



# Student Retention in an Affinity Bonding Model

Alderson Broaddus University



Patricia Kucker & Melissa Martiros

May 1, 2019

Peabody College of Vanderbilt University

THIS PAGE LEFT BLANK

## Foreword

This research study is presented by two doctoral students as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education in Higher Education, Leadership and Policy from the Peabody College at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee.

### About the Authors:



**Patricia Kucker** served as Provost for the University of the Arts in Philadelphia and recently accepted the role of Director for the Stuckeman School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture at Penn State University. She is trained as an architect and holds a Master of Architecture from The University of Pennsylvania and attained licensure in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Following professional practice, her career in higher education has spanned over twenty years with faculty tenure and administrative roles at several universities including the University of Virginia and the University of Cincinnati where she served as an associate dean.



**Melissa Martiros** is an assistant professor and Director of Music at Anna Maria College. She is the founding director of OpporTUNEity Music Connections, a nationally recognized program for underserved youth and children with special needs. She holds a Doctor of Musical Arts in Piano Performance & Pedagogy from the University of Wisconsin Madison where she also received a Master of Science degree in Special Education. Melissa also holds a Master of Music degree in Piano

## Executive Summary

College student retention and persistence are complex problems that challenge most American colleges and universities (Kuh et al., 2005). While these terms are linked, the difference between these terms can be further understood when considering that institutions retain students, and student themselves persist (Tinto, 2017). Following an innovative and successful student recruitment campaign, based on the affinity students feel for their athletic teams, Alderson Broaddus University (AB) experienced substantial enrollment growth with over a 100% increase in the incoming student cohorts. Alderson Broaddus is a small private institution with a liberal arts curriculum and a focus in health care and professional education. The new recruitment campaign included the development of division II sports, marching band, color guard and Greek organizations, and resulted in the large influx of student-athletes. With the growing student population, AB also saw an increase in student departure from the freshman class. Prior to 2012 recruitment initiative, fall-to-fall retention rates for first-time freshman at AB averaged 66.6% over a period of five years. The fall-to-fall retention rate for first-time freshman at AB from 2012 to 2016 averaged 56.2%, a rate which the administration expects to continue to decline. It is with this context of change that Alderson Broaddus retained our team to conduct a study on student retention.

To explore and understand the impact of the Affinity Bonding recruitment model at Alderson Broaddus, we employed a mixed methods approach research design to answer the following questions:

- (1) What are the pre-entry attributes and institutional experiences of enrolled students that predict departure after the first year?
- (2.A) What perceptions do undergraduate students have about positive experiences at Alderson Broaddus during their first year?
- (2.B) What perceptions do undergraduate students have about negative experiences during their first year?

Our study is guided by the extant literature on student retention models that considers both the sociological as well as psychological perspectives of the student's transition and success in the first year of college. We further consider the impact of an institution's unique organizational culture on a student's socialization and subsequent commitment to the institution, and to their academic journey. A mixed methods approach allows us to compare existing national data on retention across universities similar to AB as we analyze quantitative data provided by the Office of Institutional Research at Alderson Broaddus for three cohorts of freshman students and incorporate qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with AB executive administration and over 40 students across six focus groups. The quantitative data, along with our literature review, informs the framework and protocols for our qualitative studies; as might be expected, the resulting interview data demands us to return to the quantitative data for additional testing and analysis.

The review of the administrative student data is structured by student retention model research and places emphasis on students' pre-entry characteristics as indicators for persistence in an institutional environment (Tinto 1993, 1995). Further, a student's academic preparation and commitment to achieving their goal at the university is noted as fundamental to retention and re-enrollment in the second year (Bean 1980, 1982). With AB's new enrollment growth there is now predominance of student athletes in

the cohorts, and we propose the student's commitment to their athletic identity as a central to their attendance and experience at AB. A student's decision to remain at the university is, as the research suggests, greatly influenced by his or her academic success, and with the quantitative student data we were able to consider each student's academic progress in the first year to the second year. Our qualitative data from the student focus groups relied on purposeful sampling to further examine the student's perspectives and their positive and negative experiences at AB. In addition, interviews with the executive administration collected the intentions of university leadership as it pertains to current and future initiatives related to retention, and to the shifting needs of student life at Alderson Broaddus.

Based on our findings as framed by a conceptual framework (grounded in theories on student retention), several recommendations are offered to the executive team at Alderson Broaddus. We recognize the substantial change in enrollment that has occurred at the University in recent years as we propose the following solutions to help improve and promote first-year retention at Alderson Broaddus University.

Our recommended policies of practice include:

1. Express commitment to the AB student identity and welfare.
2. Define Affinity Bonding as social bonding by reframing the concept of Affinity Bonding from bonding with athletic teams to bonding with people who define the Alderson Broaddus experience, from coaching staff to faculty and, most importantly, to each other.
3. Create an environment for excellence, from athletics to academics.
4. Define the AB Student, and develop recruiting practices and academic supports that cater to holistic student success.
5. Develop ways for students to know their investment in education at AB is valuable and will have a positive impact on their future selves and professional careers.

Develop ways for students to see that their investment in education at AB is valuable and will have a positive impact on their future selves and professional careers

Our study contributes to the overall body of literature as we come to understand the outcomes of a unique recruitment plan that resulted in substantial enrollment growth and a changing student profile. The student transition to college, student success in the first year and student retention at AB are central to our thesis, research questions, and final report. In closely examining the conditions for enrollment at AB, we hope to provide insights to other institutions seeking to increase student enrollment and better understand the influence programs like the Affinity Bonding model has on institutional retention. That said, it is important to note that higher education is complex—each institution is unique with regards to organizational structure, interpersonal dynamics, culture and educational mission. Any recommendations adopted by an institution must be done so through an awareness of its organizational dynamics and conditions.

THIS PAGE LEFT BLANK

# Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>List of Tables &amp; Figures</b> .....	<b>v</b>
<b>Definitions</b> .....	<b>vi</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
Research Questions & Hypotheses.....	2
<b>2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework</b> .....	<b>3</b>
Sociological & Psychological Views for Retention Models .....	4
Conceptual Framework for Our Study.....	10
Formulation of Pre-Entry Attributes.....	11
Formulation of Student Experience & Organizational Culture .....	13
Formulation of Organizational Culture .....	16
<b>3. Data &amp; Research Methods</b> .....	<b>18</b>
Quantitative Data & Methods .....	18
Qualitative Data & Methods.....	26
Integrated Mixed Methods.....	28
<b>4. Results of the Data Analysis</b> .....	<b>30</b>
Research Question 1: <i>Impact of Pre-Entry Attributes and Institutional Experiences</i> .....	30
Research Question 2: <i>What are the Student’s Positive and Negative Perceptions</i> .....	36
Thematic Findings.....	37
<b>5. Discussion of the Findings</b> .....	<b>51</b>
The Student Athlete: A Proxy for Student Commitment .....	53
The Role of Pre-Entry Attributes in Student Success .....	53
Motivation to Attend versus Motivation to Stay.....	54
Affinity Bonding IS Social Bonding .....	55
The AB Student Experience .....	56
Success in the Academic Core .....	57
Commitment to Care and Support .....	57
Expressions of Integrity: Mission and Integrity Gap .....	58
Defining Cost and Value Satisfaction .....	58
Limitations and Contributions to the Literature.....	59
<b>6. Recommendations</b> .....	<b>60</b>
Recommendation 1: Express Commitment to Student Identity and Welfare .....	61
Recommendation 2: Reframe Affinity Bonding as Social Bonding .....	62
Recommendation 3: Create an Environment for Excellence .....	63
Recommendation 4: Define the AB Student.....	63
Recommendation 5: Develop Ways for Students to see that their Investment at AB is Valuable .....	64
<b>7. Conclusion and Discussion</b> .....	<b>65</b>
<b>8. References</b> .....	<b>67</b>

<b>9. Appendices.....</b>	<b>73</b>
Appendix A: Conceptual Framework Diagram.....	73
Appendix B: Broad Topic Areas and Initial Questions Proposed to the Executive Team.....	74
Appendix C: Student Focus Groups .....	75
Appendix D: Codebook for Qualitative Data .....	76
Appendix E: Analytic Memo Example .....	78
Appendix G: Table of Correlations of Pre-Entry Variables.....	79

## List of Tables & Figures

Table 1: Definitions for Our Study .....	vi
Table 2: Pre-entry Attributes and College Experiences Variables Used in Analysis .....	19
Table 3: Cases Removed from the Original Dataset .....	19
Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Data for Students Entering AB in 2015, 2016, 2017.....	21
Table 5: Retention for our Study Population of First-Time Freshmen .....	22
Table 6: Degree Programs with Largest Freshman Enrollment.....	23
Table 7: Athletic and Sport Teams with Largest Freshman Enrollment .....	24
Table 8: Focus Group Characteristics .....	27
Table 9: Strongest Correlations of Pre-Entry Attributes.....	31
Table 10: T-test of Differences in Pre-Entry Attributes .....	31
Table 11: T-test of Academic Progress Variable within Sub-Groups .....	32
Table 12: Regression Models for Students Enrolled 2015-2017 .....	34
Table 13: Met and Unmet Expectations .....	41
Figure 1: Tinto’s Institutional Departure Model.....	5
Figure 2: Bean and Eaton’s Model of Student Attrition .....	7
Figure 3: Adaptation of Tinto’s Model for Organizational Culture.....	9
Figure 4: Conceptual Framework for Our Study.....	11
Figure 5: Integrated Mixed Methods for the Research Study .....	29



## Definitions

Table 1: Definitions for Our Study

Retention	Percentage of first year first time fulltime students that re-enroll in the fall of their second year (National Clearinghouse Research Center, 2017).
Persistence	Percentage of students (usually by cohort definition) that maintain their enrollment status (National Clearinghouse Research Center, 2017).
Attrition	The number of individuals, or percentage of individuals, who leave a program of study before it has finished. Attrition is the opposite of persistence.
Dropout	A student who withdraws before completing a course of instruction. Students dropout from a program or an institution. Dropout and attrite are often used interchangeably.
Institutional commitment	Institutional commitment has been defined in a number of ways. Included in these definitions are the student's overall impression, satisfaction, sense of belonging, and perception of quality, and/or match with, and attraction to a particular institution
Academic Rigor	Rigor is widely used by educators to describe instruction, schoolwork, learning experiences, and educational expectations that are academically, intellectually, and personally challenging. Rigorous learning experiences, for example, help students understand knowledge and concepts that are complex, ambiguous, or contentious, and they help students acquire skills that can be applied in a variety of educational, career, and civic contexts throughout their lives (Glossary of Education Reform, 2014).
Academic Press	Academic press refers to the extent to which school members, including students and teachers, experience a strong emphasis on academic success and conformity to specific standards of achievement.



THIS PAGE LEFT BLANK

# 1. Introduction

More and more students are attending college. In 2018, 19.9 million students enrolled in college, an increase over the 15.3 million enrolled in 2000 (USDE, 2018). In addition, students of color and Latino students are also seeking higher education at greater rates. As more students enroll in college, retaining students has become a critical problem for many colleges and universities across America. The U.S. Department of Education (2018) defines retention as the proportion of first-time, first year students returning to enroll in their second year of college or university. Across the U.S., the national average for first-to-second-year college student retention at all public and private 4-year institutions stands at close to 81%. It is important consider however that retention rates differ across institutional types. For example, students attending private PhD-granting institution are retained at a high rate of 81.5%. Whereas 2-year public colleges retain students at a rate of 56.4% (ACT, 2016). During 2015-16, the average retention rate of first time, full-time degree seeking students in 4-year private not-for-profit institution, with 75%-80% selectivity for admissions was 78.9%. (USDE, 2018). During 2016-17 this rate was 79.4% and this rate has remained relatively consistent for this institutional type. When considering student retention, it is also important to reflect upon student persistence. More specifically, institutions retain students, whereas students persist at an institution (Tinto, 2017).

Our study engages Alderson Broaddus University a small liberal arts institution with similar admissions selectivity and a five- year student retention rate of 55% during the period 2012-2017. Historically, the University reported a modest level of student enrollment with the incoming freshman class averaging 150 students during the period from 2005 through 2011. In response to this enrollment, and with new executive leadership a unique recruiting program immediately increased enrollment by more that 100%, however student retention rates became 20% lower than those previous experienced at the University. Student retention at the University continues to drop and has decreased from 2011 when retention was 66% to the 51% reported in 2017.

Alderson Broaddus University (AB) is a private university located in Philippi, West Virginia. Affiliated with the American Baptist Churches, USA, and the West Virginia Baptist Convention, AB offers a liberal arts curriculum that specializes in health-related and professional education. The town of Philippi has been home to the University for over a century, is the county seat for Barbour county and has a current population of approximately 3,500 residents. The economy in Philippi has been defined by the coal and railroad industry, both of which have declined significantly, and Alderson Broaddus University and the Broaddus Hospital are now the major employers in the community (Philippi, n.d.). During the period beginning in 2003 and for close to ten years, the incoming freshman undergraduate class at Alderson Broaddus averaged 145 students. In 2012, when university enrollment hovered close to 500 students the new president embarked on an “Affinity Bonding” recruitment plan that prioritized by the establishment of team-based extra-curricular activities designed to create strong bonds between the students and college-life at the University.

The Affinity Bonding model, as defined by Alderson Broaddus, was explained by a member of the executive team as follows:

*The Affinity Bonding concept was brought by former president who had been employed at an institution that had multiplied their enrollment through Affinity Bonding programs. It primarily ends up being through athletics though admittedly it's*

*not the only way that affinity bonding is intended to work from a conceptual perspective.*

She went on to explain that Affinity Bonding holds its background in healthcare, primarily nursing, as “hospitals embrace the force of magnetism that causes people accept positions in a hospital and stay because it is both professionally rewarding.” She states:

*The same concept, through the creation, was applied to Affinity Bonding at Alderson Broaddus by getting into the minds of the 17-year old students and giving them something else to do besides class. First and foremost, Affinity Bonding through athletic programs, and then Greek organizations...Most students at the age of 17 didn't see that a major in English was going to serve them well (job wise) so Affinity Bonding created opportunity for students to come because there was something more to do beyond their discipline, athletic training, sport management, education, not majors people were coming to AB for. Affinity Bonding created lots of sport opportunities that brought students...oh! and by the way while you're here you're going to get an education in something.*

As the executive team embraced this Affinity Bonding model, the number of athletic teams was increased from 9 to 21, while pursuing the addition of marching band, cheerleading, dance team, majorettes, and color guard squads with additional efforts to establish Greek fraternities. The addition of athletic teams has also substantially increased student recruiting efforts as each coach must build a roster of athletes for competitive play.

As a result of the recruitment plan, AB experienced an enrollment surge in a few short years with total University enrollments topping 1,100 students. The large influx of athletes has substantially impacted the culture and operations of the school, which obtained university status in 2013. As part of the planned enrollment growth, university leadership constructed four new dormitories and a state-of-the-art athletic stadium with high interest bond financing. However, as enrollment increased dramatically, the first-time fulltime freshman fall-to-fall retention rates declined. Prior to 2012, the five-year fall-to-fall retention rate for first-time freshman averaged 66.6%. The fall-to-fall retention rate for first-time freshman from 2012 to 2016 has averaged 56.2% and expectations are for a continued decline. A major consequence to this enrollment flux was that the institution defaulted on their bond debt, resulting in probation status from the institutional accreditor. As a result, there is interim presidential and financial leadership in place, and the university's financial health appears to be on track for recovery.

Improving the declining student retention rate has been a consistent focus of the university administration and the retention committee over the past five years, to no avail. A few university initiatives have been implemented with minimal success in attempting to positively impact retention. The true reasons students are choosing to leave after the freshman year have not yet been determined. As a research study, we are interested in the phenomena of student departure and retention that is informed by a vast body of literature. Furthermore, we consider the expectations students hold for their college experience, their social and academic experiences and the changing organizational and social culture of the university.

## Research Questions & Hypotheses

We have partnered with AB to determine why freshman students leave the University and what can be done to reverse this trend; determining why students who stayed at AB decided to stay; and in designing

initiatives/programs that AB can implement to improve retention. To these ends, we used the following research questions to guide our study:

- (1) What are the pre-entry attributes and institutional experiences of enrolled students that predict departure after the first year?
- (2.A) What perceptions do undergraduate students have about positive experiences at Alderson Broaddus during their first year?
- (2.B) What perceptions do undergraduate students have about negative experiences during their first year?

With our first question we hypothesize that demographic attributes and, or the student's institutional experiences, can predict student departure after the first year. Furthermore, we hypothesize that students able to find an affinity social group, such as a membership on a team, will have higher rates of student retention. Our second research question considers the student perspective of their experiences at AB. Our hypotheses for their perceptions are as follows: (1). When a student perceives the institution as an organization that expresses a commitment to the student's success and welfare, the greater level of commitment there is from the student to their persistence and resulting retention; (2). When a student perceives the institution exhibits institutional integrity, such as consistency and actionable mission and values, the greater the level of commitment the student has to the institution and their persistence and resulting retention; (3). When a student perceives there is a potential for a like-minded community on campus; and engages opportunities for social integration, the greater the level of integration and persistence and resulting retention; and (4). When there is a level of satisfaction with the costs of attending the institution, the greater the level of commitment to persistence and resulting retention. We intend our hypothesis reflect not only the literature but also the role of social bonding that is at the heart of Alderson Broaddus' recent and ongoing recruitment initiative.

We hope that our study contributes to the literature by providing insights gleaned from our case study at Alderson Broaddus University (AB) that will either complement or run contrary to the results found in past studies on enrollment and retention practices in higher education. A unique aspect of our case at AB is the labelling and adoption of the "Affinity Bonding" model to recruit new student populations to the institution and grow enrollment. While this model may have precedence in enrollment management practices in higher education, to the best of our knowledge, in published education literature the term itself does not yet extend much beyond the borders of Alderson Broaddus University. In this context, our study contributes to the overall body of literature related to the field of higher education as we make Affinity Bonding at AB central to our thesis, research questions, and the report provided to the leadership team at AB. Specifically, in closely examining the successful recruitment aspect of Affinity Bonding model at AB along with its relationship to first-year student retention rates, we hope to use the knowledge acquired from our research of AB to provide insights to other institutions seeking to adopt a similar affinity bonding model to enhance their enrollment management strategies and college student retention practices.

## 2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

There are two distinct models and a variety of theories that describe the complex interactions that lead to student departure, as well as to student persistence in higher education. These models have evolved as higher education's institutional organization and culture emerged and diversified. In general, the early

pioneer works of student retention were influenced by three major theories. These are Durkheim's Theory of Suicide (Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975) from the field of sociology, the theoretical views of the rites of passage in tribal societies from Arnold Van Gennep (Tinto, 1988, 1975) from the field of social anthropology, and lastly the concept of labor turnover from the field of human resources (Bean, 1980, 1983). Later and continuing studies of student retention were interpreted according to theoretical perspectives including physiological, psychological, sociological, cultural, organizational, environmental, interactional and economic views. A unifying theme among all of these models is the idea that a student's engagement in the social environment as well as success in the academic environment is critical to their retention. The models of student retention continue to be tested and evaluated and form the theoretical basis for our research study.

Below we present a review of the literature that serves as a point of departure for our research study. Specifically, we ground our review in an analysis of student retention theories which help to develop the context of our problem statement and the research questions developed through our partnership with Alderson Broaddus University. As we move forward with our presentation of theory, we adopted Tinto's Student Departure Model as guiding work for our conceptual framework. Within this framework of college student retention theories, we present selections from a robust body of research literature to define the variables for our research study such as the student's the impact of pre-entry attributes on college student retention and the impact of undergraduate student experiences on first-year student retention including academic engagement, social engagement, institutional context and institutional supports.

### Sociological & Psychological Views for Retention Models

In the 1970's, conceptual models began to emerge in order to explain why students leave the colleges and universities they chose. William Spady's Sociological Model (1970, 1971) appeared first, followed by Tinto's Institutional Departure Model (1975, 1993) that built on Spady's work and included the element of time in regard to student experiences in the college or university. Other retention research includes James Bean's Student Attrition Model (1980, 1982, 1983), the Student-Faculty Informal Contact Model (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980), Astin's Student Involvement Model (1984), and the Student Retention Integrated Model (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993). These models fall into two distinct approaches. The sociological view focused on the social dynamics of the culture and this model comes from Vincent Tinto's research. The second model, developed by James Bean and Shevawn Eaton, is informed by psychological theories that recognize the psychosocial needs of young adults in the challenging college environment.

As the body of student retention research has grown, the variables of Tinto and Bean's model have been empirically evaluated and new research related to institutional types and shifting student demographics has occurred. As the focus of this research turns toward the goals and missions of diverse institutional types, a significant modification to Tinto's model includes the role the institution plays in meeting the student's needs, expressing integrity and a commitment to the goals of student success. Our literature review recognizes the broad arc of this research with the dominating sociological and psychological perspectives that focus on the student's experience. Significant to our study and to the evolution of student retention research is the role that institutional behavior plays in meeting the student's expectations and supporting their college experience and persistence to graduation.

Sociological perspectives for student retention models emphasize students' socialization experiences to the college environment as being predictive of student retention. These perspectives include Vincent

Tinto's (1975) Interactionist Theory, Alexander Astin's (1999) Student Involvement Theory, and the role of student–faculty relationships in Ernest Pascarella's (1980) research.

### *Sociological Perspective I: Social Interactions and Community*

Across the discipline of higher education, the most widely recognized perspective for student retention is Vincent Tinto's Interactionist Theory (1975). Following the work of William Spady, Tinto drew heavily on sociologist Emile Durkheim's Suicide Model (Tinto, 1975). Durkheim's studies of suicide behavior relied on the substantive connection people feel to their community, a feeling which resulted in their social integration and sense of stability within their society. According to Durkheim, social integration is the result of shared values and norms along with a clear purpose, and shared ideals. A lack of these values, or instability of social belonging resulted in anomie which contributed to a person's withdrawal from community. Inspired by Durkheim's work, Tinto's Institutional Departure Model shown in Figure 1 focused on the formal and informal experiences that define a student's successful integration to the academic and social environments of an institution. Over time, Tinto also incorporated the work of anthropologist Van Gennep's on the tribal rites of passage which allowed Tinto to further develop the temporal quality of his model of student retention (Tinto, 1988).

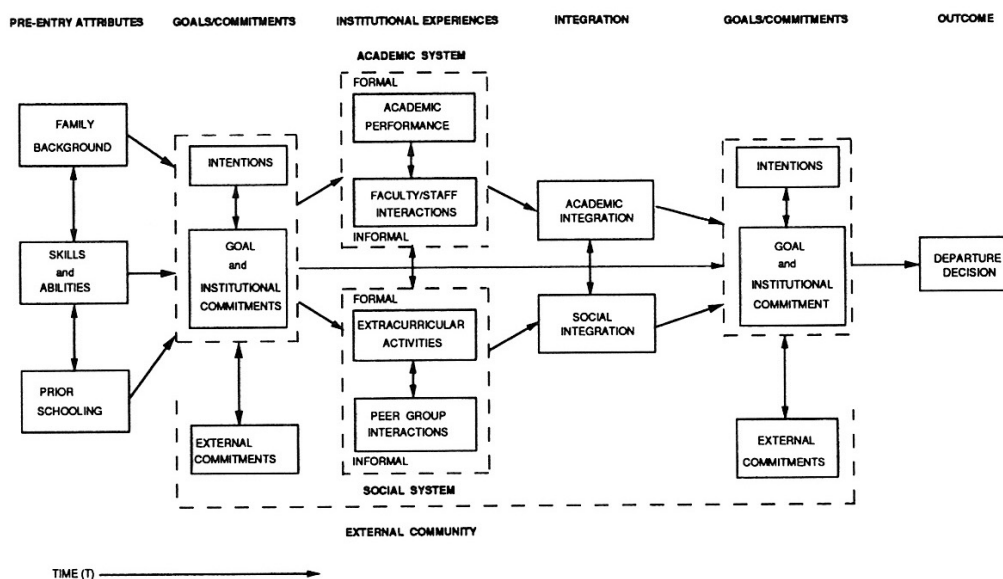


Figure 1: Tinto's Institutional Departure Model

Reprinted from, *Leaving college: rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.), by V. Tinto, 1993, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Tinto constructed a parallel to Van Gennep's model as he described and accounted for the student's acclimation to college life through the phases of separation from home and family, as they moved towards the incorporation within the college community. Tinto revised his research in an updated model (1993) wherein he added additional variables that impact the student's transition including "adjustment difficulty, incongruence, isolation, finances, learning, and external obligations of commitments" (p.112). According to Tinto's evolving model of cause and effect, the student's success at college is defined, through time, by the experiences of acceptance and integration (or isolation) in the academic and social

communities. Because this occurs through time, the student's experiences continuously modify (weaken or strengthen) the student's level of goals and commitment to persistence, and to the institution itself (Tinto, 2006). A key takeaway from this literature is that the student's experiences include not only social interactions with peers, but also the interactions the student has in the classroom and with faculty, staff and administrators. These experiences, taken together as the experiences the student has with the university as an institution, convey support and acceptance of the student's values, goals and sense of purpose and are powerful in the manner that they contribute to the student's integration to the institution's community and culture, and to their ultimate retention and success.

### *Sociological Perspective II: Student Engagement*

Alexander Astin (1984) postulated that a student's desire to participate and engage in college is positively correlated to their learning and personal development. Astin's Student-Engagement Theory follows the simple premise that students learn from what they do. Even though the focus of this body of research is on student engagement per se, an institution's policies and practices influence levels of engagement on campus (Kuh, et al., 2005, 2008, 2013). Astin proposes that what a student gains from the college experience is directly proportional to the extent in which they are involved. Astin's Student Involvement Model is defined by inputs (student effort and participation), the environments (classroom, social, professional), and outputs (resulting outcomes of integration, learning outcomes, success) and relies on the continuous physical and psychological involvement of the student in the college environment as a predictor of student retention and persistence.

### *Sociological Perspective III: Faculty Engagement*

In 1980, Ernest Pascarella constructed the Student-Faculty Informal Contact Model that highlighted the value of student-faculty interactions outside of class as a contributor to student success. According to Pascarella (1980), the quality of informal student-faculty contact is influenced by a variety of factors including initial student differences, faculty culture and classroom experiences, peer-culture involvement, and the size of the institution. The model emphasized the role of students' individual differences, such as the students' personalities, abilities, educational and professional aspirations, prior schooling, achievements and experiences, and the characteristics of their families and home environments (Pascarella, 1980). These differences and characteristics influence the student's ability to form impactful relationships with faculty. These relationships in turn serve to support student success in the university's academic environment.

### *Psychological Perspective I: Focus on Student Perception & Expectations*

Psychological perspectives find that a student's own psychological processes and skills influence their successful socialization and academic success. Following from Pascarella's research, James Bean and Shevawn Eaton considered the psychological processes that inform the student's decision making as a precursor to student departure. As a result, Bean and Eaton's model is distinct as it recognizes the existence of the social environment but focuses on the student's perceptions. Furthermore, Bean and Eaton explained the student's internal psychological processes act in a reciprocal and iterative manner, providing continuous feedback and adjustment for the student. Knowledge of the role of a student's developing psychosocial processes provides a new opportunity for institutional support.

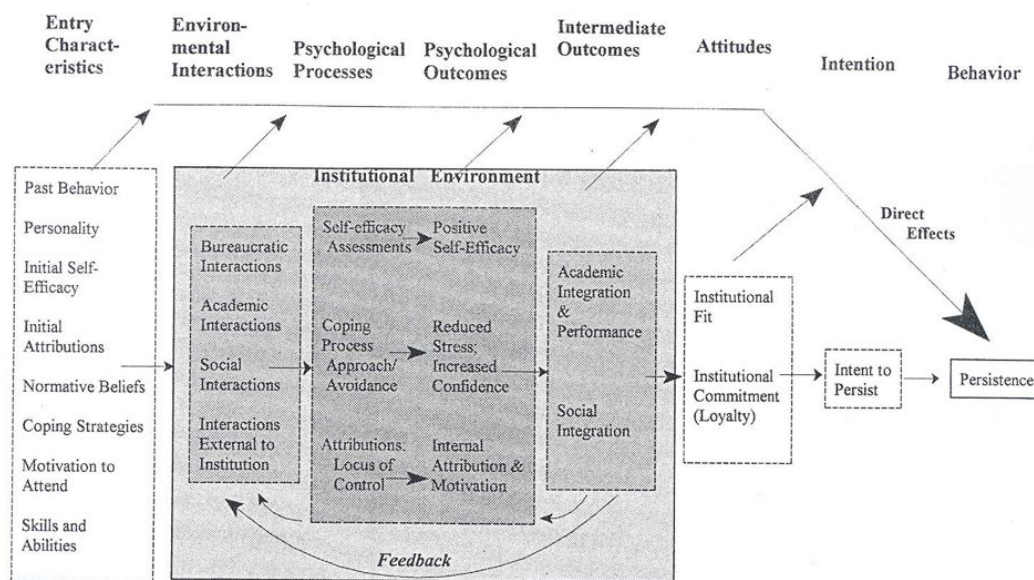
To complement the sociological perspective on student retention, James Bean (1980, 1986) focused on the psychological characteristics of college-students as he formed his model of student retention. Offering



a different starting point, James Bean utilized the theoretical views of employee turnover in work organizations and incorporated the research of J.L. Price (Bean 1980, 1982) as a parallel to define the relationship between the students and their institutional environment. Bean reasoned that student satisfaction can be considered similarly to employee satisfaction. Furthermore, that an individual's persistence at school or work is affected by organizational determinants. Bean adapted the employee turnover process for the context of higher education and replaced the employee's salary variable, a significant indicator of employee turnover, with four significant indicators in higher education. These indicators are student grade point average, academic development, institutional quality and practical value. James Bean continued his research of student attrition in partnership with Shevawn Eaton (Bean & Eaton, 1982, 2000, 2001) and with a focus on psychological theories and processes that led to reframing the variables of academic and social integration. Bean's research expanded on the previous work of Tinto and Astin by integrating academic variables, student intent, goals, expectations, and external and internal environmental factors into a revised model of persistence.

### *Psychological Perspective II: Student Perception, Intentions and Decision Making*

The result of Bean and Eaton's efforts was a single heuristic psychological model that explained the interaction among factors that ultimately resulted in student departure or persistence. Underlying this model are three psychological processes. First, action precedes outcomes, such that students' interactions with institutions precede the departure decisions. Secondly, the cognitive processes such as expecting, evaluating, choosing, and desiring proceed any student behavior. And lastly, a student's attitude precedes



**Figure 2: Bean and Eaton's Model of Student Attrition**

Reprinted from, "A psychological model of college student retention" by J.P. Bean and S.B. Eaton, in *Rethinking the Departure Puzzle: New Theory and Research on College Student Retention* (48-61), by John Braxton, 2000, Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.

intentions, which then initiates behavior. In this context, the Student Attrition Model shown in Figure 2 presumes that behavioral intentions are shaped by a process whereby beliefs shape attitudes, and attitudes,

in turn, influence behavioral intents. Beliefs are presumed to be affected by a student's experiences with the different components of an institution (that is, institutional quality, faculty and staff, courses, and friends). Bean and Eaton (2000, 2004) conclude that these psychological processes result in an attitude about one's self that is singularly most important for one's ability to navigate academic and social integration. They argue that students are psychological beings and the collective issues of sociology play the secondary role, with the student's psychological development as a primary source. The social environment is important only as it is perceived by the individual. The student's internal psychological processes result in increased positive self-efficacy, defined as the ability to manage stress and the capacity for an internal locus of control. Furthermore, these internal processes are reciprocal and iterative providing continuous feedback and adjustment, and in turn lead "to academic and social integration, institutional fit and loyalty, and intent to persist" (p. 58).

#### *Integrative Approach: Accounting for Complex Interactions*

The Student Attrition Model (Bean & Eaton, 2001) cites the roles played by the student's intent to persist, attitudes, institutional fit, and external factors such as the form of family approval of institutional choice. Additionally, external factors encompass the role of peer encouragement to continue enrollment, attitudes about finance, and perceived opportunity to transfer to other institutions is incorporated (Bean, 1982). Cabrera, et al. (1993) indicate that when these two theories merge into the Student Retention Integrated Model a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay among individual, environmental, and institutional factors can be achieved. The effect of environmental factors was more greatly considered in Cabrera et al.'s research. Whereas Tinto's model (1987) constrained the role of environmental factors to merely shaping commitments, the Integrated Model suggests that these factors exert a substantive influence in the socialization and academic experiences of the students (Cabrera, et al., 1993). From this perspective, findings support the expanded consideration of the Student Attrition Model approach where environmental factors can be taken into account in explaining persistence processes.

The sociological basis for Tinto's Institutional Departure Model and the psychological perspective of The Student Attrition Model developed by Bean and Eaton identify a complex set of interactions over time that influence student retention. Research points to these two models and argues that a student's pre-entry characteristics affect how well the student will adjust and succeed at the institution. Further, both models argue that persistence is affected by the successful match between the student and the institution (Cabrera, et al., 1993). Cabrera et al.'s research-based Student Retention Integrated Model (1993) demonstrates considerable overlap between Tinto's model and the Bean-Eaton model and places a new emphasis on an institution's organizational factors (courses, majors, institutional life) and the factors that define a student's commitment to the institution (a response to perceived institutional commitment, institutional fit and quality).

#### *Integrative Approach: Institution's Organizational Attributes*

The organizational culture of corporate America impacted James Bean's initial research (Bean 1980, 1982). In 1998, Joseph Berger and John Braxton returned to the role of organizational culture. Through their research, Berger and Braxton (1998) reasoned a significant relationship exists between the students' experience and the organizational attributes of an institution. Although organizational characteristics had been previously considered (Bean, 1980; Cabrera, et al., 1993; Pascarella, 1980, 1985; Spady, 1971), Berger and Braxton focused on the impact that an organization's behavior has on the student's expectations and their subsequent and ongoing experience. To test this thinking, Berger and Braxton (2005, 1998) modified Tinto's paradigmatic model with three new organizational attributes as variables to

consider as a source of influence relative to explaining differing levels of the student's social integration and commitment to the institution. The new attributes in Tinto's model formed by the Berger and Braxton study are defined in Figure 3. The variable "institutional commitment" is redefined with the sub variable experiences that students would react to such as institutional communication, fairness in policy and rule enforcement, and student participation in decision making.

The statistical analysis in Berger and Braxton's study provides strong support for the influence that a student's experience of organizational attributes has on a student's sense of social affiliation and integration with the institutional culture. Moreover, the influence of these new organizational attributes was not limited to social integration alone. Further, the analysis of data also suggested an indirect influence of the organizational attributes on students' intentions to persist). Thus, one of the key findings of the Berger-Braxton study is that a student's experience of the institution's organizational attributes, such as institutional integrity, and the institution's commitment to student welfare play a significant role in the student retention phenomenon (Braxton, et al., 2005).

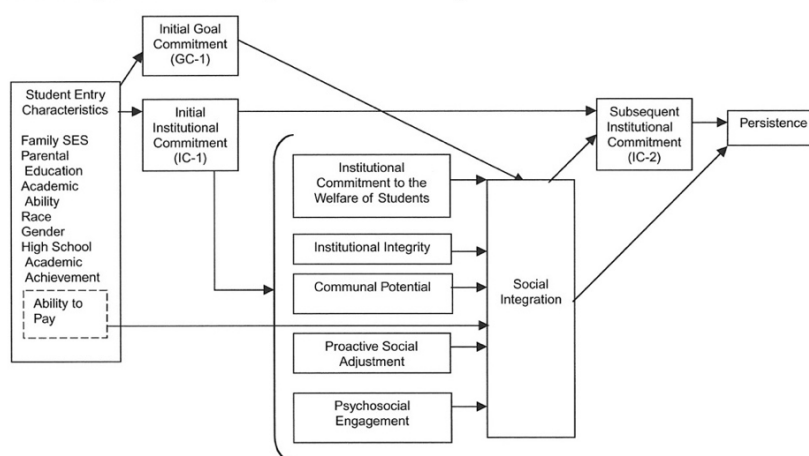


Figure 3: Adaptation of Tinto's Model for Organizational Culture

Reprinted from "Theoretical developments in the study of college student" by J. M. Braxton & A. S. Hirschy, in *College Student Retention: Formula for Student Success*, by A. Seidman 2005, NY: Praeger Press.

### In Summary

Applying models and invoking theories to predict the student departure phenomena from institutions of higher education comprises a body of empirical research that spans over fifty years. This research was undertaken parallel to the contemporary history of the American college and university system. This is a history of skyrocketing enrollments, a diversified student body and an expanding array of institutional types created to serve the needs of students (Kuh et al., 2006). Yet, graduation rates for first time students continue to range from 50% – 75%, depending upon the type of college or university examined (USDE, 2018). These statistics, provided by the U.S. Department of Education, remind us that close to 40% of the students entering the college of this choice will not graduate and therefore the research continues (Kuh, Kinzie, et al., 2006).

Two models of student retention or departure have dominated the research and continue to be empirically tested and as a result are modified. Sociological theories inform the Institutional Departure model by

Vincent Tinto (1975, 1993) and the field of psychology is the basis for the Bean and Eaton Student Attrition model (2004). While these models focus on students' experiences in college; acclimation to academic and social challenges; and the development of psychosocial skills, the account of an institution's expressed commitment to the student's welfare, the organizational culture and institutional integrity are variables that are most relevant to our study. We know that there is an impact that these variables have on a student's commitment to the institution and their goals as they perceive themselves in a welcoming and supportive environment that is palpably inscribed by an affirmative organizational culture, institutional mission and goals. Each university context is unique, as is the student's expectations of college. Empirical research with student retention theories can be illuminating but is also limiting in the ability to apply these models (and findings) broadly across institutions. We must continue to recognize that each institution of higher education is a complex and unique formation of human relationships, organizational structure and educational mission. Any recommendation to improve student retention and persistence must recognize these conditions.

### Conceptual Framework for Our Study

The conceptual framework for our research is informed directly by Tinto's Institutional Departure Model shown in Figure 1 and the research for the Student Retention Integrated Model by Bean and Eaton shown in Figure 2. This as a temporal model that includes the role of the student's pre-entry attributes and their ability to successfully transition to the college community, including the experience supportive and value-laden relationships inside and outside the classroom, and a new culture defined by the values and goals of students, faculty staff and the institution itself. Developing variables to support these propositions can be seen in the table in Appendix A. Berger-Braxton revisions to Tinto based on organizational attributes has helped us test the role of the University itself as a somewhat absent actor. We want to understand the role that student background characteristics have on a student's success at Alderson Broaddus University during the transition from the first to the second year. We also want to understand and identify the student experiences and perceptions that contribute to students' academic and social integration, which are defined as the fundamental precursors for retention (Tinto, 1993, 1975).

From Tinto's model we have identified three elements to illuminate the structure of a logic model to guide our literature search: the student's pre-entry attributes, their institutional experiences, and lastly, the institutional support, values, and commitment that is defined by organizational culture. This culture is host to the student experiences. These three elements can be found in our conceptual framework in Figure 4. Tinto's model recognized the role of a student's pre-entry attributes and proposes that once the student is emotionally content and integrated into the social communities within the university or college, their academic and cognitive development will flourish and further, they will become committed to the institution and will persist to graduation. Over the course of our research study, we have come to understand the modification to Tinto's model and the role of an institution's organization attributes that serve to express institutional commitment to the students, and aid in social integration. In this model, the institution can be perceived as an absent actor; an institution's attributes are palpable messages and commitments that are present when a student considers and selects to attend. These initial commitments establish a student's expectations for their academic experience (Braxton, Hirschy, McClendon, 2004). The institution's expressed commitments, values and integrity are then affirmed through experiences and interactions when a student joins the campus community. This is a social condition, developed over positive multiple interactions, resulting in an affinity that the student feels for their institution; proud alumni have a life-long affinity for their institution.

## Formulation of Pre-Entry Attributes

Our conceptual framework can be understood from three elements or propositions that will be the basis of our study. The first proposition of the model identifies the characteristics, values and skills a student brings to college that impact their success. Although these attributes offer only one piece of the retention and persistence puzzle for each student, these characteristics provide insight into understanding how a student will respond to their educational environment. A student's pre-entry attributes also capture their intentions for college success and the external commitments supporting and informing the student's journey.

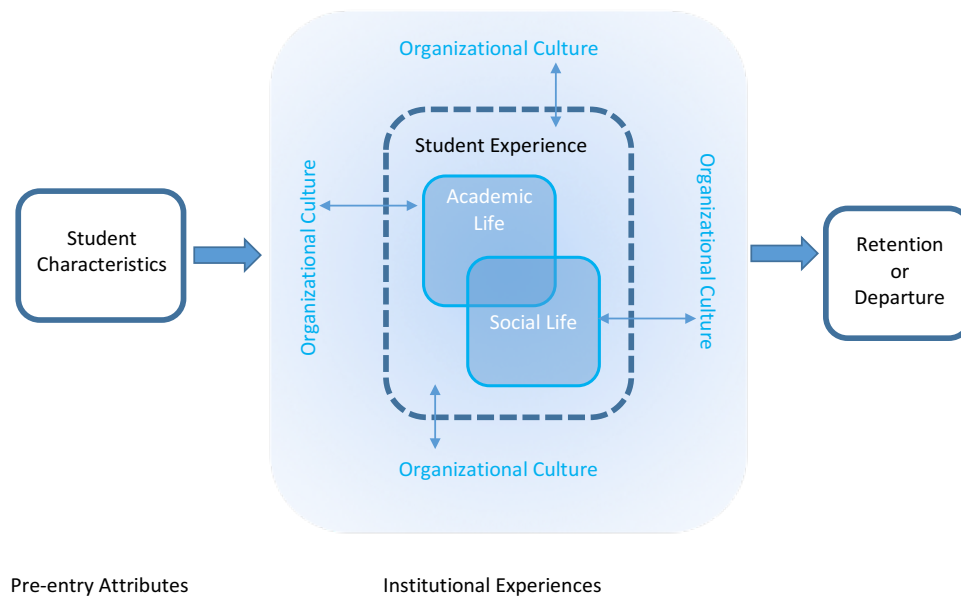


Figure 4: Conceptual Framework for Our Study

Authors adaptation of Tinto's Institutional Departure Model (1993) and the Student Retention Integrated Model by Bean and Eaton (2000).

### *Family Background, Cultural and Social Capital*

From the research studies we know that race, sex, wealth and a mother's educational level are predictive of student educational success (Kuh, et al., 2011; Perna, 2006). However, these variables can also refer to a system of socio-cultural attributes, such as language and mannerisms, which are derived in large part from parents or another influential family group. These socio-cultural attributes define one's social status (Perna, 2006). Furthermore, it is one's social status that grants access to information regarding behavioral norms, practices and expectations. This relationship between social status, information regarding norms and expectations is particularly pervasive in higher education. Students from high status backgrounds are attuned to the social and academic expectations of college in a different manner than students from a lower socio-economic status family households or first-generation students (Kuh, et al., 2011; Perna, 2006). As a result, cultural and social capital define the ways in which students' interpersonal and familial network both affirms and supports the pursuit and goal of a college education.

Significant associations exist between various types of support and intentions to persist. For example, the encouragement from friends or parents and/ or other family members are found in the research (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Calebera, et al., 1993; Kuh, Kinzie, et al., 2006; Nora, 2004). This support includes the student's belief that family members expect them to finish their degree (Hossler & Stage, 1992; Perna, 2006). There is a body of literature on social reproduction theory that examines education and schooling with varied outcomes based on a student's social capital, cultural capital, and habitus (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). The relationship between parents and their children, and parents and other adults generates the value-laden social capital that impacts a student's opportunities and is a framework of values and norms carried by the student into adulthood (Perna, 2006).

Habitus is a term for the resulting viewpoint of the individual, or student. Habitus is the lens by which we judge the options and decisions that are comfortable for us based on our given backgrounds (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Kuh, Kinzie, et al., 2006; Nora, 2004). While students come to college with a framework of values, expectations and needs that form the basis of their habitus, institutions have distinct identities and habitus that have a strong influence on the student experience. The culture, values and mission of a college or university impacts a student's experience and their sustained persistence (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Kuh, Kinzie, et al., 2006; Nora, 2004).

A substantial element of Tinto's model is the relationship, or fit between a student's background, needs and interests and the identity of the educational institution. Bowman & Denson (2014) identify this aspect of Tinto's model through the application of their Student Institution Fit Instrument. They find the extent to which student pre-entry characteristics match or mismatch institutional culture and values greatly impacts students' overall experience and social integration. In this context, students can exhibit misfit in either direction. For instance, with regards to religious values, an institution can be too religious or not religious enough. Students who report a sense of greater spiritual fit also report positive interactions with faculty and peers along with a greater satisfaction with the academic challenge and greater interest in succeeding in college (Moris et al., 2004). The overall student-institution fit as it pertains to pre-entry attributes is associated with greater college satisfaction and is indirectly and positively related to intent to persist.

### *Economic Status*

The level of financial aid, and the continued stress of daily finances has an impact on persistence (Ishitani, 2016; Martin 2017). Research identifies students who take out loans during their first year of college are less likely to persist into their second year (Luo & Williams, 2013). Financial variables have been the focus of several influential casual models of retention in terms of their direct effects on persistence (Cabrera, et al., 1992). While affordability generally determines the types of institutions students initially consider, the perception of value received, rather than small variations in cost, is the variable that drives students' decisions (Sloan, 2013).

### *Commitment & Motivation*

Who students are when they start college, their background characteristics and pre-college behavior is associated with what they do during their first year of college (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). As a student enters the institution, pre-entry attributes such as intention, motivation and external commitments or obligations to family, or work opportunities have a significant bearing on student retention. The first two segments of Tinto's model illustrate the qualities and intentions that define a student's disposition at the time of entry to the institution. These characteristics and factors prepare the

student for the experiences that he or she may encounter. Strauss and Volkwein (2004) affirm that the strongest influence on commitment and retention comes from student-level variables and subsequent campus experiences. Experiences in the classroom, faculty-student interaction, and the character of intellectual-growth experiences are especially powerful predictors of student commitment, and thus persistence. Bray, Braxton, and Sullivan (1999) found that positive coping (positive reinterpretation and growth) and negative coping (denial and behavioral disengagement) techniques were associated with a student's academic and social integration and commitment to persistence and the goal of graduation. Furthermore, these internal processes are reciprocal and iterative, thus providing continuous feedback and adjustment for the student's perspective and in turn lead "to academic and social integration, institutional fit and loyalty, and intent to persist" (p. 58).

### *Psychosocial Skills*

The relationship between personality and adjustment variables and retention has received increased attention over the last decade. Bean and Eaton (2004) posited a psychological model of retention that features variables that are prominent in the field of personality. This included variables such as self-efficacy defined by Bandura (1997); Aldwin's (2007) coping strategies and Perry's (2003) personal control (as cited in Bean and Eaton, 2004). They argue that student's developed internal psychological processes result in increased efficacy and positive self-efficacy, the ability to manage stress and the capacity for an internal locus of control. In a study on psychosocial factors that predict first-year student success, Krumrei-Manusco, Newton, Kim, & Wilcox (2013) determined that the extent to which a student develops self-efficacy, organization, and attention related skills early in their academic careers can influence his or her academic success in college

### *Family Commitments*

Geography also influences goodness of fit as well as student retention and persistence. For instance, the proximity of a student's home location to campus has a significant relationship with first-year students' retention (Luo & Williams, 2013). For many student's affordability is a significant determinant for the institutions that are initially considered however, the need for the safety net of family close by "just in case" can prompt a student to transfer during his/her first year (Sloan, 2013). While a transfer or drop out decision often manifests as a financial decision, the root cause may have more to do with the need to be geographically closer to a system of supports and the student's overall mental health (Sloan, 2013).

For our study, the student's pre-entry attributes are captured in the administrative data maintained by the University and this includes information regarding a student's socio-economic status, family status, gender, race, culture and ethnicity, high school curriculum, grade point average, SAT/ACT scores, and distance from home.

## Formulation of Student Experience & Organizational Culture

### *Academic and Social Experiences*

Students' engagement in the social environment of college is an independent but complementary endeavor to success in the academic environment. The primary element of our model is the experiences that a student has at the institution, through time. This includes both formal and informal aspects of the institutional experiences, as well as the student's interaction with, and the effect of both the academic and

social realms that exist at the university or college. Research shows that institutional characteristics and cultures have both a direct and indirect effect on a student's desire and ability to engage with academic and non-academic activities (Bean, 1980; Braxton, et al. 1995; Tinto, 1993, 1973). Tinto found that a student's sense of academic and social belonging impacts retention and graduation (1993) and further that this sense of belonging is increased or decreased through interactions with the academic and social environments of the university.

One challenge institutions face related to the retention of first year students involves the multiple interconnected factors that influence academic success and persistence among first year college students (Reason, Terenzini & Domingo, 2016). Institutions that face retention challenges should aim to engage students both inside and outside of the classroom by prioritizing the development of academic and social engagement equally with the ultimate goal of developing the attitudes, behaviors and skills of all students in alignment with their desired academic outcomes (Reason et al., 2016). To these ends, institutional leadership should aim to hire, orient and develop faculty to promote good teaching practices and exemplary advising to assist with the academic and social development of undergraduate students (Braxton, Doyle, Hartley, Hirschy, Jones & McLendon, 2014).

### *Academic Engagement*

Simply stated, what happens in the classroom matters to student retention. Faculty members should be encouraged to adopt pedagogical methods that cultivate and promote active engagement for first-year students (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006). In a study on the link between high-impact practices and student learning, Kilgo, Sheets, & Pascarella (2015) present ten high-impact research practices that positively affect student engagement. These practices include first-year seminars, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service learning and community-based learning, internships (IPEDS Table 326.30), and capstone courses or projects (p. 510). When adopted pedagogically as means to engaging undergraduate students in the classroom, research demonstrates these practices lead to greater participation and retention of undergraduate students. However, active and collaborative learning and undergraduate research appear to be the most impactful practices of undergraduate student academic engagement and, by extension, retention (Braxton, & Mundy, 2001-2002; Gardner, 2001; Kilgo et al., 2015).

As institutions embrace high-impact practices for undergraduate student engagement, it is important that faculty be involved with the development of classroom practices as well as overall institutional efforts to weave academic experiences into administratively defined retention practices (Braxton & Mundy, 2001-2002). Faculty should be provided with professional development opportunities and workshops that help to support, promote, and increase access to knowledge about high impact practice along with other co-curricular programs and resources (Braxton & Mundy, 2001-200). Furthermore, faculty should be encouraged to maintain norms for classroom engagement including setting expectations, maintaining firm deadlines and providing timely and appropriate feedback that are readily understood by students in their classrooms (Sloan, 2013).

In a study on college persistence, Davidson & Beck (2006) reviewed literature on retention as they developed a College Persistence Questionnaire. Although their primary purpose was to validate a measuring instrument, the results have ramifications as their process of analysis contributes to persistence theories. For example, the Academic Integration assessment was "composed of the student's understanding of lectures, believing that faculty care about their intellectual growth, taking an interest in



class discussions, and seeing a connection between courses and careers, among other things (p.14).” With covariation analysis a clearer sense of the meaning of academic integration comes into focus. The researchers conclude that “factors affecting retention are often specific to the institution and the individual student.” And further recommend that in “planning persistence-oriented courses or funding institutional changes, it is important to know which variables most strongly affect attrition at a particular school or for a certain group of undergraduates (p.16).”

### *Social Engagement*

The kinds of experiences students have during their first year of college shape the amount and nature of student learning and change, including social and personal competence (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2005). Regarding the social aspects of undergraduate student engagement, Bergen-Cico & Viscomi (2012-2013) distinguish between active and passive activities. In a study on the relationship between college co-curricular involvement and academic achievement, they found a positive correlation between students who attended between five and fourteen co-curricular campus events and overall GPA. This increase occurred regardless of whether the engagement activity was active or passive. Passive student engagement involves attendance at campus-sponsored co-curricular events such as concerts and sporting events, but does not involve active participation, as the case for student athletes, students involved with Greek organizations, and students involved with other active student organizations. Ultimately, a student’s satisfaction with his/her university-affiliated social network is positively correlated with his/her level of institutional commitment (McEwan, 2014).

### *Experience of the Student-Athlete*

The student athlete enters college with great time demands while being expected to achieve high levels of academic and social integration (Carodine, Almond & Gratto 2001). More recent literature suggests that student-athletes enter college less prepared than their peers, particularly those athletes who were highly committed to their sport with a strong athlete identity (Gayles, 2015). Furthermore, the rigors of athletics can contribute to a sense of isolation in the college undergraduate student (Astin, 1999). This isolation stems from long practice hours, constant travel to and from athletic competitions, and, in some cases, special living arrangements for the student athlete that keep them apart from other students (Astin, 1999). Gayles (2015) points out several studies, including the National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE), that indicate student athletes are engaged in the college experience at rates similar to non-athletes, although differences exist between Division III schools and those in Division I and II.

In 2014, Johnson, Wessel & Pierce set out to examine the influence of student background characteristics on the retention of NCAA student-athletes. They found that college student-athletes were less likely to drop out if they were Caucasian, were admitted with high GPA’s and high standardized test scores, attended a college close to their hometown (less than 25 miles), and earned a considerable amount of playing time. They grounded their study in the recognition of a student’s life-long “athletic identity,” an identity that defines their self-worth and is quickly subject to a variety of emotional stressors that can hinder their academic performance and contribute to attrition. One of the outcome of the study revealed that the proximity to home variable correlated significantly to retention. They state “students whose homes are within 100 miles of their college are three times as likely to be retained as students whose homes are more than 250 miles from their college” (p.145). Playing time was another significant variable significantly correlated to retention. These results suggest the more playing time a student-athlete has, the more likely they are to persist.

A big challenge for student athletes lies in finding balance between the demands of academic coursework and the demands of athletic practice and competition (Gayles, 2015). As indicated above, social and academic engagement requires a combination of student effort and institutional support through policies and practices that help encourage participation in college-wide engagement activities (Gayles, 2015). As undergraduate student athletes manage game and practice schedules, they may struggle with time-management that may result in missing class, not completing homework assignments on time, inadequate study habits, and as a result, a lack of adequate progress towards degree attainment (Gayles, 2015). It is important that the institution recognizes the unique challenge undergraduate student-athletes face and develop appropriate policies and procedures that support their academic achievement as well as their advancement in collegiate athletics.

### Formulation of Organizational Culture

This element of our conceptual framework represents the formal services and programming provided for holistic success of all of its students, as well as the positive campus climate that is reflective of the institution's values and mission. An institution's commitment to services and programming and a students' value to the institutional community conveys institutional habitus. Berger and Braxton's (1998) research identified organizational behavior, conveyed through clear and effective communication among other behaviors, is critical in socializing a student to the institution and is significantly related to student retention. Reason, Terenzini, and Domingo (2006) argue that the undergraduate student's first year of college is critical to laying the foundation for their subsequent academic success and persistence. To lay this foundation, institutions of higher education must adopt a culture that weaves into the campus fabric the policies and programs that prioritize first-year student persistence and success (Braxton & Frances, 2017). In this context, areas for best practice include academic advising programs, first year experience courses, orientation programs, transparent financial aid process, residential living, enrollment management, leadership involvement, and institutional mission (Bigger, 2014; Braxton, Doyle, Harley, Hirschy, Jones, & McLendon, 2014; Ishitani, 2016; Reason et al., 2006; Sloan, 2013).

### *Academic Advising*

High quality academic advising has demonstrated positive impacts on academic achievement and satisfaction as well as negative effect on intent to depart from an institution (Braxton & Munday, 2001-2002). Colleges and universities should conduct regular training of faculty for advising practices to promote awareness and connection between academic and student affairs as they support students with their transition process. Emphasis should be in the on holistic development of the student, student advocacy, self-efficacy, time management, clear communication, and broad institutional values (Braxton & Munday, 2011-2002). Students are more likely to persist when they feel their advisors are readily available and approachable, and when they feel impressed with the content of the major they have chosen or are considering (Schreiner, 2009). With this in mind, students need exposure to their opportunities present in their major within the first year.

### *First Year Experience & Orientation*

Most orientation programs stress the provision of information, more personal contact with other students, faculty and staff, and are imperative to good retention practices. Orientation programs should develop multiple opportunities for first-year students to interact socially with their peers (Braxton & Munday, 2001-2002). Summer orientation programs, freshmen seminars, and first-year-experience workshops are a

critical component of student success, especially when they provide opportunity to acclimate students to institutional norms and policies. However, providing students with this information during summer months does not guarantee retention of this knowledge throughout the academic year (Bigger, 2014). When orientation is a discrete event and not something that is incorporated throughout the first year, students can feel like they have missed their chance to ask for help (Sloan, 2013). Orientation programs should include Parent's Weekend, a Parent's office, and newsletters that keep parents connected to their children's collegiate experiences as well as the institution in which their children are enrolled (Bigger, 2014; Braxton & Frances, 2017).

### *Residential Life*

A study published in 2017 that reported the results of interviews conducted with 144 non-returning students between their freshmen and sophomore affirmed several negatives related residential life during the freshmen year. Students identified significant issues with university housing, roommates, and/or neighbors (Martin, 2017). Braxton, Doyle, Hartley, Hirschy, Jones, & McLendon, M.K (2014) provide recommendations and policies related to student welfare and institutional integrity in residential life. These include developing social integration, identity interaction and solidarity in the residence halls and providing funding for first-year residential hall activities and programming to create interaction and self-belonging and a sense of community socialization.

### *Institutional Leadership*

Leadership plays a significant role in retention and developing policies and practices that can either support or negate overall efforts to reduce rates of departure of first year students (Braxton & Munday, 2001-2002). At the executive level, leadership should clarify institutional values and expectations early, and often, to prospective and matriculating students. In the context of adopting a holistic approach to supporting students academically, personally and socially (Reason et al., 2006) institutional leadership should seek to influence the development of academic competence and cognitive engagement of all students (Reason et al., 2006). They should also provide specific services and address student concerns to foster student perceptions of the institution as supportive and caring (Braxton & Munday, 2001-2002; Reason et al., 2006).

### *Institutional Culture & Mission*

In a study on student satisfaction and retention, Schreiner (2009), reported predictors of retention as they differ across student cohort and length of time at the college or university. First-year student retention is best predicted by Campus Climate, although global satisfaction is also a strong predictor (Schreiner, 2009). Additional items that were most predictive of freshmen students returning their sophomore year included satisfaction with being a student, meeting their expectations for advisor availability, feeling a sense of belonging, perceiving their future major to have valuable course content, believing that student fees are used wisely, and feeling that the campus is a safe place. These factors all contribute to the overall findings that institutional culture, as grounded in institutional mission and manifested through campus policy and programs, strongly influence student retention rates.

In 2017, Braxton & Francis published an organizational assessment to improve student persistence. The authors present factors of organizational behavior that influence retention including student perceptions of institutional integrity and the perceived commitment of the institution to student welfare. The institutional commitment to student welfare is understood by the student experiences and the college or university's

communication that places high values on student potential, growth and development. In 2006, Pike & Kuh set out to better understand the relationships among structural diversity and student perceptions of campus environment. Their results indicated that characteristics such as institutional control, institutional mission, and size are strongly related to the student's perception of the campus environment. Students who can express the value of their institution in their own words, having internalized their decision to be there on a deeper level, are more likely to believe in it, and to persist when faced with challenges (Sloan, 2013).

### *In Summary*

Our research study is informed by the seventy-year history of research on the problem of college student departure. To this end, we have been purposeful to engage the literature and include the indicators of pre-entry attributes, academic and social integration, and institutional commitment, as key proposition to student retention at Alderson Broaddus. Following our adaptation of student retention models, our research considers the impact that student engagement has on re-enrollment in the second year with the large population of athletes, as well as the influential variables of a student's pre-entry characteristics, academic progress and integration and the recognition of institutional commitment. With a mixed method study, the student focus group data provided narratives reflecting student perceptions of academic course work, the life of a student athlete, campus residential life, campus climate, institutional values and support services, leadership and organizational culture. We have come to understand that every institution has a self-defining culture that is a powerful part of the student experience. Through our partnership with Alderson Broaddus, our charge is to understand why so many students depart at the end of their first year as we attempt to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the pre-entry attributes and institutional experiences of enrolled students that predict departure after the first year? (2.A) What perceptions do undergraduate students have about positive experiences at Alderson Broaddus during their first year? (2.B) What perceptions do undergraduate students have about negative experiences during their first year?

## 3. Data & Research Methods

### Quantitative Data & Methods

#### *Administrative Data*

The data for quantitative analysis was collected through the University's student information system that is maintained by the Office of Institutional Research. This administrative data includes demographic and academic progress for entering freshman students attending AB for the period of 2015-2017. This period coincides with the University's focus on building enrollment following the 2015 initiative that developed division II team sports and recruiting students for these teams. The data does not carry student identifiers but includes information on students' background characteristics (i.e. race/ethnicity, sex, age, home zip code). The data also contains the student's high school academic performance (i.e. high school GPA, SAT or ACT scores), as well as their college academic progress and engagement in college activities (i.e. athletics and team group variables). We organized this data to group variables into the categories shown in Table 2. These include variables that are present before entering college (column 1) and variables that are impacted by the first year of college (column 2).

Table 2: Pre-entry Attributes and College Experiences Variables Used in Analysis

Before Entering College (Group 1)		College Experience (Group 2)	
Student Characteristics	Race	College Academic	Declared major College GPA Credits earned
	Sex		
	Home zip code		
	Pell Grant		
	Age at admission		
H.S. Academic Performance	High school attended	College Engagement	Athletic / Team Sport Band Greek Life
	High School GPA		
	ACT/SAT score		

Missing data was found in a number of the variables and the students' cases with missing values were removed from the data set. The variables with missing data are high school GPA and SAT score. For the most part, these cases were international students from high schools that do not offer this information. We also found student cases where there was no credit load in the first semester. Furthermore, our study keys into retention from the first to the second year. Both the literature and comparable data sets report retention of first time, full time freshman. As a result, we removed transfer student cases. The original dataset included 1054 cases. We removed 161 transfer students and then removed missing data in three variables (High School GPA, SAT Score, fall semester credits), and as a result the final dataset includes 865 cases, or 82 % of the original dataset. A summary of the cases removed is found in Table 3.

Table 3: Cases Removed from the Original Dataset

Cases in original dataset	1054	
Removed	Remaining	
Transfer students	161	893
No high school GPA	14	879
No SAT/ACT	5	877
No year one fall semester credits	12	865

### Data Sample

The sampling strategy for the student administrative data is purposive sampling, a nonprobability sampling strategy that includes all students from the 2015 to 2017 cohorts (Babbie, 2008). The original sample provided included all first-year students who were accepted to AB in the fall of 2015, 2016 and 2017 and includes academic performance data through the spring semester of the student's second year.

As shown in Table 4, the student population at AB is unique in several dimensions. The majority of freshman students declare their major (91%), are white (66%), are male (61%) and are engaged in the University's many co-curricular offerings. A large majority of the entering freshman are members of athletic teams or other team-based programs, such as band or cheer (83%). More than half the first-time freshman students receive Pell Grants (53%), and one third of the students live within 100 miles of their home address (33%).

Alderson Broaddus is located in rural West Virginia and the one-hundred-mile radius does not include a major city with the exception of Morgantown with a population of just over 30,000, and some of the suburbs of Pittsburgh. One third of the freshman class is within 200 miles of their home and this includes the regional cities of Pittsburgh, PA, the suburbs of Washington, DC, and Columbus, Ohio. Thirty-two percent of the students in the three-year data set are from West Virginia. 14.4% are from Ohio and 13.6% are from Pennsylvania. The remaining 40% of the students in the cohorts we studied come from states as far as California (5 students, or 0.5%) or Georgia (21 students, or 5.6%). Student populations from all of these states are in the single digit percentages.

The freshman class across these three years carries a mean high school grade point average of 3.2, with a standard deviation of .56. Within the data set the GPA range includes schools with both a 4.0 GPA range and a 5.0 GPA. Only 5% of the students exhibit a GPA above 4.0, but the 5.0 GPA scale inflates all of the GPA mean scores. Standardized test scores include both SAT and ACT scores. These scores were translated to SAT comparable scores and the mean score for the dataset is 1030, in the bottom 45 percentile, nationally. Students entering AB make a commitment to their academic major. Top majors across these three cohorts are Biology (15%), Nursing (13%), Business Administration (10%) and Criminal Justice (7%). This group of majors represent 45% of the entering student population. The remaining students enter degree programs at the rate of single digit percentages. This is likely the result of a broad menu of major choices offered at AB. Only 9% of the incoming class have an undeclared major which is explained by the large student population receiving federal funding where declaring a major is prerequisite for funding.

Over 80% of the students entering Alderson Broaddus during this period are student athletes or participate in a team sport such as cheer, majorettes and band. Football athletes make up 30% of students in the athlete group. All other sports programs attract students in single digit percentages. The largest of this group is men's soccer (7%).

A clear picture of the average student emerges. The average student in our dataset is from a regionally located (tristate) high school and is male, white and receives a Pell Grant. As a Pell grant recipient, we know that the family income is lower than \$50,000 a year and many Pell grants go to families with incomes less than \$20,000 a year (DOE, 2017). Because the student is likely to play a team sport (80% of the freshmen), he is also a recipient of a partial-scholarship for sports as is the custom in division II sports. He has declared an academic major, which is required for student financial aid. He comes to college having experienced academic accomplishment demonstrated by his high school grade point average, but standardized test results captured a lower level of academic proficiency.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Students Entering AB in 2015, 2016, 2017

Data Set Population		865	
Gender	Male	527	61%
	Female	338	39%
Race	White	569	66%
	Black	211	24%
	Hispanic	34	4%
	Asian	7	1%
US Resident	Resident	822	95%
	Non-Resident	25	3%
	Other	17	2%
Age	Up to 19	397	45.98%
	19.5 - 21	427	49.36
	21 and older	41	4.74%
HS GPA	Mean	3.21	
	SD	(0.55)	
	Min Max	1.4	4.94
SAT/ACT	Mean	1030.9	
	SD	(120.25)	
	Min Max	630	1400
	# of students with a score < 920 (AB admission criteria)	118	
Pell Grant		462	53.41%
Home State	West Virginia	262	31%
	Ohio	123	15%
	Pennsylvania	114	14%
	Maryland	64	8%
Distance from Home	< 100 miles	578	67%
	101 – 200 miles	145	17%
	> 250 miles	142	16%
Athlete	Athlete	720	83%
	Non-Athlete	145	17%
	Greek	112	13%
Major	Declared	780	91%
	Undeclared	85	9%
Credits	1 <sup>st</sup> semester mean	14.56	

	SD	(1.89)	
	Min Max	6	8
	2 <sup>nd</sup> semester mean	11.63	
	SD	(5.76)	
	Min Max	0	19
GPA	1 <sup>st</sup> semester mean	2.39	
	SD	(1.06)	
	Min Max	0	4.0
	2 <sup>nd</sup> semester mean	2.50	
	SD	(1.01)	
	Min Max	0	4.0

Note: 5% of the students in our study had a GPA above 4.0, this is likely due to AP course grades. Our calculations show that these students increase the standard deviation by only 0.02. It is unclear how many students are evaluated on a 5.0 scale.

Note: SAT/ACT scores were converted to a single combined SAT score.

Note: Athletic programs include, Band, Cheer & Dance, Color Guard & Majorettes, Softball, Baseball, Football, Men's and Women's Basketball, Soccer, Golf, track, Lacrosse, Volleyball, Cross Country, Swimming and Diving, Men's Wrestling, Women's Gymnastics, and Women's Tennis.

Note: SD is standard deviation.

### Enrollment Rates

Table 5 presents descriptive enrollment information for all students in the original sample entering Alderson Broaddus in 2015, 2016 and 2017. The total number of students entering in 2015 numbered 381 students. Of this group, 333 were first time freshman and when we follow the academic progress of this group to the fall semester of the second year, there are 150 students registered for zero credits, with only 182 first time freshman students attending. Following the US Department of Education's definition of retention, we report retention only on the first-time freshman (not including transfer students), and so the retention rate for the AB dataset that we are considering is 54.7% in 2015-16.

The cohort entering in 2016 numbered a total of 309 students. Of this group, 257 were first time freshman, and 52 were transfer students. While observing the academic data, we see that only one student was registered for zero credits in that fall semester, suggesting that this student was accepted, but did not attend. As we look to the fall semester of the second year, there are 128 students registered for zero credits, and 111 of these students are first-time freshman. Following the US Department of Education's definition for retention, the retention rate for AB in 2016-17 is 56.8%.

Table 5: Retention for our Study Population of First-Time Freshmen

	2015	2016	2017
All students entering AB	381	309	364
First time full-time freshman Fall Year 1	333	257	303
Spring enrollment Year 1	266	226	229
Fall semester Year 2	332	257	303



Fall registration = zero credits	150	111	145
FTFY freshman re-enrolled	182	146	158
Retention for FTFY freshman	54.7%	56.8%	52.1%
National retention rate	78.9%	78.1%	

Note: National retention data is for 4-year private institutions that have a 75%-89% acceptance rate and is from the National Center for Education Statistics, Table 326.30 (USDE, 2018).

We can similarly follow the results for the entering cohort of 2017 that numbered a total of 364 students. We see that in the fall semester of the second year, 145 students are registered for zero credits, with then only 158 students attending. The first-time freshman cohort is 48% smaller and the first-year retention rate for AB in 2017-18 is 52.1%, the lowest across the three cohorts in our study.

Following the standards set by the Department of Education, the average retention rate across these three cohorts is less than 55% and is compared to the national retention rate for 2016-2017 of 78% at similar institutions (USDE, 2018). As we know, this retention calculation does not include transfer students and although transfer students are a small population at AB, our data shows that they are retained at a higher rate than the first-time freshmen.

We also considered retention for this population of first-time full-time freshmen by academic program and by athletic team. AB offers numerous academic programs and some only admit a few freshmen each year. Because 44.6% of the incoming freshmen have declared a B.S. in Biology, Nursing, Business Administration, or a B.A. in Criminal Justice we were interested in the retention among these majors. In Table 6 we can see the first-to-second year retention for the B.S. in Biology is 64.2%; for B.S. in Nursing 46.8%; for the B.S. Business Administration 39.8%; for the B.A. in Criminal Justice 50.8%. The Nursing program, Biology program and Business Administration program enroll close to 45% of the first-year students, however more than 50% of these students do not reenroll in their second year.

Table 6: Degree Programs with Largest Freshman Enrollment

Degree program	Year 1 Enrolled	Year 2 Did not re-enroll	Retention
B.S. Biology	134	48	64.2%
B.S. Nursing	109	58	46.8%
B.S. Business Administration	88	53	39.8%
B.A. Criminal Justice	59	29	50.8%
B.A. Sports Management	51	17	66.7%
B.S. Exercise Science/Athletic Trainer	41	21	48.8%
B.S. Athletic Training	39	21	46.2%
B.S. Exercise Science Physical Therapy	30	15	50.0%
Total study population entering these programs	472	214	
Total first-time full-time freshmen	865	386	

We reviewed data for twenty-five teams, and on average eight new freshmen join each team, excluding football. Among these teams, there is high enrollment in men's soccer, which added an average 15 freshmen each year; Volleyball added an average 17 students. In Table 7 we see that year-to-year retention for these selected teams. In 2017, the retention of football athletes was 41.5%, compared to 55.6% retention in 2015 and illustrating a downward trend. The retention rate for the men's soccer is 47.5% and displays an upward trend for retention over the three-year period. In 2017, the retention of male soccer athletes was 52.6%, compared to 40.0% retention in 2015. 30% of the incoming freshman in our data set commit to these athletic teams and the first to second year retention is consistently lower than the University retention rates. The majority of students attending AB are athletes and retention rates for all of the athletic teams can be found in Table 7.

Table 7: Athletic and Sport Teams with Largest Freshman Enrollment

Athletic Teams	2015	2016	2017	Av. Retention 2015 – 2017
Football Team* retention	55.6%	50.7%	41.5%	49%
Men's Soccer Team retention	40.0%	50.0%	52.6%	47%
Men's Volley Ball retention	50.0%	52.6%	55.6%	53%
Total freshman team members	113	94	110	
Total team members re-enroll	65	48	49	
Total freshman athletes	288	250	279	
% of athletes in freshman class	75.6%	82.8%	77.1%	
Total students entering AB	381	309	364	

\* Highest # students admitted of all sports

### Research Methods

The student administrative data was imported into STATA, a general-purpose statistical software package to complete the quantitative analysis. Before the analysis could begin, some variables had to be modified. First, the variables for Sex, Pell Grant status, Athlete or Team status, Fraternity and Sorority (Greek) status were recoded into new binary variables. The Race/Ethnicity variable was recoded into new variables for each of the primary racial/ethnic groupings at the institution: White; Black; Hispanic/Latino; Asian; and All Other Races. Further, the student's birthdate was translated into a new variable that identified their age at admission. Second, since some students took the SAT exam, whereas others took the ACT, a new test score variable was created. All ACT cumulative scores were recoded into SAT cumulative scores using the concordance tables published by The College Board (2015). Third, the student's degree major variable was recoded into a new binary variable of declared or undeclared major (declared=1, undeclared=0) to identify those students who have or have not expressed a commitment to an academic program. Finally, the home zip code variable was recoded into a categorical variable by 50-mile distance increments based on the distance to Alderson Broaddus. Student home addresses within a 50-mile distance (1), within 100-mile distance (2), within 200-mile distance (3) within a 400-mile distance and (5) for all others. Zip code distances were based on CDXZipStream technology that employs on USPS zip code data.

A review of the descriptive statistics of the data set led to exploring influential relationships among the variables, particularly the relationship to a student's re-enrollment for classes in the fall semester of the second year. Pearson's correlations were reviewed, and subsequent t-tests were performed to isolate the

relationship between variables among subgroup populations defined by race, gender or athletic status, for example.

We then conducted stepwise linear regressions to consider the impact of variables on student retention to the fall of their second year. Each array of variables is defined by the groupings established previously and they are: pre entry characteristics of demographics, pre-entry characteristics of high school academics; the student's college experience of academics and the student's college engagement experience. We created models for the regression analysis that group independent variables according to a perceived temporal order of occurrence, beginning with the pre-entry demographics, and then add the academic experience variables, and then college experience variables, then athletics and Greek life variables. The dependent variable for the regressions is the binary variable of student enrollment or no enrollment in the fall semester of the second year.

The equation for model 1 is only the pre-entry demographic variables is below. These include race, gender and Pell grant status.

$$y \text{ (non-enrollment in year 2)} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{pre-entry demographics} + \varepsilon$$

To this equation, the pre-entry high school academic variables are added to create model 2. These new variables include the student's high school GPA and their SAT/ACT score.

$$y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{pre-entry demographics} + \beta_2 \text{pre-entry high school academics} + \varepsilon$$

Next, we add the selected college academic experience variables to the equation for model 3. This variable is the student's total credit load in the spring.

$$y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{pre-entry demographics} + \beta_2 \text{pre-entry high school academics} + \beta_3 \text{college academic progress} + \varepsilon$$

Model 3A added the college academic programs with the highest first year student enrollment.

$$y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{pre-entry demographics} + \beta_2 \text{pre-entry high school academics} + \beta_3 \text{college academic progress} + \beta_4 \text{high enrollment degree programs} + \varepsilon$$

The next model (4) added the variables for college student engagement that include Greek Life and all of the athletic teams.

$$y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{pre-entry demographics} + \beta_2 \text{pre-entry high school academics} + \beta_3 \text{college academic progress} + \beta_4 \text{high enrollment degree programs} + \beta_5 \text{college student engagement} + \varepsilon$$

Model 4A removed the variable for athletic teams, but added a new variable for the high enrollment athletic teams.

$$y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{pre-entry demographics} + \beta_2 \text{pre-entry high school academics} + \beta_3 \text{college academic progress} + \beta_4 \text{high enrollment degree programs} + \beta_5 \text{college student engagement} + \beta_6 \text{high enrollment athletic programs} + \varepsilon$$

At each step, the model is evaluated for the increase in predictive power ( $r^2$ ). The last model included fifteen variables, and resulted in six variables deemed significant indicators of non-enrollment in the second year.

## Qualitative Data & Methods

### *Executive Team Interview Data*

To address our second research question, we employed a qualitative protocol and analysis to better understand the perceptions students have about experiences during their first year. We began our data collection with semi-structured interviews with the executive team. These were conducted during the Summer of 2018 using protocol developed around initial quantitative data collected and our conceptual framework (refer to Appendix B for a list of semi-structured interview questions). We conducted these interviews over the phone as we transcribed the conversations nearly verbatim for us to use as a point of departure as we designed the rest of our data collection process moving forward.

Our first conversation was held with the Vice President for Enrollment Management, who served as our point of contact between ourselves and Alderson Broaddus University. We used insights from this conversation as we conducted follow up calls with remaining members of the University's executive team including the Vice President for Academic Affairs, Director of Institutional Research, Vice President for Administration and Finance, Chief Financial Officer, Director of Financial Aid, and the Director of Athletics. In between each interview with a member of the executive team, the research team held follow-up conversations with each other during which we discuss insights gleaned from each interview that helped better inform and provide nuance to each follow up interview.

### *Focus Group Data*

From our conversations with the executive team we developed semi-structured protocol for interviews with student focus groups. We traveled to the Alderson Broaddus campus in October of 2018 to tour the campus, meet previously interviewed members of the executive team, and engage student focus groups. As we conversed with students throughout our two-day visit, we sought to understand, from students who remain at the university, how the university has met their college expectations as we gathered information about their positive and negative experiences with AB. To these ends, we focused our focus group sample on incoming freshman cohorts from the 2015, 2016, and 2017 academic years and worked to ensure each focus group was representative of the overall student body at AB with regards to demographics, including gender and ethnicity.

### *Data Sample*

Given the limited scope of our project, we relied heavily on a purposive sampling procedure. Specifically, non-probability, voluntary sampling was used to recruit student interviewees. We engaged the Vice President for Enrollment Management for assistance with gathering student athletes and non-athletes to participate in focus group interviews. The groups were selected from classes that faculty offered for our research study. Five predominately mixed focus groups were established from which we compare our results. Table 9 presents the location and student characteristics for each of the five groups. We were able to hold five focus groups of 8 to 15 students who were all full-time students at the time the interviews were conducted. The groups were selected from classes that faculty offered for our research study.

Current freshman students were excused and the remaining groups of sophomore, junior and senior students participated. Athletes and non-athletes were in the focus groups, and students identified their athlete/non-athlete status as well as their year standing when making comments. One focus group (four members) consisted of only non-athletes. Interviews were conducted in a variety of spaces, from large classrooms to small labs, a factor we believe may have influenced student responses.

### *Thematic Coding*

We conducted an initial thematic coding of the semi-structured interviews with the executive team, placing direct quotes into themes built around our conceptual framework. These themes included Affinity Bonding defined, Affinity Bonding impact, retention theories (why team members believe the AB retention problem exists), the impact the retention problem has had on the institution, undergraduate student pre-entry attributes and student body profile, student athlete experience, student non-athlete experience, student academic & social engagement, academic advising, first year experience and new student orientation, residential life, financial aid, enrollment management, leadership steps taken to improve retention, and institutional support as related to current institutional mission. Appendix C presents a detailed list of questions asked during our semi-structured interviews with the executive team.

The topical discussions for our semi-structured interviews with the student focus groups were informed by insights gleaned from our initial analysis of interviews conducted with the executive team, along with our conceptual framework and the results from our quantitative data analysis. The audio recordings from the focus groups provided data related to the participating student's academic and social experiences. Field notes taken by both researchers during these interviews helped to capture “rich, detailed descriptions” (Patton, 2002, 36) and provide nuance to our analysis as we transcribed and analyzed focus group data.

All recordings were transcribed verbatim as we employed an inductive analysis process during which each researcher reviewed the transcripts to uncover emergent themes and patterns (Saldana, 2009). Upon doing so, we employed a Structural Coding Schema which “both codes and initially categorizes the data corpus to examine comparable segments’ commonalities, differences, and relationships” (Saldana, 2009, 84). This resulted in the “identification of large segments of text on broad topics” which formed the basis for an in-depth analysis within and across topics (Saldana, 2009). Open coding was used to match sections of the text with themes identified in our literature review and conceptual framework. Each researcher repeated the structural coding process twice in order to identify deeper themes and help formulate a more reliable code frequency report for our findings. The research team compared the results of their coding process between each round of coding, adding an additional level of reliability to our overall findings. We provide a detailed codebook for our final round of structural coding in Appendix D.

Table 8: Focus Group Characteristics

Focus Group	Interview Location	Student Information
Focus Group 1	Large Multi-Purpose Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10 Students</li> <li>• 7 Males, 3 Females</li> <li>• 9 Athletes</li> <li>• 6 Caucasian, 4 African American</li> </ul>

Focus Group 2	Mid-Sized Auditorium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3 Students</li> <li>• 2 Females, 1 Male</li> <li>• Non-Athletes</li> <li>• All Caucasian</li> </ul>
Focus Group 3	Mid-Sized Auditorium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 11 Students</li> <li>• 3 Males, 8 Females</li> <li>• 1 Non-Athlete, 1 Band Member</li> <li>• All Caucasian</li> </ul>
Focus Group 4	Small Science-Lab Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8 Students</li> <li>• 4 Males, 4 Females</li> <li>• 6 Athletes</li> <li>• All Caucasian</li> <li>• All upperclassmen</li> </ul>
Focus Group 5	Small Multi-Purpose Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 12 Students</li> <li>• 9 Males, 3 Females</li> <li>• 2 Non-Athletes</li> <li>• 9 Caucasian, 2 African American, 1 Asian</li> </ul>

To this end, we employed analyst triangulation which helped to eliminate the potential bias by both researchers in the process of independent analysis. Each researcher analyzed the same data and compared their findings (Patton, 665). Short analytic Memos helped us document significant reflections and observations. Future directions, unanswered questions, frustrations with the analysis, and insightful connections were all documented in these memos and included in the coding process (Saldana, 2009). Examples of analytic memos can be found in Appendix E. The authors jointly reviewed findings after each of the round of coding, to check for consistency and strengthen the trustworthiness of findings. The themes that emerged from the coding process were consistently placed alongside of our conceptual framework, research questions, and goals of our study (Patton, 2015) to help us maintain focus and inform the organizational structure for the presentation of our findings.

### Integrated Mixed Methods

In what we hoped to be a truly integrative, mixed-methods approach, in between rounds of coding we ran statistical tests that were designed to gather quantitative support for our qualitative findings and vice versa. For example, after running our initial quantitative tests, we found a lack of notable difference in retention numbers between athletes and non-athletes, so we changed our second research question to remove this distinction. And then after Coding Round One, we realized we needed to run statistical tests comparing the retention of students involved in different athletic programs and students across different academic areas. As we wove our data analysis process across our two methods employed, we strove for a highly-integrative approach that increased our likelihood for triangulation in addition to the reliability of our findings. In figure 5, we provide a visual representation of the purpose of the data collected in relationship to our integrated approach.

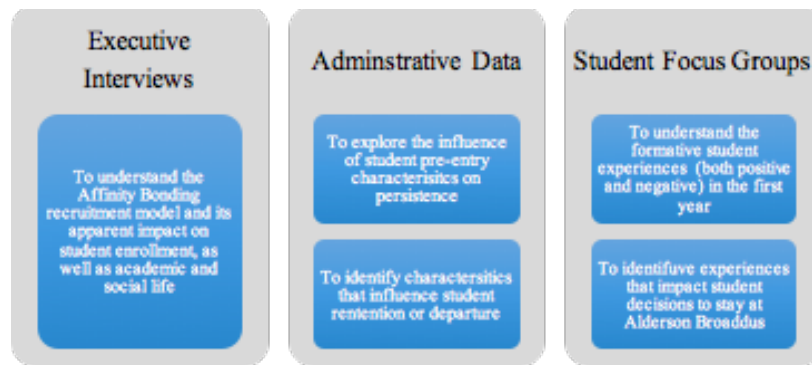


Figure 5: Integrated Mixed Methods for the Research Study

## 4. Results of the Data Analysis

### *Research Question 1: The Impact of Pre-Entry Attributes and Institutional Experiences on Enrollment in the Second Year*

Our research with Alderson Broaddus was structured around our conceptual framework as we explored the variables contributing to falling levels of student retention. The first research question asks: What are the pre-entry attributes and institutional experiences that predict student departure after the first year? The initial analysis of the student administrative data included correlations among the variables and to the enrollment variable defined by a student's (re)enrollment in the fall semester of the second year. Continued analysis allowed us to isolate high correlation variables of the students that did not enroll in the second year to compare the variables among the group of students re-enrolling and those that did not. We identified the variable of academic progress as having the strongest correlation to the fall re-enrollment, and so we considered this variable relative to numerous student subgroups, such as those defined by gender, race, and athletics. These results led us to reflect upon our conceptual framework and we developed regression models with grouped variables. These models added variables to determine statistical significance in predicting a student's re-enrollment. The model groups reflect our conceptual framework and the additive process is a proxy for the element of time in a student's transition to college and across the conceptual framework.

#### *Pre-entry Attributes*

The pre-entry attributes of our data set include the variables for age, race, gender, Pell grant eligibility and the student's distance from home. In addition, the academic preparation of the students is included in the variables: high school GPA and the student's SAT/ACT score that has been translated to a common SAT rubric. Pearson's correlation coefficient tests were performed on each of the variables to determine the strength of linear dependence among two variables. These correlations can be seen in the Appendix G. We considered the influential relationships among the variables, particularly to a student's re-enrollment for classes in the fall semester of the second year. In Table 9 we observe that the pre-entry variables demonstrate a weak correlation to student re-enrollment. These variables are high school GPA to re-enrollment (0.22); SAT/ACT common score to re-enrollment (0.10); those students that are White (0.07); those students that are Black (0.06) to re-enrollment. Pell Grants status identifies students with financial need, however when considering this variable against re-enrollment the correlation was also weak (0.05).

#### *Institutional Experiences*

Once a student is admitted and begins to show academic progress there is new data to consider. In Table 9 below, variables from Table G that demonstrate a moderate correlation are displayed, such as the correlation between the student's high school GPA and their fall semester GPA (0.59), and the correlation between the high school GPA and their subsequent spring semester GPA (0.48). These values are statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ , and is somewhat of an expected outcome, and reflect a student's preparation for college and ongoing acquisition of skills and culture for continued success. Table 9 also shows that there is also a moderate correlation between the student's spring semester earned credits and their decision re-enroll in the fall semester of the following year (0.54). This value is statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ . With this correlation, we will continue to consider the student's academic progress as an indicator for re-enrollment.



Table 9: Strongest Correlations of Pre-Entry Attributes

Variable	Does not re-enroll in Year 2	High School GPA	Year 1 fall GPA	Year I spring GPA
High school GPA	-0.22	1	0.59	0.48
Year 1 fall GPA	-0.34	0.59	1	0.67
Year I spring GPA	-0.32	0.48	0.67	1
Year 1 spring credits	-0.54	0.21	0.36	0.40
Year 1 Total credits in Spring	-0.54	0.36	0.43	0.43

$r = 0.7 - 1.0$  or  $-0.7 - -1.0 =$  strong correlation  
 $r = 0.4 - 0.7$  or  $-0.4 - -0.7 =$  moderate correlation  
 $r = 0.2 - 0.4$  or  $-0.2 - -0.4 =$  weak correlation

Note: a full table of correlations is in Appendix G.

### T-tests – Two Samples

The t-test afforded the isolation of the pre-entry variable means to be considered in the students who did not enroll in the second year (n=386) and the students that did enroll (n=479) Table 10 captures the difference in high school GPA's among the groups of students who re-enrolled and those that did not. Students that re-enrolled have a mean high school GPA of 3.32, and students that did not enroll have a mean high school GPA of 3.08. This difference of 0.24 is statistically significant ( $p = 0.000$ ). There is also a slightly higher GPA mean for White students who have re-enrolled compared to all other races in the student population we studied. This is also a statistically significant outcome ( $p < 0.05$ ). With regards to gender, there is a slightly higher mean GPA for women who re-enroll compared to men, statistically significant (0.000). Table 10 shows the variables of high school GPA, white students and female students had the only significant relationship to student re-enrollment.

Table 10: T-test of Differences in Pre-Entry Attributes

Variable	Group 1 Enrolled mean	Group 2 Not re-enrolled mean	p
Race: White only	0.689	0.619	0.0
Race: African American	0.221	0.272	0.0
No Pell Status	0.489	0.438	0.1
High school GPA	3.319	3.078	0.0
Distance from Home	477.536	663.85	0.1
Gender (female)	0.443	0.326	0.0
Age at Admission	18.535	18.666	0.0
Year 1 fall GPA	2.718	1.983	0.0

Year 1 spring GPA	2.72	2.004	0.0
Year 1 total credits	29.27	22.29	0.0
Athlete	0.843	0.819	0.3
Greek member	0.789	0.971	0.0
Observations	479	386	

N=865; \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

Because we know that successful academic progress has moderate correlation to re-enrollment, additional t-tests were performed with population subgroups to consider the impact of academic progress within these groups. These can be found in Table 11. For example, a significant difference in the GPA's between men and women during the spring semester of the first year was found. Women performed better than men by 0.37 GPA ( $p=0.000$ ). There was also a significant difference in the GPA's between White (2.60) and non-White students (2.28) during the spring semester of the first year. White students performed slightly better by 0.32 GPA ( $p=0.000$ ). The subgroup of athletes / non athletes was analyzed, and we found there was a difference in GPA means, however this difference was not significant ( $p=0.27$ ). The difference among the means for spring GPA's of Pell students and non-Pell students is statistically significant ( $p=0.000$ ). The mean GPA for Pell students is 2.34 and is 0.34 GPA points lower than non-Pell students. The difference in means for a student's GPA and by the credits they earned is significant among all groups, except athletes and non-athletes.

Table 11: T-test of Academic Progress Variable within Sub-Groups

Variable	Group 1	Group 2	Difference	p
	Male	Female		
Year 1 fall GPA	2.199	2.69	0.491	0
Year 1 spring GPA	2.347	2.715	0.368	0
Year 1 total spring credits	25.22	27.62	2.406	0
	Athlete	Non Athlete		
Year 1 fall GPA	2.373	2.477	0.104	0.2
Year 1 spring GPA	2.481	2.597	0.116	0.27
Year 1 total spring credits	26.272	25.582	0.689	0.24
	All other races	White		
Year 1 fall GPA	1.998	2.595	0.596	0
Year 1 spring GPA	2.284	2.604	0.32	0.001
Year 1 total spring credits	25.03	26.74	-1.70	0
	All other races	African American		
Year 1 fall GPA	2.56	1.864	0.697	0
Year 1 spring GPA	2.615	2.126	0.499	0
Year 1 total spring credits	26.61	24.77	1.840	0

N=865; \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

In an effort to identify variables that predict student departure after the first year, we developed a stepwise regression model. Furthermore, we identified subgroup populations in the athletic teams and degree programs with high enrollment that were discussed in our research and were often identified in the student focus groups. While following the transcripts of the student interviews, we identified teams and degree programs that attracted a large number of students. For example, student athletes on the football teams represent 30% of the student population in our data, however only 49% of these students re-enroll. The Nursing program attracts 15% of the incoming population and is also one of the most popular choices for a major. It is also one of the programs that accounts for a large percentage of total enrollment and demonstrates low levels of retention. To consider how a student's pre-entry attributes, combined with degree program choices as well as engagement in activities, we developed models to test. The stepwise models are structured in a progressive manner; to add groups of variables to test their impact on, and predictive variability for enrollment, and non-enrollment. The dependent variable is student non-enrollment or drop out. The model is testing the linear relationship between the variable(s) and non-enrollment in the fall of the second semester. The final model is a backward stepwise regression performed by STATA that reduces the total combination of variables to those that are statistically significant in predicting non-enrollment in the second year.

Referring to Table 12, we can see the results for the models. In Model 1, the only significant predictor of student non-enrollment in the second year was gender. Because we observe a negative coefficient (beta) in the table there is evidence of a negative relationship between student dropout and female students, therefore female students are 11% less likely to dropout in their second year compared with other students. The predictive value of Model 1 is however low, accounting for only 1.3% of the variability in this model for student dropout, as captured by the adjusted  $r^2$  outcome in the last row of Table 12.

In Model 2, the pre-entry variables of academic preparation were added. In Table 12 the variables for high school GPA and the SAT/ACT score are included. We observe the only significant predictor of student non-enrollment in the second year for this model is a student's high school GPA. With the negative co-efficient (beta), a single grade-point increase (1.0) in the student's high school GPA is associated with an 18% decrease in student dropout in the second year. This model also has low predictive value, accounting for only 4.5% of the variability ( $r^2$ ) for dropout.

Model 3 adds the student's academic progress in year one at AB represented by the variable of total credits in the spring semester. In this model, we are considering the impact of seven variables. The student's high school GPA remains a significant predictor and the number of student credits earned by the spring semester is also statically significant. We continue to observe a negative co-efficient (beta) and as the student's high school grade-point increases (1.0) there is a 9% decrease in the likelihood of a student's dropout in the second year. Further we observe that with a one credit increase in the credits earned, there is a 4% decrease in student dropout. We might expect to observe this occurrence because students with low credit loads often signal low academic progress that can lead to student departure. The seven variables considered in this model account for 30% of the variability ( $r^2$ ) in student non-enrollment in the second year.

Model 3A contains all of the previous variables and adds a select group of high enrollment majors that we identified earlier in our research. When referring to Table 12, in this model we observe the high school GPA and the student's total credit load in the spring semester are significant in predicting a student's non-enrollment in the second year. Because we observe a negative coefficient, as the student's high school

Table 12: Regression Models for Students Enrolled 2015-2017

Predictor	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 3A	Model 4	Model 4A	Model 5
	beta p	beta p	beta p	beta p	beta p	beta p	beta p
White	-0.055 0.342	-0.039 0.494	-0.031 0.525	-0.017 0.724	-0.006 0.900	-0.015 0.765	-0.003 0.949
Black	-0.015 0.816	-0.016 0.339	-0.058 0.290	-0.043 0.430	-0.041 0.444	-0.061 0.281	-0.047 0.403
Female	0.108** 0.002	-0.062 0.084	-0.001 0.967	-0.013 0.075	-0.004 0.899	0.026 0.464	0.013 0.712
Pell status	-0.038 0.278	-0.016 0.627	-0.024 0.423	-0.026 0.370	-0.017 0.541	-0.013 0.659	-0.158 0.589
HS GPA		0.180*** 0.000	-0.091** 0.004	0.094** 0.003	-0.080* 0.010	-0.078* 0.013	-0.081* 0.009
SAT/ACT		-0.000 0.891	0.002 -0.134	0.0003* 0.048	0.0003* 0.033	0.0003* 0.054	0.0003* 0.026
Total credits fall and spring			0.041*** 0.000	0.040*** 0.000	0.038*** 0.000	0.038*** 0.000	0.038** *
BS Nursing				0.115* 0.010	0.112* 0.011		0.113** 0.008
BS Bus Admin				0.102* 0.035	0.100* 0.036		0.092* 0.049
BS Athletic Training				0.080 0.244	0.079 0.245		0.081 0.263
Greek organization membership					0.225*** 0.000	0.229*** 0.000	0.225*** 0.000
Athletics or Team membership					-0.010 0.793		
Football						0.040 0.294	0.038 0.326
Men's Soccer						0.029 0.674	0.0211 0.761
Men's Volleyball						0.033 0.803	0.022 0.866
Observations	865	865	865	865	865	865	865
Adjusted r <sup>2</sup>	0.013	0.045	0.297	0.320	0.325	0.318	0.323

N=865; \*p&lt;0.1; \*\*p&lt;0.05; \*\*\*p&lt;0.01

grade-point increases (1.0) there is a 9% decrease in their decision to student dropout. We also observe that with a one credit increase in the credits earned, there is a 4% decrease in the likelihood of dropout. Two new variable have significance in predicting student non-enrollment and this is enrollment in the B.S. Nursing program, or enrollment in the Business Administration program. The nursing students are 11% more likely to depart by the second year compared to all other students. The business students are 10% more likely to depart by the second year compared to all other students. The variables considered in this model account for 32% of the variability ( $r^2$ ) in student non-enrollment in the second year.

Model 4 includes the degree programs from above as well as the new variables of membership in athletics or any team, or to a Greek organization. Referring to Table 12, we observe the high school GPA, credits earned by the spring semester, the B.S. Nursing program students and membership in a Greek organization are significant predictors of student non-enrollment in the fall semester of the second year. Because we observe a negative coefficient, as the student's high school grade-point increases (1.0) there is an 8% decrease in the probability for student dropout. Further, as a student's credit load increases by a grade point, there is a 4% decrease in the likelihood of dropout. A student' membership in a Greek organization decreases likelihood for dropout by 23% compared to all students not in a Greek organization. Student's in the B.S. Nursing program continue to be 11% more likely to drop out in the second year compared to all other students. The business students are 10% more likely to depart by the second year compared to all other students This model accounts for 33% of the variability ( $r^2$ ) in student non-enrollment in the second year.

In Model 4A we want to consider the impact of the high enrollment athletic teams. To this end, the degree programs are removed so that we can review the impact of these teams along with the pre-entry characteristics, and the academic progress variables. Referring to Table 12, we again observe the high school GPA, credits in the spring semester and membership status in a Greek organization are a significant predictors of student non-enrollment in the second year. As a student's high school grade-point increases (1.0) there is an 8% decrease in the probability of their dropout. Further, as a student's credit load increases by a grade point, there is a 4% decrease in the likelihood of dropout. A student' membership in a Greek organization also decreases their probability for dropout by 23% compared to students not in a Greek organization. This model accounts for 32% of the variability ( $r^2$ ) in student non-enrollment in the second year.

To conclude our analysis, Model 5 shown in Table 12 is comprehensive and includes the pre-entry attributes, the variables for academic preparation, academic progress, Greek status, high enrollment athletics, and the selected degree programs. Working with so many variables challenges the predictive value of a model. In response, a stepwise regression working backward evaluated the variables that did not increase the predictive value and removed them. These variables carried high p-values, such as those we observe for Pell status, or for the race variables. The result is a new model with six variables that are significant predictors of student non-enrollment in the second year. The six variables are, the high school GPA, the SAT/ACT score, the student's total credits earned in the spring semester, a declared major of Nursing or Business Administration, and membership in a Greek organization. This model has a predictive value of 32% of the variability for student dropout in the second year.

In model 5, the significant predictors of student non-enrollment or dropout in the second year are (again) the high school GPA, the student's total credits in the spring semester and membership status in a Greek. In addition, the student's SAT/ACT score has significance as a predictor. As we have observed previously, when a student's high school grade-point increases (1.0) there is an 8% decrease in student dropout. Further, an increase to the student's credit load by a credit, decreases the likelihood of dropout

by 4%. We also observe that when a student's SAT/ACT score increases by 100 points, there is a 3% increased probability of student dropout in the second year. This value may suggest the presence of high performing students that are departing, however more analysis is needed. Reporting on the remaining variables, a student's membership in a Greek organization decreases their probability for dropout by 23% compared to students not in a Greek organization. Students in the nursing program or in the business administration program are more likely to not enroll in the second year. Business students, are 9% more likely to not re-enroll in the second year compared to all other students, and nursing students are 11% more likely to not re-enroll. Model 5 has six variables and accounts for 32% of the variability ( $r^2$ ) in student non-enrollment in the second year. Model 5 is very similar to Model 4 in predictive value, however the backward stepwise regression allowed the evaluation of more variables than those in Model 4.

### Research Question 2: *What are the Student's Positive and Negative Perceptions*

Our second research question asks: What perceptions do undergraduate students have about positive experiences at Alderson Broaddus during their first year? And further, what perceptions do undergraduate students have about negative experiences during their first year?

The initial analysis of semi-structured interviews with the executive team revealed they had many theories about the cause of the retention problem and struggled to create a strategic approach to managing the situation. Several programs to improve retention were implemented, however a true assessment process to determine what is working and what is not working for student engagement and retention appeared absent. This seemed especially true in the areas of student affairs and is demonstrated by the information shared with us by a member of the executive team:

*The student affairs operation has struggled, not because they don't want to (be successful), but because this is a cultural shift: move from male to female, in-state to out-of-state, a complete shift. We are probably understaffed in student affairs to be able to make this shift. We made a hire that was probably not the right hire, because of this lagging in student affairs. Planning on the student affairs side was not done and we are just now starting to catch up with some of these cultural shifts.*

As a collective body, the executive team conveyed mixed perceptions related to whether the retention problem exists predominately with the student athlete or the student non-athlete:

*If you talk to people on campus, they're going to say you have an athletic retention problem, and this is true if you only look at the numbers but if you look at the percentages you would see we have a non-athlete retention problem and what I mean by that is, we are a 70/30 split. You have more athletes leaving than non-athletes. If everything was equal, and this is true, but if you look at the percent of athletes versus non-athletes, and the percent that's withdrawing it's like a 50/50 split. So, what this really tells you is that you have a non-athlete problem in that the percentage is higher for the non-athlete.*

A lack of clarity about the attrition rates between athletes and non-athletes became somewhat problematic as we crafted and re-crafted our original research questions; first, to better understand the student

experience from the perspective of athletes and non-athletes and then to better understand the overall experience from the perspective of the AB student.

## Thematic Findings

During our visit to Alderson Broaddus, we met with the Retention Committee chaired by the Vice President for Enrollment Management where we discussed some of our initial findings. This included the mature and wise viewpoints of senior students in rigorous science-based majors who quickly affirmed their decision to attend AB, should they have the chance to do it all again. We did, however, have conflicting viewpoints from freshmen and sophomore students who conveyed distress and unease with un-met expectations that were expressed at the time of recruitment, or the perceived lack of academic rigor along with a lack of support and engagement from advisors and faculty.

As a collective body, student stories carry common threads which we hope to represent in our narrative below. This narrative is organized by seven themes that grew out of the student focus groups and these are: the student's decisions to attend and stay, the expectations that have been met and unmet, feelings of inconsistency and instability, what it means to be an AB student, frustrations around institutional oversight and conflict, a lack of communication and transparency, and the cumulative impact small things have on their overall experience at Alderson Broaddus University.

### *The Student's Motivation to Attend and/versus Motivation to Stay*

With the exception of financial aid, the reasons students chose AB and the reasons they stay at AB tended to overlap. Specifically, students cited academics, athletics, social climate, and location as contributors to their motivation to attend and motivation to stay. However, the specificities within these themes sometimes varied between attending and staying, even changing for students along the way. This was especially true for students in focus group four who witnessed the evolution of the AB campus since starting their freshmen year: "The reason I came and the reason I stayed are different. So, everyone probably feels like this, but the AB that we came to is very different from the AB now because there have been a lot of changes."

The absence of financial aid amongst the list of reasons student cited for staying at AB is of significance as it becomes a negative factor that plays out in many of the themes discussed below. Additionally, some students made reference to feeling trapped and without options that circle around institutional choices before AB and transfer options upon completion of the first year. When discussing her recruitment process for volleyball, one student from group three said:

*If I would have started the recruiting process earlier in my high school career, then I wouldn't have come here. My number one goal was to go further South and I think if I had started the recruiting earlier, I could have met that goal.*

Another student from group one discussed the issue with transfer credits: "They (parents) want me to stay here. Just because of the credits. How many credits would I be able to get at another school if I were to transfer?" This becomes an important lens for students as they are psychologically displaying the intention to transfer (Bean & Eaton, 2004). This intention, compounded by a lack of perceived freedom, can enhance feelings of negativity related to the overall AB experience.

*Motivation to Attend.* As we coded transcripts from student focus groups, broad themes of financial aid, academic programs, athletic opportunities, social climate, and location emerged as categories for why students decided to attend Alderson Broaddus. With regard to social climate of the AB campus, the students we interviewed used words like warm, home, friendly, nice and generous to describe the students they met when they toured AB and how these influenced their decision to attend. It appears these qualities are woven into the friendships they have made and what can be interpreted as an overall sense of satisfaction with the campus environment. The academic programs that appear to be the most compelling for students we interviewed were nursing and the gateway physician assistant program.

That said, nearly all of the students we interviewed pointed to scholarship money connected with athletic opportunity as the number one factor that influenced their decision to attend AB. Across focus groups, we heard “if it wasn’t for the money, I wouldn’t be here” as a common thread. A student from focus group for commented:

*I chose AB because I was heavy in athletics in high school. And I got the opportunity to come here and play basketball and run track. I got a scholarship for it, so it was going to be the cheaper route. So, I mean, that’s why I came.*

This is an important perspective to consider, as students who attend for financial reasons are significantly impacted when their financial aid package changes (as discussed below). Finally, students who cited location as a motivating factor for enrollment tended to be from the area and motivated to pursue an education close to family.

*Motivation to Stay.* As we coded transcripts from student focus groups, broad themes of academic programs, athletic opportunities, social climate, and location emerged as categories of why students decided to stay at Alderson Broaddus. Of significance is that students did not cite financial aid as a motivational factor for retention, despite it being a dominant motivator for students deciding to attend. In fact, many students cited inconsistencies in financial aid as reasons they contemplated leaving. One student from focus group one said:

*They took a lot of scholarships away. I worked really hard in high school to get a lot of scholarships to come here. And then when I decided to come here, and I did my financial aid and everything I decided to live off campus and they probably took \$12,000 in scholarships away.*

Even still, students referenced academic programs, athletic experiences, and geographical location as primary motivators for their continued enrollment. Ministry, Physician’s Assistant, and Nursing were specific academic programs cited by students as programs of satisfaction.

Beyond specific programs, students discussed ways different faculty members and coaches positively influenced their continued enrollment by demonstrating a level of care and support for their academic and personal development. As explained by a student from focus group three:

*I’m a second semester sophomore and an athlete. I think I stayed because the people, the teachers and stuff that I met didn’t just see us as students. They saw us as the future so they want to help as much as they can because we will be teaching heir kinds one day and stuff like that.*



Across focus groups, students discussed athletic, academic, and social experiences at AB and the various ways they were satisfied or dissatisfied by these experiences. A few students have even found satisfaction in all three areas, including this student from focus group five: “So far, so good. My goal was to come here, get good grades, make friends, and get better at wrestling. I’ve done that so far so as long as it keeps doing that (I’ll stay satisfied).” It seems that students who have met expectations across all three areas tended to express higher levels of satisfaction with their overall undergraduate experience.

### *The Student’s Met and Unmet Expectations*

As students across focus groups discussed their positive and negative experiences at AB, it became clear that many of their perceptions are grounded in expectations that had been established in advance of them starting their undergraduate careers and the extent to which AB has either met or not met these pre-existing expectations. As one student from focus group four indicated:

*It’s just unmet expectations. Like, we’re told one thing and then it’s not. Like the liberal arts thing, like we have an honors program that I’m a part of now that we do a lot more of the liberal studies that I really wanted to have when I came here.*

Further, the tendency for students to hold their high school experiences as a point of comparison emerged as a significant contributing factor. Specifically, as students processed their experiences at AB, many of them defined these experiences as positive or negative based their positive and negative experiences in high school. In this way, the high school experience becomes an important factor with many students arriving at AB with expectations that were defined prior to their first day as undergraduate students. Additionally, student mindset becomes an important factor as one student from focus group five indicated:

*I think with all the negative if there’s a lot of positive. You’re never going to go to a perfect place. So, I think like they have the right idea the right mentality. You have like trying to figure out change that’s awesome.*

With this in mind, we found that student expectations fall within the following subthemes: College Social Life, Fluctuating Finances and Perceived Value, Academic Rigor and Press, the AB Athletic Experience, and Residential Life. And that, within these themes, the extent to which students’ expectations were met or unmet greatly contributed to whether they perceived their different experiences at AB to be positive or negative. We present these categories of met and unmet expectations in Table 13 along with bulleted examples of expectations cited by students.

*College Social Life.* Students frequently referenced social experiences at AB and the impact these opportunities (or lack thereof) left them feeling satisfied and/or unsatisfied with their overall undergraduate experience. Across focus groups, students complained that their experience at AB just “isn’t the college experience.” This complaint was most commonly connected with campus size and geographical location and was most prominent amongst students in focus group one: “When you go to college you expect, aside from academics, you expect a great social life. It’s not here. It’s like, okay I’m going to go to your dorm. And then what are we going to do?”

This perspective is shared by members of the executive team who attribute the “culture shock” of some students to the rural and isolated geographical location of Philippi as well as the small size of the AB campus. This became an especially prominent issue as the campus adopted the Affinity Bonding model

and shifted their recruitment efforts to a more national scale. For students across focus groups, it seems the overall social culture at AB falls on a spectrum that ranges from “boring” to “you make your own fun.” Students defined making their own fun as finding a good group of friends to enjoy spending time with. Students who have not found those social groups are less satisfied with their overall AB social experience, as expressed by a student in focus group four:

*The people that say, when they're freshmen and sophomores, that they hate it here because there's nothing to do, usually those people don't have a good group of friends or something because you can always find something to do if you have a good social group. You can always find something to do.*

While the students discuss various ways in which the institution itself provides and/or does not provide opportunities for social engagement, the perspective amongst members of the executive team is that they do provide opportunities but that student affairs struggles to “connect with students in the right way to determine what they like.”

*Fluctuating Finances and Perceived Value.* Fluctuating tuition along with shifting financial aid packages is a source of frustration for many students, many who were told by AB representatives that they would not experience hikes in tuition. The general consensus was that AB “raises tuition every year for no reason.” This was especially true for students who saw significant raises in tuition charged each year while simultaneously receiving level financial aid packages. With each year, the out of pocket expense increases, and this is unexpected. A student from group four commented, “it’s like 5% every year but there’s no more money to help cover that. Like, our scholarships are the same as freshman year but the tuition’s going up and we max out our student loans really fast with that.”

These unanticipated tuition increases become a burden for students who struggle to fill in the gap between financial aid and the tuition, room and board charged.

We heard student frustrations related to rising costs and the unexpected fees that stack up in their perception that the University tries “to get money out of you anyway they can” (student from focus group one). Students explained that they are paying more for the basics, such as WIFI services, and up-charged for extra condiments when using their meal plans. Some students are faced with thousands of dollars in parking tickets, and most students relayed that they are fined hundreds of dollars in trash fines for circumstances beyond their control. As a result, many students develop low tolerance for any institutional deficit they may experience and expressed animosity toward AB. As one student from focus group five commented:

*The trash thing, that's my biggest problem. We live on the first floor and the first floor definitely takes a beating because I walk out and there's the courtyard. So it might be a like a Saturday night or Sunday morning, we see trash and we pick it up and it's just going to come back again. So, when you get the fine and your front room is cleaned up, it's gonna make me stop wanting to clean up. Like, why am I going to waste my time if I'm still going to get fined at the end of the day?*

As these frustrations build, overall perception of institutional value is impacted. For some, as this perception becomes skewed, they begin to question the value of their investment in their education Alderson Broaddus University. This is especially true when financial unpredictability is paired with dissatisfaction with academic rigor, advising supports, the athletic experience, and residential life.

Table 13: Met and Unmet Expectations from Student Focus Groups

Subtheme	Met	Unmet
Social Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make your own fun</li> <li>• Good group of friends</li> <li>• Small community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Boring</li> <li>• Dry campus</li> <li>• Not a lot to do.</li> <li>• Small campus</li> <li>• Not the college experience</li> <li>• Geographical location</li> </ul>
Finances and Value		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raise tuition every year</li> <li>• Took my scholarships away</li> <li>• Max out loans fast</li> <li>• Weekend trash fines</li> <li>• Charge for sauce</li> <li>• Dorm trash fines</li> <li>• WIFI upcharge</li> </ul>
Academic Rigor and Press	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Small class sizes</li> <li>• Known by professors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of academic rigor</li> <li>• Lack of diverse course offerings</li> <li>• Instability within programs</li> <li>• Feels like high school</li> <li>• Feels like middle school</li> <li>• Many cancelled classes</li> <li>• Shortened class times</li> <li>• Too many virtual substitutions</li> </ul>
Athletic Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scholarship money</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lies told by coaches</li> <li>• Want more out of it</li> <li>• Lack of playing time</li> <li>• Coaching turnover</li> <li>• Poorly performing teams</li> </ul>
Residential Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choice to live elsewhere as freshmen if you have upperclassman friends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Laundry facilities</li> <li>• Hot water issues (cold showers)</li> <li>• Lack of cleanliness</li> <li>• Sanitary concerns</li> <li>• Expensive</li> </ul>

*Academic Rigor & Press.* Shifting expectations for academic rigor, faculty turnover in academic programs, and perceptions of institutional disorganization with regard to academic programs contribute to feelings of unmet expectations. Students who experienced program cuts in music, graphic design, and other areas developed concerns for the stability and the continued value of their own academic experience at AB. Additionally, students enrolled in programs like Ministry and Education, where small enrollments drive course decisions, expressed concerns with these limitations.

A student in focus group five commented on the lack of course offerings in the Ministry program, the result of small enrollments across the program itself, and the impact this has on his overall sense of stability a student inside of the major:

*I feel like there's not enough in the ministry program, because there are only actually three people who are actually majoring in it, and then maybe two others who actually have it as a minor. And so our classes are very limited. They even want to try and change the major while I'm still in it which means some of the classes I've taken previously do not qualify anymore for the future of the major. I've always kind of looked at the major as if they're trying to drop it but since there are technically still people in it, I think they feel forced to continue it.*

This example highlights the extent to which students feel unstable and dissatisfied by their academic experience. Despite athletics being a primary motivator for student enrollment at AB, the majority of student athletes we interviewed desire a rigorous college experience in the classroom. And, in some cases, it does not seem this expectation is being met.

Further, students referenced courses that lack rigor and result in unmet expectations for them in the classroom. These experiences included faculty who don't show up for classes, faculty who hold class for less than ten minutes, an overload of "virtual Friday's" for classes designed to meet on the ground, an over-abundance of busy work assigned by faculty, and the perception that they felt more academic rigor in high school than they do at AB. One student commented:

*I feel like the high school I went to had a higher education standard than here. I feel like I'm doing high school work, if that. Maybe middle school work. There are some things I am doing here that I did in middle school.*

There is a sense amongst the students we interviewed of wanting to invest in programs that are strong academically. More importantly, students seem to want programs that push academic rigor while also prioritizing consistency (we address consistency and inconsistency below). Students frequently expressed frustrations about Chemistry courses as they discussed paying high fees at other institutions to skirt around instructional ineffectiveness in order to earn their respective degrees. One student in focus group four commented:

*I think we can attest to this, the people who come in as Biology majors and want to do pre-med and the people who actually end up going all the way, there is a really big difference, like a huge difference...there's even people who want to go to medical school and they literally can't because Chemistry here is just really terrible. With our organic class last year, I'm the only person who passed. Passed. Period. Not got an ABCD, like they only person that passed. Now I'm taking classes at another University just to fulfill those Chemistry requirements and I think it's the professor and the accountability with that professor...like, I am paying thousands of dollars right now to do this.*

Authentic to the Alderson Broaddus experience are small class sizes that create space for students to develop good relationships with their professors. This is an institutional characteristic that students seem to highly value.

*AB Athletic Experience* There appears to be a lack of alignment between what students during the recruitment process to AB and how the experience manifests when they arrive at AB. Put differently, students felt they had been lied to by coaching staff who they felt set them up for higher expectations from the AB experience than what has actually been delivered by the athletic programs at AB. One student from focus group one explained:

*They kind of feed you, like, your coach would feed you a bunch of lies just to get you to come here. You know, they say like this year, we're going to do this and they make it sound like it's gold. She told us so many lies.*

This appeared to be consistent across all athletic programs but volleyball, football wrestling, cheer, swimming, and softball were specific programs cited by students across focus groups. Another student from focus group one commented:

*During my recruiting process, it was just the amount of my scholarship and how they talked about the program, just wanting me to come here. And then I got here and it just wasn't like, out of the program they explained, it just was not the same thing.*

The list of unmet expectations related to the AB athletic experience includes lack of support from coaching staff, underperforming teams, lack of playing time, and constant coaching turnover. Several students who expressed dissatisfaction with their athletic experience explained that scholarship eligibility is the reason they continue to play.

*Residential Life: Prison Cell Dorms.* Perceptions of value weave into students' expectations of their residential life experience as we frequently heard "we pay a lot to go here" in connection with frustrations with the residential life experience. Students mentioned laundry facilities, hot water issues, cleanliness, and overall sanitary conditions of the dorms as items areas where expectations have not been met. A student in focus group three explained:

*There's more negative than positive, honestly. The dorm rooms are a big problem. Half the time, I don't have hot water and I pay a lot for the building I'm in. And it's just not very clean, even when you clean it. It's outdated. I never have hot water. I live in Blue. I take a cold shower every day and it's the most expensive place to live.*

Students in focus group five discussed how the freshmen dorm felt more like a prison cell than a dorm:

*My freshmen year, I lived in Benedum, which is the freshmen dorm (students chime 'Oh God'). Those are rough. It's the oldest dorm. It's traditional (the ceilings were falling), two people to a room, small, community shower, bathroom. You felt like you're in a prison cell. If one person stinks, the whole floor stinks. It's rough. Bathrooms are gross (students chime it was disgusting). It's more so, kids that are gross, doing immature things. Not good.*

Student frustrations with on-campus living situations are further amplified when they are charged trash fees (as previously discussed) and are asked to pay more for amenities like WIFI.

### *The Student's Experience of Inconsistency and Instability*

Themes of inconsistency were seen across the areas of academic rigor and press, academic advising, athletic teams and experiences, athletes and non-athletes, and in coaching and faculty turnover. Students described inconsistent patterns with regard to academic programs, courses, and norms in addition to inequitable experiences between athletic teams and across student subgroups. In many ways, these themes connect back to themes of met and unmet expectations as students come to AB with certain expectations that erode as they experience a culture of inconsistency across campus. These inconsistencies contribute to an overall sense of instability and can frustrate some students to the point of departure.

*Academic Rigor and Press.* Across focus groups, students discussed inconsistent experiences across standards and expectations in academic courses which they perceive to be dependent on the professor and the major program of study. A student in focus group one commented, “last year I wrote papers when I had English but now, I don’t have English. I don’t do anything at all. I can skip class for a whole week and get an A on a test” while another student followed up with “it’s not accurate for me. I’m a bio major. I feel like I have at least one or two exams every week. It’s insane.” When asked about feeling adequately challenged in coursework, a student in focus group five explained:

*Freshmen year, but not now. It was like your typical college experience. I wouldn’t even say it was too much work. But you definitely felt when you got your final grade, you earned that. As far as it’s gotten, the professors have been really cool and nice and what not but maybe haven’t adequately challenged you to what you are paying for.*

Another student followed up with:

*I agree with that. I’m not going to say names, but I have a professor that sometimes, like the past two and a half weeks or so I’ve had one class for ten minutes. And then we’ll show up and have to take a take home test and we’re like, what the heck is going on? In the classroom a lot, especially this professor and one other professor they, excuse my, they half-ass their teaching and you get to the text and you’re like what the heck is going on?*

From the discussion groups, we perceive student’s evaluating their academic experience and connecting this evaluation with the value of an AB degree (as discussed above). When inconsistencies prevail across the small student community, students start to become disheartened, and become increasingly critical of their commitment to the institution and the implicit value of their academic pursuits at AB. At this point we feel it is important to note that there was no mention of erosion of academic standards in conversations with the executive team.

*Across Advising Experiences.* Students also discussed inconsistent experiences with advising and advisors at AB. We heard frequently from students that their advisors know very little about them, to the extent that they do not even know advisee names. Students reported a lack of organization and commitment to efficient communication from advisors across all programs which contributes to a sense of faithlessness with the advising process. This can drive students to advise themselves which, at an academic institution like AB, can be risky business. As a student from focus group five explained:

*My first advisor was kind of scatterbrained, I guess. So, when I would go to him he would suggest classes that he thought were interesting instead of classes that I needed to take. So, I would kind of have to figure it out on my own.*

Other students discussed high turnover rates in faculty and the impact this has on the advising experience. Another student from group five commented:

*I've had three advisors in four years. My advisor now is not even related to my major. I'm meeting with her for the first time just to make sure I don't get screwed over and have to take more classes and come back a fifth year. My first advisor was like...there was no personal connection. To this day, he probably doesn't know my name and I've had him for like ten classes. Then I moved on to a second professor and he was a really good guy, not the best at what he did, but a really good guy. He has just gone on to other professional opportunities. So now I might be sitting here second semester senior year just to have to bang my minor, which is fine, but you know I'm just not happy with the bounce back and the turnover and now I'm dealing with somebody who has no experience within my field.*

Still, other students expressed satisfaction with their advising experiences and we heard many enthusiastic reports about Amy from ACES. In our conversation with the retention committee prior to our campus departure, the committee conveyed that advising is a strength at Alderson Broaddus. However, based on our conversations with students in all focus groups, we cannot come to the same conclusion.

*Across Athletic Programs.* Students expressed concerns about inconsistency across the athletic programs. For some student athletes, inconsistent and inconvenient practice times became a source of frustration, especially with late night and early morning practice times that disrupt sleep cycles and interfere with academic work and social opportunities. This was especially bothersome to older students, who started at AB with a smaller number of athletic teams and began to experience competition for facilities with the rapid increase of athletic programs on campus. A student from focus group four explained:

*If you're not in season, you don't get a good time for practice....It's either six a.m. or ten to twelve thirty at night...My freshman year, I think we were like eight to ten, which was reasonable. I didn't really have a problem with that. But then they just keep adding more and more programs, trying to find field time and get out of there at a decent time, you know, eat, shower, do homework, any meetings or groups you're a part of. By the time you're done it's like three a.m. and you're like 'oh my gosh I have to be up in like two and a half hours for practice again. They just don't do a really good job of managing that for us. We get kind of thrown into whatever they feel like doing and then we're stuck with that, which is honestly tiring.*

One of the more pressing concerns, expressed by the students, appears to be inequities between male and female athletic programs. The standards of Title IX preclude the existence of these inequities. Specifically, we heard from several female students on both the volleyball and cheerleading teams describe participation in national competitions that they were expected to drive themselves to. Other women described how they fit large groups into small vans that were driven by team members, while men on the football team were provided with coaches for transportation. Further, female students described an unfulfilled hiring process for coaching staff. As one student from focus group three explained:

*We had this one coach, she was an assistant coach and then became the head coach, but we never got another assistant coach when she became head coach (women's volleyball). So, she does everything. She's just really overwhelmed, and she wants and assistant coach and has been looking for one but hasn't received any help to hire and assistant coach. And they just lost the men's volleyball coach and they hired a new one like that, so, I don't know why it's been so difficult for them to find an assistant.*

We recognize that inequitable distribution of resources across male and female athletic programs is a Title IX violation. In our discussion section, we make recommendations for AB to begin addressing this institutional problem.

*Between Athletes and Non-athletes.* As previously discussed, our sample size of non-athletes was substantially smaller than athletes due to the high percentage of AB students involved with athletics. Based on our conversations with the executive team, we expected to find a negative impact of athletics on the nonathletic academic experience. One executive team member commented:

*Faculty have changed how they approach their classrooms because of student athletes. This is only hearsay...In this context, the non-athlete sees themselves as a second-class citizen I would say. They see that AB is really about athletics and so part of this problem, this environment for them can be negative...as a non-athlete you'd get pretty tired of it after a while. The non-athlete sees that the school is driven by athletics. The athletes like it and the non-athletes are disappointed.*

However, when we asked non-athletes how their experience at AB is impacted by the high prevalence of athletes, none of them gave any indication that their academic experience at AB is negatively impacted by athletics.

The only real inconsistency across the subgroups lies in academic support where athletes communicated a higher level of institutional support for their academic success than non-athletes. The majority of athletes described study halls and interventions from coaching staff that support their efforts to stay the course with regard to academic pursuits. In contrast, non-athletes frequently described feeling unsupported. As an example, one nonathletic student from focus group one explained:

*You're just kind of on your own. I've tried to contact people. I've never had a situation where my grades are too low. But I try to contact people to ask questions, like the faculty, and they've never responded to my emails or anything. They're just general questions.*

The possibility exists that there is more of a discrepancy between the experiences of athletes and non-athletes, especially given the low prevalence of non-athletes in our focus group sample, but based on our data collected, we do not see evidence that this experience exists as strongly as the executive team indicated in our initial interviews.

*Turnover of Faculty and Staff.* Students discussed high turnover rates of faculty and staff as negative experiences, particularly when coaching staff who recruited them left AB and were replaced by coaches whom students see as less seasoned. As described by a football player in focus group one:

*It's just, very inconsistent. The coach who recruited me...I came here. I've never seen him. He left. I've been coached by three different coaches in a year. So, it's very*



*inconsistent. Like, the coaches don't have a bond together. Half of the coaches are kids. Like, they're fresh out of here, like, they just graduated here.*

A swimmer in focus group three described a similar scenario where he was recruited by one coach who was replaced with a coach he described as “a wreck.” Resultantly, this student quit swimming and stated, quite definitively, “I’m done.”

Students described similar situations with professors and advisors. Like coaching staff, when valued mentors leave the institution, students respond negatively to the change, especially when the replacement person is not perceived to be of similar quality. We heard from a student in focus group five who described the following:

*I'm a business major and we had two business professors that were actually pretty good. But now I have to basically teach myself. It's the best way to do it. I keep good grades. I have above a 3.0 but I basically have to teach myself.*

This turnover can create feelings of abandonment in students when they are left on their own to determine the next best step. Regarding the loss of an advisor, one student noted that he was “just dropped. He (the advisor) left over the summer and he was supposed to help me and he just dropped me. Like, what am I supposed to do?” Based on these conversations, we understand the important bonds first year students form with faculty, coaching staff and advisors. Students rely on the stability of this support system and abrupt changes, with little explanation of follow up, leave students describing frustration and questioning their academic and athletic persistence.

### *What Students Say About Becoming an AB Student*

All first-year students transition to a college community and their ability for integration and success in the classroom and into social circles defines their college student identity. With a high student athlete population, the students at Alderson Broaddus develop and maintain identity across three distinct areas and these are academic, athletic and social. Students discussed the expectations, challenges and conflicts among and between these identities. For some students, the transition from high school to college calls upon a certain self-awareness needed to develop and change to meet academic challenges, as one student described:

*I think time management, for me that was my big thing too, is like, in high school, I didn't really have to study or anything or in like, now I like have to write down everything and make my schedule for the week because I like to see what I have to get done.*

In some cases, the expectations established between high school and college creates discord for students once they officially begin their undergraduate careers. Students described this dissonance between their expectations for the academic college student identity and their reality as they pointed to examples of academic experience at AB feeling like “high school all over again.”

The student athletes arriving at Alderson Broaddus are a majority of the incoming class and have carried their athlete identity throughout high school. They were personally recruited by AB and awarded a sports scholarship that demonstrates merit to the student athlete. Their athletic identity is a defining character,

and they carry expectations for AB college sports to affirm this identity. Adjusting expectations and assimilating to their responsibilities creates new challenges for students to sort out. One student shared, "... it's just not the college football that you would expect to come to." And another, "I wrestle, like, it's not bad it's just, I want more out of it." Students shared experiences with unusual practice and training times late in the evening, or early departures to team competitions, that became delayed for hours resulting in compromised performance at the event. The student's frustrations conveyed challenges to the value of their athletic identity. And as a result, doubt in their investment in playing sports for AB, and more critically self-doubt in their athletic identity; their self-esteem.

Traveling for competitions caused a point of stress from many athletes as they manage performing well as an athlete and meeting academic expectations. "Yeah with the travel schedule, over weekends, and we'll have an exam Monday morning and we don't get back until 2 a.m. sometimes, so, that can be hard." Students report varying responses from faculty to the demands placed on athletes in competition and one student offered: "(they) give you your assignment a day early, so you can finish it. So, it's not like it's not hard not to worry about anything. I mean, they make it pretty easy for us." Or in contrast:

*I was going to play tennis. And he told me that I had to skip Anatomy Lab or reschedule it. And I had three other labs, like I couldn't reschedule, and I told him that and he wasn't down for it. So, I had to not play tennis.*

While managing their roles in the classroom and as a competitive athlete, students also assimilate to social communities that they identify with from shared experiences values and behaviors. For many students, their social identity is directly related to their teammates. "I do acro and tumbling so I came with automatic friends." And further, "you become like family with your teammates and stuff... A lot of the trips were something that I'll remember forever, because it's when I made a lot of the friendships." For other students, their social affiliation grew from the classroom. In addition, students also spoke to us about making friends through a sorority and campus organizations that provided meaning for their identity.

The AB student identity is complex and challenging to develop. College student transition in the first year is dependent upon seek success and integration in academic and social communities. For AB students, there is a negotiation and balance needed between three distinct communities. Many of the student we spoke to found success in only two of these communities, which lead them to abandon the third often with an expression of remorse.

### *In Loco Parentis: What Students Say about Collaboration and Conflict*

From our interviews and discussions, we perceive a difference between how the administrative team at AB portrays their role in the lives of its students, and how students experience this institutional oversight. Students come to Alderson Broaddus as undergraduate students clearly expecting to be treated like adults. In some cases, students recount being treated like children which creates a culture of conflict between student perceptions and institutional intent.

Perhaps the best example of this is represented by a cultural shift on campus centered around the alcohol policy and consequence. In our conversations with the executive team, several individuals referenced a recent school dance during which the University provided beer for students twenty-one or over. The administration described this as a "watershed event" for the University as it was the first time they allowed alcohol to be consumed at a University sponsored event that was "well-controlled and well-

attended.” The overall perception of the administrative team being that the students “loved it.” Based on our conversations with students, the upperclassman appeared to appreciate the event as a step towards developing the overall college social experience at AB. However, the freshmen we spoke to held a difference of opinion as they described being overly-parented throughout the experience. One student commented:

*I'd rather go to a party where I can drink by myself and get my own alcohol. I'm not in high school. I went to an eighth-grade dance. That was the last dance I went to. We're in college but you treat us like we're still kids... We're grown. We're not kids.*

It is especially interesting to observe this reaction when juxtaposed with an administrative team member comment proposing the University is taking the initiative to teach students to drink responsibly. In this manner, the historical role of in loco parentis prevails despite students being resistant to the culture.

Interestingly, the upperclassmen who witnessed this evolution in institutional parameters around the undergraduate drinking culture had more of a positive response to the watershed dance referenced by the executive team. More importantly, they noted the impact this dance had on the overall drinking culture on campus. A student in focus group four explained:

*Technically, it's a dry campus. I'm going to get that out right now. And the first, the last three years, it was somewhat enforced, you could hang in your room (and drink) as long as you weren't causing issues. This year, I don't think there are rules anymore. Before, if you were on the balcony in Kincaid, which is where people usually go to party, security came, you know, we're gonna shut it down. Now you can walk in, there's 150 people on the balcony and nobody cares. Catch up with a security guard, 'hey how's it going? Alright, drive safe!' And then just walks away.*

One drawback to this move towards a permissible drinking culture is that students who act recklessly while under the influence create situations where all students are punished by the institution through fines when dorms are left in a state of disarray following weekend shenanigans. This is especially frustrating for students who receive these fines that are the result of actions made by other students.

In our discussion, students often conveyed a mature viewpoint for their responsibilities to the dorm community. While considering and managing the needs of the dorms, the students suggested that they have proposed solutions that are dismissed in advance of truly being considered. One student explained her frustrations around the regular trash fines with regard to proposed solutions there were dismissed:

*We are also the only building that doesn't have trash cans outside of the building. Like, all the other buildings have trash cans, at least two or three right before you walk in so you can throw stuff away but we got told that would be unnecessary because who's going to empty them? But maintenance empties the ones at the other buildings so I don't understand that either. We've actually had people volunteer to buy trash cans but we got told by the RD that it would be pointless because who's gonna empty them?*

It appears that the institutional administration gave students space to “be college students” by loosening the restrictions on campus drinking but when this resulted in destructive behavior, they applied financial punishment to all students as they were unable trace the responsible parties. While students are provided

opportunities to have the fines removed from their bill when they attend campus events, to students this feels very much like a parent reinforcing positive behavior after unfair punishment

Finally, students talked about overall campus security and cited a lack of security cameras on campus. We heard examples of expensive items being stolen from dorm rooms with no institutional capacity to trace down thieves. We also heard from one student in focus group three, who stated:

*It's a smaller school, so I definitely feel safer here than WVU but there's definitely been, especially for girls. I'm not trying to be like, but girls especially have, there's been a lot of things that the school doesn't know about that has happened to girls on campus and there's no cameras to prove that it happened so most girls don't want to come forward because there's no way they can prove that it happened to them.*

Amidst the conflict students feel between themselves and the institution, an underlying theme that emerged was a desire to be kept safe and a desire to be seen as collaborators in the interest of improving University life on campus.

### *What Students Say about Communication and Transparency*

Our conversations with students and the executive team revealed instances of a communication breakdown between administrative intent and student interpretation. Disorganization was cited by students, particularly with regards to faculty handling academic assignments and institutional management of financial aid. Perhaps the best example comes from the institutional decision to increase the quality WIFI, charging more for this enhancement, while simultaneously changing policy that shifted the burden of responsibility to the students when the WIFI malfunctions. While the administrative team believed this would be best for students who can now resolve WIFI issues in their rooms through a direct phone call to the service provider, students interpreted this as the institution charging them more while deflecting responsibility.

Other examples of insufficient communication came from residential life fines that are applied to student bills before they are made aware of the amount of the fines. One student commented, “the worst part about it is they tell you they fine you, but they don't show you how much the fine you. None of us know, the just add it to your bill...you get these notices that are loaded up with bills that you've already been charged for.” As these frustrations build up, students can begin to question the intent and integrity of the University administration. Students often conveyed that the institution is focused on money and is “stealing from them.”

### *Students Talk About Small Things That Become Big Things*

Students made reference to small things that, when combined, contribute to an overall positive or negative experience at Alderson Broaddus University. From a positive perspective, students appreciate positive rapport with faculty, are affirmed when faculty care about them and know who they are, value the approachability of staff and administration, and take note when the institution demonstrates a commitment to their overall success. From a negative perspective, students become frustrated when unanticipated fees and tuition increases combine to create the sense that the administration at AB is in the business of robbing them and their finances. Combined with residential life issues related to hot water, clean clothes, parking, food, and quality of WIFI, we saw a decline in the overall perception of value for the financial investment that students have made. This ran contrary to the belief held across members of

the executive team who attribute financial frustrations solely to financial aid and inability for students to pay for their college experience. The build-up of small things becomes a large problem, especially when students experience more negatives than positives throughout their undergraduate experience.

## 5. Discussion of the Findings

The conceptual framework for our study was grounded in the substantive body of literature related to student retention theory and research. Specifically, the sociological basis for Tinto's Institutional Departure Model and the psychological perspective of The Student Attrition Model developed by Bean and Eaton identify a complex set of interactions over time that influence student retention. Research points to these two models and argues that a student's pre-entry characteristics affect how well the student will adjust and succeed at the institution. Both models argue that persistence is affected by the successful match between the student and the institution (Cabrera et al., 1993). Berger and Braxton (1998) focused on the impact that an organization's behavior has on the student's expectations and their subsequent and ongoing experience. One of the key findings of the Berger-Braxton study is that a student's experience of the institution's organizational attributes, such as institutional integrity, and the institution's commitment to student welfare play a significant role in the student retention phenomenon. A unifying theme among all of these models is the idea that a student's engagement in the social environment as well as success in the academic environment is critical to their retention.

We set out to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What are the pre-entry attributes and institutional experiences of enrolled students that predict departure after the first year?
- (2.A) What perceptions do undergraduate students have about positive experiences at Alderson Broaddus during their first year?
- (2.B) What perceptions do undergraduate students have about negative experiences during their first year?

Our hypotheses regarding the role of pre-entry attributes, the variables of demographics and academic preparation, as predictors of student departure after the first year, in students we studied, is sustained by the moderate predictive value identified by the student variable models we developed for analysis. The correlative value of any single variable, such as gender, or high school GPA, to student re-enrollment in the second year is however very weak. In response to this weak correlation, and through analysis we can identify a dynamic interplay of variables in the student administrative data that is valuable. Across the student data we analyzed, the model containing the following variables had the highest predictive value and explained 31% of the student re-enrollment and departure in the second year. The variables in the model include two pre-entry attributes, the student's high school GPA and SAT/ACT score, and further, declaring the Nursing or Business Administration degree program, the total number of credits the student earned in the spring semester of year one and their membership in a Greek organization.

The hypotheses regarding institutional experiences as predictors of student departure in the first year are supported. Academic progress, a variable in the form of degree credits earned through the fall and spring semester, is a statistically significant predictor of student re-enrollment in the fall of the second year. Degree credits earned are often associated with degree progress and students move through a curricular structure that is tiered with subsequent courses that depend on pre-requisites. Students that are not

progressing by passing courses and accumulating credits are students at risk for departure. The hypothesis of a social group membership impacting student retention after the first year is supported. Participating in a Greek organization has statistically significant impact in predicting of re-enrollment in fall of the second year for the student group we studied.

While we are not able to draw direct causation between student focus group interviews and institutional retention, based on our qualitative findings, two of our hypotheses related to student perceptions may be supported. Our first hypothesis proposes that when students perceive the institution's commitment to the student's success and welfare there will be a greater level of student commitment to their own persistence resulting in student retention. Our third hypothesis reflects the student's perception of alike-minded community on campus and engagement in opportunities for social integration. With these hypotheses, we return to the relationship raised in our study's introductory paragraphs that identified the student's commitment to persistence in the college environment and the institution's subsequent retention of students.

From the focus group interviews we understand that when the first year students perceive the institution to be an organization that expresses commitment to their success and welfare, they affirm their commitment to their academic journey at AB. This is evidenced by the high number of references to faculty commitment to care and support woven throughout the focus group interviews as students placed this on the list of reasons they chose to stay at AB. In addition, when students perceive there is a potential for a like-minded community on campus and engage opportunities for social integration, they expressed higher levels of satisfaction with their overall AB experience and expressed a commitment to stay. These opportunities can be found through athletic teams, academic programs, Greek life, work study programs, and other social avenues students pursue on campus. In light of this finding, we make the recommendation that AB reconsider its Affinity Bonding model, reframing it as a bonding to athletic teams to establishing social bonds amongst people (i.e. with peers, teammates, faculty, staff, etc.).

Two additional hypotheses for the student experience remain. Hypothesis (2) identifies the impact that institutional integrity, with the defining measures of consistency and the outcomes of an actionable mission and values has on a student's experience. The final hypothesis is the perceptions student have that their financial investment in attending AB is valuable. In this regard, once in College, students are able to perceive that their experiences are valuable and will serve their future and as a result, the academic journey is worthy of continued persistence. Our results provide evidence to support the notion that the institution's failure to meet student expectations for a culture of integrity along with unsatisfying experiences that question the value of their financial investment in studies at AB contributed to high levels of student frustration and negativity. While we suspect that these frustrations may contribute to the high levels of attrition on campus, since we were not able to interview students who left, we are not able to draw direct connections between these results and the retention problem on campus. That said, institutional administration would be well served to take heed, affirming student frustrations while understanding the broad experiences contributing to the erosion of institutional integrity and cost value satisfaction when implementing changes to improve retention. Improving the University's response to these factors may contribute greater levels of student commitment to persistence, student success and resulting retention.

We discuss conclusions drawn from the data collected related to our research questions below.

## The Student Athlete: A Proxy for Student Commitment

Since many students at AB are athletes (80% of the cohort we studied), we considered the commitment a student athlete makes to the discipline, focus, and requirements of competitive collegiate sports. To this end, we considered the status of athlete as a significant proxy for student commitment to higher education and sought to find a relationship between the student's pre-entry commitment to sports and their decision to re-enroll. We found no such statistical impact on predicting retention at AB. Athletics and team sports are however a significant social microcosm and AB recognized this quality of team sports when establishing the new recruiting model. The Alderson Broaddus Affinity Bonding recruitment campaign was based on the affinity team members share for the essential values and team work needed to achieve competitive performance. AB recognized the strong social enclaves that form around teams, and proposed that these athletes, once on campus, would also make a commitment to the educational journey at the University. While our research found no substantial correlation between being a student athlete and returning in the second year to re-enroll in the fall, we also could not conclude that being an athlete created an expressed allegiance to the University.

Based on the results of our statistical tests and focus group interviews, we did not find strong evidence to support the hypothesis, offered by the executive team, that the institution has a retention problem related to a specific subgroup population of students. In contrast, we found students to be displeased with a variety of experiences on the AB campus that spread across academic, athletic, and social themes making it difficult to isolate a single variable that contributes to student departure. For example, the quantitative data revealed that the retention rate for cohorts across three years in the very popular nursing program is only 47% while the retention rate for football players, a high enrollment program comprising 22% of the entering class, is also low at only 49%. At present, there are approximately 15 freshman students enrolled in nursing who are also on the football team helping us understand the distinct identities of these subgroups. While football enrolls twice as many students than nursing does annually, both programs enroll high numbers of students, supporting the conclusion that the institution has a retention problem that it is not strictly defined by the subgroup athletic population.

## The Role of Pre-Entry Attributes in Student Success

The results of the quantitative research regarding the efficacy of pre-entry attributes as predictors of student departure or retention after the first year were unsupported by our statistical testing of the cohort group we studied. These entry attributes include the student demographics of race, gender and Pell eligibility, as an indicator of economic status. We also considered the student's distance from home when they are attending AB, as we understand that some students retain strong ties to family commitments. None of these variables exerted significant influence on student departure or retention after the first year. The most typical attributes considered for college admission screening were also analyzed, such as the student's high school grade point average and the SAT or ACT scores, and these attributes did not prove to be indicators for retention. Although Alderson Broaddus admission criteria establishes the lowest acceptable SAT score as 920, approximately 15% of the entering class has a score equal to or less than 920.

Research on the role of pre-entry characteristics in the student retention puzzle defines these attributes as indicators of the student's preparation and commitment to the goal of higher education (Braxton, Hirschy, McClendon, 2004). To support the first-year student's journey, the institution must express a commitment to student success, to "talent development," through the arrangement of curricular offerings, pedagogy

and faculty, and the cadre of advisors and learning support. The relationship between a student's successful academic progress in the first semesters, as a predictor of student departure, is revealed in our testing. This relationship is well known and is the basis for research and recommendations for high impact faculty teaching practices as well as academic advising programs for first year students (Braxton, et al., 2014; Kuh et al., 2005). With this said, a lack of relationship between the pre-entry and institutional experience predictive variables and the large numbers of student departing from the 2015 – 2018 cohort that we studied, gives increasing emphasis to the sense-making of themes that have developed in the qualitative research derived from the student focus groups.

As the institution aims to meet recruiting goals and enrollment targets, administrators, coaching staff and enrollment management professionals must also consider the ways in which they market their programs to meet student expectations. This should be accomplished by understanding and aligning the college experience story, as conveyed by coaches and recruiters, with the goals and expectations of the prospective AB student. Across the interviews with students, we heard several accounts related to a perceived lack of transparency and in some cases instances of misrepresentation that contributed to an overall sense of frustration that rose to the level of complaints, disenchantment and distrust. The expression of frustrations that we heard will substantially erode the relationship between the student and Alderson Broaddus University. All because expectations that were set in advance by agents of the University, became expectations that the University at large failed to meet once the student was on campus. Furthermore, the student's frustrations have a negative influence on their desire and effort for activities that will enhance their academic success and their athletic or team identity (Gayles, 2015; Sloan, 2013).

### Motivation to Attend versus Motivation to Stay

Unmet expectations can also contribute to a shift in students' motivations to stay at Alderson Broaddus University. While many of the reasons why students chose to attend AB overlapped with reasons for staying, in some cases this congruence did not occur. For instance, in our focus group interviews, students cited academics, athletics, social climate, and location as contributors to their motivation to attend and their motivation to stay. However, while financial aid appeared to be a significant contributor to students' decisions to attend AB (53% are Pell Grant eligible), and most often cited were the positive impact of athletic scholarships, we found a complete absence of financial aid mentioned as a reason cited for continued enrollment. This is of significance as it becomes a negative factor for students who, while noting consistency in their financial aid package from year-to-year, expressed frustrations with tuition rates that often increase by no less than \$2,000 each year.

Further, we found that for many students the motivation to attend Alderson Broaddus was established during the recruitment process, and often grounded in the story told by institutional recruiters that set up for certain expectations for students prior to arriving on campus their freshmen year. Often these expectations were ill-informed, the result of inaccurate messaging they received during the recruitment process. For instance, several students expressed that they had been told by recruiting staff that their tuition would never increase. When this expectation is established, students experience high levels of frustration with mistruths the moment their tuition bill arrives that resets the expectation that their tuition will, in fact, increase. As students transition from satisfaction with their finances to frustration over their finances, some students then referenced positive themes related to the culture of college-life at AB and friendships as primary motivators for continued enrollment. The nature and role of AB friendships became a constant theme, if not a refuge for these students.



The addition of division two athletic teams and the promise of regional and national competition has driven enrollment growth and created expectations among prospective AB students that has resulted in over 80% of the students in the freshman cohort belonging to this “subgroup” of students. Across both men’s and women’s athletics, football draws the highest freshman enrollment (23%, 3-year average) and our quantitative data revealed that football players re-enroll in the second year at a substantially lower rate than other student athletic groups. This evidence was further expanded by the high numbers of students who spoke out in our focus groups, expressing frustration in the recruitment process as they arrived at AB with the expectation that they would not only be part of an excelling athletic team, but they would also see significant playing time. With large numbers of students recruited to the program, many of them have not seen any playing time and those that have seen playing time are disheartened by the lack of success during the season with regard to wins versus losses. Further, this finding was affirmed by members of the executive team who mentioned the recruitment process for football and the disappointment many students fell into as they realized they had been recruited alongside high numbers of peers who were competing for the positions on the same team resulting in frustration with the lack of honesty in recruitment process. As one Vice President stated:

First year football, anyone who wanted to play came, they took them. In retrospect it was the right thing to do for enrollment but the wrong thing to do to start a football team. We had 11 tight ends on the team that first year. We brought in 170 kids. Now if you’re the 11<sup>th</sup> string tight-end, you don’t see light at the end of the tunnel, and you are probably going to leave. Growing pains of starting new programs manifest themselves in retention issues for the reason cited.

One student specifically called out the institutions for “unmet expectations” as they are given a snapshot of AB during the recruitment process that proved to be inaccurate once they arrive on campus. Students highlighted the many positives of the AB campus and stressed that AB employees need to do a better job of telling the true AB story to recruited students as opposed to the one that is tailored to what they believe students want to hear in order to get them to attend. In this context, accuracy of the story told to students throughout the recruitment process is critical as expectations left unmet can contribute to student’s loss of motivation and self-esteem resulting in poor academic and athletic performance and the decision to withdraw from the institution.

### Affinity Bonding IS Social Bonding

In our conversations with the executive team, emphasis was placed on the concept of Affinity Bonding defined through the culture of athletic teams and other extra-curricular programs such as marching band, majorettes, sororities and fraternities. What we found was that although these teams and extracurricular programs have an established identity, the social contract is between and among the students and is not a commitment to the organization per se. George Kuh (2001) identified the role that these student subcultures have within a college or University and recognizes that these subgroups can offer an “enhancing role” to the institutional culture as well as a provide resistance in counterculture. Kuh acknowledges the substantial influence student subcultures exert on persistence decisions as well as other important dimensions of the student experience. Furthermore, research on student social integration identifies student at risk for leaving college early are those students that do not affiliate with a peer group or establish affinity bonds (Tinto 1993 as cited in Kuh 2001).

With such a large population of student athletes at AB, the role of this subculture within the institution becomes increasingly significant. In his research, Kuh (2001) identifies football players and male fraternities as countercultures and develops this argument with the perspective that socialization to these

particular organizations is distinct, and often occurring over the summer and before classes separate from the student's socialization to the academic culture of the institution. Furthermore, with the expectations for competitive success, the behavior of these teams during the first year can be antithetical to the academic values (Kuh, 2001). With this in mind, Kuh asserts that football team culture prevails over the culture of the classroom and student development (Pascarella, Flowers, & Whitt, 1999 as cited in Kuh 2001). We should however not dismiss the powerful role of Affinity Bonding that occurs in numerous student subgroups such as work study, internships, fraternities, sororities, academic programs and the numerous team sports.

The network of relationships cultivated by these groups engender “unusually high bonds of loyalty and encourage people to support one another which leads to higher persistence rates by the members of these groups (Kuh, 2001, p.29).” The key takeaway here is that affinity bonding is social bonding which provides a support structure which influences student development and success and that the administration would benefit from re-framing the ways in which they perceive and define this critical aspect of their recruitment strategy, broadening it to emphasize academic success.

### The AB Student Experience

A student's perception of college-life at AB is impacted by the academic and social milieu of the institution, as well the affinity they feel towards the culture of the athletic teams to which they identify. Students react to the college experience in different ways, and in great part this is because students come from different cultures and orientations and with a limited set of social skills for this new environment. The transition from high school to college for academics includes the self-awareness needed to develop and change to meet academic challenges. Many student athletes described their teammates like family, but at AB this analogy was also true in some academic programs.

Student athletes arrive at AB through a unique process of direct recruitment and are awarded a sports scholarship that demonstrates their value as an athlete. Their athletic identity is a defining characteristic, and with this are expectations for AB college sports to affirm this identity. Adjusting expectations and assimilating to their responsibilities creates new challenges for student athletes to sort out. In our focus groups, students shared experiences with unusual practice and training times late in the evening, or early morning departures for far away team competitions, as well as faculty announcing exams and quizzes on the tail of athletic travel all of which raise examples of conflict between academic and athletic expectations.

From our interviews and discussions, we could perceive a difference between how the administrative team at AB portrays their role in the lives of its students, and how students experience this institutional oversight. Students come to Alderson Broaddus clearly expecting to be treated like adults. In some reports, students recount they are treated like children which creates a culture of conflict between student perceptions and institutional intent. Responding to this issue requires Alderson Broaddus to develop an institutional culture that a student can affiliate with; a culture that helps students make meaning of various events and activities, teaches them about what the institution stands for and how it works, and encourages them to perform in ways that will enable them to succeed academically and socially at the institution, and in their lives after graduation.

The AB student identity is complex and challenging to develop. Research demonstrates that student development in the first year is dependent upon achieving success and integration in academic and social communities. For AB students, there is a negotiation and balance needed between three distinct

communities: academic, social and athletic. As previously discussed, many of the student we spoke to found success in only two of these communities, which lead them to abandon the third, and often with an expression of remorse.

### Success in the Academic Core

From the focus group data, we see that some students are required to meet very demanding academic standards and faculty expectations, while other students are not appropriately challenged in their coursework at a level that evidences undergraduate rigor. We imagine that this unevenness in student experience of the first-year academic core is coincident with the influx of a new student population defined as athletes. As more and more students arrived with a mixed and at times conflicting agenda for their success, faculty adapted their teaching practices as they perceived necessary to support the academic progress of this new population.

In this context, we present the idea to the executive team at AB that revisiting their commitment to a student-centered learning environment is essential. The responsibility for student academic success is an institutional commitment and while stated as a University goal, we observed that responsibility is not well coordinated and structured among the faculty, athletic staff and advisors. Initiatives to coordinate and develop ways to challenge and accommodate student learning for the current student population would be effective and wise. We can also point to literature that supports the notion that AB likely experienced a decline in academic rigor with the adoption of Affinity Bonding. However, in order to definitively state this as fact we would need data that allows for comparison of courses and student learning outcomes over the past five or so years. However, this project is beyond the scope of our current methodology and research questions. As such, we present this perspective for further consideration.

### Commitment to Care and Support

First and foremost, institutions of higher education are in the business of educating students through content delivered in the classroom. A culture of academic success for all students is a core principle for many institutions and with this commitment are numerous initiatives across all units that work in concert to ensure success. Students must know that they are valued members of the higher education community. Residential colleges and universities such as Alderson Broaddus must also commit to an abiding concern for the holistic view of a student's growth and development (Braxton, et al., 2014, 2004).

The commitment to the welfare of students, their experiences outside the classroom, including the significance of their roles in athletics, Greek life and clubs, should be understood and collectively expressed by the faculty, staff and administration through both messages and actions that value student growth and success across multiple dimensions. From our focus group discussions, we found numerous points of disconnect between the academic and athletic environments where demands placed on students created unresolved conflict. Alderson Broaddus promotes a "student centered learning environment", however we found student perceptions that lead us to believe that this concept is not operationalized across the university in a manner that it is fundamental to all students.

Further, the student's expression of frustration for basic services, including safety and collaborative policies related to residential life spill over and contribute to a negative perception of the institution's values for student care and welfare. This could be seen across focus groups as students expressed concern related to security, particularly with regard to campus theft and criticisms over the lack of security cameras installed across campus. One of the key findings of the Berger-Braxton (1998) study that

presented student's experience if the institution's organizational attributes, such as institutional integrity, and the institution's commitment to student welfare play a significant role in the student retention phenomenon.

### Expressions of Integrity: Mission and Integrity Gap

An institution's commitment to the fundamental goals for education is conveyed through the expression of integrity that is demonstrated through the prevailing culture that the institution constructs by the actions of administration, faculty and staff (Braxton 2014). Institutional integrity is evidenced when the actions of institutional agents are congruent with the mission, vision and goals of the university. Further, institutional integrity is conveyed through the consistency of its messaging and the student's experience with institutional actors. Outcomes from the student focus groups lead us to believe that students receive inconsistent messages about a range of topics including tuition, residential life policies, academic expectations, and basic services like hot water and the internet. A student's ability to perceive the institution's abiding commitment to their success, care and welfare is essential to their persistence, and commitment to the institution. Although we did not speak to students who left Alderson Broaddus, the student focus groups expressed varying degrees of affirmation and frustration for an institutional culture that responded to their expressed needs.

Across focus groups, students discussed athletic, academic, and social experiences at AB and the various ways they were satisfied or dissatisfied by these experiences. With a high number of athletes, having three defining points for student success are unique to Alderson Broaddus. For some students, though, they found a path towards meeting all three: "So far, so good. My goal was to come here, get good grades, make friends, and get better at wrestling. I've done that so far so as long as it keeps doing that (I'll stay satisfied)." And it seems that students who have found a robust culture of support through the faculty, staff and coaches that are consistent and regular feature in their lives, tended to express higher levels of satisfaction with their overall undergraduate experience. What we perceive is a fragmentation of common values and goals across the University such that not all students experience a supportive culture for academic success, athletic competition and social growth and development.

We did observe, however, that students who come for one or more points of the AB triangle and are dissatisfied in one area can be retained through the satisfaction they experience in other areas. From this perspective, the consistent messaging and actions of the individual coaches, faculty and staff make a substantial difference to the student's persistence, and commitment to their time at AB. Conversely, the inconsistencies in the responses from institutional actors as well as incongruent policies and procedures frustrated students and raised doubt in their commitment to the educational journey. Numerous studies (Kuh, et al., 2005, Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) have shown that the institutions' cultural milieu affects students' perceptions of the institution which then in turn influences a student's overall satisfaction with their educational journey and the degree to which they devote energy to the activities that matter to their academic success.

### Defining Cost and Value Satisfaction

The student administrative data shows that 53% of the entering freshmen in our study are Pell eligible. The maximum Pell award is less than \$6,000 annually, and the eligibility for a Pell Grant is decided by total family income. The Pell family income limit is \$50,000 a year, however national data shows that most Pell grant money goes to students with a total family income below \$20,000 (DOE, 2017). From this perspective we know that more than half the students attending AB are from middle and lower-middle

class families that will need substantial financial aid for their children to attend college. National data shows that 92% of students from families with incomes less than \$60,000 receive some form of financial aid, with 88% of these students receiving grant aid (Radwin, et al., 2018). Similar data that compared full-time undergraduates in national private four-year non-profit institutions that are similar to AB shows that 86% of students receive some form of financial aid. With the annual cost of attendance at AB hovering above \$35,000, families make a commitment to send their children to Alderson Broaddus with their savings accounts and through loans that are paid back in the future. Parents' are therefore investing in their children's future opportunities for success with the college degree that will get them there. With rising costs for all institutions of higher education, the students return on investment becomes a paramount value that contributes to their persistence and goals.

Many students spoke to us about the significant influence of their sports scholarship on their decision to attend. Since scholarships of this type are not loans, the cost of attendance comes into reach, or rather the gap between the cost of attendance and the amount of loan debt becomes less. While the scholarships were clearly important to students, the students and families are significantly impacted when their financial aid package changes. This was especially true for students who saw significant raises in tuition charged each year while simultaneously receiving stagnant financial aid packages. The stacking of fees and fines resulted in students feeling they don't have control over their finances and a recurring theme began to come forward and this is that AB just takes money from the students any way they can. We can see how financial stress contributes to a growing pinch-crunch- theory where small pinches become big irresolvable issues.

### Limitations and Contributions to the Literature

The 44 students who participated in our focus-group interviews come from a variety of socioeconomic, ethnic, and academic backgrounds. Resultantly, each focus group carried its own flavor as one can assume the combined personalities of each group in addition to the time of day interviews were conducted swayed the conversation. It is important to note that the setting for each interview changed as we moved between large and small classroom spaces and a mid-sized auditorium, which appeared to have some influence on the quality of student responses. For instance, students in the small-sized biology lab were more conversational than students in the large auditorium space. It is also important to note that focus group four was filled with upperclassmen who were able to provide a more birds-eye view perspective that helps to provide nuance to our overall response to our second research question.

As with most research studies, our data has limitations that will make it impossible to generalize our results beyond the parameters of Alderson Broaddus. Given the scope of our Capstone project at Vanderbilt University, we were limited by the parameters of a research design structured within a real-world consulting project. We were charged with the task of understanding an issue that currently challenges AB and, as a result, our population has been limited to one of convenience, selected using a purposive sampling procedure. In this context, there are a number of internal and external validity issues that stem from not having a true random sample. Additionally, we are not able to interview a broad sample, rather, our focus groups were limited to small numbers in order for us to best gather the depth and richness required of this work. While efforts were made to ensure that students selected for our focus groups were representative of the overall student population at AB, we cannot guarantee the ability to generalize our focus group data to the institution at large.

We attempted to offset this sampling bias by gathering quantitative data from the Office of Institutional Research to examine student background characteristics for patterns of risk factors that predict student

departure after the first year. That said, the limitations of our study were such that we were not able to conduct interviews with departed students and therefore were not able to gather first person input from the students who have contributed to high attrition rates at Alderson Broaddus University. We instead used quantitative data to fill in the gaps because we also relied on currently enrolled students as we inquired about positive and negative experiences had on campus in an effort to better understand factors that may contribute to retention problems on the AB campus. Furthermore, we relied almost entirely on self-reported data provided to us by the executive team at AB when we designed our research questions, methods, protocol and design. While they collectively have a vested interest in supporting our work and benefitting from the results of our project, we must keep the context in which this data was gathered in mind as we relied on it to capture a snapshot of AB and its current practices that contribute to retention and attrition of their undergraduate students.

## 6. Recommendations

College and universities exhibit self-determined institutional cultures. At Alderson Broaddus this culture is defined by the learning environment, the training of competitive athletes and the numerous social organizations that weave through and around campus life in Philippi, WV. As students interact with this culture they contribute to its further definition, integrate to this culture, or may choose to leave. Research on student retention highly values the reciprocating relationship between academic success (aka academic integration) and the process of social integration that results in a student's enduring commitment to the institution and their progress to the goal of graduation (McEwan, 2014). At AB, the culture of the student experience is defined by an academic, athletic, and social triangle. Students have expectations for one or more points of this triangle and are if they dissatisfied in one area, they are often retained by their satisfaction in another. The students we spoke to who have had their expectations met across all three areas of the triangle tended to express higher levels of satisfaction with their overall undergraduate experience at AB.

While it is difficult to ascertain in advance is the implications of our study as an affect for practice and policy, however we anticipate our contributions to the literature on student retention and to the leadership team at AB to be of equal value to the larger context of policy. In an age where small, mission orientated liberal arts colleges struggle to remain viable, any case study that contributes to the understanding of university identity, recruitment and retention processes will only serve to improve the policy process for administrators and leadership alike. Most importantly, however, are the implications of our research for the leadership team at AB. As we work to better understand retention practices at AB and answer our research questions that seek a relationship between student departure after the first year and student background characteristics; student departure and first-year student experiences; student departure and the positive and negative perceptions students have of their experiences at Alderson Broaddus, one can only assume that the results of our study will have specific and broad implications to all current and future stakeholders at AB.

Based on the results of our study, we make the following recommendations:

6. Express commitment to the AB student identity and welfare.
7. Define Affinity Bonding as social bonding by reframing the concept of Affinity Bonding from bonding with athletic teams to bonding with people who define the Alderson Broaddus experience, from coaching staff to faculty and, most importantly, to each other.
8. Create an environment for excellence, from athletics to academics.

9. Define the AB Student, and develop recruiting practices and academic supports that cater to holistic student success
10. Develop ways for students to see that their investment in education at AB is valuable and will have a positive impact on their future selves and professional careers.

### Recommendation 1: Express Commitment to Student Identity and Welfare

Our first recommendation is for the institution to express a commitment to the AB student identity and student welfare through the implementation of steps that affirm the integrity of core values, messaging and follow through, with increased levels of consistency across all channels and student experiences. These steps recognize the substantive change in both student population and student life that has occurred at AB and brings together all constituents on this account. Such an effort includes identifying and developing a new responsive core mission, goals and values that reflects how the institution serves the student demographic currently attending AB. Defining and supporting student success across the dimensions of academic, social, and athletic spheres is exceedingly complex, and requires both leadership and broad collaboration and commitment among numerous units across the University. With this said, the triad of academic, social and competitive athletic priorities is the unique and rich environment that has recalibrated the identity of the University. The University has a clear opportunity to embrace and leverage this context as a substantial advantage.

An institution's mission should contain clearly articulated educational purposes and aspirations that set the tone as well as frame a future the institution's approach to educational priorities, structures policies and practices for student success. In many cases, the institutional mission provides guidance for an operating philosophy that can be understood by the community. We recommend the AB triangle be prominently featured in the mission. While considering the currently stated mission statement and goals, Alderson Broaddus must come to terms with the fact that most institutions operate with two missions. That is the "espoused mission" what the school writes about itself and publishes on its website, and the second is the "enacted mission" that reflects what the institution actually does and who it serves. Research shows that institution's that can close the gap between the espoused mission and the enacted mission are driven by a broadly held culture of integrity and experience high levels of student success (Kuh et al., 2005), and so we therefore recommend that this should be an objective for the team at Alderson Broaddus.

When crafting and educational philosophy, administrators, coaches, faculty and staff at Alderson Broaddus should consider how to integrate an incoming student's commitment to the demands of competitive sports as leverage, or model or paradigm to be employed to meet the challenges for success in the classroom. And furthermore, how this unique and challenging environment for student learning is a hallmark of the Alderson Broaddus educational experience. Our research shows that despite athletics being a primary motivator for student enrollment at AB, the majority of student athletes we interviewed also desire a rigorous college experience in the classroom and will need a more broadly coordinated initiative to develop the skills necessary to be accomplished both on the field and in the classroom. Most certainly these are valuable skills for a 21<sup>st</sup> century career and should be the basis for an institution's educational mission.

Alderson Broaddus must acknowledge that operationalizing student success by tapping into the values of teamwork, discipline, and commitment that define competitive sports is a way of promoting the "AB way" as a set of core values that can be broadly understood across the university and can apply to the multiple dimensions of student life. So much of the research on high impact faculty practices, as well as

first year student experiences (Braxton et al., 2014; Sloan, 2013), revolve around the many practices and cultures that we see in team sports. These are the result of the social bonds of loyalty that students make to each other that support not only how to persevere, but what behavior is acceptable and how to meet commitments. The goal at AB is to create a mutually informing and supportive environment among academic, athletic and social priorities and needs.

## Recommendation 2: Reframe Affinity Bonding as Social Bonding

Our second recommendation is for executive team at Alderson Broaddus to reframe how they conceptualize Affinity Bonding, recognizing that at its core, Affinity Bonding is grounded in social bonding. This would mean taking the concept of Affinity Bonding beyond the current definition that it is the bonding of students to extra-curricular programs while prioritizing the bonding of students to the people who define their Alderson Broaddus experience, from coaching staff to faculty and, most importantly, to each other. While students in our focus groups discussed various ways in which the institution itself provides and/or does not provide opportunities for social engagement, the perspective amongst members of the executive team is that they do provide opportunities but that student affairs struggles to “connect with students in the right way to determine what they like.” Reframing the Affinity Bonding model and infusing social the prioritization of social bonding across all areas may be one step towards improving retention across curricular and extra-curricular programs on campus.

Several students who expressed dissatisfaction with their athletic experience explained that scholarship eligibility is the reason they continue to play. This points to the Affinity Bonding model, as currently defined at AB, as flawed. If it was working, students would be bonded to the programs, not the money connected to the programs. Further, attrition of employees leads to feelings of abandonment in students. This is especially true for students who were recruited by coaches who left, bonded with advisors who left, and/or were recruited to programs that collapsed who expressed feelings of abandonment as they had bonded to social ties that left holes in their absence. Based on these conversations, it seems the college could do a better job of retaining of faculty and staff, recognizing that high attrition rates of employees can contribute to high attrition rates of students. At the very least, there is ample room for the institution to do a better job of helping students transition between coaching staff, faculty, and academic advisors should high turnover rates remain constant.

When students come to college, they transition from a well-known familial culture to a new community that is defined by pre-existing expectations that stem from numerous influences ranging from the internet, to brochures, the campus tour and athletic coach. Organizational studies of higher education institutions draw parallels to strong and vibrant community cultures that place value on good internal communication and incorporate a diversity of talent and opinions, support caring, trust and teamwork, shared leadership and governance, links to external communities and a shared culture (Gardner 1989 as cited in Kuh et al., 2005). Students in our focus groups relayed a range of experiences that supported their development of community and culture that included the cultivation of relationships through work study jobs, athletic programs, academic programs (particularly those that incorporate a cohort design), Greek life, marching band, and, in some cases, unification over frustrations with the University itself.

In the spirit of recognizing that allegiances and solidarity are as essential to academic challenges as are they are to athletic challenges, leadership should strive to build stronger academic programs and teams, prioritize high impact classroom practices, bring athletic staff closer to university administration, and, ultimately, invest in the development of stronger coaches and faculty through high accountability practices and an increased commitment to retention across all areas. Reframing Affinity Bonding from the



bonding of athletic teams towards social teams, the institution will recognize that coaches, teachers, and advisors are the first point of contact between the institution and its students, creating space for authentic connection while recognizing that social engagement and bonding is at the heart of the educational enterprise.

### Recommendation 3: Create an Environment for Excellence

Our third recommendation is for the leadership team at Alderson Broaddus to unify and align their definition of excellence, coming to an intimate understanding of what excellence looks like on the Alderson Broaddus campus across all areas and subgroup populations. By being intentional about how excellence is conceptualized at AB and infusing it throughout the organization, students will see stronger patterns of consistency across all areas of engagement which will likely contribute higher levels of student satisfaction and, ultimately, higher retention rates across campus.

A point of uniqueness for Alderson Broaddus is its emphasis on the development of academic, athletic, and social engagement for its students. As we reflected on this triangle, we discovered that students who come for one or more points of this triangle and are dissatisfied in one area can be retrieved through their satisfaction in another. Additionally, it seems that students who have met expectations across all three areas tended to express higher levels of satisfaction with their overall undergraduate experience. Interestingly, despite athletics being a primary motivator for student enrollment at AB, the majority of student athletes we interviewed desire a rigorous college experience in the classroom. And, in some cases, it does not seem this expectation is being met. This speaks to developing a unified definition of excellence and weaving it throughout all three points of the academic, athletic, and social triangle.

Further, our conversations with the leadership team at Alderson Broaddus alerted us to what appears to be a dearth of data driven practices across institutional procedures and protocol. While administration has launched a number of changes in response to drop in retention rates on campus, it is not clear if the administration is keeping data on these programs and their impact. With no unified definition of excellence or identified proxy for success, it is not possible for leadership to parcel out implemented practices that work from those that do not. We recommend that the administrative team pursue assessment practices that measure effectiveness of retention procedures and programs, using the data to determine the most effective use of their limited resources in order to best impact retention rates across campus. Additionally, we recommend the administrative team move away from its intense focus on the student athlete versus non-athlete and shift towards a more holistic paradigm of the undergraduate student population at large and the overall undergraduate student experience.

### Recommendation 4: Define the AB Student, Develop Recruiting Practices and Academic Supports that Cater to Holistic Student Success

As we analyzed our focus group data, we found that high school experiences become a lens from which AB students interpret their undergraduate experiences. This provides support for administrative beliefs that AB needs to recruit the right kind of student, i.e. the student who is more compatible with the culture at AB and, as a result, more likely to stay. To this end, our fourth recommendation is for institutional leadership to define what makes an Alderson Broaddus University student an Alderson Broaddus University student and make space for this definition to spread across all areas of engagement. Once defined, the institution should strive to recruit students who align with this definition while simultaneously implementing programs that support these students academically and socially.

We encourage University administration to be intentional about building a culture of student success. The executive team may wish to turn to DEEP schools (Kuh et al., 2005) for insights and examples of data drive practices that support student engagement and academic success. They may also wish to examine research on Intrusive Academic Advising and Differentiated Instruction as examples of best practices that contribute to first year student success. To address the conflict that exists between students and upper level administration, as defined by students in our focus groups, we recommend the University move towards a collaborative philosophy with its undergraduate students, crafting a philosophy of Student Affairs that establishes respectful dialogue and transparency, while also prioritizing the development of student leadership and engagement within the University at large.

Additionally, we encourage the leadership team to be intentional about the messaging they convey throughout the recruitment process in order to ensure that the expectations established between the University and its incoming students come to fruition throughout the undergraduate career. The expectations that are established for students prior to their arrival as freshmen plays a critical role in their progress towards completion of their degrees. Since the majority of recruitment comes from coaching staff, we feel strongly that efforts to better coordinate recruitment standards and align them with academic practices will have an immediate impact on retention rates for first year students. If recruiting personnel do not take care in establishing expectations amongst the students they recruit to the University, the end result could be continued unmet expectations which translate to even higher rates of attrition.

#### Recommendation 5: Develop ways for students to see that their investment in education at AB is valuable

Our fifth and final recommendation is for the leadership team at AB to develop ways for students to know their investment is valuable. A critical point our analysis of student focus group transcripts involves the absence of financial support as motivation for student retention, despite its strong prevalence as an enrollment motivator for students at the onset of their AB careers. Thus, while affordability seems to draw students to the AB campus initially, the perception of value perceived, rather than small variations in cost, is the variable that seems to drive student decisions (Sloan, 2013). While we heard from members of the executive team acknowledgment that increases in tuition lead to student dissatisfaction, there appeared to be a disconnect in how they understand the impact these tuition increases have on student stress and persistence (Ishitani, 2016; Martin, 2017). In addition to making taking steps to prevent the build-up of unnecessary fees, such as the trash fines imposed by residential life, we encourage the leadership team to address ways to develop trust amongst the students at Alderson Broaddus in the value of their AB education and know that their investment is one that is sound.

Many students expressed dissatisfaction with the financial aid, tuition, and fees structure at Alderson Broaddus leading them to believe that the organization itself only values the student body for its economic contributions. Many students referenced scholarships as incentives to attend AB; since scholarships are not loans, the gap between the cost of attendance and loan debt becomes less, making higher education an option for them when they graduate high school. AB students and families are significantly impacted when their financial aid package changes, particularly when raises in tuition charged annually to not coincide with increases in financial aid. Further, the stacking of fees and fines contributes to a sense in students that they don't have control over their finances. We believe that by addressing the increases in tuition along with the gap between rising tuition costs and financial aid, AB could see improvements to retention. At the very least, adopting a philosophy of transparency, beginning

with the recruitment process, through clear and supportive messaging designed to educate families on the true costs of attending AB, may help to recruit students that will be more likely to stay.

We recommend faculty and staff examine the value currently placed on academics across the organization. As previously discussed, adopting a unified definition of excellence and weaving throughout the athletic, social, and academic triangle could be one step towards accomplishing this. That said, we encourage the leadership team to examine what is messaged about student supports and success, evaluate current faculty practices across the curriculum and program, and assess the current degree programs offered in the spirit of coming to terms with AB student needs and how these are being met (or unmet) across the institution. For example, by developing more extensive internship programs and requiring them across programs, students may begin to more strongly associate their academic experience with career development and commitment.

Finally, much of the success of this recommendation lies in marketing, messaging, and communication between AB staff and students recruited to the AB campus. If the recruitment team is not aligned with regard to their messaging and transparent in their communication with families about the financial aid process at AB, they will continue to see an erosion of trust between the student body and the administrative team. Once a clear protocol for ROI messaging is established, it is imperative that the executive team work together to ensure that the AB sold to students during the recruitment process sets the students up for expectations that are met throughout the duration of their undergraduate careers.

## 7. Conclusion and Discussion

College student retention is an ill-structured problem that defies any single solution (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). Institutions of higher education are uniquely complex organizational enterprises and the students who attend these institutions are diverse in race, ethnicity, national origin, customs and values. Undergraduate students seek knowledge and training while simultaneously developing fundamental psychosocial skills throughout their pursuits in the college environment. Each college or university has a self-determined institutional culture and numerous social organizations that weave through and around the classroom experience. As students interact with this culture, they seek the good life of the college experience. College life is complex.

Following a student recruitment campaign, Alderson Broaddus University experienced substantial enrollment growth, as well as rising rates of student departure from the freshman class. The characteristics of the student population at AB also changed. With the development of division II sports and an influx of athletes, the athlete population dominated the first-year populations we studied with a close to 80% majority, creating a unique population for our research study. From the perspective of student retention, first to second year student retention statistics are nationally published by the National Education Digest. Retention for the 2016 entering freshman that are re-enrolling the fall of 2017 in institutions that are similar to AB is 79.4%. The reported retention rate in AB literature and websites is 55%. To explore and address what causes the student departure at AB, the conceptual framework for our study is informed by a multi theoretical approach regarding retention for residential colleges and is developed in the literature review. In great part we are in debt to Tinto's Interactionist Theory, however we acknowledge the role that organizational behavior plays in Tinto's model and the variables added to the model by Berger and Braxton (1998).

The student administrative data we analyzed answered the first question of our study and also allowed us to address some of the issues raised by the executive team interviews revolving around the impact of the

student-athlete population. Students athletes now make up close to 80% of the incoming student cohorts that we studied however, they do not depart at a higher rate than non-athletes and being an athlete does increase their commitment to staying at AB. Conversely, non-athletes do not depart at a greater rate than athletes. We found little evidence to identify any pre-entry attributes in the study population that were indicators for retention or departure after the first year. The greatest indicator for re-enrollment in the second year was a student's academic progress identified by credits earned. Those students that did not perform well academically departed. The quantitative data is helpful in making correlations between a student's academic preparation and their college academic success and these indicators are in the high school grade point average, SAT/ACT score, as well as the fall semester credits and grade point average.

The student focus group data addressed our second research question. From our interviews we found students to be displeased with a variety of experiences on the AB campus that spread across academic, athletic, and social themes making it difficult to isolate a single variable that contributes to student departure. At AB, the culture of the student experience is defined by an academic, athletic, and social triangle. Students have expectations for one or more points of this triangle and are if they dissatisfied in one area, they are often retained by their satisfaction in another. The students we spoke to who have had their expectations met across all three areas of the triangle tended to express higher levels of satisfaction with their overall undergraduate experience at AB.

We heard students speak of both academic demands and the commitment to athletic expectations, and it became clear that AB students navigate a unique set of the challenges for college life and these are the triad of Academic, Athletic and Social spheres. Some students relayed that AB faculty, coaches and staff are also struggling, and at times failing, to balance the competing demands among athletics and academics, as well as equitable resources and facilities. Students also spoke of the character of residential facilities and expressed concerns for their safety, along with frustrations for the most basic features of room and board. The student's ability to perceive the institution's consistent and abiding commitment to their success, care and welfare is essential to their persistence, and commitment to the institution. Although we did not speak to students who left Alderson Broaddus, the student focus groups expressed varying degrees of affirmation and frustration for an institutional culture that responded to their expressed needs.

Significant to our study and to the evolution of student retention research is the role that institutional behavior plays in meeting the student's expectations and supporting their college experience and persistence to graduation. We found that for many students the motivation to attend Alderson Broaddus was established during the recruitment process that set up for certain expectations for students prior to arriving on campus their freshmen year. Often these expectations were ill-informed, the result of inaccurate messaging they received during the recruitment process, for instance, that their tuition would never increase, or the win record of the athletic team was inflated, or the quantity of competitive play time was maximized. Most students conveyed a mix of met and unmet expectations however the network of friendship and the affinity that these students feel for each other moves past the bounds of sports and includes numerous relationships made in the subcultures of work study, student cohorts formed around academic demands, as well as sororities or residential life. The key takeaway here is that Affinity Bonding is social bonding which provides a support structure which influences student development and success.

Our study contributes to the overall body of literature related to the field of higher education as we made Affinity Bonding at AB central to our thesis, research questions, and final report provided to the leadership team at AB. In closely examining the successful recruitment aspect of Affinity Bonding model at AB along with its impact on first-year student retention rates, we found evidence to support that the

network of relationships cultivated by these groups engender “unusually high bonds of loyalty and encourage people to support one another which leads to higher persistence rates by the members of these groups” (Kuh, 2001, p.29). The key takeaway being that Affinity Bonding is social bonding, which provides a support structure which influences student development and success and that the administration would benefit from re-framing the ways in which they perceive and define this critical aspect of their recruitment strategy, broadening it to emphasize academic success.

## 8. References

- Astin, A. W. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 25(4): 297-308.
- Astin, A. W. (1999). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Development*, 40(5): 518-529.
- Bean, J. P. (2005). Nine themes of college student retention. *College student retention: Formula for student success*, 215.
- Bean, J. (1980). Dropouts and turnover: The synthesis and test of a causal model of student attrition. *Research in Higher Education*, 12(2): 155-187.
- Bean, J. (1982). Conceptual models of student attrition: How theory can help the institutional researcher. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 1982(36): 17-33.
- Bean, J. P. (1983). The application of a model of turnover in work organizations to the student attrition process. *The Review of Higher Education*, 6(2), 129-148.
- Bean, J. P. (1985). Interaction effects based on class level in an explanatory model of college student dropout syndrome. *American Educational Research Journal*, 22(1), 35-64.
- Bean, J. P. (1986). Assessing and reducing attrition. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 53: 47-61.
- Bean, J. P., & Eaton, S. B. (2000). A psychological model of college student retention. In J. Braxton (Ed.), *Rethinking the Departure Puzzle: New Theory and Research on College Student Retention* (48-61). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Bergen-Cico, D. & Viscomi, J. (2012-2013). Exploring the association between campus co-curricular involvement and academic achievement. *College Student Retention* 14(3): 329-343.
- Berger, J. B. B. (2000). Organizational Behavior at Colleges and Student Outcomes: A New Perspective on College Impact. *The Review of Higher Education* 23(2), 177-198. Johns Hopkins University Press. Retrieved March 20, 2019, from Project MUSE database.
- Berger, J. B., & Braxton, J. M. (1998). Revising Tinto's interactionist theory of student departure through theory elaboration: Examining the role of organizational attributes in the persistence process. *Research in Higher Education*, 39(2), 103-119

- Bigger, J. (2014). Improving the odds of freshman success Retrieved from <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Clearinghouse/View-Articles/Advising-first-year-students.aspx>
- Bowman, N. A., & Denson, N. (2014). A missing piece of the departure puzzle: Student-institutional fit and intent to persist. *Research in Higher Education, 55*: 123–142
- Braxton (Ed.) (2013). Rethinking the Departure Puzzle: New Theory and Research on College *Student Retention* (48-61). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Braxton, J.M., Doyle, W.R., Hartley, H.V., III, Hirschy, A.S., Jones, W.A., & McLendon, M.K. (2014). Chapter 3: Recommendations for institutional policy and practice. In *Rethinking College Student Retention* (35-67). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Braxton, J.M. & Francs, C.H.W. (November, 2017). Organizational assessment to improve college student persistence. *Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly, 5*(2): 80-87.
- Braxton, J. M. & Hirschy, A. S. (2005). Theoretical developments in the study of college student departure. In Seidman, A. (Ed.). *College Student Retention: Formula for Student Success*. Praeger Press.
- Braxton, J. M., Hirschy, A. S., & McClendon, S. A. (2011). Understanding and reducing college student departure. In *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report 30*(16). John Wiley & Sons.
- Braxton, J. M., Milem, J. F., & Sullivan, A. S. (2000). The influence of active learning on the college student departure process: toward a revision of Tinto's theory. *Journal of Higher Education, 71* (5):569-590.
- Braxton, J.M., & Mundy, M.E. (2001-2002). Powerful institutional levers to reduce college student departure. *Journal of College Student Retention, 3*(1): 91-119.
- Cabrera, A. F., Castaneda, M. B., Nora, A., & Hengstler, D. (1992). The convergence between two theories of college persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education, 63*(2): 143-164.
- Carodine, K., Almond, K. F., & Gratto, K. K. (2001). College student athlete success both in and out of the classroom. *New Directions for Student Services, 2001*(93): 19-33.
- Davidson, W. B., & Beck, H. P. (2006-2007). Survey of Academic Orientations scores and persistence in college freshmen. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 8*(3): 297-305.
- Davidson, W. B., Bromeld, J. M., & Beck, H. P. (2007). Beneficial academic orientations and self-actualization of college students. *Psychological Reports, 100*: 604-612
- Davidson, W. B., Beck, H. P., & Silver, N. C. (1999). Development and validation of scores on a measure of six academic orientations in college students. *Educational and Psychological Measurement, 59*(4): 678-693.

- Department of Education. (DOE, 2017). *Federal Pell Grant Program Data Book, 2015-2016*. Table 10A. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/finaid/prof/resources/data/pell-data.html>.
- Gardner, J. N., & Siegel, M. J. (2001). Focusing on the first-year student. *Priorities, 17*: 1-17.
- Gayles, G. (2015). Engaging student athletes in *Student Engagement in Higher Education: Theoretical Perspectives and Practical Approaches for Diverse Populations, Second Edition*. Quaye, J. & Harper, S., Eds. (209-220).
- Glossary of Education Reform (2014). Rigor. Retrieved from <https://www.edglossary.org/rigor/>.
- Hossler, D., & Stage, F. K. (1992). Family and high school experience influences on the postsecondary educational plans of ninth-grade students. *American Educational Research Journal, 29*(2), 425-451.
- Ishitani, T. T. (2016). Time-varying effects of academic and social integration on student persistence for first and second years in college: National data approach. *Journal of College 18* (3): 263 – 286.
- Johnson, J. E., Wessel, R. D., & Pierce, D. A. (2014). Exploring the influence of selected demographic, academic, and athletic variables on the retention of student athletes. *Journal of College Student Retention, 15*(2): 135-155.
- Kilgo, C. A., Sheets, J. K. E., & Pascarella, E. T. (2015). The link between high-impact practices and student learning: Some longitudinal evidence. *Higher Education, 69*(4): 509-525.
- Krumrei-Mancuso, E. J., Newton, F. B., Kim, E., & Wilcox, D. (2013). Psychosocial factors predicting first-year college student success. *Journal of College Student Development, 54*(3), 247-266.
- Kuh, G. D. (2001). Organizational culture and student persistence: Prospects and puzzles. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 3*(1), 23-39.
- Kuh, G. D. (2008). Excerpt from high-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter. Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Buckley, J. A., Bridges, B. K., & Hayek, J. C. (2011). *Piecing together the student success puzzle: research, propositions, and recommendations: ASHE Higher Education Report* (Vol. 116). John Wiley & Sons.
- Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J. H., & Whitt, E. J. (2005). Assessing conditions to enhance educational effectiveness: The inventory for student engagement and success. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. (IE: Institution)
- Kuh, G.D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J.H., & Whitt, E.J. & Associates (2005). Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kuh, G. D., Cruce, T. M., Shoup, R., Kinzie, J., & Gonyea, R. M. (2008). Unmasking the effects of student engagement on first-year college grades and persistence. *The journal of higher education, 79*(5): 540-563.

- Kuh, G. D., O'Donnell, K., & Reed, S. (2013). *Ensuring quality and taking high-impact practices to scale*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J. L., Buckley, J. A., Bridges, B. K., & Hayek, J. C. (2006). *What matters to student success: A review of the literature* (Vol. 8). Washington, DC: National Postsecondary Education Cooperative
- Luo, M., & Williams, J. E. (2013). Geographic characteristics and first-year retention: An examination of the linkages. *Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*, 25(2): 77–94.
- Martin, J. M. (2017). It just didn't work out: Examining non-returning students' stories about their freshman experience. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 19(2): 176-198.
- McEwan, B. (2014). Retention and resources: An exploration of how social network resources related to university commitment. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 15: 113–128.
- National Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC, 2017). Persistence & retention. Retrieved from <https://nscresearchcenter.org/snapshotreport28-first-year-persistence-and-retention/>
- Nora, A. (2004). The role of habitus and cultural capital in choosing a college, transitioning from high school to higher education, and persisting in college among minority and nonminority students. *Journal of Hispanic higher education*, 3(2), 180-208.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1980). Predicting freshman persistence and voluntary dropout decisions from a theoretical model. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 51(1), 60-75.
- Pascarella, E.T., Terenzini, P.T., & Wolfe, L.M. (1986). Orientation to college and freshman year persistence/withdrawal decisions. *Journal of Higher Education*, 57: 155-175.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Perna L.W. (2006). Studying college access and choice: a conceptual model. In: Smart J.C. (eds., *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, 21: 99-157.
- Philippi, West Virginia, (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.city-data.com/city/Philippi-West-Virginia.html>.
- Pike, G. R., & Kuh, G. D. (2006). Relationships among structural diversity, informal peer interactions and perceptions of the campus environment. *The Review of Higher Education*, 29(4): 425-450
- Redwing, D., Condemn, J.G., Nunnery, A., Lacy, T.A., Wu, J., Lew, S., Wine, J., and Siegel, P. (2018). 2015–16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16): Student Financial Aid Estimates for 2015–16 (NCES 2018-466). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved March 29, 2019 from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2018466>.



- Reason, R. D., Terenzini, P. T., & Domingo, R. J. (2005, November). Developing social and personal competence in the first year of college. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of Higher Education. Philadelphia, PA.
- Reason, R. D., Terenzini, P. T., & Domingo, R. J. (2006). First things first: Developing academic competence in the first year of college. *Research in Higher Education*, 47(2): 149-175.
- Silvana, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Schreiner, L. A. (2009). Linking student satisfaction and retention (1-16). Retrieved from [https://www.ruffalonl.com/documents/shared/Papers\\_and\\_Research/2009/LinkingStudentSatis0809.pdf](https://www.ruffalonl.com/documents/shared/Papers_and_Research/2009/LinkingStudentSatis0809.pdf)
- Sloan, C. (2013). Teenagers in the ivory tower: Engaging and retaining traditional college students. *Change*, 45(2): 35-39.
- Spady, W.G. Dropouts from higher education: An interdisciplinary review and synthesis, *Interchange* (1970) 1: 64.
- Spady, W. G. (1971). Dropouts from higher education: Toward an empirical model. *Interchange*, 2(3): 38-62).
- Strauss and Volkwein (2004). Predictors of student commitment at two-year and four-year institutions. *Journal of Higher Education*, 75(2): 203-227.
- Terenzini, P. T., & Reason, R. D. (2005, November). Parsing the first-year of college: A conceptual framework for studying college impacts. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of Higher Education. Philadelphia, PA.
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of educational research*, 45(1): 89-125.
- Tinto, V. (1988). Stages of student departure: Reflections on the longitudinal character of student leaving. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 59(4), 438-455.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Tinto, V. (1999). Taking retention seriously: Rethinking the first year of college. *NACADA Journal*, 19: 5-9.
- Tinto, V. (2006-2007). Research and practice of student retention: What next? *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 8(1): 1-19.
- Tinto, V. (2017). Through the Eyes of Students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 19(3), 254-269. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025115621917>
- Tinto, V., & Enstrom, C. (2008). Learning better together: The impact of learning communities on the persistence of low-income students. *Opportunity Matters*, 1: 5-21.

Tinto, V., & Goodsell, A. (1994). Freshman interest groups and the first-year experience: Constructing student communities in a large university. *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*, 6(1), 7-28.

United States Department of Education (USDE, 2018). Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. Undergraduate Retention and Graduation rate. Retrieved from [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_ctr.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_ctr.asp).

## 9. Appendices

### Appendix A: Conceptual Framework Diagram

#### *Three Elements of the Theoretical Framework to Guide Research*

<b>1. Pre entry Attributes</b>	<b>2. Goals and Commitments</b>	<b>3. Institutional Experiences</b>
Student	Student	Academics
Family background Race, Sex, Age Location, state zip High School Curriculum High School GPA SAT/ACT test	College Search Process; Selection of AB Expectations for college Family expectations and support Family obligations External communities Student aspirations and motivations Value of Education Declared major Career goals	Interaction with faculty Availability of Faculty Faculty relationships Orientation to academics Course selection and course quality, Quality of instruction Availability of support Classroom climate (learning is social), Academic press/expectation, Multiple teaching/learning approaches in classroom Interaction with staff (advisors)
	Institution	Social
	Understanding/expression and affirmation of Mission and Goals of University  University commitment to well-being of students & programs; attitudes  Faculty and staff response to students in need, faculty support of students  Institutional values expressed though all members of the community	Peer groups Residential life peer group Athletic/non-athletic peer groups Student activities, orientation Relevant /valuable social programming to needs, Expectations for college social life Member of a community Racial, ethnic, LGBTQ climate, Discriminatory attitudes Emotional well being Counseling support Caring environment (faculty, staff, students), Self-efficacy, Independence/dependence

## Appendix B: Broad Topic Areas and Initial Questions Proposed to the Executive Team

### Affinity Bonding Recruitment: The Strategic Plan

- What do you perceive to be the impact of "affinity bonding" on AB's recruitment, retention, and overall strategic plan?

### Goals and Objectives for Enrollment Management—Institutional Competitors

- What do you perceive to be the goals and objectives for recruitment initiatives at AB?
- What is the history of recruitment in athletic programs at AB?
- Can you identify AB's institutional competitors?

### Faculty Attitudes Towards Recruiting Plan and the Development of Athletics

- What do you perceive to be the faculty attitudes to the recruiting plan's focus on athletic teams?
- What impacts to the university are evident?
- What is the relationship like between coaching staff and faculty on the AB campus?
- What academic programs currently exist to support student athletes who are recruited to the institution using the current recruitment/past affinity bonding model?

### Learner Centered Environment

- What programs currently exist to support students who are recruited to the institution using the current recruitment/past affinity bonding model?

### Student Life Programming

- Is there social programming for student athletes and across the university?
- What is the character of social life for students at AB?
- What types of programs currently exist that support the transition of student athletes as they enter into their first semester at AB?
- How much contact do incoming students have with coaching staff prior to the start of the new academic year?

### Ties to American Baptist Churches

- What are the ties to American Baptist Churches and how do they impact programming, academic and student life at AB?

### College Community Relationships and Perceptions

- What do you perceive are the relationships between AB and the local community of Philippi?
- Is there a history of AB-Philippi relations?

### Profile of the Average First Time Student

- Can you provide a profile of the average first time freshman student.

### Perceived Barriers to Retention

- What do you think is contributing to the student retention problem?

## Appendix C: Student Focus Groups

### *Semi-Structured Interview Protocol*

#### Academic Engagement

- How did your academic experience as a freshman differ from high school?
- If you are an upperclassman, how have your academic experiences at AB changed since your freshman year?
- Can you tell us about an academic experience you had your freshman year that was especially impactful either positively or negatively?
- Can you tell us about an experience you had with a college professor that stands out in your mind as being either positive or negative? What made it so memorable to you?
- Do you feel adequately challenged in your academic course work at AB?

#### Social Engagement

- Has your experience of college life outside of the classroom met the expectations you had prior to coming to college? If so, how? If not, how have you accommodated?
- Are you satisfied overall with your social opportunities at AB?

#### Athletic Experience

- How has your experience as a student athlete has impacted your overall experience at AB?
  - How does your practice and competition schedule as an athlete impact your academic success inside and outside of the classroom?
  - How do you feel your athletic schedule impacts your social experiences at AB?

#### Non-Athletic Experience

- How does the dominant athletic culture at AB impact your overall experience at AB? Positively or negatively? Inside and outside of the classroom?

#### Institutional Support, Values, Commitment

- What experiences most helped you acclimate to your first year at AB?
- What experiences do you wish AB provided that would have helped you acclimate/transition better?

#### Academic Advising

- How would you describe your relationship with your academic advisor?
- Was there a faculty person with whom you identified your freshman year that impacted you?

#### Enrollment Management (Financial Aid, Residential Life)

- Why did you choose AB?
- Do you feel like AB has met your initial expectations?

#### Leadership & Institutional Mission

- Do you feel as though the faculty and staff care about you and your success? Examples?
- If you had the opportunity to do all of this again, would you choose AB? Why? Why Not?

## Appendix D: Codebook for Qualitative Data

Code	Themes	Description	Example
Motivation to Enroll	Financial Aid; Athletic Opportunities; Academic Programs; Social Climate; Location	Motivating factors for students to enroll at AB.	'I chose AB because I was heavy in athletics in high school. And I got the opportunity to come here and play basketball and run track. I got a scholarship for it.'
Motivation to Stay	Financial Aid; Athletic Opportunities; Academic Programs; Social Climate; Location	Factors that motivate students to stay at AB. Does not include financial aid.	'The reason I came and the reason I stayed are different.'; 'I think I stayed because the people, the teachers and stuff that I met didn't just see us as students.'
Expectations	Social Life; Finances & Value; Academic Rigor; Athletic Experience; Residential Life	Expectations students have for the AB experience as incoming freshman. Can be met and unmet.	It's just unmet expectations. Like, we're told one thing and then it's not.'; If you're coming from a place not like Philippi, it can be a culture shock.'
Inconsistency/ Instability	Academic Rigor; Across Advising; Athletic Programs; Between Athletes & Non-Athletes; Turnover of Faculty & Staff	Inconsistent patterns and experiences students have throughout their AB experience. Contributes to a sense of instability.	I've had three advisors in four years. My advisor now is not even related to my major.'; 'The non-athlete sees that the school is driven by athletics. The athletes like it and the non-athletes are disappointed.'; 'It's just, very inconsistent.'
AB Student	Athletic Identity; Academic Identity; Social Identity	Student identity related to the culture at AB	'I got really, really involved. And I found a lot of purpose in being involved in the things that I wanted to see change here.'
In Loco Parentis	Collaboration; Conflict	Relationship between the administrative team at AB and student perceptions of this relationship. Can be over-controlled. Needs can be unmet.	'We're in college but you treat us like we're still kids... We're grown. We're not kids.'; 'Students are going to drink, let's teach them responsibility, taking this tact instead of being prohibitionist.'

Communication	Transparency; Lack of Transparency	Communication breakdown between faculty and staff at AB and the students.	'I just feel like they don't listen to what we have to say.'; 'We have the same advisor and she got an email about registration and I didn't.'; 'I don't even think I think they've ever like specified how much that they're fining us. They just say there will be a fine for finding two pieces of trash out in the courtyard.'
Small Things Become Big Things	Rapport with Faculty; Institutional Commitment to Success; Financial Frustrations	Small frustrations build and become big sources of unhappiness for students.	'The worst part about it is they tell you they fine you, but they don't show you how much the fine you. None of us know, the just add it to your bill.'

## Appendix E: Analytic Memo Example

Theme	Example	Memo
Motivation to Stay versus Motivation to Attend	<p>‘I chose AB because I was heavy in athletics in high school. And I got the opportunity to come here and play basketball and run track. I got a scholarship for it.’</p> <p>‘The reason I came and the reason I stayed are different.’; ‘I think I stayed because the people, the teachers and stuff that I met didn’t just see us as students.’</p>	<p>This interview showed an interesting contrast because we had students who had been there through the major transition from academics to athletics. They had great insights. One theme that stands out: motivation to attend versus motivation to stay. Another theme could be unmet expectations as a follow-up to this because if their expectations are not met in one area they may leave OR they may end up latching onto another area that helps to support their persistence. This also can link to inconsistency of experience.</p>
Met/Unmet Expectations	<p>It’s just unmet expectations. Like, we’re told one thing and then it’s not.’; If you’re coming from a place not like Philippi, it can be a culture shock.’</p>	<p>Met expectations align with motivation to stay and attend? Recruiting the right student is important in this context so that the expectations are aligned. Students who know what they’re getting seem more satisfied (like, if they attend ABU because it’s small they are satisfied; when they show up for the strong nursing program, they are satisfied, etc.) Students who are motivated to come for the money, when you take the money away by adding more burden, it creates discord (again, unmet expectations).</p>



STUDENT RETENTION IN AN AFFINITY BONDING MODEL  
ALDERSON BROADDUS UNIVERSITY

Appendix G: Table of Correlations of Pre-Entry Variables

	no re-enroll	HS GPA	ylfgpa	ylfall credits	ylsgpa	ylspring credits	total credits	athlete team	Greek member	Pell eligible	sex Female	SAT score	Race White	Race Black	No major	traditional age
no re-enroll	1.0000															
HS GPA	-0.1847	1.0000														
ylfgpa	-0.2770	0.6061	1.0000													
ylfcredits	-0.1590	0.2903	0.2983	1.0000												
ylsgpa	-0.3140	0.4836	0.6684	0.2620	1.0000											
ylscredits	-0.1827	0.2765	0.3611	0.2012	0.3976	1.0000										
tot. scredits	-0.2211	0.3647	0.4274	0.7423	0.4304	0.8057	1.0000									
athlete	-0.0095	0.1236	0.1104	0.0922	0.0412	0.0260	0.0735	1.0000								
Greek	0.2103	-0.2081	-0.2283	-0.1342	-0.1470	-0.0983	-0.1484	-0.0096	1.0000							
Pell	-0.0687	0.1956	0.2739	0.1114	0.1659	0.1138	0.1452	-0.0505	-0.1066	1.0000						
sex: female	-0.0797	0.2928	0.2268	0.1545	0.1789	0.2073	0.2352	0.2347	-0.1475	0.1020	1.0000					
SAT score	-0.0518	0.4828	0.3668	0.2048	0.2801	0.2163	0.2718	0.1370	-0.1441	0.1988	0.1222	1.0000				
race white	-0.0591	0.3089	0.3058	0.1661	0.1485	0.1207	0.1830	0.2141	-0.1641	0.1795	0.2214	0.3066	1.0000			
race black	0.0521	-0.3390	-0.3274	-0.1946	-0.2053	-0.1634	-0.2295	-0.1724	0.1512	-0.2226	-0.1983	-0.3146	-0.7963	1.0000		
undeclared	-0.0597	-0.0870	-0.0447	-0.0773	-0.0054	-0.0756	-0.0985	-0.0032	0.0346	0.0070	-0.0851	-0.0128	0.0111	0.0122	1.0000	
traditional age	-0.0900	0.1134	0.0965	0.0226	0.1009	0.0365	0.0386	-0.0267	-0.0002	0.0152	0.0328	0.1029	0.0510	0.0517	-0.0060	1.0000
distance	0.0306	-0.0115	0.0598	0.0413	0.0902	0.0684	0.0717	-0.0870	0.0343	0.1351	-0.0800	-0.0469	-0.2590	-0.0721	0.0047	-0.2359
distance	distance															
distance	1.0000															