meeds' institutional integrity. Regarding expectations, many Non-Joiners reported they were satisfied overall. Zian, a first-year international student, offered his assessment of the College:

I think [Meeds] pretty [much] satisfied my requirements. I expected Meeds would be very rigid [academically]. I mean, there's a lot of homework. It quite fit my requirements.

Mala and Ben expressed similar sentiments as Zian. Carl had high expectations surrounding the liberal nature of education at Meeds:

Well I do enjoy the pursuit of knowledge, and so to find out that Meeds is a liberal arts college at which you can study just about anything. I thought, you know, that this was really a fit for me.

However, in discussing her expectations, Jill expressed disappointment in the student environment:

I thought Meeds was going to be more adult given the type of institution that Meeds is. I didn't expect the students to be childish—acting out and whatnot. I also didn't know that their Greek life would not be what I was expecting. I had never heard of fraternities and sororities being off-campus.

The latter sentiment was an acknowledgement that Meeds currently has no historically Black Greek organizations chartered on campus.

Aspiring Non-joiners

True to their expectations, most Aspiring Non-Joiners found Meeds to be a place of high achievement, with goal-driven faculty, staff and students. They also appreciated the values espoused by the College, which in many cases served as the motivator for choosing the institution. However, there was isolated discontentment surrounding unmet expectations.

ANJs tended to be attracted to Meeds's size and the advantages offered by a small school. Greg offered that he had applied to a small school like Meeds hoping he would have strong relationships with faculty. Likewise, Matt chose Meeds because of its size, as he felt it would foster a learning community committed to shared values. Specifically, he expected the College would offer "a small community of students who all had unique qualities and were excited to learn – kids that cared about each other and cared about the Honor Code at Meeds." He believed Meeds has met this expectation.

Nearly all ANJs noted the emphasis placed on student learning by College instructors. Caleb selected Meeds because of the opportunities for relationships with faculty, an expectation that has been fulfilled. Alone in his assessment, Paul expected the academic environment to be tougher than what he has found. However, he felt that Meeds has provided him with a generally positive experience:

I thought it was going to be overly rigorous academically and everyone here is going to have the mindset of working 24/7 to achieve what they want. But then after going through [recruitment], getting out, meeting people, there's a lot of people that can do both, almost at the same time. So it really helped me feel like it was a more social campus than I had thought possible.

Two ANJs, Greg and Lucy, also expressed unfulfilled expectations. Greg was unsatisfied with the social environment, and Lucy expressed dissatisfaction with the level of student-faculty interaction:

I think I expected more from the teachers. I have great professors, but it is hard to find them on a one-on-one basis because they do teach so many courses, and their office hours are usually pretty full.

Both Greg and Lucy stated that they have considered transferring to other institutions. Greg seems to have decided against transferring due to the "hassle" of doing so and the fact that he "already know(s) people" at Meeds. Interestingly, he continued by offering that he felt a sense of obligation to the College because it was his "first choice" and he does not want to lose the close relationships he has with his professors.

Taking her mother's advice, Lucy has decided to "give [Meeds] the full cycle before determining future plans." Therefore, she is going to remain at Meeds through the spring semester and assess her plans at that end of the academic year.

PROACTIVE SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT

Joiners

Joiners described an environment where students engage in the process of making friends and getting involved in activities very early in the first year. The College facilitated this process through orientation programming and other activities. Francis described how the process unfolds:

I feel like most people get involved right off the bat, at the beginning of the year. Within the first week, maybe two weeks of school, they hold the SACK Fair, where all the different organizations on campus have a little booth set up, and you go around and put your name on a bunch of email lists. I feel like, at least for me, that was definitely [helpful]...I just started getting involved as soon as possible. And I feel like most people do that.

Kevin recounted how his social adjustment was facilitated:

I ran for Honor Council during last fall. I didn't get it, but that was a good experience. It was through those meetings – like with College Republicans, College Democrats – those things [that I met people]. Once you start getting involved...you start having meetings, especially after the SACK Fair.

Tara described the “automatic” nature of social adjustment for athletes:

I am an athlete, so that was my automatic friend group. I was here early, it's a fall season, so we were here before everybody else got here. There are six freshman in my class and then the upperclassmen, that's who you spend all your time with, so that's who you know the best.

Interestingly, she expounded that this experience may have limited the extent of her social interaction:

I feel like I kind of missed out on some of the freshman things. We would come back [from trips relating to athletics] and our hall had done activities together for orientation and stuff. Now that I've kind of settled into it, and our season just wrapped up, I feel like I'll have the opportunity to expand outside of that...not limited to the team.

According to some Joiners, the Greek rush process is a central component of early efforts to form friendships and get involved. Kevin, a sophomore and member of a fraternity, explained the role of Greek life in social adjustment:

Since I think 40-50% of the campus is Greek, [students make friends] during the rush parties or during rush events, and also sometimes during Welcome Week, that orientation week when you come here. I was friends with my roommates

pretty much during Welcome Week, and then my suitemates. And then during the rush process, I met some other guys, and even during my pledge-ship last fall, I met a lot of guys through that that I'm really close friends with.

Kate discussed the temporary nature of initial friendships and the continuous effort to make friends and get involved:

I feel like freshman year, everyone gets here and they're just kind of excited, and they make friends with whoever's on their hall for the convenience. But I feel like second semester of your freshman year is when you really start coming into your own. Academically, socially, extra-curricular and such, that's when you really get involved with your clubs. You start taking leadership roles. You start finding friends who aren't just there for convenience but who actually have things in common with you and understand you. I feel like that's really when you start understanding what you're going to get out of college.

For Joiners, balancing academic and social demands was important, and all accepted the challenge as a part of college life. Greeks tended to emphasize that academics took priority over their social obligations. According to Nicole:

Definitely the sorority stuff comes second, definitely. And that's across the board. A lot of times we'll have formals on Thursday nights and a lot of girls won't go because they have homework. It's understandable. I feel very comfortable missing meetings for academic stuff.

Neither of the two Joiner athletes expressed such a prioritization. And Tara stated that she did not believe she was doing a good job of balancing her academic demands with those of her sport.

Non-joiners

Non-Joiners found that Meeds provided structured opportunities for students to adjust proactively to college life and forge social relationship in the process. Carl, a freshman NJ recalled:

Meeds has this thing they call Welcome Week that they do in early August And I did engage in that. They had things like pumpkin drops and water balloon fights so that's where a lot of the big activities come from. It's a chance for all of the students to connect. So I'd say it is within the first week.

A number of Meeds NJs detailed struggles with the challenge of balancing social and academic demands, a critical component of proactive social adjustment. Some NJs reported less than successful results. Ben, a sophomore NJ found that:

Aside from classes, it can be stressful...the amount of events there are that seem really important that you want to go to, but often can't. It can be stressful trying

to budget my time enough to be able to make it to those lectures, meetings or events.

Students found that they needed to spend more time studying, which resulted in less time for campus activities. Karna expressed frustration with his inability to participate in a greater number of organizations:

I think if I had enough time, I would be happy to take part in as many organizations as possible. I think it's that you really have to manage your time. That is the main factor why you're restricted to four or five organizations. There is so much stuff I want to do, but since academics comes first, after that you aren't left with much time.

Charles, however, expressed lofty goals for future campus involvement:

I am going to try study abroad next semester. I'm thinking of joining Amnesty International and I'm probably thinking of starting a Chinese language club for non-native speakers.

Aspiring Non-joiners

Aspiring Non-Joiners had mixed results adjusting to the demands of campus life. The need for social interaction drove most ANJs to attempt joining a Greek-letter organization. Although unsuccessful in their efforts, some ANJs found their circle of friends had expanded after the recruitment process.

Caleb said that going through recruitment broadened his group of friends: "I'd say about 50% of my friends are Greek." Mary, a sophomore, also felt that her circle of friends was larger due to her participation in Greek recruitment as a first year student. Lucy, a first-year ANJ, stated her circle of friends has changed "at least two or three times" in the two months since recruitment. Since then, she has looked for a diverse group of friends.

Greg's role as a resident assistant fostered his social adjustment and eased some of the social pressure:

Being an RA sort of filled a need, I think, for a group. Because we're a pretty close group, between us, because of the experiences we go through, so I don't feel the need to join any ore or take any more of my time, or give any more of time really, to anything.

Several ANJs noted the importance of the formal social activities, including the SACK Fair. In particular, two students discussed how the Fair assisted them in their adjustment to the social scene. Paul stated:

I really like the extracurricular program they have set up here. At the beginning of the year, they have the SACK Fair. I don't know what it stands for, but it helped a lot, just looking around, looking at different things.

Lucy said attendance at the fair was crucial, or students may be left seeking opportunities on their own:

They have one student fair and that's the only time you really get to know what's going on campus. Other than that, you have to go find it yourself.

Stressors thwarted ANJs from being proactive in their adjustment to campus life at Meeds. Time, in particular, proved to be a challenge for many students. Mary openly worried about being prepared for her classes, which may have negatively impacted her ability to get involved across campus. She was stressed over managing her time effectively: "It's [stressful] just getting everything done on time." Lucy also struggled to find enough time:

There's just never enough time. I'm usually in the library until 2am when it closes. On Saturdays, I'll sleep in as late as I can to catch back up on that sleep that I definitely missed all week.

Lucy offered that she could not easily find the time to invest in extracurricular activities and social life: "It's just a matter of how much time you can commit to that because academics are so demanding." She feels that the College could do more to assist students in making a positive social adjustment to campus.

Greg also noted he would not be able to increase his involvement in social life due to "lack of sleep." In fact, he pledged a fraternity but ultimately did not join due to the amount of time it would take.

Paul, a first-year student, reflected on how he has dealt with the demands of campus life:

So I've sacrificed a few hours of sleep to do a different club here, or to go out, or to study later, and think that's been very important.

PSYCHOSOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Joiners

Joiners reported dedicating between three and 15 hours each week to extracurricular activities. These activities ran the gamut from those associated with membership in a Greek organization to community service. These students dedicated this time, even though it often requires them to juggle academic demands. Kevin described how he balances academic and extracurricular activities:

It's a very fine balance. I'm in one of the leadership positions within my

fraternity, and I intend on running for a leadership position in the elections that are upcoming in this fall. It's mainly realizing that I'm here because of my academics, and my fraternity is my social life, so I need to make a balance between the two. Especially when you have a position in the fraternity, like I do, being able to say, okay, so I don't have to just go to meetings every week, I don't just have to make sure that the candidates do their stuff they're supposed to do, I have to make sure that I get my grades first, and then I can do my work within the fraternity. It's a fine balance.

Athletes dedicated much more time while their sport was in-season. Tara explained the extensive time commitment involved with participating in varsity athletics:

During season, it would probably be 3 hours a day practice. Our weekends would be game days, Friday to Sunday, so on weekends it would be probably 12 hours, 13 hours. During the week we have one day off, mandatory. Our season just ended last weekend. We are not allowed to have mandatory anything until February. [But] we have workouts that are strongly encouraged.

Non-joiners

Non-joiners were involved in an array of student groups and extracurricular activities, though not high-commitment as defined by this Capstone team. Tom stated:

I am an Independent student, but there's a lot of different things you can get involved in. I am in this Bonner program – a scholarship program – where we do service ten hours a week, I am also in the Black Student Association (BSA). I am a First Book member; we fund-raise money to buy books for kids.

Similarly, Zian detailed his campus involvement and myriad activities:

I do a lot of things. I play French horn. And I play basketball. I'm not an athlete, but I just like to play for fun. I read some books that are not required and search (the) Internet for stuff. And my roommate was just making a small film, and I was in one scene of the film.

Ming listed several of her activities in which she is involved, including “a group for Asians where we have sushi night.” In describing engagement opportunities, Karna explained:

There's always something going on, as in there's always a lecture or some meeting. Meeds really keeps you busy all the time. Whenever I have free time, I just attend various lectures, seminars. I either spend time studying or playing sports with my friends. “

Conversely, Aaron noted that some students were not as active as others:

There's a lot of people who really don't get involved in anything. There tend to be certain kinds of people who are involved in everything, and other types of people who aren't involved in very much on campus.

Aspiring Non-joiners

Aspiring Non-Joiners, by definition, spent time engaging in campus social activities. Their attempts to join high commitment groups, while unsuccessful, required them to expend both mental and physical energy. ANJs expressed interest in meeting other students and participating in clubs, organizations and College activities.

Nearly all ANJs became involved in some form of extracurricular activity. For example, Lucy is interested in starting a club sport team that does not currently exist at Meeds, while Mary spends her Saturdays playing intramural soccer. Matt noted that varsity or club sports are a possible outlet for all Meeds students.

Caleb felt as if options existed for Meeds students to explore beyond the Greek life and athletics:

I feel like there's opportunities for everyone to find some sort of extracurricular activity that they want to get involved with. There are tons of different groups and activities: sports clubs and everything. I'm pretty sure there's a group for everyone here, if they wanted to get involved.

As previously noted, many ANJs participated in Greek recruitment and unsuccessfully attempted to join. Moving forward, most ANJs were unsure if they would pursue membership in a fraternity or sorority again. Caleb expected that he would consider Greek life again:

Once the spring semester comes, I'm probably going to rush again, just going into that open like I did the fall rush.

Matt participated in fall recruitment but may pursue membership in a later term: "I haven't decided if I'm going to do Greek life yet. I'm going to just look into that next semester when rush starts over." Matt wanted more time to examine his options and get to know more students before committing to a fraternity:

One of the main reasons I didn't join a fraternity was not because I said I'm never going to do that, but I wanted more time to check them out and see what the different ones are all about. So I've been getting to know different people who have joined different ones, seeing how they work and what kind of guys join. I wasn't exactly sure how many kids go Greek, and now I've got a general idea of that.

On the other hand, Mary, a sophomore, did not see herself trying Greek life in the future. Rather, she expected to explore other types of student clubs:

I know they have honor societies, so I guess that. I feel like I pretty much allocate my time between non-academic and non-Greek student groups already.

Lucy felt similarly after she quit recruitment on Panhellenic's preference night (the last event of the recruitment process) – to the consternation of her friends – stating that she was unlikely to join in a subsequent semester. According to Lucy, she only wanted membership in one sorority,

and that group was no longer an option (although another one was). After time passed, Lucy believed she made the right decision:

All of my friends were like, I should have just joined it, one of the other ones. But it's really good because, in the end, the one I thought I wanted to join is the one that I'm not really close with any of the girls, which is really surprising.

One ANJ advised that knowing people prior to arriving on campus made a difference in his success getting involved on campus. Caleb had met with current students when he was considering Meeds. As his first year began, found he could join them in attending club meetings and activities: "I've had friends who I already knew before I came to Meeds, so I also became a part of their groups, and also activities they're in."

Discussion

Project Question 1

Are there differences in the entering characteristics of Non-Joiners, Aspiring Non-Joiners, and Joiners?

- a. *Do non-joiners and aspiring non-joiners enter with a lower ability to pay Meeds' tuition and fees than joiners?*

Among the three cohorts overall, ANJs had the highest average gross family need (Table 5). However, this amount – \$14,116 – was only slightly higher than the average gross family need of Joiners, which was \$14,027. NJs had the lowest average gross family need (\$12,140). Joiners had the highest percentage of students with gross family need, 45 percent compared to 42 percent of NJs and 41 percent of ANJs. And among these students, Joiners had the second highest average need (\$31,066), higher than NJs (\$28,979) but lower than ANJs (\$34,507).

Among interviewed students, NJs and ANJs had higher average gross family need than Joiners. NJs and ANJs had need of \$19,873 and \$31,888 respectively, while Joiners had need of only \$9,763. This disparity was due to the underrepresentation of Joiners with need among our pool. However, when only students demonstrating gross family need are considered, Joiners had the highest average need among those interviewed.

Students' ability to pay was determined using the level of gross family need. In general, the higher the level of gross family need, the lower the family SES. Based upon average levels of gross family need per student, NJs and ANJs do not enter Meeds with markedly different SES than Joiners. While the average gross family need for Joiners was \$31,066, it was slightly less for NJs at \$28,979 and slightly more for ANJs at \$34,507. The levels for our interviewees were even higher (although tightly bundled from a low of \$36,435 for NJs to a high of \$39,051 for Joiners), suggesting that they were less well off financially than peers in their cohorts.

Ability to pay has been identified as an entering characteristic that can affect a student’s level of social integration (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004; Tinto, 1987). Essentially, lower ability to pay tended to have a negative effect on social integration. Based on the findings of this capstone team, differences in ability to pay did not appear to place Joiners at an advantage in terms of social integration. When viewing all students across the cohorts, Joiners had higher gross family need than NJs and only slightly lower need than ANJs. Therefore, differences in social integration among the groups were likely attributable to other factors.

Table 5: Ability to Pay

Student Type (n)	Avg. gross family need: all students	Students w/ gross family need (%)	Avg. family need: students with need > \$0
Joiner Cohort (361)	\$14,027	163 (45.2)	\$31,066
Joiner Interviewees (8)	\$9,763	2 (25.0)	\$39,051
NJ Cohort (475)	\$12,140	199 (41.9)	\$28,979
NJ Interviewees (11)	\$19,873	6 (54.5)	\$36,435
ANJ Cohort (22)	\$14,116	9 (40.9)	\$34,507
ANJ Interviewees (6)	\$31,888	5 (83.3)	\$38,266

b. Do non-joiners and aspiring non-joiners enter with lower pre-college academic preparation than joiners?

Among the three cohorts overall, Joiners had the lowest average score on the ACT and on all parts of the SAT (Table 6). For example, the average Joiner score on the ACT was 27.79, compared to 28.18 for NJs and 28.06 for ANJs. Among interviewed students, Joiners had the second-highest score on the ACT and on the SAT math and writing sections; Joiners had the highest score on SAT verbal.

Pre-college academic preparation has been identified as an entering characteristic that can affect a student’s level of social integration (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004, Tinto, 1987). Essentially, lower academic preparation has been shown to have a negative effect on social integration. Based on the findings of this capstone team, differences in academic preparation did not seem to place Joiners at an advantage in terms of social integration. Overall, Joiners entered Meeds with lower pre-college academic preparation than NJs and ANJs. Therefore, differences in social integration among the groups were likely attributable to other factors.

Table 6: Academic Preparation

Student Type (n)	Avg. ACT composite	Avg. SAT verbal	Avg. SAT math	Avg. SAT writing
Joiner Cohort (361)	27.79	622.74	617.02	612.18
Joiner (8)	28.83	678.33	628.33	618.0
NJ Cohort (475)	28.17	634.48	639.37	631.11
NJ Interviewees (11)	26.56	580.0	629.0	592.0
ANJ Cohort (22)	28.06	646.67	645.83	612.73
ANJ Interviewees (6)	29.75	664.0	712.0	642.0

Project Question 2

Are there differences in the levels of social integration among Joiners, Non-Joiners, and Aspiring Non-Joiners?

- a. *Do Non-Joiners and Aspiring Non-Joiners harbor lower perceptions of Meeds’s commitment to students than Joiners?*

Students across all groups expressed high opinions of Meeds’s commitment to the welfare of its students; however, a majority of ANJs shared perceptions that members of Greek organizations and athletes receive preferential treatment from the institution. Thus, suggesting that students are not all treated equally.

In their interviews, students in all groups had favorable views of Meeds faculty and staff. Some of the terms and expressions used to describe faculty were: “really sweet”, “very approachable” and “genuinely interested in their students”. Some students noted that they had close relationships with professors, and most identified at least one faculty member who has been most helpful in easing their transition to Meeds.

The general sentiment expressed about Meeds staff was that they are friendly and helpful. Some students shared specific examples of when a staff member or campus office provided able assistance. Tom, a Non-joiner, recounted how Campus Safety assisted him with his car after it broke down off campus. Kate, a Joiner, shared how campus counselors helped a friend deal with a difficult issue. And Caleb, an aspiring non-joiner, expressed a high opinion of “all student services”. Of course, the level of interaction with campus staff varied; however, all students seemed to be confident that if they needed help, they knew that someone would be willing to assist them.

These types of opinions of faculty and staff foster perceptions of what Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon (2004) termed an “abiding concern for the growth and development” of students. The Commitment of the Institution to Student Welfare influencer is perceptual in nature, thus requiring interactions between students and the institution to foster perceptions of institutional commitment. Needless to say, a campus safety officer going beyond the expected scope of his duties and a faculty member expressing interest in whether her students are grasping course material help foster favorable perceptions.

Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon (2004) identified specific teaching methods as affecting student perceptions of institutional commitment. Active learning methods increase understanding of course material and as a result render classes more rewarding for students (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004, Braxton, Milem & Sullivan, 2000). The more rewarding the classes the more likely that students feel their professors care about their intellectual growth and development (Braxton, Milem & Sullivan, 2000). All students shared that their professors employ active learning methods in their classes. Most of these students stated that the use of these methods enhanced the learning environment.

An area of distinction among the groups dealt with perceptions of special treatment received by certain students, specifically members of Greek organizations and athletes. These observations were shared by four of the six aspiring non-joiners interviewed. Examples dealt with activities and accommodations targeted specifically at members of Greek organizations, as well as Meeds’s efforts to recruit and retain athletes. Not all of these students saw the perceived special treatment in decidedly negative terms; however, Lucy expressed the sentiment that a student’s non-affiliation with an organization or activity risks her being seen as “just another random student” in the eyes of Meeds administration. Equal treatment of students, both as individuals and in groups, is central to fostering positive student perceptions of an institution’s commitment to their welfare. Thus, the fact that 75 percent of aspiring non-joiners perceived preferential treatment for Greeks and athletes should cause some concern for Meeds. This sentiment could reflect a larger issue that has an indirect effect on the Greek/non-Greek persistence disparities.

b. Do Non-Joiners and Aspiring Non-Joiners view the Communal Potential at Meeds less favorably than Joiners?

Most students across all groups stated that there was much communal potential at Meeds; however, there was a low, but noteworthy, level of discontentment among African-American students and an international student related to limited communal opportunities. Also noteworthy was the overwhelming acknowledgement and identification of cliques on the Meeds campus.

The prevailing sentiment of the Meeds student environment was that it is friendly and welcoming. Karna, a non-joiner, stated that it is “like a small family”. Mary, an aspiring non-joiner, termed it “united”. Based on the interviews, peer relationships are formed in various settings—both informal and formal. Informal relationships tend to be formed in the residence halls. These relationships were cited by some students as being initially based on convenience and, therefore, more temporary in nature. However, some of these relationships have endured. In fact, some students across groups talked about how they still “hang out” with people whom they

initially met in the dorm; others talked about how an upper-level student, often an RA, has been a useful confidant in their process of transitioning to college.

Formal settings in which students build relationships revolve around extracurricular activities, especially Greek life. Many of the Joiners mentioned meeting people as a motivating factor in their decision to join a Greek organization. Many students across groups stated that orientation activities, particularly the SACK fair, provided a formal setting for them to meet people and get involved in extracurricular activities.

Formal communal settings are heavily influenced by institutional policies. For instance, orientation programming can set the tone for how students interact with each other. One policy that has fostered some level of discontentment among two of the African-American students is the absence of historically black Greek organizations on campus. In order to become members of these organizations, interested students must engage other chapters in the area. The two students in question stated that this level of effort was not worth it. Jill explained that “[y]ou have to run across town to try to get involved.” While these students did not seem overly upset by the absence of these organizations, Meeds could very well be missing out on an opportunity to further integrate this subset of students into the institution’s social system. Additionally, Ming stated that she feels Meeds could do more in aiding the integration of international students into the student community.

A student’s perception regarding the communal potential of a campus hinge on his belief that there are other students like him—specifically, there are other students who share his “values, beliefs, and goals” (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004, p. 23). This sentiment was favorably expressed by many students across groups. For example, Mary in explaining the student environment at Meeds stated, “we’re all just a bunch of geeks”. Not everybody described the student environment in such unified terms. The vast majority of students across groups stated that there were noticeable cliques among the student body. The most commonly identified clique was based on Greek affiliation. Other cliques based on ethnicity and athletic participation were identified as well. Cliques are not necessarily harmful. In fact, cliques can aid social integration by allowing subsets of students to find the “sufficient friendship support” referenced by Tinto (1975). However, Meeds must consider the extent to which these identified cliques detract from fostering communal potential among its students.

c. Do Non-Joiners and Aspiring Non-Joiners view Meeds’ institutional integrity less favorably than Joiners?

According to Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon (2004), “Institutional integrity manifests itself in the extent to which student expectations for college receive fulfillment” (p. 24). A heightened sense of institutional integrity leads to a greater level of social integration (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). The extent to which an institution meets student expectations greatly influences student perceptions of the institution’s integrity and, in turn, social integration. Students across all groups expressed high expectations of Meeds and feelings that those expectations had been met. Matt, a first-year ANJ, represented the opinion of the majority: “[Meeds] has been pretty close to what I expected. I haven’t had too many surprises.” However, a few students expressed some unmet expectations related to accessibility of faculty and Meeds’s

social environment.

Institutional integrity is the extent to which an institution is faithful to its mission and goals (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). The Meeds Vision Statement gives four strategic imperatives for the College: student access, student learning, student engagement, and student inspiration. The College “aspires to graduate students with a lifelong passion for learning, a compassion for others, and the ability to translate academic study and personal concern into effective leadership and action in their communities and the world” (Meeds Vision, 2010). In this statement, the College highlights aspirations such as faculty/staff involvement, diverse opportunities for student learning, and an emphasis on integrity and values. Throughout the team’s interviews, Joiners, Non-Joiners, and Aspiring Non-Joiners generally found Meeds to be an institution that adhered to its mission and core values.

Regardless of category, Meeds students had high expectations of the College prior to arrival. Most often Meeds students shared they expected a rigorous academic environment that would challenge them intellectually. Mary’s comments succinctly reflected the opinion of her peers: “I knew [Meeds] was going to be a lot harder than high school.” Those interviewed also desired an atmosphere that allowed for good faculty-student relationships, and many mentioned they had selected a smaller school for that reason. Students wanted to be at an institution that viewed them as individuals and “not just a number.” Paul shared this sentiment: “There’s not going to be a lot of nameless faces wandering around.” Across category, students said they were around caring faculty and staff who took the time to know them personally. In addition, students offered that attending a liberal arts college allowed them to grow personally and explore their interests in both academic and co-curricular realms.

Yet isolated perceptions regarding unmet expectations were expressed by Lucy, an ANJ, and Jill, a NJ. Lucy noted that while faculty members were willing to assist, they were not always readily available for consult. Too few office hours, too many students to advise, and too many courses taught were given as reasons why a professor may not be responsive. Also Lucy offered that she “expected [Meeds] to be way more engaging than it is.” This minor, yet important, difference in perception reflected some unfulfilled expectations by ANJs seeking faculty time and assistance, an issue that was not raised by any of the Joiners or NJs.

Two students—Greg and Lucy—have both considered transferring to another institution. Greg, a sophomore ANJ, stated: “probably why I stayed is how big the hassle is to transfer. You already know people.” He continued by offering that he felt a sense of obligation to the College: “I felt that because Meeds was my first choice, I was bound by it.” Greg’s relationship with faculty also impacted his decision to stay: “I got to know professors. I feel like the closeness, how close I was with professors. I didn’t want to lose those relationships.” For now, Lucy has agreed to stay through the academic year, but summed up her time at Meeds thus: “I’m content at Meeds, [but] it’s not like I’m overly happy to be here like I thought I would be.” While Lucy has made connections with Greek students, she noted that one of her suitemates, another first-year non-Greek student, has not been able to do so: “She doesn’t really associate with them, so she’s kind of on her own, and I can already tell that she wants to transfer.”

An interesting theme among the joiners was trust, specifically trust rooted in the Meeds honor code. Half of the Joiners mentioned the honor code as a basis upon which students interact with each other. Among the other groups, only one ANJ mentioned the Honor Code. Joiners appeared more comfortable using the Honor Code as an illustrative tool to highlight the College's values. This difference in terminology is striking, given the central role that the Honor Code is intended to play in the lives of all Meeds students. The difference may suggest that Non-Joiners and Aspiring Non-Joiners do not feel as strongly tied to the Code as Joiners.

d. Do Non-Joiners and Aspiring Non-Joiners spend less psychological energy engaging in social interactions and activities than Joiners?

Students across all groups described active social lives on campus. Aspiring non-joiners, however, seemed to express greater difficulty in juggling academic and social demands, as compared to other groups.

Students described an environment where the process of making friends begins immediately upon beginning the freshman year. Much of this pace is dictated by the inherent nature of starting college. However, formal dimensions of the institution, including orientation programming and the Greek recruitment period, also dictated the pace by which students made friends. Many students referenced the SACK Fair as a vital part of the social adjustment process. As referenced earlier, Lucy, an aspiring non-joiner, stated that the fair was "the only time you really get to know what's going on." Other students discussed how this fair is the springboard for getting involved.

Another formal means of adjusting proactively is participating in the Greek recruitment process. Recruitment begins a couple weeks after the start of the school year, requiring new students to decide very quickly whether they want to pursue membership to a Greek organization. Most Joiners viewed the recruitment process specifically as a means of meeting people. This same motivation prompted ANJs to pursue membership as well. Most NJs, while not interested in Greek life, found other formal and informal means of adjusting socially. In sum, the majority of students were actively adjusting to social life at Meeds, with some exceptions among the ANJs.

Social adjustment and social engagement require both a desire for social stimulation and affirmative effort to acquire that stimulation (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004). Anticipatory socialization is a vital component of social adjustment, because in order to gain membership into a peer culture, one must adopt through emulation the "norms, attitudes, values, and behaviors" of that culture (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004, p. 25). The Greek recruitment process is a useful example of anticipatory socialization.

Many challenges are inherent in social adjustment, including increased levels of stress that are associated with increased academic demands (National Institute of Mental Health, 2000). Based on the interviews, ANJs seemed more affected by this challenge than any other group. One-half of these students specifically cited time demands as a factor that limited the energy they were able to dedicate to social engagement. This finding was seemingly counterintuitive given

that ANJs initially attempted to join high-commitment student organizations. However, for at least one student, concerns about academics prompted him to quit the recruitment process early.

Conclusions

This capstone project was undertaken as a follow-up to a project undertaken in 2008-2009 by a previous capstone team. The scope of the previous study was to determine the effects of Greek affiliation on desired institutional outcomes, such as persistence rates. The principal conclusion of that study was that a marked difference existed between the graduation rates of Greek-affiliated students and Independent students (Gideon, Hayse, & Wiley II, 2009). That team posited that the difference in persistence was largely related to the inclination of some students to be “joiners” and others “non-joiners”, with joiners having a greater probability of persisting. In concluding their report, last year’s team put forward multiple recommendations. The following three recommendations inform the scope of this capstone project:

1. Administrators at Meeds should sponsor a thorough qualitative investigation into the effects of Greek life at the College.
2. Administrators at Meeds should undertake further study to better understand the extent to which Greek life pervades student life on the Meeds campus.
3. Administrators at Meeds should conduct a careful and thorough examination of the social engagement possibilities for Independent students.

Pursuant to these recommendations, this Capstone team undertook a principally qualitative investigation of social integration differences among students we defined as Joiners, Non-joiners, and Aspiring Non-joiners. Joiners consisted of students affiliated with Greek organizations and/or athletic teams. Non-joiners consisted of students not affiliated with either type of organization; and Aspiring Non-joiners consisted of students who sought, but failed to gain, membership into a Greek organization or on an athletic team. Rather than focusing on graduation rates, this project focused on attrition between the first and second years. At Meeds, attrition is highest during this period, setting the stage for the graduation rate disparities cited earlier.

The conceptual basis of this report was a revision of Tinto’s Interactionalist theory, first posited by Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson (1997) and later expounded upon by Braxton, Hirschy & Johnson (2004). The revision identified social integration as a critical factor in determining chances of persistence at a residential institution. The more socially integrated a student became at his or her institution, the more likely he or she persisted (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004). Components of the revision, including theories relating to the effects of entry characteristics and the factors that influence social integration, formed the basis of the study questions posed by this capstone team.

In examining the differences in the entering characteristics among the groups, this team focused on students’ ability to pay tuition and fees at Meeds, as well as these students’ pre-college academic preparation. Lower ability to pay and lower levels of academic preparation have been shown to negatively effect social integration (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004).

We concluded that only nominal differences existed among Joiners, NJs and ANJs on both characteristics and, therefore, differences in social integration across these groups were likely attributable to other factors.

The qualitative portion of the study delved into *how* and *why* students' experiences impacted their levels of social integration, and in turn, chances of departure. The study highlighted noticeable differences in levels of social integration between ANJs and both Joiners and NJs. Compared to Joiners and NJs, ANJs were less socially integrated. Some ANJs expressed perceptions that Meeds showed favoritism towards athletes and members of Greek organizations. They seemed less satisfied with various aspects of academic and social life at Meeds. They also had more difficulty balancing the academic and social demands of college life, thereby damaging their chances of social integration. Differences between Joiners and NJs were more subtle.

A finding that was practically unanimous across all groups was that Greek life is very pervasive on Meeds's campus. All students were affected by Greek life and institutional policies relating to Greek life. Sororities and fraternities were primary avenues through which students formed social groups and, given the early onset of the Greek recruitment process, students must often make hasty decisions regarding whether they want to pursue membership or spend their first year as an unaffiliated (Independent) student. Based on the interviews, many social opportunities existed for Independent students; however, there was a palpable sentiment among these students, particularly ANJs, that Greek life culture dominated the social scene, and those who were unaffiliated were at a social disadvantage.

Limitations

Limitations inherent to this capstone project have the potential of biasing our findings. The primary limitation concerns the type of student who was most likely to respond to our invitation to participate in an interview. The team suspected that students who were most disaffected by their experiences at Meeds (and thus least likely to persist) were least likely to respond to our invitation. This supposition is based in large part on a discussion of student attachment to schools posited by Johnson, Crosnoe & Elder (2001). According to the authors, students who feel "embedded in...their school communities" are more likely to participate in academic and extracurricular activities (Johnson, Crosnoe & Elder, 2001). Thus, it is our belief that disaffected, or less embedded, students were less likely to participate in our study than other students. The effect of this limitation could be selection bias that resulted in an understating of differences among the three categories of students.

Another limitation results from the lack of representativeness among the groups of interviewed students when compared to overall cohorts. Students with financial need were underrepresented among interviewed Joiners and overrepresented among interviewed NJs and ANJs. These trends resulted in average gross family need among interviewed Joiners being lower than the cohort overall, and the averages for interviewed NJs and ANJs being higher than their cohorts overall. Additionally, the group of interviewed Joiners was less diverse than the overall cohort. Of the eight Joiners who were interviewed, only one was male, only two were

athletes (the rest were members of Greek organizations), and none were students of color. While representativeness was not a paramount concern of this project, we nonetheless sought a representative sample of students by randomly selecting whom we invited to participate. The effect of this limitation could be that differences within and among groups could be understated or overstated. For example, the lack of diversity among the Joiner group could foster a higher level of response consistency than would be reflected among a representative group. The financial need disparities could lead to overstated response differences between Joiners and the other groups.

A final limitation results from the capstone team's use of the Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon (2004) influencers of social integration. While these influencers play a role in the critical issues surrounding college persistence, they are of an indirect nature and, in of themselves, do not predict student departure. Inferences made by this capstone team about levels of social integration found across the three categories of students – Joiners, Non-Joiners and Aspiring Non-Joiners – have been done based upon personal interviews. Differences found among interviewees are helpful in better understanding, if not directly correlating, student integration levels and decisions about departure.

Recommendations

1. Meeds administrators should defer the Greek recruitment process.

We recommend that the Meeds administration consider a deferred recruitment process based upon empirical evidence indicating that the communal potential influencer constitutes a pivotal factor in both student retention and peer interactions affecting students in ways that lead to student success (Braxton & Jones, 2008). Among the students that we interviewed, findings revealed across all groups that the vast majority of Meeds students identified noticeable cliques among the student body. Greek affiliation emerged as the most commonly identified clique. As previously noted cliques are not necessarily bad and can aid in social integration by allowing subsets of students to find the sufficient friendship support referenced by Tinto (1975). However, Meeds must consider the extent to which cliques detract from fostering communal potential among its students. Formal communal settings are heavily influenced by institutional policies. Last year's Meeds Capstone team pointed out that early rush and pledging may be an activity that serves to isolate Independent students before they have an opportunity to find other opportunities that offer communal potential. Delaying rush could provide a more natural setting in which all students could seek out and develop friendships and peer support on their own rather than depending on the more artificial mechanism of fraternity and sorority rush activities (Gideon, Hayse, & Wiley II, 2009).

Currently, the College allows its Greek-letter organizations to recruit new members, including first-year students, at the beginning of the fall semester. This practice, while common among higher education institutions, often creates challenges for members of the entering class. First-year students, the primary audience for most Greek chapters when recruiting, are less well equipped socially and academically to begin membership in a high commitment group such as a fraternity or sorority. In some cases, students were unable to commit to membership in a Greek

organization without first surveying the available options. In other cases, students made the decision to join but felt rushed (ironic given the slang name ‘Rush’ that is given to recruitment activities). Several interviewees, particularly first-year students, expressed apprehension related to making such a major decision so early in their Meeds careers. Aaron, a sophomore Non-Joiner, gave voice to the sentiment expressed by many Meeds students that the Greek recruitment period occurs too early on in the first semester:

I thought about it (Rush) very briefly during Welcome Week. I think that the biggest thing my freshman year was that it (Rush) happened so quickly, probably within the first week or two of class, they were already in the later stages of recruitment. It just happened so fast.

If Meeds moved back its recruitment process, the College would not be alone in administering deferred recruitment. While fall semester recruitment remains commonplace, deferred recruitment has become an acceptable practice for institutions that seek to provide structured and informal opportunities for new students to acclimate prior to joining. In 2005, the North American Interfraternity Conference (NIC) surveyed 800 college and universities with Greek communities, and 160 (20%) responded that they employed some form of deferred recruitment for membership (Farrell, 2006). However, a disproportionate number of the institutions with deferred recruitment were private (NIC, 2005), which provides a strong peer network for Meeds to access around this issue. Institutions with strong academic credentials and an undergraduate curriculum focused in the liberal arts that employ a deferred recruitment process include Cornell University, Duke University, Emory University, Northwestern University, and Vanderbilt University. Given the recent trend of delaying recruitment, the number of institutions with some form of deferred recruitment process is only likely to have grown in the five years since the NIC survey.

Concerns exist among students and institutions alike when considering the deferral of Greek recruitment. Loss of chapter/headquarters revenue, loss of student interest, and “dirty rush” of potential new members are reasons given to maintain an early fall recruitment schedule (University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, 1996). In addition, backlash from chapters, alumni and international organizations charging that the institution has infringed upon their opportunity to effectively recruit and, thus, sustain themselves, is a possibility (University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, 2006).

Even with these potential challenges, the capstone team recommends that Meeds College defer its Greek recruitment process to, at the very least, the middle of the first semester. Consideration for implementation of deferred rush is also buttressed by the significant support documented in last year’s Capstone team report for such a change amongst Meeds faculty and administrators (Gideon, Hayse, & Wiley II, 2009). Allowing first-year students two months to acclimate to their new surroundings, settle in academically, and adjust socially provides much-needed time to reinforce institutional values, foster a sense of community, and create opportunities for friendships to develop without regard to affiliation. With this foundation in place, students would be better prepared to cope with the stressors associated with recruitment. They would also be better informed as they considered whether or not to participate in recruitment and, if so, which chapters were a good fit.

2. Meeds administrators should extend the College's orientation program into the fall semester.

Deferring Greek recruitment would provide Meeds with an ideal opportunity to extend its orientation program and in the process foster more opportunities for all students to become socially integrated. Even though most students we interviewed expressed favorable opinions of academic and social life at Meeds, it was apparent that levels of social integration varied among different groups. To a person, Joiners were socially integrated; other groups were not. Also, the existence of easily identifiable cliques and the difficulty of ANJs in juggling academic and social demands provide compelling justifications for an extended orientation program consisting of structured, universal opportunities for social integration.

At Meeds, all students are required to participate in orientation, though some waivers are granted. Meeds's Director of New Student Programs, Marcus Langford, estimates that about 95% of Meeds first-year students participate in all components of orientation, with notable exceptions being international students for whom pre-enrollment travel to Memphis is impractical (Langford, 2010). International students have a separate orientation conducted by the international office at Meeds (Langford, 2010).

Currently the Meeds's orientation program has three central components: Open Meeds, Welcome Week, and Peer Assistants (PAs):

- Open Meeds takes place over two days in the summer (Meeds College, 2010h). Its goal is to provide “new students an opportunity to begin their transition to Meeds” (Meeds College, 2010h, p. 1). Students are given an overview of the College's academic curriculum and opportunities to interact with faculty, staff, and current students (Meeds College, 2010h). Students can choose among four, two-day sessions (two in June, two in July) in which to participate (Langford, 2010).
- Welcome Week takes places over five days just prior to the start of classes (Meeds College, 2010h). Its goal is to “provide new students with social, educational, cultural and recreational activities and programs to further assist them with transitioning to the Meeds campus and greater Memphis communities” (Meeds College, 2010h). It is intended to build upon Open Meeds, allowing students to further acclimate themselves to college life.
- Peer Assistants are upper-level students who assist first-year students in their acclimation to Meeds (Meeds College, 2010h). Each Peer Assistant is assigned a group of 15-20 first-year students for whom he or she plans one or two activities during the first semester (Meeds College, 2010h). Fundamentally, Peer Assistants are intended to be human resources whom first-year students can tap for information and assistance throughout the school year. Peer Assistants are unpaid volunteers (Langford, 2010).

College orientation programs have long been valued for their critical role in successfully acclimating students (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfe, 1986; Tinto, 1988; Tinto, 1993). Pascarella, Terenzini & Wolfe (1986) stated that orientation programs are a form of anticipatory

socialization that facilitate social integration. Tinto (1988) argued that effective orientation programs assist students in dealing with the transitional difficulty of starting college. However, Tinto (1988) further argues that most orientation programs are perfunctory in nature and too short in duration, and these deficiencies limit their effectiveness. According to Tinto (1988), “[o]rientation programs should span the first six weeks of the first year, if not the first semester” (p. 451).

Meeds’s orientation program appears to suffer from at least one of the deficiencies cited by Tinto (1988): short duration. The formal aspects of the program – Open Meeds and Welcome Week – end before the school year begins. Peer Assistants are available to offer ongoing support to new students, but given the informal structure of the program, the effectiveness of each Peer Assistant varies widely.

Meeds could facilitate the social integration of all its students by extending orientation well into the first year. The program could begin with Open Meeds and Welcome Week, but should also include a third component that builds upon the foundation laid by the earlier components. Specifically, this new component could assist students with their transition and integration by providing formal and structured opportunities to interact with faculty, staff, and each other. Opportunities to develop school and class identity before embarking upon individual paths improves the chances that all students, whether or not they choose to join a high commitment group, feel connected to the College and its institutional mission and values. At Meeds, the separation that begins almost immediately after students’ arrival with Greek recruitment and, for varsity athletes, with practices and competitions makes extending the orientation period all the more critical in order to create a common experience as well as to ensure a successful transition and first-year experience for all students.

Like Tinto, Pascarella, Terenzini & Wolfle (1986) offered that effective orientation activities are recurring and sustained in their frequency. The new component of Meeds’s orientation could make use of programs already in use, including the Peer Assistant program, residential life programming, and potentially some aspects of the Search and Life curricula. The goal would be to align these separate but complementary entities into an extended orientation program with a common and integrated mission.

3. Meeds administrators should track Aspiring Non-Joiners and formalize mechanisms to identify and support these students.

Aspiring Non-Joiners have unique needs. These students unsuccessfully attempted to attain or ceased their pursuit of membership in a high commitment group. Although the group may be relatively small – 22 first-year and sophomore students were identified for this project – certainly more exist. An internal mechanism for discretely tracking these students is needed to ensure that they do not “fall through the cracks.” According to Dr. Marcus Langford, director of New Student Programs, this is unlikely given that the Meeds Student Response Team – a group that discusses students of concern – is currently in place (and a very good idea) (Langford, 2010). However, a more formalized process of identifying and monitoring ANJs is useful for two reasons. First, it allows the College to dispatch appropriate resources and ensure that at least

one member of the Meeds community is in contact with each ANJ. Second, data can be obtained about the characteristics of the ANJs and used for purposes of longitudinal study and institutional research. Establishing a content management system ensures centralized recording of student cases and documents the assignment of cases that require action. Without such data, the College cannot accurately determine: (a) the number of ANJs; and, (b) whether or not they are more likely than their Non-Joiner peers to depart. Recent data show that non-Greeks, who are part of the NJ population, graduated at much lower rates than Greeks (Gideon, Hayse, & Wiley, II, 2009).

This capstone team's findings showed that the thought of transferring was shared by one in three ANJ interviewees, while none of the Non-Joiners and Joiners expressed a desire to leave Meeds. In addition, several ANJs experienced difficulty acclimating to the College and adjusting socially. First-year students, particularly those who have experienced a difficult adjustment, may have heightened levels of stress. According to the National Institute for Mental Health (2000), stressors common in college life include being on one's own in a new environment, adjusting to changes in social life, and exposure to different people, ideas, and temptations. The team hypothesizes that the retention problem among non-Greek students found by Gideon et al (2009) lies disproportionately in the relatively small but significant number of ANJs in each class who have had difficulty navigating and engaging various campus environs.

In the last several years, and certainly since the tragedy at Virginia Tech in 2007, institutions have been reviewing and enhancing their resources in an attempt to assess threats and intervene with students in the hope of abating harmful incidents (The Associated Press, 2008). As a result of these enhancements, institutions are better equipped to identify and track all students of concern. While threat assessment may not be a critical need at Meeds as identified by this team, the College may find useful models employed by other campuses that more formally approach the "kitchen cabinet" concept already in place. Duke University, a private, selective institution with a liberal-based undergraduate curriculum recently developed a structure to identify and support at-risk students. Sue Wasiolek, assistant vice president for student affairs and dean of students, offered:

For almost the past two years, we have had the good fortune at Duke to have added the position of case manager to the Dean of Students Office. This person is responsible for creating, maintaining and following up with the list of students that we have identified as 'Students of Concern.' This list is generated as a result of meetings, phone calls, emails, and reports that are received from staff, faculty, students, parents and others who have a minor or more serious concern about a student. For example, the student may not have received a bid to join a Greek organization or may have been dismissed from an athletic team. Or, at the other extreme, the student may have expressed suicidal ideations. Regardless of severity, a tracking system such as this one, overseen by a staff member within Student affairs, enables us to have a tighter, more effective support system (and safety net) for all of our students. By managing and monitoring students in this way, we better insure that students will access the resources that they need, thus feeling cared about and supported by the university (Wasiolek, 2010).

Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon (2004) offered a “best practices” retention model, the Strategic Retention Initiative, in *Toward Understanding and Reducing College Departure*. The model is designed to identify and support first-year students, particularly those students who are considered at-risk. The initiative would be well suited as a powerful tool to assist Meeds in identifying ANJs. The Strategic Retention Initiative uses the theoretical concepts of commitment of the institution to the welfare of students and institutional integrity to translate these theories effectively to real life situations. Personal outreach is employed to foster first-year student affiliation with the institution. The model was described and highlighted by Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon (2004) in *Toward Understanding and Reducing College Departure* as an exemplary retention program for students who are at the greatest risk for withdrawal, such as Aspiring Non-Joiners. The initiative was developed and implemented at Vanderbilt University ten years ago by Ellen Brier, who is an assistant dean of Peabody College.

The personal outreach in the Strategic Retention Initiative entails the dean of students contacting 200 first-year at-risk students. The process employs a phone log that includes each student’s name, home address, campus address, academic major as well as in some cases notes on the student’s background drawn from their admissions application (Brier, Hirschy, & Braxton, 2008). Calls are made in the fall to coincide with specific pressure points in the students’ first semester when academic and social challenges are at an apex. If a telephone conversation with a student warrants it, the dean will ask to meet with the student one-on-one. Notes on each call are recorded in a log and a follow-up call is made in the spring. Although Brier, Hirschy & Braxton (2008) do not imply causality, they report that when the initiative began, Vanderbilt’s first-to-second year rate of retention was approximately 88 percent. Over seven years of the initiative’s implementation, the retention rate has ranged between 95 and 98 percent. The Strategic Retention Initiative should be given serious consideration by Meeds College as the prospective centerpiece of a formalized process to identify ANJs at an early point in the fall semester. Early detection of ANJs who may be struggling to adjust and engage socially provides the administration the necessary time to secure assistance and appropriately follow-up with students at risk for departure. By formalizing its structure and codifying its approach, the Meeds administration can more rapidly and intentionally provide resources and support to this group of at-risk students.

Final Thoughts

It is a pleasure to acknowledge those who have made this capstone project possible. We owe a debt of gratitude to Robert Johnson, Vice President for Student and Information Services at Meeds, for his insight and for the important suggestions he made which influenced our thinking throughout the course of the study. He was accessible, congenial and extremely giving of his time. Associate Director of Information Services, James E. Eckles, provided us with vital facts and data that proved instrumental to the completion of the project. To him, we are exceedingly grateful for enhancing the quality of our work. We thank Marcus R. Langford, Director of New Student Programs, for his generosity in providing us with access to his expertise regarding new student programs as well as granting us permission to include remarks in the report garnered from a personal interview conducted with him. We would also like to thank the wonderful Meeds students (who remain anonymous to preserve confidentiality) for forfeiting

limited discretionary time in order to complete questionnaires and to engage in face-to-face interviews with the team. We appreciated the honesty, openness and thoughtfulness with which the students responded to our questions; their comments and observations were both illuminative and interesting. Finally, we would like to express our deep appreciation to Professor John M. Braxton from Peabody College of Vanderbilt University. His timely and instructive evaluation at every stage of the research process was invaluable. As a team we were exceptionally fortunate to be privy to the guidance, support and knowledge of one of higher education's leading scholars in the area of student departure. His excitement and enthusiasm toward research is infectious and he embodies the level of high quality scholarship to which we all aspire.

Retention of students is a priority of any postsecondary institution, and Meeds College is to be commended for undertaking a project to study the differences in students' levels of social integration as an indicator of their satisfaction and desire to persist. As a Capstone team, we found differences in integration among students who joined high commitment groups – Greek organizations and varsity athletic teams – and those who did not. In particular, the team noted the emergence of a particular group of students, the Aspiring Non-Joiners, and found that their experiences differed from Joiners and other Non-Joiners. Although a relatively small group, Aspiring Non-Joiners struggled to socially integrate, had less positive views of the College, and were more likely than their peers to consider departure; this group should be tracked and studied further by Meeds administrators as a significant amount of the attrition that occurs among students who are not affiliated with high commitment groups may be localized here.

As they do at other institutions, Greek life and athletics engender myriad, often polarizing views at Meeds; some people find them a benefit to undergraduate life while others view them as cliques and a detriment to the school's academic mission. Given the positive effect that Greek membership and athletic participation at Meeds have on persistence and, from the team's perspective, on social integration, we find students' involvement in these areas beneficial. However, the College must continue to examine how Non-Joiners and, in particular, Aspiring Non-Joiners, acclimate to campus life, both academically and socially. Opportunities exist in the first year to develop a strong sense of community and a connection to Meeds beyond those made through co-curricular affiliations. We believe that through small yet significant changes to the Greek recruitment process and College orientation program, Meeds administrators can positively impact the first-year experience to encourage social integration of all students while continuing to support participation in Greek life and varsity athletics.

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Appendix A

Dear (insert first name),

The purpose of this letter is to invite you to participate in an interview about academic and student life at Meeds. We are doctoral candidates at Vanderbilt University, and we are conducting this study both as part of our degree requirements and as part of a larger effort by Meeds to evaluate academic and student life at the College. Your participation would be very useful in pursuing both endeavors. You were selected to be part of this study because you are a freshman or sophomore.

Each interview will last 20-30 minutes and is scheduled to take place on November 12 anytime between 8:30am and 9:30pm and on Friday, November 13 between 8:30am to 12:30pm. As part of the study, you would be asked to complete a brief pre-interview questionnaire and then participate in the interview. The pre-interview questionnaire will request demographic information. In the interview, you will be asked questions about your perceptions of academic and student life at Meeds.

The interviews will be audio taped. The tapes will only be reviewed by members of this research team who will transcribe and analyze them. They will then be destroyed. While we do not foresee the questions taking on a sensitive nature, please know that you do not have to answer any questions about which you do not feel comfortable.

Your participation would be confidential. The results of the study will be shared with Meeds administrators and may be published, but your identity will not be revealed. As a token of our appreciation, we will give you a \$5 gift card to The Middle Ground for your participation. Refreshments will also be provided during the interviews.

We will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact (insert team member name) at (insert team member email address) or by phone at (insert team member phone number) with any study-related questions or concerns. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Meeds College Office of Institutional Research at Meeds at (901) 843-3745.

If you wish to participate, please contact (insert team member name) at (insert team member email address) by November 8 and provide us with your availability during the days and timeframes listed above. We look forward to hearing from you soon and gaining your insights about academic and student life at Meeds College.

Sincerely,
Todd Adams
Donna Ashford
Aaron Taylor

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form for Interviews Meeds College

As a current Meeds College freshmen or sophomore student aged eighteen or above, you have been invited to participate in a research study. We are graduate students at Vanderbilt University in Nashville conducting these interviews and focus groups as part of doctoral level coursework. We are interested in finding out about student persistence patterns at Meeds College.

Your participation in this study will require that you answer written pre-interview questions and be a part of an interview or focus group. This should take approximately ninety minutes of your time. Your participation will be anonymous and you will not be contacted again in the future. You will not be paid for this study. The interview/focus group does not involve any risk to you. However, the benefits of your participation may impact society by helping increase knowledge about how to improve college student retention.

You do not have to participate in this study if you do not wish to do so. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer for any reason. We will be happy to answer any questions that you have about this study. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact Donna Ashford at 615-366-4440 or the project advisor at Vanderbilt University, Dr. John M. Braxton, at 615-322-8021. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Vanderbilt Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 615-343-0275. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Thank you for your participation in this study.

Appendix C

Pre-Interview Questions

- Age:
- Gender:
- Ethnicity/Race:
- Year in college:
- Major:
- Hometown:
- How would you describe your socioeconomic background (high SES, mid, low)?
- Where do you live when school is in session:
- Are you a member of Greek-letter organization?
 - If yes, which one?
- Are you a member of an athletic team?
 - If yes, which one?
- Are you a member of any other student groups?
 - If yes, which one(s)?
- What type of HS did you graduate from? Private/Public
- Do you have a job while school is in session?
 - If yes, is it on campus?
 - How many hours per week do you work?
- Was Meeds your first choice school?
- Parental Education
 - High School/GED
 - Some College/Associates Degree
 - Four –Year Degree
 - Masters Degree
 - Doctoral/Professional Degree
 - N/A
 - Don't Know

Appendix C (continued)

Interview Questions

The bracketed information appearing after each of the following interview questions are the research questions [Q] and social integration influencers [I] to which each interview question relates.

Legend: Commitment of the Institution to Student Welfare [CSW]; Communal Potential [CP]; Entering Student Characteristics [ESC]; Institutional Integrity [II]; Proactive Social Adjustment [PSA]; Psychosocial Engagement [PE]. The relationships are reflected within the brackets.

A. General

1. Once accepted, did you engage in any activities to prepare yourself for college? [Q= 2, 2B, 2D] [I= ESC, PSA]
2. What were your expectations of Meeds prior to arrival? [Q= 1, 2] [I= CP, PE]
 - How do your expectations and experiences compare?
3. Prior to the start of your freshman year, in what ways did you “identify” with Meeds (e.g. display a window decal)? [Q= 1, 2, 2B] [I= ESC, PSA]
4. What constitutes your definition of a successful school year at Meeds? [Q= 1, 2] [I= ESC]
5. How would you describe the student environment at Meeds? [Q= 2, 2B, 2D] [I= CP, PSA]
6. When do students typically get involved on campus and form their group(s) of friends?
7. To what extent does Meeds provide opportunities for students to interact and develop relationships with each other outside of the classroom?
 - a. In what ways – programs, resources, and/or services – does the College support Independent (non joiner) Students? Athletes? Greeks?
8. What identifiable cliques, if any, exist among the Meeds student body? [Q= 2, 2B, 2D] [I= CP, PE, PSA]
 - Describe them.
 - Are you a member of any of these groups?
9. About how many close friends do you have at Meeds? [Q= 2, 2B, 2D] [I= CP, PE]
10. How do you spend your free time? [Q= 2, 2B, 2D] [I= PE]

Appendix C (continued)

11. How would you describe your relationship with professors? [Q= 2, 2A, 2C] [I= CSW, II]
12. In your classes to what extent, if any, do your professors encourage active participation among students? [Q=2, 2A, 2C] [I=CSW, II, PSA]
 - Would you describe yourself as an active participant in your classes?
13. How would you describe your relationship with campus staff? [Q= 2, 2A, 2C] [I= CSW, II]
14. Can you identify three people who have been most helpful to your academic and social adjustment at Meeds? [Q= 2, 2A, 2B, 2D] [I= CSW, II]
 - If so, whom are they, what positions do they hold, and how have they been helpful?
15. What do you find most stressful about life at Meeds? [Q= 2, 2A, 2B, 2C, 2D] [I= PSA]
 - How do you cope with school-related stress?
16. What has been the most significant adjustment you've had to make at Meeds? [Q= 1, 2] [I= PSA]
17. What are your perceptions of student support services at Meeds? [Q= 2, 2A, 2C] [I= CSW, II]
 - Have you utilized any of those services? If yes, which ones?

B. "Joiner"

1. What motivated you to become involved in [Greek life, athletics, etc]? [Q= 2, 2B, 2D] [I= CP, PE, PSA]
2. How do you balance your extracurricular obligations with your academics? [Q= 2, 2D] [I= PE, PSA]
3. How much time do you devote to group activities per week? [Q= 2, 2D] [I= PE, PSA]
4. Describe the extent of integration between your group and the larger environment at Meeds. [Q= 2, 2B] [I= PE]
5. From your perspective, in what ways, if any, does Meeds support your organization? [Q= 2, 2A, 2C] [I= CSW, PR]

Appendix C (continued)

6. About what percentage of your friends are also members of your organization? [Q= 2, 2B, 2D]
[I= PE, PSA, CP]

C. "Non-joiner"

1. What made you choose not to pursue membership in a high commitment group at Meeds? [Q= 1, 2, 2B, 2D] [I= CP, PE, PSA]
2. What are your perceptions of extracurricular activities at Meeds? [Q= 2, 2A, 2B, 2D] [I= CP, PE, PSA,]
3. From your perspective, are there any differences in the manner in which Meeds engages members of student groups and non-members? [Q= 2, 2A, 2C] [I= CSW, II]
4. What plans, if any, do you have to pursue membership into any (additional) student groups? [Q= 2, 2B, 2D] [I= CP, PE, PSA]
5. What could the College do to support Independent (non-Greek/non-athlete) students?

D. "Aspiring non-joiner"

1. How have your perceptions of Meeds College changed since going through the recruitment (Greek/athletic/etc.) process? [Q= 2, 2B, 2D] [I= CP, PE]
2. What are your perceptions of extracurricular activities at Meeds? [Q= 2, 2A, 2B, 2D] [I= CP, PE, PSA]
3. From your perspective, are there any differences in the manner in which Meeds engages members of student groups and non-members? [Q= 2, 2A, 2C] [I= CSW, II]
4. Since arriving at Meeds and participating in the recruitment/selection process, has your circle of friends changed? [Q= 2, 2B, 2D] [I= CP, PE]
5. What plans, if any, do you have to pursue membership into any (additional) student groups? [Q= 2, 2B, 2D] [I= CP, PE, PSA]
6. What could the College do to support Independent (non-Greek/non-athlete) students?

Appendix D

Student	Finding #1	Finding #2	Finding #3	Finding #4
ENTERING CHARACT. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic Prep (Gen: #2, 16) 	Assessment + Key quote	Assessment + Key quote	Assessment + Key quote	Assessment + Key quote
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Entering Student Characteristics (Gen: #3, 4) 				
SOCIAL INTEGRATION <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commitment to Student Welfare (Gen: #11,12, 13, 14, 17) (Joiner: #5) (A-J: #3, 7) (N-J: #3, 5) 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communal Potential (Gen: #2, 5, 8, 9) (Joiner: #1, 6) (A-J: #1, 2, 4, 6) (N-J: #1, 2, 4) 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Institutional Integrity (Gen: #11, 12, 13, 14, 17) (A-J: #3) (N-J: #3) 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proactive Social Adjustment (Gen: #3, 5, 12, 15, 16) (Joiner: #1, 2, 3) (A-J: #2, 6) (N-J: #1, 2, 4) 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Psychosocial Engagement (Gen: #2, 8, 9, 10) (Joiner: #1, 2, 3, 4) (A-J: 1, 2, 4, 5) (N-J: 1, 2, 4) 				
OTHER <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 				

Appendix D (continued)

KEY

Gen General questions from Interview Protocol

Joiner Joiner specific questions from Interview Protocol

A-J Aspiring-Joiner specific questions from Interview Protocol

N-J Non-Joiner specific questions from Interview Protocol

In beginning line, students should be coded as M/F, FY/SOPH, J/ANJ/NJ