

2-2016


# What are the Barriers and Conduits to College Success for Academically Vulnerable Students?

Marisol Zacarias

*Graduate Center, City University of New York*

## How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_etds](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds)

 Part of the [Counseling Commons](#), and the [Student Counseling and Personnel Services Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Zacarias, Marisol, "What are the Barriers and Conduits to College Success for Academically Vulnerable Students?" (2016). *CUNY Academic Works*.

[https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_etds/711](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/711)

This Thesis is brought to you by CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact [deposit@gc.cuny.edu](mailto:deposit@gc.cuny.edu).

What are the Barriers and Conduits to College Success  
for Academically Vulnerable Students?

by

Marisol Zacarias

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2016

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the  
Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the  
thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

---

Date

---

Thesis Advisor

---

Date

---

Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS AND CONDUITS TO COLLEGE SUCCESS FOR  
ACADEMICALLY VULNERABLE STUDENTS?

by

Marisol Zacarias

Advisor: Professor Juan Battle

What are the barriers and conduits to college success for academically vulnerable students? Employing two theoretical frameworks—ecological systems theory and intersectionality—this thesis interrogates two concepts: grit/persistence and support. To do this, data were collected from a group of academically vulnerable students of color from low-income backgrounds via two methodologically different venues: a focus group in 2012 and follow-up one-on-one interviews two years later, in 2014. From the focus group, two themes emerged: discouraging messages and hope. Two years later the follow-up one-on-one interviews produced two additional themes: balancing act and support. Building positive peer relationships was identified as a key strategy to foster their retention and graduation in college. This thesis concludes with recommendations for students, college administrators, and policymakers to build more strategical mechanisms that ensure the success of all academically vulnerable students.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Theoretical Framework and Literature Review.....	6
Methodology.....	19
Findings.....	24
Discussion.....	34
Conclusion.....	38
References.....	44

## INTRODUCTION

Low-income students of color are not being prepared for college, and it is a national crisis. Of those who do make it to college, Black and Latino students have the lowest retention and graduation rates nationally. In a 2014 *New York Times* article “Who Gets to Graduate,” striking data were reported. "About a quarter of college freshmen born into the bottom half of the income distribution will manage to collect a bachelor’s degree by age 24, while almost 90 percent of freshmen born into families in the top income quartile will go on to finish their degree” (Tough, 2014). Low-income students are less likely to graduate from college, when compared to higher income students. What do low-income students of color need to transition successfully to college? What strategies will help them stay in and complete college once they enter?

In recent years, there has been a growing concern about the widening gap between the knowledge, skills, and experiences of our nation’s youth and what they need to be successful in a highly competitive, technology-driven global economy. Too many students are unprepared for post-secondary education and face serious challenges in their journey to a financially sustainable adulthood. The situation is particularly critical for vulnerable youth from high-need urban communities. In New York City, those most vulnerable are predominantly low income and minority students, who fall behind on national averages in academic performance, high school graduation, college enrollment, and degree completion. Community colleges, because of their accessibility and affordability, play a key role in helping underserved students gain access to post-secondary education. Students, however, are increasingly entering these institutions lacking basic skills. An article in the *New York Post* indicated that 80% of NYC public school graduates

who enrolled in City University of New York (CUNY) community colleges in 2012 needed remediation in reading, writing, and especially math (Gonen, 2013).

In New York City the majority of students attending public schools are low-income youth of color. In the NYC Department of Education demographics snapshot of district schools for the 2013 - 2014 school year, 28.3% of students were Black, 40.2% were Latino, and 78.9% received free or reduced lunch (New York City Department of Education, 2013). A large number of Black and Latino students are placed in remedial courses at CUNY's two-year community colleges. Numbers reported by local newspapers indicate the problem persists. Remedial courses are not only a financial burden on the students, they are also additional courses that take time and do not apply towards credits needed to graduate. What pushes some to persist despite these obstacles? Throughout my thesis I will rely on Angela Lee Duckworth's idea of grit and Vincent Tinto's use of interactionist theory, two theories that explain student persistence and retention.

Unique to this research is the representation of the voices of community college students. Throughout my experience as the program director of a college retention program for four years, young people have been invited to small focus groups, where we discussed their educational journey and the negative messages they received in grades K-12. Almost two years after the focus group, I re-interviewed two of the original four students who participated – the only two who have persisted and are still enrolled in college. In those interviews we examined the reasons why they remained in college, the obstacles they faced, and how they approached those challenges. Through their stories we will learn how they have persisted despite the odds against them.

The next two sections of this thesis will investigate low retention and college graduation rates for Black and Latino students, followed by a discussion of the academic achievement gap.

### **Low Retention and Graduation Rates**

Black and Latino students have the lowest retention and college graduation rates in New York City. Specifically, students who graduate from New York City public schools have high remediation needs when entering the CUNY system. According to recent data highlighted in the Center for an Urban Future report *Completion Day*, only 26% of two-year college students earn an associate's or bachelor's degree within six years of enrolling (Hilliard & Spaic, 2013). According to *Core Principles for Transforming Remedial Education*, the graduation rate is even lower for students who are required to take remedial courses. Just one quarter of community college students who took a remedial course earned a degree after eight years (Charles A. Dana Center, Complete College America, Inc., Education Commission of the States, and Jobs for the Future, 2012). Remedial course placement is high, while graduation rates are low, especially for those in remedial classes. Community colleges play a pivotal role in helping underserved students gain access to post-secondary education. In 2013 the American Association of Community Colleges reported that community colleges enrolled 46% of undergraduate students nationwide (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015). Since community college enrollment is high, we can see that this is an issue that affects many of our students across the United States.

The challenge is even greater for students who graduate from Multiple Pathways programs; these are alternative education programs for overage and under-credited youth that have dropped out or are at risk of dropping out of high school. Graduates of Multiple Pathways



programs in New York City have faced enormous challenges simply to graduate from high school, placing them at an even greater disadvantage and lower academic skills than the average student entering a CUNY college. “In New York City, 138,000 youth between the ages of 16 and 21 are overage and under-credited. 70,000 of them are in school, while 68,000 have already dropped out. Compared with the total NYC high school enrollment, there are 11% more males and 14% more African Americans and Hispanics in the overage, under-credited population” (New York City Department of Education, n.d., p. 2). According to a New York City Department of Education demographic profile of the overage and under-credited population who graduate from Multiple Pathways programs, approximately “60% are male, 42% are age 18 or older, and 83% are African-American or Hispanic” (Lynch, J., 2006). Graduates of Multiple Pathways programs are at high risk of dropping out of school. As demonstrated from the data, the majority of these students are African-American and Latino males. The voices reflected in this thesis are from graduates of Multiple Pathways programs. They have faced enormous life challenges and critical conditions, which place youth at high risk of academic failure; some of the high-risk conditions include severe poverty, being from a young family, and recent immigration.

A study by Fruchter et al. (2012) *Is Demography Still Destiny? Neighborhood Demographics and Public High School Students' Readiness for College in New York City* points to the inequities of college readiness in New York City. This study reveals that the racial and economic profile of a student's home neighborhood continues to be a strong predictor of chances of graduating ready for college. It points to huge disparities in college readiness across the city's boroughs and neighborhoods, those with high populations of African Americans and Latinos, faring the worst.

## **The Achievement Gap**

The achievement gap is an academic performance disparity between different racial groups. The National Education Association describes students affected by the achievement gap as racial and ethnic minorities, English language learners, students with disabilities, and students from low-income families (National Education Association, n.d.). And while there are four ethnic groups affected by the achievement gap, my research primarily focuses on Black and Hispanic/Latino students from low-income families.

In the 1960s the United States was in the midst of the civil rights movement, which challenged us to think about equity in our educational system. Desegregation changed the lives of African American children in America. During that time it was the “federal government, specifically the federal courts that served as a guarantor of equal access to public schools” (McDermott, 2007, p. 87). Since it was the federal government making decisions about equal access to education, the reality of the desegregation was very different locally. At the local level there was little commitment to equity, thus limiting access of an equal education to children of color. In many areas racial desegregation did not affect affluent White neighborhoods, while poor Whites and poor Blacks were lumped together in schools with few resources (McDermott, 2007). The achievement gap in schools has had a long-term effect on segregated communities and those consequences include limiting the opportunities of students of color in terms of higher education, earning potential, and employment opportunities (Lee, 2002).

Often it is poor children of color who are disproportionately put into low-ability classes early on in their educational careers. This stratification of students, or tracking, leads to placement in remedial classes. Curriculum tracking has harmful effects on the achievement of low-track students. Kao and Thompson (2003) show that Whites are tracked into college

preparatory classes at a much higher rate than Black and Latino students. Later on in their educational careers, in middle school and high school, these same Black and Latino students are placed in remedial classes at a much higher rate than they are in college preparatory classes. In the long run, placement in the lower track has a negative effect on students of color. It places them at a disadvantage in academic achievement and academic motivation (Kao & Thompson, 2003).

### **Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

It is evident that academically vulnerable students of color have many barriers to successfully transitioning to college and ultimately graduating. Despite these barriers they exhibit grit and persist. Though there are several theories that are important to what is discussed here, four are particularly significant. In the context of this thesis I will examine two theoretical frameworks, ecological systems theory and intersectionality, as the lens I use when interrogating two concepts, grit and college student social integration.

A young person's day-to-day environment influences his or her development. Ecological systems theory can provide a framework to understand interactions between an individual's day-to-day life and those systems outside of their control, to understand their growth and development. Intersectionality studies social identities whose complexities and interdependencies affect individuals facing discrimination.

Related to the themes uncovered during this study, I will present an overview of grit and persistence towards long-term goals. Additionally, I will examine interactionist theory; it provides a theoretical model that explains a student's interaction in college with others, which leads to their social and academic integration.

Finally, I will discuss the findings that emerged and recommendations.

## Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological systems theory, developed by psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), is about people and their environment. Bronfenbrenner was interested in the development of children in their daily life. In the 1970s when he developed this theory the research in developmental psychology was limited. The research up until that time focused on “the science of the strange behavior of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible period of time” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 513). He was interested in research that focused on the development of individuals over time. It is a lens through which to analyze individuals and the impact of the environmental systems they encounter throughout their growth. There are five environmental systems that individuals encounter. Those five systems are the macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem, microsystem, and chronosystem. Figure 1 below describes the different systems.

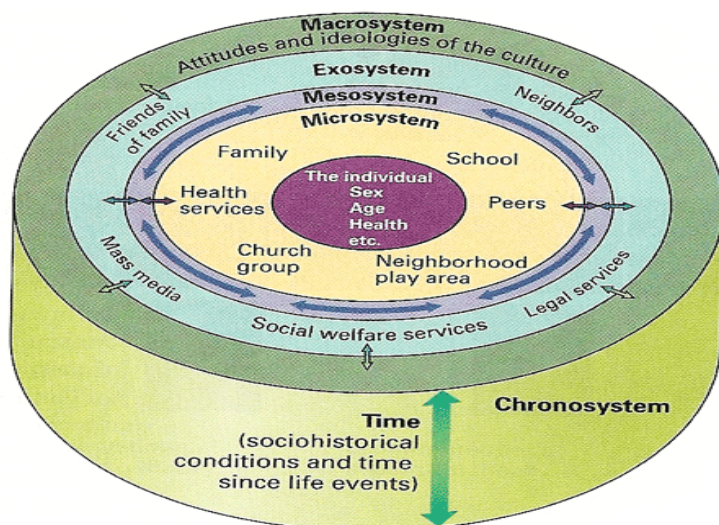


Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory  
Source: Santrock 2007

In reviewing figure 1 above, the center of the circle is the individual, surrounding the inner circle is the microsystem. Moving outwards from the center, following the microsystem is the mesosystem, then the exosystem, and finally the macrosystem. The chronosystem in the figure is described as covering the lifespan of the individual. In describing each system, I will use the example of a twelve-year-old boy named David, as the individual at the center of the system.

### Microsystem

The first circle outwards from the individual is the microsystem; this image includes family, school, peers, and church groups. These are people with whom an individual has direct contact on a day-to-day basis. It is important to examine how those day-to-day interactions influence the growth and development of a child. For example, David, a twelve-year-old boy would typically have day-to-day interactions with his family, school and neighborhood friends, and his teachers.

### Mesosystem

The second circle outwards from the middle is the mesosystem, the bi-directional arrows represent the interactions between the microsystems in every-day life. For instance David's day-to-day life interactions would include family and school; the mesosystem explores the interactions between the two (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). How do the interactions in David's family influence the interactions in his school life and thus influence his development?

### Exosystem

The third circle from the middle represents the exosystem, where we find neighbors, social welfare services, friends of family, and mass media. These social structures are outside of the individual's control but they are present and therefore influence development. Some of these

social structures may even determine what happens to the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

An example of this could be David's family moving out of state because his dad was promoted at work. The financial benefits of a promotion will relieve the financial burden on his family, but the move presents other issues outside of the family's control. The family moves into a district that has failing schools, which in turn has an impact on David's schooling experience.

### Macrosystem

The last circle represents the macrosystem, which is composed of cultural attitudes and ideologies. It "refers to the overarching institutional patterns of the culture or subculture, such as the economic, social, educational, legal and political systems, of which micro-, meso- and exo-systems are the concrete manifestations" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 515). Bronfenbrenner notes the place children and their caretakers have in these macrosystems affects how they are treated and interact (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). To follow the exosystem example, for David, attending a failing school not only influences his development but also his view on failing school districts. His experiences could lead him to explore equity inside and outside of his community.

### Chronosystem

The chronosystem is seen in the visual representation of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory at the bottom cupping all of the other systems because it encompasses all of the experiences in an individual's lifetime. The experiences include all of the changes and transitions in an individual's lifespan. Additionally, the chronosystem includes the social historical contexts that influence the development of a child and family. Historical influences that occur at the macro level can positively or negatively affect a family based on its ability to respond to those events (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Finally, in the chronosystem it is important to examine all of the experiences in David's life. How did his family's move affect his

development? How did attending a failing school affect his academic development, thus his worldview?

As is seen through the ecological systems theory, there are many systems and factors that influence the development of a child. Understanding the individual circumstances for that particular child and the interactions of those environments can shed light on its growth and development.

### **Intersectionality**

When studying the types of discrimination certain populations face throughout their lives, the identities the discriminated assign to themselves and what identities are being given to them are important. Over time there is an overlap of social identities, and whether that overlap compounds the discrimination or alleviates it is an area of social study that has grown significantly as we have become a more diverse society.

Intersectionality, as coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, is the study of overlapping or *intersecting* social identities and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination used to understand how systemic injustice occurs on a multidimensional basis (Crenshaw, 1989). These social identities are based on biological, social, and cultural categories such as race, class, gender, ability, sexual orientation, size, religion, and age. Intersectionality explains how these identities interrelate and affect groups that face discrimination. In many cases multiple forms of discrimination interact to produce a stronger effect. This study is extremely important to social work because until recently there has been little research into the experiences of people who are subjected to multiple forms of subordination.

The idea that social identities overlap was introduced as part of an internal critique of feminist theory during the late 1970s. The critique challenged the idea that gender was the sole factor determining an individual's fate (hooks, 1984). Academics such as Crenshaw, and later Patricia Hills, argued that while white women and black women did indeed suffer the same gender-based discrimination, the ways that this discrimination affected them differed due to other social identities, such as race and class. Crenshaw, in her 1989 essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" presented the discrimination faced by the women of the Combahee River Collective of Boston, Massachusetts to highlight this difference. These women brought a discrimination suit against General Motors (*DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*). The background leading to this suit was as follows: The General Motors Corporation had never hired a Black woman for its workforce before 1964—the year the Civil Rights Act passed Congress. All the Black women hired after 1970, however, lost their jobs fairly quickly in mass layoffs during the 1973–1975 recession. Such a sweeping loss of jobs among Black women led the plaintiffs to argue that seniority-based layoffs, guided by the principle "last hired-first fired" discriminated against Black women workers at General Motors, extending past discriminatory practices by the company (Crenshaw, 1989).

Unfortunately, the courts did not allow the plaintiffs to combine the discrimination they faced as women and Blacks into a single category of discrimination. This was likely due to complexities that would be created in future discrimination cases. While the discrimination they faced was compounded, the courts would not allow this effect to be examined, and it fell through the cracks (Crenshaw, 1989).

While born from the black feminist movement, the idea of viewing discrimination through the lens of intersectionality has returned to the frontlines of social justice as our society



has diversified and various self-identified groups have come forward to demand that attention be given to the discrimination they experience daily. Patricia Hill Collins has argued that examining an individual's standpoint is a better way to grasp the compound discriminations she faces. A *Standpoint*, is an individual's unique world perspective. This standpoint is informed by and dependent on the societal conditions to he or she is exposed. In some cases, an individual's standpoint can put her in a position of being "the outsider within," which adds a deeper layer of complexity since it encompasses the self, family, and society (Collins, 1986).

Regrettably, intersectionality can quickly reach a level of complexity that while useful in examining a small number of cases, becomes complicated when tackling, at a similar depth, the discrimination faced by large diverse groups. Even so, there are undeniable real world expressions of compounded discrimination, leading to unfortunate situations, where identities intersect.

The complexities of intersectionality can be seen in education. Access to a quality education throughout the United States is a direct result of the tax bases of the communities in which those children and families live. Generally, communities with lower property values pay less tax and this leads to fewer resources for schools. The children attending these schools are less likely to be taught by an experienced and qualified teacher; as a result their ability to graduate from college or be career ready is negatively affected. According to Johnson (2011), students who attend segregated schools are more likely to face negative consequences throughout their lifetime. They are more likely to be poor. They are less likely to graduate from high school, or to go to college. Since they are more likely to live in segregated communities as adults, their kids are more likely to attend segregated schools. This perpetuates an endless cycle of students of color living on the margins (Hannah-Jones, 2014).

## **Grit/Persistence**

Angela Lee Duckworth and colleagues popularized the term “grit” in the field of education. They defined grit as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087). In their study “Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals,” Duckworth and her colleagues showed that “grit, perseverance and passion for long-term goals,” can be measured, and furthermore, it is a stronger indicator of future success than intellect alone (Duckworth et al., 2007, p.1087).

The authors asked “why do some individuals accomplish more than others of equal intelligence?” (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087). While leaders have many different characteristics that make them successful, the authors suggested grit was “shared by the most prominent leaders” (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087). Those who believe in grit as the answer to the always-present question, what motivates students, believe that people with grit have set long-term goals for themselves and do not move away from those or jump around to other goals. In their research they found that those with grit will continue to work “maintain effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity and plateaus in progress.” (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1088). Even in the face of obstacles, according to Duckworth, grit is inherent and those with grit will continue to work towards their goals.

A few years prior to the 2007 grit study, Duckworth and Seligman published an article titled “Self- Discipline Outdoes IQ in Predicting Academic Performance of Adolescents” (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005). In their study they focused on answering questions such as “what distinguishes top students from others?” and “what explains the wide range of performance among children of equal IQ?” (p. 939). Duckworth, a former educator in both New York City and Chicago public schools was intrigued by questions of performance and

motivation. In their study they found that those students who were highly disciplined outperformed their more impulsive peers. They found that “self-discipline also predicted which students would improve their grades over the course of the school year, whereas IQ did not” (p.942).

Duckworth and colleagues developed the grit scale and published it in their 2007 study. The researchers sought to develop a self-report questionnaire that included questions that measured grit. When generating those questions their “overarching goal for scale development was to capture the attitudes and behaviors characteristic of the high-achieving individuals described to us in early, exploratory interviews with lawyers, businesspeople, academics and other professionals” (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1090). They sought to capture not just perseverance over time but also in the face of obstacles. The final product was a twelve-item scale, “six items indicating consistency of interests” and “six items indicating perseverance of effort” (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1090).

The research found that the individual with grit will be the one who sticks to her goal. Through interviews, Duckworth developed the “hypothesis that grit is essential to high achievement.” In their 2007 study, Duckworth et al. proceeded to use the twelve-item grit questionnaire in six different case studies (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1088). In studies one and two, a large sample of adults twenty-five and over was used to validate the grit scale. It was found that grit was higher among adults who completed higher education levels than those who had not and were the same age. In study three, grit was associated with lower SAT scores among students who were psychology majors at the University of Pennsylvania, in fall 2002. The research concluded that those participants who were considered less bright compensated by working harder than their more intelligent peers. The participants in studies four and five were

United States Military Academy cadets training at West Point during the summer of 2004. In both studies, those who displayed more grit completed their summer training successfully. In study six it was found that grit predicted spelling bee participants' movement into higher rounds. At the 2005 Scripps National Spelling Bee it was found that those who studied longer outperformed their peers. In all six studies, participants who demonstrated grit, defined as persistence over time towards long-term goals despite any obstacles, "accounted for significant incremental variance in successful outcomes over and beyond that explained by IQ, to which it was not positively related" (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1098).

In academia, not many opponents of grit can be found. Most believe it is a predictor of success. There are, however, some concerns with the populations that are not captured in the studies. While grit is a useful measurement of success it is important to note, the studies on grit in large part include high performing students, a flaw recognized by the researchers themselves. They do not take into account cultural, social and environmental factors. Duckworth's article on grit, featured students at the University of Pennsylvania, the U.S. Military Academy at West Point (which has highly competitive training), and Scripps National Spelling Bee finalists. The studies do not address a student population that faces socio-economic and academic challenges in their day-to-day lives. Outside of academic challenges, high needs young people face economic, housing, crime and drug use issues in their communities. They may also have limited social supports at home.

Often, students of color receive negative messages regarding their academic performance. These negative stereotypes about a race's ability and knowledge can lead to internalized thoughts that undermine their intelligence. In the report "Promoting Grit, Tenacity, and Perseverance: Critical Factors for Success in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" this is referred to as stereotype threat, "a threat

to self-esteem that entails a felt pressure and anxiety that his or her poor performance may confirm the negative stereotype” associated with that ethnic minority group (Shechtman et al. 2013, p. 3). Stereotype threat, in turn, undermines perseverance when faced with difficult situations. These other factors will affect the way a population of low-income, high-needs students respond to a self-report on a grit scale questionnaire on any given day.

Additionally, with any self-report questionnaire responses are based on that moment, and how that person feels. While considering methodological tradeoffs the researchers who designed the study *Promoting Grit, Tenacity and Perseverance* recognized the risks in using survey data. They recognize that surveys may not capture the changes in grit of people over time and across different types of situations. This fault may in turn contribute to false assumptions that there is stability in the grit scale across different situations (Duckworth *et al.*, 2007).

### **Interactionist Theory**

Vincent Tinto introduced to college retention professionals an important piece of research in his 1975 article “Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research.” With this widely-cited article he introduced us to an interactionist theory of college student departure. The theory familiarizes us with college persistence as a result of students effectively interacting with the academic and social activities of a college. According to Tinto, this integration positively influences a student’s persistence and decreases their likelihood to leave college (Tinto, 1975).

Tinto noted social integration must happen in the classroom because it functions as a gateway for student involvement in other aspects of the college experience. By actively engaging in the classroom experience, integration leads to continued involvement outside of the

classroom and in the larger social community. He found students who demonstrated a greater commitment to their educational experiences had a greater rate of persistence in college. In engaging with peers, faculty, social systems, and intellectual college life, students deepen their commitment to the institution (Tinto, 1975). Interactionist theory attributes an important role to socioeconomic background, personal characteristics, and pre-college experiences in shaping students' commitments to their institutions. There are many factors that influence a student's decision to remain in or leave school; he believes those core factors contribute to student persistence. The following figure illustrates the impact of the interactions between a student and the academic and social systems in college, it demonstrates how those systems contribute to a student's decision-making process to persist in or leave school.

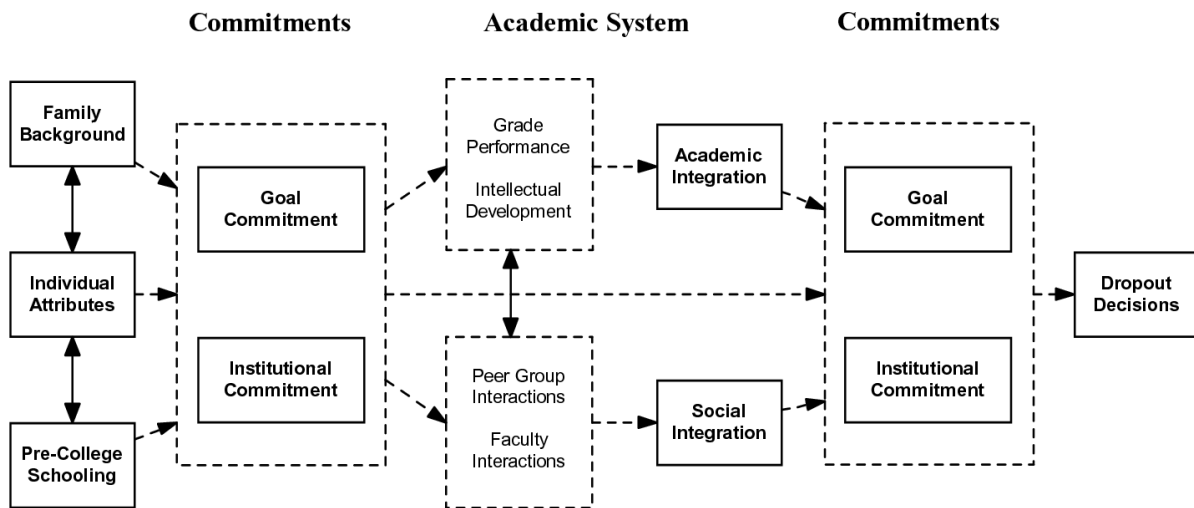


Figure 2: A Conceptual Schema for Dropping Out of College (Tinto, 1975, p. 95).

From left to right, first, the image portrays the variety of attributes and experiences with which students enter college. Every student is different; family backgrounds, individual attributes, which include sex and race, and pre-college experiences, will vary. The combination of these experiences will have a direct or indirect influence on performance in college. Based

on these characteristics a student will develop goal and institutional commitments, which they carry with them to college. For example if students have had disappointing pre-college academic experiences, their goal commitment to graduate from college may be less robust (Tinto, 1975).

Once in college, an individual has an opportunity to integrate academically and socially into the college environment. Pre-college commitments coupled with college experiences will determine the new levels of commitment to goals and academic institutions. The more involved students become, the greater the chances are that they will persist. The chart illustrates the pathways through which grade performance and intellectual development lead to academic integration. In the chart the peer group, faculty, and institutional interactions demonstrate social integration.

Finally, on the far right of the chart we see that social and academic integration can lead to greater individual commitment to academic goals and institutions. With successfully integration into college communities, Tinto's interactionist theory predicts the student will persist to college completion. If the student, however, has demonstrated either low goal or institutional commitment, they are more likely to drop out of college. If they exhibit low commitment to their institution, but not to their college completion goal, this could mean they may transfer to another school. That combination of commitment could also result in the student sticking it out because they have a strong commitment to their college completion goal (Tinto, 1975).

Tinto's interactionist theory demonstrates that student involvement and integration have shown to increase student persistence in college (Tinto, 1993). Therefore, a student who builds relationships inside and outside of the classroom with his peers, faculty, and institution shows integration into the social fabric of college life.

## METHODOLOGY

Often youth voices are missing from the conversation about how to best support their education. It would be beneficial to those in the field of higher education to ask youth: What would keep them in college, even when they have many obstacles to overcome? This thesis explores their responses to those questions. It introduces the lived experiences of college students who are vulnerable youth and at risk and low-income, the least likely students to go to college and persist.

### **Research Design**

When conducting a focus group, it is important to create a setting where participants feel comfortable discussing a topic deeply. According to Anthony G. Picciano “qualitative research relies on the meanings, concepts, context, descriptions and settings” (Picciano, 2004, p.32). On October 26, 2012 four college students in their first year of college participated in a focus group. The method allowed for sharing knowledge and experiences, within a community that was familiar and safe for the students. Our discussion began with a go around where everyone shared something positive that happened during the week. Often times it is easier for individuals to think about the things that didn’t go well during the week. This question challenged them to think about the positive. When faced with so many life obstacles, it can be a struggle to think about the positive. This exercise allowed us to start the conversation from a place of positivity. Questionnaires play an important role in quantitative research, but they do not take situational factors into consideration and may be subjective, based on the day the student has had. Therefore, it was important to collect qualitative data for this study.



Everyone learns and expresses him or herself differently; consequently focus group members had the option to write or draw their educational journey on paper. Throughout the focus group, youth participated in different activities, because based on my experience some students work better alone, while others work better in a group. I wanted to take into account the different styles of learning and engagement of each of our participants. During this exercise some youth used images, while others were more comfortable with writing words to express themselves. Each participant engaged in their own drawings, three of the four students were self-conscious about sharing their stories, and their artwork. Individuals can be especially self-conscious when their journey involves making themselves vulnerable to the rest of the group. If they were taking a questionnaire, they may not be aware of the level of risk everyone else was taking in their responses. In these activities, however, they were able to open up. Focus groups tend to have a group effect. In some cases one person sharing experiences may lead to others drawing their own memories or experiences. This leads participants to engaging in a “cascading effect,” where memories are triggered and the conversation flows from one participant to another (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). To facilitate the process of sharing openly and honestly, I shared my story first. Participants had a trusting relationship with me, and this allowed them to open up and share with one another. The focus group ended with a talk back session in response to the messages the students received at school and in their community.

In July 2014, I met with two of the original focus group participants for one-on-one interviews. During the one-on-one interviews the students reflected on their experiences in college since the October 2012 focus group. I focused questions on their educational journeys in college, how they responded to obstacles they faced, and what advice they would give to incoming freshmen. In the interviews I shared artifacts such as an academic transcript of their

progress in college to ground them on the facts, when necessary. Similar questions were used throughout each interview.

This work was conducted during my term as the program director of a college transition and retention program. All interviews and conversations took place at my office during work hours. These interviews informed our program offerings and our counseling support.

### **Participant Summary**

Participation was voluntary. The students who were asked to take part in the feedback sessions were all participants of a college transition and success program. They were chosen because they had gone through the pre-college and college retention support program offerings; throughout their participation they demonstrated a commitment to our program protocols and expectations. Each student was given a small incentive for participating.

All participants graduated from Multiple Pathways high school programs. Often the students we engaged in our program had a history of failing classes, truancy, or other issues that stood in the way of them graduating from a traditional high school. Due to the history of obstacles in their academic lives, they attended alternative high school education programs and entered our program already having experienced many obstacles and failures.

As a result of negative messages they received regarding their academic performance, students were not only academically underprepared for college but also did not have the support for the transition to college.

The four students who participated in the focus group had a history of having fallen behind in their high school journey; they either graduated from a GED, Transfer School, or Young Adult Borough Center, which are all part of a portfolio of alternative options developed

by the NYC Department of Education, Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation (OMPG). Students who graduate from alternative programs are overage and under-credited, which means they are at least two years behind in academic credits. The OMPG was established in 2005 by Chancellor Joel Klein in response to a “2005 data study by The Parthenon Group that identified 138,000 youth between the ages of 16 and 21 who were overage and under credited (New York City Department of Education, n.d., p. 2). According to the report, if all of the overage and under-credited young people in school and out of school were counted, it would “rank [as] the second-largest high school district in the US” (New York City Department of Education, n.d., p. 2). According to the demographics of this population, most are male, and either African American or Hispanic. As already cited in the report *Is Demography Still Destiny?* (Fruchter et al., 2012), neighborhoods with high African American and Latino student populations are faring the worst in graduating college-ready students.

Each of the students in the focus group received full financial aid, which includes federal and state grants. To receive full financial aid, family income and size are under the federal poverty line; in the following statistic we see that this is \$20,000 for a family of four. According to a July 2011 policy brief released by the American Association of Community Colleges, “nearly 80% of Pell Grant recipients attending community colleges in 2009-2010 had family incomes of less than 150% of the federal poverty threshold, and 60.7% were below the poverty threshold for a family of four (\$20,000)” (Baime & Mullin, 2011, p. 4). The majority of our students and their families live below the poverty line. Financial resources are limited and often serve as an obstacle to transitioning to college as a full-time student. Financial demands at home become a priority and an obstacle to enrolling in college.

**Adetayo** immigrated to the United States from Nigeria during middle school. He lived with his mother and a toddler sister. His father was not present. Adetayo's mother worked many hours, and he was often responsible for taking care of his little sister. He was an English language learner and has had a particularly difficult time passing his remedial writing course. Adetayo was in his first year of college when he was initially interviewed. He became involved with the college retention program while he was in his senior year of high school.

**Roberto** is a male, born in the United States to Dominican parents. He and his younger sister lived in the housing projects near his college, in a single parent household with their mother. His father was not present. Roberto was in his first year of college in a rigorous and competitive academic program when he was initially interviewed. He received full financial aid. Roberto became involved in the college retention program while he was earning his high school diploma from a New York City Community Transfer high school.

**Monique** self identifies as African American. When she was initially interviewed she was in foster care—her parents were not present in her life—and in her first year of college. Monique received full financial aid. She became involved in the college retention program while she was earning her GED.

**Maria** self identifies as Latina and White. She lives in a single-parent household with her mother and autistic son. Maria was in her first year of college in an academically rigorous program when he was initially interviewed. She received full financial aid. She became involved in the college retention program while she was earning her high school diploma at a Young Adult Borough Center in NYC.

## FINDINGS

As a result of the focus group and interviews four themes emerged. The themes that surfaced are important to understanding what has kept the participants motivated in their pursuit of a college education. Each participant demonstrated a sense of hope, despite individual circumstances and the obstacles that had to be overcome. Each also described the lack of a supportive environment in his or her community and high school experience; this theme is labeled “discouraging messages.” Additionally, once the participants discovered what it took to persist in college, they described the need to balance all of their responsibilities, which I have named “balancing act.” Finally, participants shared the importance of support from peers and institutional retention programs.

### Hope

Roberto described his images as filled with “messages of success” and “living in the projects.” He strove towards images of success, because he felt that “those in college have the opportunity to strive towards those images.” Those images of success highlighted professions in law, medicine, the military, finance, and the music industry. Whereas the “things you see in the projects” highlighted pizza dinners, taxi cab drivers, pole dancing for money, and drug selling. Roberto understood that “you do what you have to do to support your family, so I don’t judge people. You sell water on the street if you have to.” His narrative, however, was different because he saw his educational opportunities as a way to overcome the housing project life. “I have this opportunity to support my family by going to school, things can be different for us.” Roberto, although in a challenging nursing program, was hopeful about his future success in the competitive academic program.

Adetayo's hope stemmed from his immigration experience in the United States. As is the case for the majority of immigrant families, his mother immigrated to the U.S. because of the "opportunities, especially when it comes to education." In the process of having to learn a new language and being the "other" in school, however, Adetayo has not had a smooth transition to the U.S. He shared his story with the group: "I had to get my act together, I was messing up." Adetayo went on to say, "my mother was a constant rock to me, she always encouraged me, but she also did this by scaring me into doing what I was supposed to do." And by "supposed to do" he meant doing well in school and persisting despite having to learn a new language. Adetayo had a difficult time transitioning into this country, but family expectations, the expectations of immigration and fear, kept him hopeful and motivated him to enroll in college. Since entering college, Adetayo has had great difficulty in transitioning and has already failed a couple of courses. But he persisted because he "has to take advantage of the educational opportunities the U.S. has to offer," opportunities that were not available to him in his home country, Nigeria.

Monique, who was in the foster care system, was hopeful of the independence a college education could give her when she ages out of the foster care system. Her educational journey has been one of great difficulty and uncertainty. This can be seen in her jumbled up image of high school letters floating in bubbles. She described those floating bubbles as her state of confusion: "I didn't know why I was going to school— to learn? Or to make OTHER people happy to see me in school." Finally, she found her way to a GED program, but when she did she was still confused and had many questions. Symbolized by the question marks in the image she shares: "I still questioned whether or not the GED program was the best route for me." Monique navigated her confusion on her own, without a foster family that she felt comfortable talking to.

We can see how Monique fell through the cracks. If it had not been for her own self-motivation, she would have “dropped out because I didn’t know what to do.”

Monique’s educational journey continued as a hope for “survival,” to provide her with some financial security once she aged out of the foster care system. Monique stated, “I get it, if I can get this degree now, maybe when I age out I can support myself.” She had a sense of urgency and felt “I just need to get in and out quickly, because I don’t have much longer at my foster home.” She was well aware of the financial benefits of a higher education but was not in a position to focus on the intellectual and social benefits of her education. Unfortunately, she did not have the luxury of going to college to enjoy learning about new subjects; she went for the credentials and the financial opportunities that a college diploma could open up for her. Monique was fueled by the hope that her college education will be her financial security.

Maria, who described her home as hopeless, came to the realization that “If I don’t have hope in my life, what hope could my family have.” Maria moved around frequently when she was younger, and having grown up in an abusive household, she ran away from home often. In her image the dark doors and stoop on the left hand upper corner of her drawing represented her home for the past 13 years, where at night, in the dark she ran away, often. And her home felt dark because, she stated, in her household “nobody aspired to do anything.”

In high school Maria found herself with few credits, pregnant, and in special education classes. Special education students are often stigmatized and left behind or ignored. Maria shares that “nobody cared about me at school, and they often encouraged me to drop out.” Her life changed when she became pregnant in high school. It was the turning point for her outlook on life, when she made the decision that “it doesn't have to be hopeless.” Again, another resilient young person, who in the face of obstacles persevered. I learned from Maria that when doors

were shut, she would “find another way.” She no longer wanted to live in a state of desperation, where people did not have goals. Ultimately, her hope stemmed from her desire to change her home life and welcome her baby.

While she describes her home life as dark and her educational environment as non-supportive, she was ready to move forward along a more hopeful path. In Maria’s “talk back” to the negative messages she had once received she shared, “I am where I need to be, and I forgive you all.” In this message, Maria demonstrated that she had put those negative messages behind her and was focused on her hopeful present and future.

### **Discouraging Messages**

As Adetayo, Maria, Roberto, and Monique shared their educational journeys, they also shared the messages they received in school and their community. The messages they received were negative and discouraging, creating a non-supportive environment. Despite the obstacles they had to overcome, however, they maintained hope for a better life for themselves. That future life, included college.

In Adetayo’s story his image of a school building is accompanied by the words “fight and bullied.” Adetayo described most of his middle school experiences as one of constant agony, he was belittled and denigrated because he was an immigrant. He was an outcast and tried to do anything he could to fit in with the “cool kids” who made fun of him; this included cutting school and getting into trouble. According to Adetayo, kids at school and an administrator told him that he “could never learn the right English because of my accent.” In his talk back, he also made it a point to share with those who did not believe in him: “remember when you told me I will never be successful, but guess what I am in my 2<sup>nd</sup> year of college.” Adetayo has a long



road ahead, but he is fully aware of his challenges and keeps working to improve his circumstances. Despite the negative messages he received he was persisting towards his long-term goals.

Maria, who was placed in special education classes, was told many times that she should just quit and drop out of school. She was behind on her high school course credits and was overage for her credit range. Despite being behind, she made the decision not to “let this teacher hold me back or push me out.” She did not let that teacher hold her back, and she was able to earn sufficient credits to graduate from high school at a Young Adult Borough Center. She had had a difficult home life and would have benefitted from a supportive educational environment. It is these types of environments that lead students to drop out of school. If the adults they encounter on an everyday basis do not support their potential, how can students be expected to succeed? Maria persisted and transferred into a school environment that supported her academic success, a multiple pathways program.

It was the lack of adult support that led Monique to “skipping and ditching, then dropping out” of school. Since she moved around a lot from foster home to foster home, she also moved around to a lot of different schools, never fitting in because she was always the new kid. Monique felt like she “didn’t care about anything - teachers didn’t care - so I definitely didn’t care.” Her lack of caring and the absence of others who cared led her to a GED program. Monique felt like it was a solution for her “to be in and out” without having to “deal” with people. In her talk back message/poem to those who did not support her, she wrote, “think about the messages you told me. Could you say that or want someone to say that to your child?” In that same poem she wrote, “ask about me.” Those three words are very powerful, and may have made a positive difference in her K-12 educational experience. Monique could have benefitted

from someone asking her how she was doing, rather than words of discouragement. Like Maria, however, Monique persisted and found a different way, she transferred herself to a GED program where she could earn her high school diploma.

Roberto's anger silenced him throughout the additional activities. We heard from him that he was a student athlete at a highly rated high school in Brooklyn, where he played baseball. During his time on the baseball team he "failed off the team because of grades." Roberto needed academic support to improve, but the adults responsible for his success did not offer him that support. Instead, he described his coach's negative reaction. He says when his coach "found out I failed off the high school team he asked, 'are you on drugs?'" In a moment when Roberto needed support he was also told to just "drop out, I don't see you going to college, just take a trade." Today, Roberto is one of the top performing students in our program. With encouragement and support he has become a college student who earns good grades, takes advantage of extracurricular activities and fully participates in our college transition and retention program.

### **Balancing Act**

Roberto who grew up in a single parent household and lives in the housing projects that can be seen outside the window of his college, had a hard time balancing the academic work of his nursing program and his responsibilities at home. Roberto described his financial situation: "there was a time I needed glasses because I couldn't see the board, but I couldn't ask my mom to buy them. I knew she couldn't afford it." Even though Roberto was struggling academically, he had to get a work-study job on campus. "Since I got the job, I'm now able to help out with the small bills at home, and I got my glasses" shares Roberto. There were many nights that he

only slept a few hours. He had difficulty managing his time in the midst of multiple reading assignments, papers to write, exams, projects, and work. Now, having wrapped up his fourth semester, he approaches his work differently. Roberto shares “I learned that reading for my courses was necessary, listening to lectures were helpful, and taking notes helped me retain the information in class.” Roberto has had a challenging amount of work to keep up with, especially since he had not been used to a large amount of schoolwork in high school. I share this because two years ago during the focus group, he was much more focused on the importance of making money to get out of poverty. Now, I think he recognizes that learning is equally important.

Adetayo has seen his share of struggles since 2012. He failed his remedial courses and had to retake them. His situation became more challenging when he failed multiple courses in his major. Adetayo described his financial struggles when he was put on academic probation: “The probation took me off financial aid. I was stuck with the bill. While on probation I couldn’t get a loan or financial aid.” In addition to struggling with his academic work, Adetayo had an added burden of figuring out how to pay for college. To pay for his classes he works as a Disc Jockey (DJ). Adetayo describes his schedule “I take my classes early in the morning, I wake up early now. When I do events I get home around 5am so I can handle classes right afterwards.” He also played a role in taking care of his little sister who is four years old. When describing the rest of his schedule we get a snapshot of his responsibilities. “I get home around 3pm from classes and picking up my sister. Then I sleep. I put my equipment in the car and do the next event. My body is getting used to it.” Tuition payments, course enrollment, and his commitments at home were too many responsibilities for someone who was already struggling. With many other responsibilities to balance, Adetayo was in no position, however, to focus solely on school.

## Support

The college transition and retention program Roberto and Adetayo participated in assigns a primary counselor to each student. Both of these students had the same counselor their first two years of college. The counselors served as an institutional representative who helped integrate students into college life. Roberto described the importance of his meetings with his counselor:

I always check up with Andre (his counselor). That will always be a reminder, a reality check. Sometimes I have to keep up with work, I do the work and I'm glad to be able to check in with someone. That's why it's good to have programs like this. To have someone to share with because sometimes when you go home...so my mom is Dominican and she doesn't fully speak English so it's hard to communicate because I don't know that much Spanish.

The level of comfort Roberto described with his counselor was one that was sustained over time. There was a commitment by the counselor and the student over the long term. Successful student advisement requires and supports fostering a relationship with a student over time, one that cannot be established in one or two advisement sessions (Roberts & Styron, 2009). These interactions have served as a vehicle to integrate Roberto into the college community.

During our interview Adetayo noted the importance of having counseling staff that come from similar backgrounds as student participants. He commented, "I never understood what it took and the struggles behind going to college, but they took the time to explain it to me and broke it down." Adetayo, a first generation college student, lamented that "parents don't really help in that regard, sometimes," because they do not understand his struggle. But "if you get to

know the people you look up to, it will help in your own desire to get what you want.”

Experiencing the support first hand from counselors in high school and now college, Adetayo has changed his major to human services. He wants to play a role in helping other young people. Building a primary counselor relationship with a student over time, especially with someone the student can relate to can positively influence that young person and further integrate him or her into college life.

### **Support from Peers**

Roberto had a hard time transitioning to college and into a competitive academic program. Nursing within the CUNY system is in high demand, and he had to pass a set of pre-clinical courses before getting into the nursing program. In the pre-clinical stage he had to maintain a 3.5 GPA, if he wanted to be considered for the clinical part of the nursing program. While the clinical courses were difficult, he attributed his successful transition to learning early on the importance of study groups. Roberto shared his learning, “the questions require more application, so you needed to apply yourself more and not only that but you learn to look around and network and use your resources because you need study groups, and other people's perspectives. You can't do it on your own, and you need to have a group.”

Despite the challenging coursework, Roberto has had a strong academic record. While he was in his pre-clinical courses he was earning As in his classes. When he was finally accepted into the nursing clinical program, however, it took him some time to adapt. In this very difficult transition he applied different techniques to overcome those tough classes. During his first semester in the clinical program he failed a class because he had to learn how to approach his studying differently. He started to interact more with other students in his program for peer

support. Roberto reflected on his study habits, “Now, I've learned to take advantage of time. I remember telling you and Andre (his counselor) that I couldn't sleep, and it was because the questions (in school work) were difficult. Getting notes from people and other people's ideas on the lessons learned help at the end of the day.”

Adetayo's story was a little different. He admitted he was very social at school and is now able to reflect on the negative impact of those relationships: “I know a lot of people that have gone to my school so it's been about people distracting me at school.” Now faced with his academic probation he has focused on “getting his act together” and shares this advice for other students: “let them know that not everyone is the right person to befriend, go after what you want. If you feel a friendship will help you achieve your own goals, then keep that friendship.” When asked about his educational goals and what kept him focused, he spoke of the positive peer relationships that he has been able to develop recently. The new relationships helped him push himself. One individual was a DJ Adetayo knew in the community: “he got his Bachelor's, he shared his struggles of getting kicked out of school, of leaving school to DJ. So I saw his struggle and I feel like I can make it also.” Adetayo was finding ways to connect with his peers in positive ways. His social decisions were no longer just an opportunity to be social. They were an opportunity to “notice what they do and follow their lead.” Despite his financial and academic struggles he found motivation in positive peer relationships. When discussing his future, Adetayo noted that “three of my friends all graduated and are waiting for me to do the same.” It is these positive peer interactions that keep him focused on his own goal to graduate from college.

## DISCUSSION

In this study, we heard directly from college students about the obstacles they faced in transitioning to college and the strategies they employed to help them persist in a college environment.

From an ecological systems theory perspective we can revisit how systems that are within an individual's control and those that are not under their control can influence their development and in turn their path. Roberto's mesosystem included interactions between his family life, neighborhood life, and school life. Considering he grew up in the housing projects, most of those interactions involved individuals in his same socioeconomic class. In his exosystem we can include social welfare services such as New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA). Roberto attended a New York City public community high school; therefore, while outside of his control, the Department of Education's (DOE) and NYCHA's policies influenced his experiences. Due to Roberto's experiences in the housing projects, we heard directly about the attitudes he developed regarding that institution at the macrosystem level. His negative attitude towards the housing projects were manifested in a desire to move himself and his family out of them. He understood that becoming financially stable was important to achieve his desire, which fueled his persistence towards graduation from college.

In analyzing Roberto's life through the lens of intersectionality theory, we will find that his intersecting social identities have shaped his goals and persistence towards college completion. When examining the interactions of micro and macro systems in his life we uncovered some of his social identities, they included his race, gender, and socioeconomic class. A Latino, low-income, male, he experienced great hardships growing up. While his individual circumstances growing up were outside of his control, he was on the receiving end of the

discrimination that came out of how his different identities interrelated. Surrounded by poverty in an area whose population with low high school graduation rates, especially for men of color, he decided he wanted his long-term outcome would be different.

As we heard from Adetayo, Maria, Roberto, and Monique, they experienced many struggles along the way, and they had to keep themselves focused on their individual motivations and desires for going to college. These students exercised what Duckworth would define as grit – they persisted towards their long-term goals despite the challenges before them. These students maintained their interest because they were grounded in their long-term goals. For Monique that goal was to become self-sufficient once she was out of the foster care system. Her college education would serve as her vehicle for economic stability. Roberto shared his long-term goal of being in a position where he did not have to sell water bottles in the streets or live in the housing projects. Persisting in college was the only way Roberto knew to change the financial circumstances for his family and himself.

Despite the negative messages each student received during their academic journey, they continued to persist and demonstrate their grit by working hard and with determination. Similar to study number six in the literature review of grit, these students, like those who participated in the Scripps Spelling Bee, put in the work to continue their studies. Maria, Monique, Adetayo, and Roberto persisted despite their difficulties with childcare, language barriers, financial limitations, and lack of family support. As a reminder, the finalist of the 2005 Scripps National Spelling Bee outperformed their peers because they studied longer (Duckworth et al., 2007). Much like Adetayo, who could have dropped out after failing his writing remedial course two times, he persisted and put in the work to remain enrolled in college.



During the interview follow up with students two years after the focus groups, we were able to hear from two of the original focus group participants. Adetayo and Roberto shared their experiences in college and the strategies that had helped them survive. It was during these interviews that it became clear how important social interaction in college was to their grit and persistence. Tinto's interactionist theory demonstrates how social interaction in the classroom can carry over to involvement in other aspects of college life. According to Tinto's theory, a student that engages in the classroom with his/her peers and the faculty will more likely engage in the college community. This engagement includes studying with peer groups outside of the classroom and connecting to different forms of support available in the college community, such as a retention programs that offers workshops and skills development opportunities.

In the findings, we heard from Roberto who enrolled in an academically rigorous and competitive program. Initially, he had a hard time keeping up with his assignments and readings. Often he would skip sleep to get his work done. As he reflected on his experiences in college he encouraged other students to join study groups. He commented, "you can't do it on your own, you need study groups." By interacting with others, which included the students and faculty in his classes, he absorbed ideas to help him learn classroom material. He no longer has countless sleepless nights. It is in those moments of struggle and finding connections that he was able to commit further to his studies and his institution. In Roberto's case he maintained connectedness to his program and school by his social integration through peer interactions (Stage & Hossler, 2000). Finding a group of students that were pursuing the same major deepened his desire to graduate and kept him focused on his goals.

Adetayo's social integration kicked off from a different direction than Roberto. He knew a lot of people in the school community, but this did not translate into positive interactions in the

classroom. When he realized he was being too socially active he pursued connections with people who had similar goals and interests. Adetayo recognized the importance of positive peer relationships. These connections started to happen more frequently in the classroom as well as within his social groups. He followed the lead of others who were successful in their endeavors. Tinto's interactionist theory calls for the integration of a student's personal attributes with the academic and social systems of a college community to determine whether or not that student will persist in college. It was when he merged academic and social interactions that he was able to keep himself on track towards his goals.

Both Adetayo and Roberto noted that the strategic support they received from their counselor helped them persist in college. According to Tinto (1993) when students are integrated into both the social and academic system of a college, they are more likely to persist. Adetayo and Roberto, at the time of their one-on-one interviews for this study, had met with the same counselor on campus for a period of two years. This counselor played a role in contributing to their integration on campus. By meeting at the college, they created a space where the students felt comfortable. Their counselor built relationships with the student affairs, financial aid, and advisement offices on campus, which often served as vehicles to share information about campus activities and resources. Tinto's interactionist theory also calls for the intellectual and social involvement of students within their institution, which is also a predictor of student retention (Tinto, 1993). The support students received from their counselor helped them become more involved in their institution, thus increasing their commitment to their institution.

In the following pages we will explore how these findings can be helpful to students, college administrators, professors, and policy makers.

## CONCLUSION

The findings from this research suggest several actions that universities and community-based organizations can take to support the retention of vulnerable students of color. Although the information was insightful, there were several limitations in the research. The sample size was small, in total the voices of four students were reflected in the research. Having additional students participate could diversify the findings. Including students from community colleges and four-year universities could provide helpful information for the administrations at those institutions about how to tailor retention support to commuter and non-commuter students. In expanding the research sample and including students in four-year universities there is the potential to include students who graduated from traditional high schools. This study only included non-traditional high school graduates who are older in age and had an alternative high school experience. In having a larger sample size there is an increased chance of conducting follow up interviews with a larger group of students. Since the sample size was small, the follow up interviews with two students represents a 50% follow-up rate.

In addition to the institutional diversity of a future study, there is an opportunity to increase the racial diversity. This research was limited to two Latino and two Black students. By including other marginalized groups there is the potential to investigate culturally responsive retention supports for students. The two Latino and two Black students do not represent the complexities of identity in each racial group. Latino students can include anyone from South or Central America and the Caribbean. The experiences of a student born in the U.S. and a student who was not were different; therefore, it is important to capture the experiences of both. Roberto was born in the United States – it would be important to capture the experiences of a Latino who was not born in the United States. There is also an opportunity to create a study that has equal

gender representation. The data included in this study represent two males more in depth than the two female students who participated in the focus group, but not the interviews.

The findings from this research suggest implications for different audiences. Students shared the factors that kept them motivated, demonstrating their grit in the face of obstacles. They also shared the positive impact of programmatic and peer support. In the following paragraphs I share recommendations for four types of audiences: students, professors, college administrators, and policymakers.

## **Students**

As we heard from Adetayo and Roberto, meeting people who shared similar goals helped keep them focused during the tough times in college. For the students in this research, going to college was a goal they pursued as the first in their family and sometimes the only one among their friends. As a result, they had experiences their family members and friends could not relate to at home and in their neighborhoods. Therefore, meeting new people in the academic major they were pursuing allowed them to make connections with people who were having similar experiences in college, and pursuing similar goals. During times of hardship these peer connections allowed them to stay focused on their individual goals.

Additionally, both students highlighted the programmatic support they received from the college retention program they regularly attended. As part of their participation, they regularly attended college-readiness workshops, life skills events, trips, and regular one-on-one counseling sessions. They took advantage of the supports available to them. Participation in most events was voluntary. Since they recognized the opportunity to strengthen their skills they often showed up. Showing up was important to connecting with others. While some events were

mandatory, there were no concrete consequences to their non-participation; therefore one could conclude that it wasn't a factor in their decision-making to attend or not.

## **Professors**

During one-on-one counseling sessions with students, counselors often checked in about student progress in each class. Whenever possible students were asked to bring their graded papers and tests, and any upcoming assignments, to their one-on-one meetings. One student once shared that he was really struggling in his English class and he didn't understand his most recent assignment. In reviewing the syllabus we were able to identify the professor's office hours and where to find him. Immediately after suggesting to the student that he go speak to his professor the following day he froze up! This young man was terrified about going to speak to his professor alone. Upon further investigation he revealed that he found his professor to be intimidating. In my experience with this student he has always been on time, was often reflective about his educational journey, and was focused on getting his degree. Beyond the friendly young man, it was important to understand his background – Steven was the first in his family to go to college. Therefore, this was the first time he would speak to a professor one-on-one, and he was not sure how to start the conversation. In that moment role playing the future interaction with the professor was crucial to increasing his comfort level. Steven left our meeting feeling prepared to approach his professor. While there was no way for this English professor to know Steven felt intimidated or why, there were steps the professor could have taken to make Steven feel more comfortable. Some of these things include:

- 1) Getting to know students and their personal background. Breaking the ice can open opportunities to build trust. Usually breaking the ice can include short

activities at the start of class session where everyone participates and shares something about themselves with the group.

- 2) Sharing information about their own background for students to feel like the professor is just like any other person and approachable.
- 3) Requiring a visit during office hours as an assignment – especially for first year students who are not accustomed to using office hours.
- 4) My favorite strategy: personally inviting the student to your office hours. This particular idea came from one of my students. His professor invited him to his office hours to praise his work on a recent assignment.

### **College Administrators**

College administrators often times have the power and funding to implement policies that can significantly increase the retention and success of their student body. At one community college partner school, there were learning communities that students could become a part of during their first semester. These learning communities enabled students to attend three different classes as a cohort. The professors of those three courses checked in with one another regularly and built their curriculum across the courses, which meant that if a student was studying astronomy in her science course, the English course that was part of that learning community was reading and writing something similar to the astronomy course. Based on the experiences of my students in these courses, they were able to build relationships with their peers and their professors. This resulted in increased student engagement in class.

At another community college, advising was mandatory throughout the first year in college. Most schools require advisement appointments before students can enroll in their first

semester courses and then the student is left alone every semester thereafter. There typically is not any support for that student during registration time, especially if he attends an already crowded public community college. Making advisement mandatory for students to register for first and second semester courses ensures that the students have someone they can speak to about their progress in school. For those students who do not have the cultural capital at home to navigate the college process, mandatory advisement could serve as an opportunity for them to check in with someone who is knowledgeable. It is a great opportunity for students to reflect on their chosen major, to ensure they are taking the correct courses for their intended major, and to set themselves up for success. Often students do not realize early on in their college career that piling on reading-heavy social science courses with a science and math course may not be a good idea.

Lastly, financial incentives can be a great motivator for students. Often, students are shocked by the price of books, especially in more technical courses like accounting, where the books are expensive. An accounting student in his fourth semester in college was invited to participate in a learning community where the accounting course he would take had an incentive, additional tutoring support and free use of the textbook for that semester. His department had put him on an academic at-risk list, based on his previous accounting course grades. This learning community would offer him extra academic assistance due to his course grade history in accounting. And in exchange for attending tutoring they would offer him the accounting book free of charge for use that semester. This student jumped at the opportunity! This particular student was the oldest of four children and from a low-income family. He received full financial aid. Not having to pay for a \$150.00 book was a big help to him and his family.

## **Policymakers**

The New York State Education department funds the Science and Technology Entry Program (STEP) a pre-college program for New York State students who are economically disadvantaged and enrolled in grades 7-12. College Now funded by the City University of New York and the New York City Department of Education offer college-level courses to the same population. These programs help raise college awareness among students from low-income backgrounds. The early exposure to college-level work can motivate a student to pursue a college education. Therefore it is important to continue to offer these types of programs to a vulnerable population of students. According to Tinto's interactionist theory, positive pre-college experiences can promote a commitment to college completion (Tinto, 1975).

Recently, the federal government has created a more user-friendly financial aid application. The application process will now allow families to apply earlier, since they will be able to use their income tax forms from the previous tax year. This change will come into effect starting in the 2016-2017 school year. I believe this will allow more families to benefit from federal and state aid. Often times when a student and her family are waiting to complete their financial aid application, they miss deadlines and do not apply early enough to take full advantage of the aid available to them. In allowing families to use the previous year's tax forms, it ensures that they will be able to apply early and on time for financial aid.



## References

- American Association of Community Colleges. (2015). *2015 Community College Fast Facts*. Retrieved from [http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Documents/FS\\_2015\\_2.pdf](http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Documents/FS_2015_2.pdf)
- Baime, D. S., & Mullin, C. M. (2011, July). *Promoting educational opportunity: The Pell Grant program at community colleges* (Policy Brief 2011-03PBL). Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges. Retrieved from [http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Publications/Briefs/Documents/PolicyBrief\\_Pell%20Grant.pdf](http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Publications/Briefs/Documents/PolicyBrief_Pell%20Grant.pdf)
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist*, 32(7), 513-531.
- Charles A. Dana Center, Complete College America, Inc., Education Commission of the States, & Jobs for the Future. (2012). *Core Principles for Transforming Remedial Education: A Joint Statement*. Retrieved from <http://www.jff.org/publications/core-principles-transforming-remedial-education-joint-statement>
- Collins, P. H. (1986). Learning from the outsider within: The sociological significance of black feminist thought. *Social Problems*, 33(6), S14-S32.
- Conley, D. T. (2007). *Redefining College Readiness*. Educational Policy Improvement Center. Retrieved from <http://www.epiconline.org>
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 140: 139-167.

- Duckworth, A. L., & Seligman, M. E. (2005). Self-discipline outdoes IQ in predicting academic performance of adolescents. *Psychological Science, 16*(12), 939-944.
- Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and Passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 92*(6), 1087 - 1101.
- Fruchter, N., Hester, M., Mokhtar, C., & Shahn, Z. (2012). *Is Demography Still Destiny? Neighborhood Demographics and Public High School Students' Readiness for College in New York City. A Research and Policy Brief*. Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.
- Gonen, Yoav. (2014, March 7). Nearly 80% of city public high school grads at CUNY Community Colleges require remediation for English or Math. *The New York Post*. Retrieved from <http://nypost.com/2013/03/07/nearly-80-of-city-public-high-school-grads-at-cuny-community-colleges-require-remediation-for-english-or-math/>
- Hannah-Jones, N. (2014, December 19). How School Segregation Divides Ferguson --and the United States. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/21/sunday-review/why-are-our-schools-still-segregated.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/21/sunday-review/why-are-our-schools-still-segregated.html?_r=0)
- Hilliard, T. & Spaic, T. (2013). *Completion Day*. Center for the Urban Future. Retrieved from <https://nycfuture.org/pdf/Completion-Day.pdf>
- hooks, b. (2000). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. Pluto Press.
- Johnson, R. C. (2011). *Long-run impacts of school desegregation & school quality on adult attainments*. National Bureau of Economic Research.

- Kao, G., & Thompson, J. S. (2003). Racial and ethnic stratification in educational achievement and attainment. *Annual review of sociology*, 29, 417-442.
- Lee, J. (2002). Racial and ethnic achievement gap trends: Reversing the progress toward equity? *Educational Researcher*, 31(1), 3-12.
- Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2002). *Qualitative Communication Research Methods, 2nd Edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lynch, J. (2006, June 22). *Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation: Developing and strengthening schools and programs that lead to high school graduation and post-secondary opportunities for overage, under-credited youth*. New York City Department of Education, Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation. Retrieved from [http://betterfutures.fcny.org/betterfutures/increasing\\_opportunity.pdf](http://betterfutures.fcny.org/betterfutures/increasing_opportunity.pdf)
- McDermott, K. A. (2007). Expanding the moral community” or “blaming the victim? The politics of state education accountability policy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 44(1), 77-111.
- National Education Association. (n.d). *Understanding the Gaps: Who Are We Leaving Behind – and How Far?* Retrieved from [http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/18021-Closing\\_Achve\\_Gap\\_backgrndr\\_7-FINAL.pdf](http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/18021-Closing_Achve_Gap_backgrndr_7-FINAL.pdf)
- New York City Department of Education. Demographic Snapshots. Retrieved from <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/default.htm>

New York City Department of Education, Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation. (n.d.).

*Multiple Pathways Research and Development: Summary Findings and Strategic*

*Solutions for Overage Under-Credited Youth*. Retrieved from

<http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/B5EC6D1C-F88A-4610-8F0F->

[A14D63420115/0/FindingsofOMPG.pdf](http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/B5EC6D1C-F88A-4610-8F0F-A14D63420115/0/FindingsofOMPG.pdf)

Picciano, A. (2004). *Educational research primer*. A&C Black.

Roberts, J., & Styron, R. (2010). Student satisfaction and persistence: Factors vital to student retention. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, 6(3), 1-18.

Santrock, J. W. (2007). *Child Development. Eleventh edition*. NY: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.

Stage, F. K., & Hossler, D. (2000). Where is the student. In *Reworking the student departure puzzle*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.

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

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

Tough, P. (2014, May 18). Who gets to graduate. *New York Times Magazine*, pp. 26-54.