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THE EFFICACY OF A GOAL-BASED STUDY SKILLS COURSE FOR ACADEMICALLY AT-RISK, FIRST-GENERATION, AFRICAN AMERICAN, FEMALE STUDENTS

by

Sarah Beth Garrison

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School,
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for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2017

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by Sarah Beth Garrison

December 2017

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ABSTRACT

THE EFFICACY OF A GOAL-BASED STUDY SKILLS COURSE FOR ACADEMICALLY AT-RISK, FIRST-GENERATION, AFRICAN AMERICAN, FEMALE STUDENTS

by Sarah Beth Garrison

December 2017

The purpose of this research was to identify effective intervention strategies used in a goal-based study skills course for academically at-risk, first-generation, African-American, female students. Based on the theoretical framework from goal, motivation and achievement theories (Covington, 2000; Kuh, 2007; Nicholls, 1984), this study provided an analysis of research regarding the academic success and persistence of at-risk students. An explanatory mixed-method design was employed that consisted of two phases. The first phase of the study used quantitative data to test for difference in GPA and academic status between the control and treatment group. Quantitative data was also used to identify variables within the goal-based study skills course that helped predict the post-term GPA of experimental group participants. The second phase of the study used qualitative data to expand upon the quantitative findings. The study utilized case study methodology and six participants of the goal-based study skills course were purposefully selected to participate in semi-structured interviews. The interviews were analyzed and coded, and three dominant themes emerged that could allow administrators and faculty the opportunity to successfully design and deliver courses to increase the academic success of at-risk students.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANOVA	Analysis of Variance
APA	American Psychological Association
GPA	Grade Point Average
IRB	Internal Review Board
PSM	Propensity Score Matching

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

Background

Universities are increasingly aware of the need to substantially increase the completion of undergraduate degrees. Since the 1970s numerous reports have been made calling for accountability and corrective action to increase student progress, success, and degree completion (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010). The current urgency to implement effective strategies that increase degree attainment stems, in part from the need to remain competitive in local and global economies (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004). The socioeconomic, demographic, and technological changes that result from globalization have a significant impact on America's workforce and therefore on postsecondary education. The changes that are occurring within our nation require individuals to obtain skills that will be marketable locally and globally. College graduates will face a workforce of international competitiveness.

A four-year degree is a means for improving one's standard of living and meeting the challenges of a changing nation (Falconetti, 2009). The achievement of a college degree creates pathways for upward social mobility and economic progress within the United States (Ishanti, 2006). It is estimated that six out of every 10 jobs require some postsecondary education and approximately 80% of the fastest growing occupations in the United States require at least some postsecondary education (Lotkowski et al., 2004). Further, a high school education can rarely provide the necessary income to care for oneself and a family. Over a lifetime, the income gap between those with a high school diploma versus a bachelor's degree exceeds one million dollars (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). This is further seen as the median annual income for those with a

bachelor's degree, over the age of 25 is 60% higher than the median income for those with a high school diploma (ACT, 2010). That breaks down to earning approximately $19,000 more per year for individuals with postsecondary education when compared to individuals with a high school diploma (Baum & Payea, 2005). In addition to higher wage earnings, individuals with a bachelor's degree also have a greater chance of securing stable employment with more opportunities for advancement and better health and retirement plans (ACT, 2010; Barbatis, 2010). This further results in better health, increased life expectancy, improved quality of life for children, and greater participation in leisure activities for college graduates (Connecticut State University System, 2004).

Helping students earn their degrees and become prepared to meet the challenging dynamics of the workplace has long-term benefits for the individual, community, and global economy. Societies receive financial benefits from higher education due to higher income-based workers that generate higher state, federal and local tax payments (Baum & Payea, 2005). College educated individuals also create less dependency on social support programs and government financial support networks. Additionally, educated citizenry creates strong communities and better civic engagement. College-educated individuals are less likely to engage in crime and more likely to provide community service and charitable donations (Baum & Payea, 2005).

The call for increased degree attainment comes at a time when many universities are experiencing a decrease in student enrollment and substantial budget cuts. Universities experience financial loss through unattained tuition and fees when students leave before earning their degrees (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004). To overcome financial challenges and increase student persistence, universities need certainty that their

resources are spent on strategies that meet the needs of their students and increase student success.

To best meet the needs of students, Universities need to understand the current student landscape. The student body within higher education has markedly changed over the years. Among students enrolled in four-year universities, 46% are Caucasians, 40% African-American and 34% Hispanic; 45% work over 20 hours per week and 23% have dependent children (ACT 2010; Johnson, Rochkind, & Ott, 2011). The enrollment of African-American students in higher education has reached an all-time high with over two million enrolled in undergraduate or graduate degree programs ("Black Students Show," 2009). However, a gender gap exists among African-American students enrolled in college. The enrollment rates for African-American women are much higher than that of men (Tyler & Johns, 2009). African-American women comprise two-thirds of the total African- American undergraduate population ("Ominous Gender Gap," 1999), referred to as the feminization of African-American education. Still, African-American students are less likely to attend college and earn their degrees than White students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). Approximately 50% of African-American women who enroll in college will earn a degree ("Ominous Gender Gap," 1999). This is, in part, because many African-American parents are not college educated, making it less likely that their children will attend college or complete their degrees (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

First-generation college student enrollment represents 40% of the student body on college campuses (Trombley & Youhanna, 2004) and approximately one-third of the enrollment at four-year colleges and universities (Johnson, 2004). The National

Education Longitudinal Study found that between 1992 and 2000, 22% of the students entering college immediately after high school were first-generation students and only 24% earned a bachelor's degree (Chen, 2005). Further, first-generation students are more likely to be from a minority group and have a lower socioeconomic status than their non-first-generation peers. It is evident that "rates of college attainment among our nation's underserved students—first-generation students, low-income students, and students of color—are significantly lower than those of other students. These achievement gaps have endured for decades, and they are now widening" (Lumina Foundation, 2008, para.4).

Statement of the Problem

Approximately one-fifth of students who enter four-year universities leave before earning a degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). An alarming number of students are underprepared when they enter college and lack confidence in their abilities to learn and succeed (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010). While research exists on programs designed to improve student success, a majority of research focuses on first-year freshman students. Quantitative analysis methods are frequently used to determine the efficacy of success programs, with GPA and graduation rates determining success or failure. Efforts to research the efficacy of programs need to be comprehensive, including both quantitative and qualitative methodology. Effective programs need to be developed that holistically include both academic and non-academic factors that extend beyond the freshman year.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to identify effective intervention characteristics of a goal-based study skills course for academically at-risk, first-

generation, African-American, female students. The results of the study will assist universities in designing and implementing effective programs to increase student success and persistence.

Research Questions

1. What impact does a goal-based study skills course have on the term GPA of participants, compared to non-participants?
2. What impact does a goal-based study skills course have on the academic status of students on academic probation?
3. What is the relationship between assignments completed, study sessions attended and class absences in a goal-based study skills course and term GPA?
4. What characteristics of a goal-based study skills course increase participant's academic success and achievement of short-term goals?
5. Through what process do participants transfer this learning to other courses?

Definitions

Academically At-Risk: students with a grade point average (GPA) of 2.5 or below.

Academic Probation: a status given to a student who earns a GPA below 2.0.

Academic Skills: the tools, techniques, and habits that students need to be academically successful. These skills include, but are not limited to time management, study skills, organization skills, test preparation and test-taking skills, note-taking skills and text reading skills.

Academic Success: achieved by a student who is progressing towards graduation by completing the necessary university requirements and remaining in good academic standing.

Attrition: students who leave a university before earning a degree.

First-Generation Student: student attending college whose parents are educated at or below the high school level.

Goal-Based Study Skills Course: a course designed and implemented using principles of goal theory to address academic and non-academic factors that contribute to student persistence.

Grade Point Average (GPA): the average grade point hours earned divided by the total number of credits attempted, reported on a zero to a four-point scale.

Higher Education: the term used to refer to education beyond the high school level, equivalent to the term postsecondary education.

Persistence: students continuing to pursue undergraduate degrees at the participating university, until graduation, also known as student retention.

Postsecondary Education: the term used to refer to education beyond the high school level, equivalent to the term higher education.

Retention: continuing in higher education until the completion of a degree, also known as student persistence.

Term GPA: the average grade point hours earned in one-semester term divided by the total number of credits attempted in one-semester term, reported on a zero- to four-point scale.

Delimitations

The primary limitations of this study will be:

1. The research is limited to a specific population of academically at-risk students at a Southern public university.
2. The small sample size will not allow for comparisons as a larger population would. However, it will allow for the attainment of very rich, intimate research data that a larger sample would lack.
3. Participants in the study will self-identify themselves as first-generation students, making it possible that some students could incorrectly identify themselves.
4. Academic achievement will be determined by grade point average (GPA) for one to two academic semesters.
5. The goal-based study skills course was offered over two academic semesters, August 2013-May 2014.
6. Attrition could occur as students could drop out of the course.

Limitations

1. The sample from one department at a Southern University may not represent populations found in other departments or universities.
2. The researcher was involved in creating and implementing the goal-based study skills course. However, she did not serve as the course instructor.
3. The researcher is employed in the field of higher education and worked within the department where the success course was offered.

4. A majority of the data will be subjective information obtained from the participants and subject to the researcher's interpretation.
5. There will not be complete control of extraneous variables for participants.

Assumptions

Five assumptions are made for this study. The first assumption is that a skills-based course informed by goal theory and persistence literature will impact participants. The second assumption is that participants will understand the definition of a first-generation student and identify themselves accordingly. The third assumption is that participants will respond to interview questions honestly. The fourth assumption is that the chosen mixed-methodology will generate the most appropriate data to determine the efficacy of the skills-based course. The final assumption is that the variables of GPA and course grades are accurately reported by the university.

Justification

College students who are academically at-risk face more challenges than traditional students. First-generation students who are academically at-risk face additional barriers; and little research exists that expands upon barriers and addresses effective strategies for intervention. Institutions are currently overhauling, creating, and implementing programs to increase student success for first-generation students. However, many universities struggle to develop realistic retention strategies because of the increased pressure to admit students who are not academically ready. Universities have limited control over individual student factors that impact persistence such as prospective students' level of commitment to college or parental socioeconomic status (McGrath & Burd, 2012). Hansen (1998) noted that the level of academic preparation for

students entering college has decreased while the level of student disengagement has increased.

Even less attention has been given to first-generation students of color. The research that does exist has demonstrated that first-generation students of color experience the same challenges as White first-generation students with added cultural stressors, such as racial discrimination, loneliness, and isolation. The research on first-generation African-American female students is virtually non-existent. The literature often makes the faulty assumption that all African-American students have the same needs and experiences. The uniqueness and additional challenges that African-American female students face is often overlooked, such as the dual burden of sexism and racism (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Case in point, African-American women make less money than White woman, and career choices of African-American women often lead to less prestigious employment and lower earning power overall (Rosales & Person, 2003).

There is a lack of understanding regarding the experiences of first-generation African-American female students. America's workforce is changing, and African-American women represent a growing number of the labor force. As such, higher education institutions have a responsibility to recruit, retain and successfully graduate African-American female students; this cannot be done without a thorough understanding of the challenges African-American students face. A thorough understanding will allow for the creation of effective university programs that are designed to meet the needs of first-generation African-American female students.

Another gap in many university's retention strategies is the exclusive focus on freshman. Most programs and services offered by universities are designed specifically

for freshmen to enhance the first-year experience and increase adjustment and successful engagement in college life. Although focusing on the first-year experience has had a significant impact on academic achievement, persistence and graduation (The Pathways to College Network, 2004), few universities are designing and implementing programs for students beyond the freshmen year (Olcott & Kotovich, 2007; Sidle & McReynolds, 2009) resulting in a noticeable gap for sophomore, junior and senior students who are academically at-risk.

Further, academically at-risk students are often placed on probationary status. Currently, there are no mandates or policies outlining the development of probationary programs for universities (Lindsay, 2000). The literature on academic departure and drop out is extensive while the literature on the topic of academic probation is limited. Research regarding academic probation programs generally examines characteristics of students on probation and the challenges that result from academic probation (Merisotis & Phipps, 2000). Additionally, although most research distinguishes between students who voluntarily withdraw versus those who are involuntarily dismissed, less attention is given to students who are dismissed involuntarily. Students facing dismissal from their program of study, even though they do not wish to withdraw, warrant intervention and investigation.

In an attempt to prevent involuntary dismissal due to academic probation, some universities offer programs for academically at-risk students. These programs tend to fall into the following two categories: (a) intrusive advisement or counseling strategies and (b) workshop or classroom-based strategies. While advisement/counseling and workshop/classroom strategies have demonstrated success through quantitative analysis,

the impact of these interventions is not often qualitatively measured through comprehensive, rich descriptions of students' experiences. It is also rare for intervention programs to combine both classroom and advising interventions. The literature on the efficacy of probationary programs is needed and can assist universities in developing effective programs. As Merisotis and Phipps (2000) noted, research on probationary programs is scarce, underfunded, inconclusive, and often lacks depth and complexity (Arcand & LeBlanc, 2010). Few studies examine the lived experiences of students on probation (Vander Schee, 2007) and their perceptions of courses designed to help them succeed (Arcand & LeBlanc, 2012). Studies with qualitative elements can offer rich portraits of the characteristics and experiences of academic success courses.

CHAPTER II – REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Characteristics of First-Generation Students

To be the first person in a family to pursue higher education and graduate from college is a momentous achievement. First-generation college students are defined as students whose parents' highest level of education is a high school diploma or less. The parents of first-generation students have not attended college or have not earned a college degree. If a student's parents have differing levels of educational attainment (i.e., one with a high school diploma and one with a college degree), the highest level of education determines whether a student is categorized as first-generation or non-first-generation. Over 50% of students who enroll in college immediately after graduating high school are first-generation students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005).

Characteristics of first-generation students often resemble those of minority or non-traditional students. First-generation students are more likely to be older, have dependents or a spouse and a lower socioeconomic status (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). As a result, first-generation students are more likely to live off campus and commute to school, thus limiting their overall engagement in campus life (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). Further, first-generation students are more likely to be female, students of color, and have lower family incomes (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Researchers have also found that first-generation students received less family encouragement to pursue higher education, had lower college aspirations, and spent less time talking to teachers and peers (Chen, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996). Additionally, because of a lack of collegiate family history, first-generation students have less knowledge of college demands and expectations.

Challenges of First-Generation Students

First-generation students are more likely to be students of color. It is estimated that by 2050, 60% of the U.S. population will be minorities and a majority of students enrolled in higher education institutions will be students of color (Hobbs & Stoops, 2002). From 1976 to 2011, the percentage of African-American students rose from 10 to 15 percent; likewise, the percentage of White students decreased from 84 to 61 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). First-generation students of color face many of the same challenges as other first-generation students, such as more challenges gaining access to higher education. Even when first-generation students overcome the barriers and enroll in college, they have difficulty persisting and earning a degree (Horn & Nuñez 2000; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez 2001).

Although first-generation college students are more likely to begin their post-secondary education at a two-year institution, they are more likely to graduate if they began their education at a four-year institution (Bui, 2002). However, first-generation students still experience challenges at four-year institutions (Bui; Ishitani, 2003). They are more likely to drop out after their freshman year than non-first-generation students, and if they remain enrolled, they are less likely to persist and earn their degrees within five years (Pascarella et al., 2004). The Lumina Foundation for Education (2008) reported that even though one million first-generation students will enroll full-time in postsecondary education, fewer than four in 10 will graduate within four years, and approximately six in 10 will graduate within six years. Although a majority of first-generation students are females, they are less likely to persist and earn a degree than their

male counterparts. First-generation males are nine percent more likely to persist in college (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

First-generation students have characteristics that are associated with attrition when compared to their peers whose parents are college graduates (Ishitana, 2003). First-generation students experience a greater myriad of transitions when entering higher education. They are often less academically prepared for higher education, as evidenced by lower scores on high school senior achievement tests and college entrance exams (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005).

Due to insufficient high school academic preparation, many first-generation students need remedial assistance once they enroll in college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Remedial coursework is less likely for non-first-generation students due to more rigorous high school coursework (Harrell & Forney, 2003). Whereas, over half of first-generation students (55%) complete at least one remedial course while in college, compared to 27% of non-first-generation students. Specifically, 40% enroll in remedial math courses, compared to 16% of non-first-generation students; and 13% enroll in remedial reading courses compared to 6% of non-first-generation students. As the number of required remedial courses increases so does the risk for dropout (Burely, Cejda, & Butner, 2001). This is especially evident in first-generation students as non-first-generation students are more likely to be White with a higher socioeconomic status (SES) and higher SAT scores and high school GPAs. African-American students are more likely to have received inadequate academic preparation, thus increasing the number of remedial courses that are required.

As evident with the number of remedial courses required, first-generation students often lag behind non-first-generation students, and they are uncertain how to navigate the university system, thus making it less likely that they will seek support services when needed (Pascarella et al., 2004). One barrier to first-generation students seeking support services is that they perceive faculty and the university institution as being unsupportive (Pike & Kuh, 2005). According to Shwitzer et al., (1999), African-American students are hesitant to seek help from faculty for fear of being perceived as needing extra assistance due to their race. These feelings are magnified when students feel underrepresented. Many students report feeling more supported in high school due to familiarity and similarity. Shwitzer et al., noted that many African-American students feel underprepared for feelings of aloneness and underrepresentation upon entering college.

However, it is important to note that first-generation students positively responded when faculty provide validation and praise, especially that which reinforces their competency to excel academically (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Also, African-American students who perceive their university as supportive tend to experience greater satisfaction and adjustment; they are also more likely to persist and earn a college degree (Shwitzer et al., 1999). As such, first-generation students need more validation and support, particularly early in their college pursuits (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Without adequate support, first-generation students are at an increased risk of dropping out after their freshman year. Family support is frequently lacking for first-generation students, making supportive peer, faculty and staff networks especially important (Dennis et al.; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004).

Creating positive connections with faculty, staff and peers is a necessary component to ease a students' transition from high-school to college (Gibson & Slate, 2010). This is especially true for first-generation students who tend to experience more difficulty transitioning than their non-first-generation peers (Gibson & Slate, 2010; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Tumen, Shulruf, & Hattie, 2008). Along with the transition from high school academic expectations to college academic expectations, first-generation students must also navigate familial, cultural, and social transitions. Orbe (2004) described the transition experience of first-generation students as entering an "alien culture" (p.113), where they must learn and navigate new social and academic environments.

Many first-generation students also experience unique stressors at home once they have entered college. They may begin to feel like outsiders at home as well as at school as they try to balance the cultural demands of two very different worlds (Rendon, 1992). Many parents may not be able to provide college-related advice due to their lack of related experience, and if parents are unsupportive of their child's academic pursuits, negative outcomes are more likely. However, parental support may positively impact the academic outcome of first-generation students (Terenzini et al., 1996). When encouragement is provided and the expectation of college attendance and degree attainment is given, positive outcomes are more likely (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005).

Another factor that impacts academic success for first-generation students is campus engagement. First-generation students are less likely to live on campus and engage in campus life, both of which are important in creating smooth transitions to

college and increasing academic success (Pike & Kuh, 2005). For example, 31% of first-generation students choose to live off-campus during their first year of college, compared to 16% of their peers. Additionally, 37% plan to work full-time while earning their degree as opposed to 25% of non-first-generation students (Higher Education Research Institution, 2005), thus making engagement in campus activities more challenging.

If campus engagement is lacking, it may be more difficult for students to receive peer support, which can be instrumental in students' transitioning to college (Astin, 1975; Tinto, 1993). This is especially true for African-American students. As mentioned above, parents of first-generation African-American students may not be able to provide academic related assistance due to lack of direct knowledge or experience; however, peers may be well-suited to provide these resources (Dennis et al., 2005). Peers help one another by providing knowledge about courses and recommending professors. They can also form study groups, share notes and provide tips for success. Yet, the increased outside responsibilities, greater likelihood of full-time employment and the tendency to live off campus make campus engagement and peer support less likely (Pascarella et al., 2004), thus increasing the risk for a difficult academic transition and drop-out after the freshman year (Ishanti, 2003).

African-American Female Students

Since 1988, the number of women in higher education has exceeded the number of males (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Between 2001 and 2011, the number of full-time female students increased by 56% compared to a 36% increase in males. Among part-time students, the number of females increased by 20% versus a 14% increase for males (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Two-thirds of the

African-American undergraduate population is women, and it is estimated that if the current trend continues, by 2097, all bachelor's degrees awarded to African-Americans could be awarded to females ("Ominous Gender Gap," 1999).

African-American women are more likely to enroll in community colleges and state universities that are not selective in their admission criteria (Renner, 2003). African-American women comprise 58% of the student body of community colleges and, after earning an associate's degree, are not likely to enroll in a four-year institution to earn a bachelor's degree (Zamani, 2003). This contributes to African-American women having less earning power and making less money than White females.

Howard-Hamilton (2003) noted that African-American women are often assumed to be in the same category as women or African-Americans in general, rather than realizing that African-American women have their own unique experiences. African-American women often report experiencing dual oppression from both racism and sexism. In education, African-American women may experience curriculum bias, exclusion from curriculum design and being left out of class discussions or asked to represent their entire race (Hayes & Pike, 2000). According to Rowser (1994), universities have an obligation to provide supportive, culturally sensitive environments for all students:

> Adapting should not be the total responsibility of African-American students. The university must assess ways in which it, too, can change to create an adaptable environment, especially for African-American students. Adjustments by both the university and student may result in better retention rates (p. 234).

If just one person in a family breaches the educational gap, statistically, future generations of children are much more likely to graduate from college (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). Investing in the academic success of one student can improve the quality of life for multiple generations.

Student Persistence

First-generation college students are 51% less likely to persist in their educational endeavors and graduate college in four years than non-first-generation students (Ishitani, 2006). Even after taking into account many related factors such as demographic background, academic preparedness, and performance, first-generation students are less likely than non-first-generation students to earn a bachelor's degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Colleges and universities that recruit and enroll first-generation students can develop ways to retain them so that they can achieve academic success and earn their degrees. As noted by Longden (2006), the first step in successfully retaining students is determining why they leave the university.

Based on a review and synthesis of research, there are a variety of academic and non-academic factors that influence student persistence. The non-academic factors that influence persistence are academic self-confidence, social support, socioeconomic status, financial support, institution selectivity, social involvement, and academic goals. The academic factors that have a positive relationship with persistence include academic-related skills, high school grade point average, and ACT/SAT scores (ACT, 2010). Because of the challenges students face, many programs designed to increase student persistence focus on traditional academic factors; however even students who can master

course content are at-risk of dropping out if they do not develop adequate academic goals, self-confidence, social support, and institutional commitment (ACT, 2010).

Multiple institutional and individual factors also impact student persistence. Institutional factors include a commitment to the institution, and academic and social integration (McGrath & Burd, 2012), and individual factors include parental support and personal motivation (Bean, 1980; Cabrera, Casteneda, Nora, & Heugstler, 1992; Tinto, 1975). Dennis et al., (2005) demonstrated the complexities and importance of institutional and individual factors by noting that positive self-concept, along with supportive individuals can sometimes be more predictive of academic success for minority students than SAT scores and other traditional measures. Rowser (1994), further noted that African-American students need more assistance with self-discipline, time management, and making friends than White students, all of which are important internal, individual factors related to persistence. Helkowski, Jongsma, and Stout (2004) also noted that students are faced with multiple internal challenges that can impact persistence, including choices about relationships and physical and emotional intimacy. Tinto and Bean have further demonstrated that student attrition is related to the quality of relationships between a student and those in the educational environment (Bean, 1980; Tinto, 1975). Similarly, Kuhl et al., (2009) suggested persistence is increased when the relationships between freshmen and their peers, faculty members, and institutions are increased and prolonged.

Moreover, certain behaviors are associated with increasing and prolonging relationships and involvement in the university, which results in higher levels of student satisfaction and greater institutional commitment. These behaviors include increased time

and energy spent on studies and involvement in extracurricular activities and professor projects (Astin, 1984). Although the literature clearly suggests that involved students are more likely to persist than those who are uninvolved, the situation may be more complicated for students who are at-risk for academic probation. As such, students who are struggling may be committed to the university, but the quality of their relationships with the institution may have suffered (McGrath & Burd, 2012).

Characteristics of Students on Academic Probation

While the literature on academic departure and drop out is extensive, the literature on the topic of academic probation is limited, even though most universities have some probationary program for students. Academic probation is a transitionary status from unsatisfactory academic performance to either academic good standing or dismissal. When students are not able to transition from unsatisfactory to satisfactory academic performance, they may be involuntarily dismissed from the institution. Tinto (1987) stated that involuntary dismissal is often the result of academic demands being too great for a student. Research examining academic probation programs generally focuses on characteristics of probationary students and challenges that lead to probationary status as opposed to characteristics that make probationary intervention programs successful (Merisotis & Phipps, 2000).

Academic probation frequently has the following characteristics, (a) students are placed on academic probation when their grade point average (GPA) falls below a certain threshold, usually 2.0, (b) students on academic probation can remain in their program of study if they bring their grades up, and (c) students on academic probation are involuntarily dismissed from the university if they do not bring their grades up enough to

return to good academic standing (Arcand & LeBlanc, 2012). When comparing students in good academic standing to those on academic probation, significant differences emerge. Research suggests that students on probation are often underprepared for higher education. They struggle with academic commitment and may lack self-discipline and other essential tools for academic success, such as study skills, goal-setting abilities, emotion management, and time-management (Arcand & LeBlanc, 2012). Literature suggests several other impediments that hinder academic success for probationary students, including challenges balancing school, work, and home obligations (Hutson, 2006), mental health issues (Holland, 2005), procrastination, disorganization, lack of motivation, and poor concentration (Isaak, Graves, & Mayers, 2007). Additionally, students on probation work more, are more likely to have children living with them, have lower high school GPAs, and express more obstacles to academic success (Isaak et al., 2007; Trombley, 2001). However, probationary students, like first-generation students, are not a homogenous group and must be viewed within their individual contexts.

Research suggests that academic failure can be a turning point that encourages people to change (Combs, 2001). However as noted by Lindsay (2000), there are no mandates or policies outlining the development of probationary programs. More research on the efficacy of probationary programs is needed and can assist universities in developing effective programs. As Merisotis and Phipps (2000) stated, research on probationary programs is scarce, underfunded and inconclusive. Most of the research utilizes a quantitative methodology which fails to take into account the lived experiences of students on probation (Vander Schee, 2007).

Student Success

As noted, first-generation students are likely to struggle more academically than their non-first-generation peers. After the first year of college, first-generation students have lower grade point averages (GPAs) than non-first-generation students, 2.5 compared to 2.8 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Lower performance and lower GPAs persist throughout the academic career of first-generation students, especially in the areas of math, science, foreign language, and history. First generation students are also more likely to withdraw or repeat courses. In all academic courses attempted by students, 12% of the students withdrawing or repeating courses are first-generation students, compared to 7% of non-first-generation students (National Center for Education Statistics).

To best understand factors that predict student success, it is important to be aware of factors that lead to academic failure, as these issues are often on opposing ends of the same continuum. Hunter and Russell (1981) identified eight common errors that students experiencing academic failure have engaged in:

1. Enrolling in more courses than one can handle.
2. Not dropping courses before the deadline.
3. Enrolling in courses that are too advanced or out of sequence.
4. Not immediately repeating courses where below average grades were earned.
5. Completing general education courses before enrolling in courses related to one's major.
6. Enrolling in courses because of a friend's suggestion.

7. Not getting help with difficult courses or personal issues until too late.
8. Failing to turn in the required work to change an incomplete grade.

In contrast, the National Postsecondary Educational Cooperative identified seven areas that in combination, define student success:

1. Academic achievement
2. Engagement in purposeful academic activities
3. Satisfaction with the university
4. Acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies
5. Persistence
6. Attainment of educational objectives
7. Post-college performance (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007).

Multiple recommendations have been made to help students attain the seven areas above that define success. For example, teaching students as early as possible, within their first year, how to effectively use college resources and creating socially inclusive and supportive academic environments can increase students' academic success. The development of early-warning systems and networks to support students can increase academic success as well. The formation of academic learning communities, quality advisement, and mentorship to students also positively impacts student success (ACT, 2010; Kuh et al., 2007). Likewise, Mattson (2007) posited that identifying within the first six weeks of the semester students who are not regularly attending class or earning low grades is crucial in providing academic assistance. Identifying struggling students later in

the semester leaves students at risk for falling further behind, dropping out, or failing to persist (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

A student's ability to successfully navigate and transition through the necessary developmental stages required of college students is linked to academic success as well. Anderson (1998) outlined nine developmental stages of the typical college student:

1. Clarification of the person they wish to be and the career that will provide them with the best opportunities to become that person.
2. Acting autonomously and become financially independent.
3. Clarifying and personalizing values and beliefs.
4. Developing positive concepts of self as learners with intellectual capabilities.
5. Learning to form intimate relationships.
6. Creating a sexual identity that is congruent with one's values and solidifying identity as male or female.
7. Gaining an increased awareness of interests and skills by making informed decisions and becoming more comfortable with change.
8. Gaining confidence and becoming more comfortable with diversity.
9. Displaying authenticity by expressing their unique selves as opposed to playing roles or games.

University programs and initiatives designed to facilitate the achievement of developmental milestones have the potential to help students grow personally and professionally. According to Shwitzer (1999), social adjustment appears to be the primary factor in retention of African-American students.

Yet, institutions struggle to develop realistic retention strategies. McGrath and Burd (2012) noted that this struggle occurs, in part, because universities face mounting pressure to admit students who are not academically ready; and universities have limited control over some of the factors that impact success, such as prospective students' level of commitment and parental SES. As such, the current trend is to offer programs and services designed specifically for freshmen to enhance the first-year-experience, assist with college adjustment and increase engagement in college life. Whereas, success courses designed for students beyond the freshman year are lacking. However, success courses for upper-classmen may help address student issues that are within the control of the institution, such as the development of time management skills, the creation of healthy relationships with faculty and peers, and the expansion of university engagement. Attitudes and behaviors that predict college success can be taught and learned with a success course. Academic success courses can help nurture relationships among students, faculty, and institutions, and attitudes and behaviors that promote student success, and therefore college persistence, can be fostered within academic support courses (McGrath & Burd, 2012).

Existing Strategies

Universities experience much pressure to assist students who are on probation, but there is limited knowledge of how to best support these students. The impact of programs designed to assist students on probation are often not measured beyond GPAs and retention rates, and little qualitative analysis exists, which can hamper the ability to design effective programs to meet the needs of at-risk students. When effective academic interventions are implemented, students can meet academic demands and avoid academic

dismissal. Further, efforts to assist struggling students are mutually beneficial to students and institutions, leading to higher graduation rates and overall student success.

Comprehensive services for students at risk are needed, as supported by Thombs' (1995) finding that students on academic probation have more problem behaviors than those in good academic standing and can benefit from holistic approaches that address academic, affective, and behavioral needs. Programs designed to increase student persistence can be improved if both academic and non-academic factors are addressed (ACT, 2010).

Interventions for special populations. Some success programs are aimed at special populations such as first-generation college students, minority students, and female students. Olive (2008) noted that first-generation college students could benefit from support courses. Interventions that successfully integrate students into the university have been found to be especially helpful for first-generation and minority students (ACT, 2010). Also, in female and minority students, mentoring, counseling and advising programs have a positive relationship with student persistence (Halpin, 2003; Landry, 2004). Studies further suggest interventions or programs that cultivate an environment of respect where faculty express their sincere belief that all students are capable of success and learning can increase persistence in first-generation, female, minority students (Flowers 1998; Good et al., 2002). Likewise, programs that increase first-generation students' sense of belonging can have a significant impact on academic success (Tumen, Shulruf, & Hattie, 2008).

Departments or colleges within a larger university setting can engage in their own efforts to increase student persistence by creating programs specifically designed to meet

their students' academic and non-academic needs (Good et al., 2002). Departmental programs have been known to include interactive laboratories, workshops and tutorials; and pair students with faculty or upper-classroom mentors (ACT, 2010). In a study with engineering students, participants in a departmental success program reported feeling more connected to the engineering community than non-participants (Good et al., 2002).

Another way to increase support for at-risk students of special populations is through learning communities. Learning communities are programs that link courses through academic and social themes (Tinto, 2006). Students are grouped according to background and intellect, and then co-enrolled in two or more courses with related topics. This allows students frequent interaction with one another and multiple opportunities to connect (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Learning communities also provide individualized instruction, the sharing of knowledge and the creation of strong academic relationships with fellow students (Barbatis, 2010). This has been found to increase students' feelings of community and belonging (Zhao & Kuh), which results in higher retention rates for participants (Waldron & Yungbluth, 2007). Specifically, there is an increased likelihood that freshmen students who participate in these communities will return for their sophomore year (Tinto).

Advising and mentoring interventions. Many schools have implemented intervention strategies involving mentoring or advising. Faculty-student mentoring, academic advising, and peer tutoring are common components of programs implemented to increase student success (Chenoweth, 1999; Roach, 1997; Rodriguez, 1997). Effective mentoring programs can help first-generation students connect with faculty through supportive one-on-one relationships (Campbell & Campbell, 1997). A program at Ohio

University paired students on academic probation with peers who can help them develop goals and time management plans (Ting, Grant, & Plenert, 2000), and an Xavier University course connected students to counselors for voluntary sessions. At Michigan State University students met with advisors multiple times throughout the semester to create plans for success that included goal development, time management strategies, and study skills. Overall, programs that include mentoring and support groups help improve student involvement, motivation, academic self-confidence, engagement, and institutional commitment (ACT, 2010). Mentoring and peer-tutoring programs encourage interaction between students and mentors in informal settings, such as athletic events, as well as formal settings where academic needs can be addressed (ACT, 2010). The success of mentoring programs is dependent upon the involvement and dedication of the mentors, mentees and larger university (Campbell & Campbell).

Intrusive academic advising is a trending intervention for students on academic probation (Tovar & Simon, 2006). Intrusive advisement combines elements of student retention and advising theory. As Higgins (2003) noted:

> in an intrusive relationship, an advisor personally reaches out to students, meets with them, helps them identify issues and situations contributing to their academic difficulty, helps them set short and long term goals, and guides them through the development of a plan to accomplish their goals which includes advisor-student follow-up. Through the interactions brought on by intrusive advising the student's relationship with the advisor, institution and self grows (para. 10).

Workshop and classroom interventions. Institutions also develop programs that are delivered through workshops or classes. UC Merced developed a mandatory mid-

semester intervention for freshmen who received at least one D at midterm (Boretz, 2012). Students attended a one-hour workshop where they completed a student success plan and a self-assessment. A majority of students positively evaluated the course; 63% strongly agreed that the course helped them understand how to help themselves so that they could succeed in their classes, and 74% indicated that they were glad they attended the workshop. Likewise, Arcand and LeBlanc (2012) conducted a qualitative study on a mandatory academic success course. The success course offered support through weekly one-on-one class sessions with a faculty member in a group setting and academic success was facilitated through seven broad dimensions:

1. Nurturing and creating safe relationships with peers and faculty.
2. Creating short and long-term goals.
3. Improving writing and speaking skills.
4. Developing essential learning strategies.
5. Examining personal obstacles and creating solutions.
6. Creating personalized and structured individualized learning plans.
7. Creating awareness of university support services (e.g., counseling centers, health services, career center).

The qualitative analysis of the course involved the experience of one student who successfully completed four classes while enrolled in the success course. The student indicated that there was both personal and academic benefit as a result of the class.

Much like the mentoring intervention programs, success courses designed for at-risk students can combine academic and non-academic factors. For example, Dweck (2006) noted that students who are at-risk academically often believe that intelligence is a

fixed ability, rather than a product of purposeful engagement. Further, Borkowski and Thorpe (1994) reported that underperforming students tend to be impulsive and inaccurately judge their knowledge of a topic and their capabilities. Courses that teach academic skills and self-discipline, encourage engagement, and reinforce positive self-concepts may be beneficial for students struggling academically (Svanum & Bigattie, 2009). Educators can build positive self-concepts through success courses by modeling empathy, integrity, and respect in the learning environment, and students gain confidence when they share their experiences with peers, especially in the midst of academic challenges. As Trumpy (2006) suggested:

> When underperforming students share their common difficulties, compare their plans of academic improvement, and are simultaneously exposed to a plethora of support services, and supportive professionals interested in their collective and individual academic success they are more likely to succeed and persist (p.3).

Therefore, intervention efforts that are highly personalized and attend to both academic and non-academic factors, such as academic self-confidence, academic goals, institutional commitment, social support, and learning skills may be beneficial.

Additionally, workshop and classroom interventions are often mandatory for at-risk students; students who perform poorly academically are less likely to voluntarily seek support services to increase academic achievement (Hsieh, Sullivan, & Guerra, 2007). Because of the mandatory nature of these courses, there is some concern that enrollment in a course for at-risk or probationary students could violate a student's right to privacy. However, as long as student records (GPAs) are not shared, mandatory enrollment in a success course or workshop is not a violation of the Family Educational

Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which protects the confidentiality of student records. However, sensitivity to students' feelings of vulnerability or embarrassment is important. The benefits of a course that brings students into a common classroom may outweigh the potential for uncomfortable feelings.

Goals, Motivation, and Achievement

Theories linked to goals, motivation and achievement help explain student learning and shed light on how to design and implement strategies for at-risk students.

Academic Goals

For the past 25 years, achievement goal theory has been one of the most prominent theories in education research (Senko, Hulleman, & Harackiewicz, 2011). Ford (1992) defined goals as desired outcomes people try to attain through cognitive, affective, and biochemical adjustments to behavior. Ford viewed motivation as the complex interaction of goals, emotion, and personal-agency beliefs. Personal agency occurs when an individual believes that he or she can achieve self-determined goals (Bandura, 2003). Elliot and Thrash (2001) expanded the above definition of goals to include not only an interrelated pattern of variables that result in an inclination towards achievement tasks but also the reason why an individual engages in achievement behavior. Additionally, motivation theories posit that people engage in and persist in behaviors that will lead to desired outcomes and goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000). However, even when individuals believe they can complete a task they may not be compelled enough to do so. Therefore, it is important to examine theories that focus on the motivational reasons individuals choose to engage in achievement tasks. Through goal theory, motivationally relevant goal patterns are identified.

Nicholls et al., (1990) identified two motivationally relevant goal patterns: mastery goals and performance goals. Mastery goals, also called learning goals, refer to increasing one's competency, and understanding and appreciating what is being learned. Mastery goals involve increasing competence and gaining mastery over tasks (Covington, 2000). Examples include questions like "How can I best complete this task?" and "What will I learn by doing this?" Performance goals, also known as ego or self-enhancing goals, refer to outperforming others to increase one's status at the expense of peers (Covington 2000). Performance goals relate to ways individuals seek to maximize favorable evaluations of their competence and minimize unfavorable evaluations. Examples include questions like "Can I do better than others?" and "Will others think I'm smart?" Further, achievement goal theorists have a two-fold hypothesis, (a) learning goals involve deep-level, strategic processing of information, which leads to an increase in school achievement, and (b) performance goals involve superficial, rote-level processing that can block achievement (Covington, 2000). Students with a learning-goal orientation engage in more self-regulation, specifically, a greater effort to (a) recognize when they sufficiently know something and when they do not (Meece & Holt, 1991; Middleton and Midgley, 1997), (b) employ organization strategies with information, such as summarizing (Archer, 1994), and (c) recognize that occasional failure does not imply incompetence, but use of inadequate learning strategies (Nicholls, 1984; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Learning goals are positively linked to pride and satisfaction when one succeeds and negatively associated with anxiety when failure occurs (Jagacinski & Nicholls, 1984).

Several revisions of goal theory have occurred throughout the years and as a result mastery and performance goals have been further categorized. Four goal orientations are now commonly accepted: mastery-approach, mastery-avoidance, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance. As stated above, mastery goals demonstrate one's competence whereas performance goals demonstrate one's competence in outperforming others (Senko, Hulleman, & Harackiewicz, 2011). Mastery-approach goals involve striving to learn or improve skills, whereas mastery-avoidance goals involve striving to avoid failure or losing skills (Hulleman, Schrager, Bodmann, & Harackiewicz, 2010). Students who set and pursue mastery-approach goals report finding classes interesting, persisting through difficulty, valuing cooperativeness, seeking help when confused, and using self-regulation and deep learning strategies (e.g., Darnon, Harackiewicz & Butera, 2007). Roney et al., (1995) found that college students with a mastery-approach orientation performed better and were more persistent on anagram tasks then mastery-avoidance orientation students. In contrast to mastery-approach goals, mastery-avoidance goals involve striving to avoid failure or losing skills, and are linked to poor performance, lack of self-efficacy, disengagement, and high anxiety (Senko et al., 2011; Hulleman, 2010).

Performance-approach goals involve striving to perform better than others, and performance-avoidance goals involve avoiding poor performance in relation to others (Abd-El-Fattah & nAL-Nabhani, 2012; Pintrich, 2000). Performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals are relatively maladaptive in one's academic pursuits (Abd-El-Fattah & nAL-Nabhani). Only a small percentage of students can attain performance goals as this requires outperforming peers; however, the attainment of mastery goals

involves greater feelings of competence and should be more easily attained (Senko et al., 2011). On educational outcomes, mastery goals have been theorized to produce similar or stronger effects than performance goals especially when they are based upon seeking challenges as opposed to task-mastery (Dweck, 1986; Hulleman, 2010; Nicholls, 1984). Mastery goals tend to promote deep learning strategies, whereas performance goals tend to promote surface learning strategies (Hulleman, 2010).

Goal orientation is also impacted by one's personal beliefs. Much can be learned about individual achievement and why one chooses to engage or disengage in tasks by examining personal beliefs. For example, experiencing setbacks and believing that goal attainment is implausible leads to a reduction in the pursuit of goals and a lack of confidence in one's level of competency. This can result in an inconsistent pursuit of mastery goals (Bong, 2005; Jagacinski et al., 2010). Also, entity versus incremental belief orientations impact goal setting. Those with an entity belief system think that personal attributes, like ability, are relatively stable or fixed, whereas individuals with an incremental belief system view attributes as dynamic and malleable (Dweck et al., 1995). As such, individuals with entity beliefs adopt performance-related goals, while those with incremental beliefs adopt mastery-related goals (Abd-El-Fattah & nAL-Nabhani, 2012). Further, an incremental viewpoint is associated with more adaptive cognitive and behavioral strategies as well as greater persistence in the face of adversity. The extent to which personal attributes are viewed as fixed or malleable is associated with motivation and learning (Dweck, 1999).

The interaction of social and academic goals and the motivating properties of these goals impact the quality of learning and the will to continue to learn (Covington,

2000). The adoption of various achievement goals is associated with emotional, motivational, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes, which influence academic achievement behaviors (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Pintrich, 2000). Student achievement is influenced by achievement-based goals through the cognitive self-regulation process (Covington 2000). Cognitive self-regulation involves students actively engaging in their learning, analyzing the demands of school, planning and mobilizing resources to meet those demands, and monitoring their progress towards assignment completion (Pintrich, 1999; Zimmerman, 1990; Zimmerman et al., 1994). Achievement goals influence the timing, quality, and appropriateness of cognitive strategies that, in turn, impact the quality of one's accomplishments.

Pintrich et al., (1993) posited that traditional "cold" cognitive models of change do not consider the motivational and contextual factors that may influence goals, achievement, and self-worth, and ultimately impact whether students change their mental concepts. Researchers of cognitive-motivational processes acknowledge that emotion and context need to be considered (Pintrich et al., 1993; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). There are internal states and psychological motives, such as the need for social approval, power, and achievement that propel people toward action. Covington (2000) stated that achievement is the result of an emotional conflict between striving for success and avoiding failure. For example, success-orientated people anticipate pride at winning or prevailing over others, while failure-orientated people focus on the capacity for shame, and avoid situations where failure may be likely. The different emotional reactions of shame versus pride explain why some approach learning with enthusiasm while others

with reluctance (Covington, 2000). Understanding the complex interactions of cognition, emotion and context are essential in understanding students' motivation.

Prosocial Goals

Knowledge of the complexity of the interpersonal world of students, such as peer acceptance and respectability can contribute to a deeper understanding of academic achievement. The need to achieve a sense of belonging, respect, and integrity is included within the larger context of goal theory (Farmer et al., 1991). It has long been known, that social concerns and behaviors, including the willingness to help others and comply with rules, are important aspects of school-based motivations (McClelland, 1995; Veroff, 1996). Prosocial behaviors like being compliant and cooperative are positively associated with academic success (Wentzel, 1993). Further, learning goals often involve experimenting, discovering, and exploring which rely on active cooperation, a key component of prosocial values. The pursuit of social goals can help empower and restructure students to achieve more fully. However, at times, prosocial and academic goals can be in direct conflict which can present painful dilemmas. Minority students may struggle with the conflict to do well in school while not incurring the resentment of their minority peers and family members for betraying their cultural heritage (Arroyo & Zigler 1995).

The teacher-student relationship impacts prosocial and academic goals as well. Teacher support is positively associated with learning goals (Wentzel 1999). Dray et al. (1999) found that when students perceived teachers as not being supportive they felt no obligation to behave in prosocial ways. The willingness of students to form goals of

academic achievement is impacted by the belief that teachers care about them as people and students (Harter, 1996; Wentzel, 1995).

Goals and Self Worth

Self-worth theory suggests that achievement goals adopted by students reflect a lifelong struggle to have and maintain worth and belonging in a society that strongly values competency and doing well (Covington, 1998). The motivation for self-worth is the desire to maintain a positive self-image. Because students spend so much of their time in a classroom, self-worth is linked to academic competence (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Grade achievement affects the way many students judge their self-worth. As such, students engage in three main defensive mechanisms to protect their self-worth. These include withholding efforts, self-handicapping and defensive pessimism. Withholding efforts include general strategies that students employ that minimize their exertion, so that, if a failure occurs, it cannot be due to incompetency, but rather lack of trying (Covington, 2000). Self-handicapping is another method of self-worth protection. This involves creating impairments so that an excuse is ready in the event of failure, such as procrastination or setting unrealistically high goals (Covington, 2000). If one procrastinates and spends a little time studying, failure is the result of procrastination, not inability. And, if one procrastinates and still does well, they will appear highly competent because they succeeded with little effort. Similarly, if an individual is not able to achieve an unrealistically high goal, the failure is minimized because others would not likely succeed in achieving such a high goal either. The third main defense mechanism used to self-protect is defensive pessimism. Individuals set extremely low expectations and goals that discount the importance of assignments and minimize anxiety (Covington, 2000). All

of these strategies to protect self-worth result in inconsistent achievement; decreased interest in achievement; and increased anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and burnout (Covington, 2000).

Students also make causal attributions to enhance one's sense of academic competence and thereby protect self-worth. Covington and Omelich (1979) found that college students and younger students preferred to attribute their successes to ability and effort, and their failures to the causal attribution of "not trying." Both younger students and college students preferred to avoid attributing failure to a lack of ability. Therefore, strategies are developed to avoid the appearance of a lack of ability, such as procrastination, not trying, avoiding difficult tasks and making excuses (Covington, 1992). Covington referred to these as failure-avoiding tasks.

Goals and Self-Regulation

Delay of gratification is relevant to the academic context because at times, achieving academic objectives requires not participating in a more immediate reward, such as going to a movie with friends. Bembenutty and Karabenick (2004) stated that academic gratification involves successfully self-regulating learning. Self-regulated learning involves learners setting goals and then monitoring, regulating, and controlling cognition, motivation, and behavior (Pintrich, 2000). Individuals who can successfully self-regulate tend to delay gratification by choosing not to participate in more attractive activities like going to a party instead of studying for an examination. Individuals less adept at self-regulation choose immediate gratification that could hinder academic success (Abd-El-Fattah & nAL-Nabhani, 2012).

Goals and Volition

Volition refers to the strength and will to make a decision or complete a task. Kuhl (1987) stated that often in motivational theories, the process of volition is ignored. He argued that motivation may lead an individual to the decision to act, but volition determines whether or not one does act. Volition is different than self-regulation in that it includes personality characteristics and cognitive processes, whereas self-regulation focuses on self-monitoring, and self-evaluation (Corno, 1993).

There are a variety of distractions that can hinder an individuals' intention to complete a task. Kuhl (1987) labeled these as cognitive control strategies, emotional control strategies, motivational control strategies, and environmental control strategies. Cognitive strategies involve avoiding distracting information, focusing on pertinent information and using selective attention, and emotional control strategies involve minimizing negative emotional states like anxiety and depression. Whereas motivational control strategies involve increasing the current behavior's motivational base; and environmental control strategies involve enhancing one's behavior in ways that facilitate motivation, such as turning off the TV while reading for class (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Corno (1993) acknowledged common volitional challenges that students face, including multiple demands that compete for one's attention, distracting environments, and vague goals. Managing negative emotional states and increasing motivation to complete tasks are essential to academic success (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

Several studies have confirmed a direct association between student goals and academic outcomes. As institutions develop interventions for at-risk students, they may find it in their own interests, and the student's interest to incorporate the theoretical

underpinnings of goal theory. Students instructed to work under a learning-goal framework may have greater task involvement and achievement than students who work under a performance-goal framework (Schunk, 1996). As such, designing programs with a learning-goal framework where students can increase competency, and understand what is being learned may result in an increase in pride and satisfaction (Jagacinski & Nicholls, 1984).

Few studies and programs examine student success beyond the freshman year, and most lack a theoretical connection. Additionally, the success of student-support programs has traditionally been measured through quantitative analysis, thus silencing the voice of students. This study will fill these gaps by used a mixed-methods approach to examine the efficacy of a study-skills course that was informed by goal theory and offered to upper-class, at-risk students.

CHAPTER III - METHODOLOGY

Overview

A mixed-methods design was developed and implemented to investigate the effects of a goal-based study skills course on academic success for academically at-risk, first-generation, African-American female students. This evaluation was based on a comparison of academically at-risk, first-generation, African-American, female students who completed a goal-based study skills course at a university in the South across two semesters, and academically at-risk students who did not participate in the study skills course. Students enrolled in the course on a voluntary basis and no course fee was charged. Permission for proceeding with the study was granted by the Internal Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix A).

Research Design

Qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were used in this study. An explanatory mixed-method design was employed, where the findings from the quantitative data were followed with a qualitative methodology to expand upon and explain the quantitative findings (Schumacher & McMillan, 2006). It is the researcher's proposition that an explanatory mixed-methodology approach, as opposed to a purely quantitative or qualitative approach, best addressed the complexities of the goal-based study skills course and its impact on student success. Descriptions of course outcomes were obtained using academic data comprised of GPA, academic status, class absences, assignment completion and study session attendance. Further, detailed explanations of the quantitative results were attained qualitatively through semi-structured interviews.

Qualitative case study methodology was utilized for this study. A case study is an empirical inquiry that results in an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system (Merriam, 2002). The goal-based study skills course represents a bounded system in that it is one particular program or unit for which there are boundaries; the object of study can be "fenced in." As Miles and Huberman (1994) stated, a case is "a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context" (p.25). The intrinsically bounded phenomenon occurs when a finite number of people can be interviewed or observed.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students who completed the goal-based study skills course. The semi-structured interview process enabled the researcher to ask a core group of questions, followed by interview probes to increase comprehensiveness (Schumacher & McMillan, 2006). This method allowed the researcher to interact with participants and describe and explore their experiences in the goal-based study skills course and their resulting self-reported academic success. During the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to describe their experiences of the course, the perceived value of the course, the most and least beneficial aspects of the course, and any positive effects they continue to experience as a result of the course.

Although a qualitative framework is better suited to gain an experiential-based understanding of the goal-based study skills course, quantitative data collection methods were also used to provide objective measures of the effects of the course. The following academic variables will be explored: academic status and term GPA, goal-based study skills course grade, the number of class absences, the number of study sessions missed, and the number of assignments missed.

Participants

The study was conducted at a Southern university with a current undergraduate enrollment of approximately 12,500 students. The student body is nearly 65% female with a minority population of approximately 40%, of which 35% are African-American. It is estimated that 95% of the undergraduate student body receives financial aid and 83% of students attend school full-time.

Academically at-risk students from one social science department were invited to enroll in a one-credit hour goal-based study skills course. A total of 18 academically at-risk, first-generation, African-American, female students enrolled in the course. Because enrollment in the course was voluntary, students could choose to withdraw from the course, in the same manner, they would withdraw from any university course.

For the quantitative data collection, the control group consisted of 22 academically at-risk, first-generation, African-American, female students from the same social science department who did not enroll in the goal-based study skills course. The researcher obtained a list of students who had a GPA of 2.60 or less from August 2013 to May 2014. Propensity score matching (PSM) was utilized to match participants from the control group to the treatment group. The purpose of PSM is to reduce potential bias from confounding variables by reducing the apparent differences between the control group and the treatment group (Austin, 2011). By matching the propensity score of research subjects, the observed baseline covariates were distributed equally between the treatment and control group. Unlike PSM, in randomized experiments, the potential for bias arises because the outcome differences in the treatment and control groups may depend on characteristics that affected whether or not a subject received a given treatment rather

than due to the effect of the treatment itself. In randomized experiments, the randomization may allow for unbiased estimations of treatment effects because the treatment groups will be balanced on average, by the law of large numbers. Unfortunately, for observational studies, the assignment of treatments to research subjects is, by definition, not randomized. PSM attempts to mimic randomization by creating a sample of units that receive the treatment that is comparable, on all observed covariates, to a sample of units that did not receive the treatment (Austin, 2011). After participants had been selected for the control group through PSM, term GPA data was compared to participants who completed the goal-based study skills course.

A purposeful sampling method was used when conducting the qualitative component of the study. Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the researcher wants to gain insight and an understanding of a situation and subsequently must select an information-rich sample from which much can be learned (Merriam, 2009). As stated by Patton (2002) "the logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of inquiry, thus the term purposeful sampling" (p.230). First-generation, African-American, female students who participated in the goal-based study skills course were invited to interview. Six participants were interviewed for the study to ensure that reasonable coverage of the phenomenon occurred given the purpose of the study (Patton, 2002).

The Intervention

The goal-based study skills course was designed by a social science department to help academically at-risk students increase their academic success. The course contained the following student learning objectives:

1. Identify the habits and strategies necessary for academic success.
2. Apply principles and techniques of effective learning.
3. Demonstrate an understanding of the importance of setting short and long-term goals for academic success.
4. Critically examine personal and financial factors impacting academic success.
5. Create solutions utilizing available resources to overcome challenges to academic success.
6. Locate peer-reviewed articles through the university library webpage.
7. Appropriately utilize APA style.

The course curriculum utilized Sufka's (2011) "The A Game: Nine Steps to Better Grades", with topics including class attendance, class preparation, asking questions, learning the material on multiple levels, using learning checks, self-testing and exam preparation.

Goal attainment was especially emphasized. The course was designed to help students create short-term semester goals and long-term goals; identify steps necessary to reach goals, factors that may hinder goal attainment and solutions to overcome challenges. Throughout the course, students were encouraged to reflect upon the progress of their goals.

The goal-based study skills course was facilitated by a graduate student enrolled in a master's level Marriage and Family Therapy program. The course was held for 16 consecutive weeks and students could earn one academic credit hour for course completion. The course was held for 50 minutes one day per week. Also, students were required to attend two weekly one-hour study sessions. One of the study sessions was held at a regularly scheduled time with the instructor, and the other study session consisted of a one-hour independent study time. The independent study hour could be completed with the instructor or at any other place on campus that the student deemed to facilitate productivity. The study session that was completed with the instructor used an intrusive advising format. As Higgins (2003) noted

> in an intrusive relationship, an advisor personally reaches out to students, meets with them, helps them identify issues and situations contributing to their academic difficulty, helps them set short and long-term goals, guides them through the development of a plan to accomplish their goals which includes advisor-student follow-up. Through the interactions brought on by intrusive advising the student's relationship with the advisor, institution and self grows (para. 10).

The following assignments were requirements for the course:

Syllabus Quiz: Each student enrolled in class was asked to read the syllabus and complete a syllabus quiz consisting of 10 multiple choice questions.

APA Quiz: After a class lecture on APA style and formatting, students completed a hands-on quiz to apply and test APA knowledge.

Course Planner: Students were asked to insert course assignments, readings, and exams for all courses into a calendar or planner of their choosing.

Achieving My Goals Assignments: Students identified short- and long-term semester goals. The specific steps necessary to reach goals and the factors that may hinder goal attainment were explored. Students also identified specific solutions to overcome challenges to their goals.

Quizzes: Students completed quizzes based on the class lectures and reading assignments.

Article Summaries: Students completed two article summaries using a three-step approach 1) outline, 2) rough draft and 3) final draft. Students received feedback on each section of the article summary.

Presentation: Students chose a pre-approved topic related to academic success and designed a presentation on that topic using information gained from peer-reviewed articles.

Final Evaluation: Students reflected upon their growth this semester by reviewing and evaluating the Goals Assignment submitted at the beginning of the semester. Students discussed their strength, semester challenges, and solutions and strategies utilized throughout the semester.

Quantitative Data Collection

Archival data from the academic records of first-generation, African-American, female students who participated in the goal-based study skills course were collected. Eighteen student records were reviewed. The following information was collected from the academic record: academic status and term GPA, goal-based study skills course grade, the number of class absences, the number of study sessions missed, and the number of assignments missed.

Archival data from Academic Standings Reports were reviewed to identify academically at-risk (probation, probation continued or suspension), first-generation, African-American, female students, from the same Department, who did not participate in the goal-based study skills course. Twenty-two students were identified. The following information for those students was collected: Term GPA, overall GPA, and class standing. The data was quantitatively analyzed, and then a qualitative methodology was utilized to give further substance to the quantitative findings.

Qualitative Data Collection and the Interview Process

The researcher contacted each student selected for an interview to schedule a mutually convenient time to conduct the interview. Before the interview, the researcher emailed a copy of the interview questions to the participant, facilitating the ability for the participant to prepare in advance for the interview. Each participant was provided a $20.00 gift card to help incentivize participation and offset the travel and time costs of participating.

The interview format was a series of semi-structured interview questions that allowed the researcher to probe deeper and obtain in-depth information from the students who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). Each interview was scheduled for 45 minutes; however, the researcher allowed the interview to go beyond 45 minutes if additional information would enhance the understanding of the course. The interviews occurred face-to-face in an agreed upon time and location to ensure minimal disruption to the participant's daily schedule. Participants were able to choose the location of the interview, with the stipulation that the setting allows for privacy to maintain confidentiality.

The researcher obtained permission to audio record each interview to ensure accuracy. A backup recorder was available to offset any disruptions a malfunctioning recorder may cause. At the onset of the interview, participants were informed of the purpose of the interview. Participants were then asked questions from the interview guide and invited to elaborate upon their experiences. Interview questions were asked in an open-ended format to facilitate the receipt of as much information as possible. The interviewer asked clarification questions as needed to enable the articulation of the participant's experience. The researcher used reflecting skills to confirm that she understood the interviewer's response. When the student's experience of the goal-based study skills course was fully explored, according to the researcher, a final question was asked: "Is there anything else you would like to say about your experiences of the course before we go?". This allowed participants to have the final word and summarize or reemphasize aspects of their experiences that were especially significant.

Upon completion of the interview, all recordings were transcribed for data analysis. The transcribed interviews were sent to each participant to ensure the accuracy of the transcription. The transcription was amended if any errors occurred. Any amended transcriptions were re-sent to the participant for final proofing before being used for data analysis.

Interview Guide

1. What do you think of the Academic Success Course you completed?
    a. What was the class like for you?
    b. What did you learn in the course?
    c. How has the class helped you?

i. What was most helpful?

ii. What was least helpful?

2. What are your academic goals?

    a. How has the course helped you reach your academic goals?

3. How have you applied the information from the success course to your other courses?

    a. Do you use any of the study and learning skills techniques you learned in the course?

        i. If so, which ones? If not, what are your reasons for not using the techniques?

4. How do you feel about your current academic performance?

5. What elements of the success course would you keep?

6. What elements of the success course would you change?

7. Is there anything you'd like to add to this interview that may be important in understanding the success course?

Data Analysis

A research matrix is provided to summarize the design of the study (see Table 1). The table connects the data collection, analysis and interpretation methods to the research questions.

The quantitative data analysis focused on factors of the goal-based study skills course (treatment group) that impact term GPA. The treatment involved a one-semester course, consisting of 16 instructional sessions of approximately one hour in length, once

per week. The treatment components involved study sessions, faculty-student mentoring, goal setting, and learning strategies for academic success.

Table 1

Research Matrix Outlining Questions, Collection and Analysis

Research Questions	Collection Method	Data Analysis
What impact does a goal-based study skills course have on the term GPA of participants, compared to non-participants?	Term GPA Treatment Group and Control Group: Pre and Post	Mixed Factorial ANOVA
What impact does a goal-based study skills course have on the academic status of students on academic probation?	Academic Standing Treatment Group and Control Group: Pre and Post	Pearson's Chi-Square Test Descriptives
What is the relationship between assignments completed, study sessions attended and class absences in a goal-based study skills course and post-term GPA?	Course Grade Book (assignments, study sessions, class absences) and post-term GPA Treatment Group	Multiple Regression
What characteristics of a goal-based study skills course increase participant's academic success and achievement of short-term goals?	Student Interviews	Verbal Analysis
Through what process do participants transfer this learning to other courses?	Student Interviews	Verbal Analysis

The following dependent variables were compared to students' term GPAs to ascertain the effectiveness of the student success course: (a) pre-term GPA, (b) number of missed assignments, (c) number of missed study sessions, and (d) number of missed classes. SPSS was used to generate descriptive statistics in the form of means and standard deviations. A multiple regression analysis was used to determine the relationship

between missed assignments, missed study sessions, and class absences on post-term GPA. A mixed factorial ANOVA was conducted to test for significant interactions between the treatment and control group and the pre- and post-term GPAs. Additionally, a Pearson's chi-square test was conducted to determine if there was a relationship between academic status and the treatment and control groups.

Verbal Analysis of Qualitative Data

Once the interviews were conducted, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy by the researcher. An analysis of the interviews was conducted, and the personal experiences of each student were examined using a constant comparative method. Units of data that can potentially answer the research questions were identified. One unit of information was compared with the next until recurring themes or patterns emerge (Merriam, 2009). The units were then categorized, and the data was brought together in a novel way that helps shed light on the research questions. According to Merriam, category construction is data analysis, and therefore several criteria should be met in the process:

1. Categories are the answers to your research questions and should reflect the purpose of your research.
2. Categories should be exhaustive. All relevant or important data should be placed in a category or subcategory.
3. Categories should be mutually exclusive. Each unit of data should fit into only one category.
4. Categories should be sensitizing. The naming of a category should be exacting and capture the meaning of the phenomenon.

5. Categories should be conceptually congruent. All categories should be characterized using the same level of abstraction.

The process of triangulation was used to enhance internal validity and reduce the potential for researcher bias. The researcher asked another professional to review the transcripts independently to establish content validity and determine what themes and patterns emerge. Interpretations were reviewed by all investigators, and a consensus was reached that determined the emerged findings.

Qualitative Reliability and Validity

According to Merriam (2009), regarding qualitative methodology, internal validity deals with how well one's findings match reality. Given that reality is dynamic, changeable and challenging to grasp, Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed that validity be assessed in terms of credibility; meaning "are the findings credible given the data presented?" (Merriam, p. 213). Three methods were used to increase the credibility or internal validity of the study: triangulation, member checks and adequate engagement in data collection. Triangulation occurs when "two are more persons independently analyze the same qualitative data and compare their findings" (Patton, 2002, p.560). As stated, the researcher asked another professional to review the transcripts independently and determine what themes and patterns emerge. The researchers dialogued and reached a consensus of the emerged findings. Member checks were also used by providing the participants with transcripts and preliminary analysis. Participants were asked to provide feedback on the researcher's interpretation. This allowed the participants to determine if their experiences were adequately captured. Adequate engagement in data collection also occurred to ensure that saturation was reached; meaning that "you begin to see or hear the

same things over and over again, and no new information surfaces as you collect more data" (Merriam, p. 219).

In qualitative research, reliability and internal validity are related. Reliability refers to the extent to which the research process can be replicated and the same results can be attained (Merriam, 2009). Although it is possible to replicate qualitative methodology, it would be impossible for an exact replication of results to occur. Because of this, Lincoln and Guba (1998) introduced the term dependability; in essence "rather than demanding that outsiders get the same results, a researcher wishes outsiders to concur that, given the data collected, the results make sense—they are consistent with the data collected" (Merriam, p. 221). Dependability was addressed in this study using triangulation.

External validity refers to the generalizability of findings from one situation to another (Merriam, 2009). As such, in qualitative research, it is the researcher's responsibility to provide enough detailed information of the study's context to allow readers to determine how well the findings fit their circumstances. Context-dependent knowledge can be valuable; information gleaned from a case study can be transferred to similar situations (Erickson, 1986). Merriam states "it is the reader, not the researcher, who determines what can apply to his or her context" (p.51). A rich description of the course context, participants and findings will be provided to ensure a measure of external validity exists in this study.

Quantitative Reliability and Validity

Reliability is the degree to which an instrument is consistent and provides repeatable results each time it is used, given the same conditions and same subjects. For

this study, archival data from Academic Standings Reports were collected to identify GPA, Class Standing, and Academic Status. The Academic Standings Report was generated by running a query from a common central server. The data collected is deemed reliable as it was generated automatically by a query and then given to the researcher. The student's data was automatically collected by the University and could not be changed by the researcher, as a system user ran the query.

The other independent variables investigated came from the student's academic record: course grade, the number of class absences, the number of study sessions missed, and the number of assignments missed. This information was provided to the researcher by the course instructor, and therefore, the final course grade could have issues with the degree of interrater reliability as grading is subjective. Despite the limitations of using course grades as a measure of academic success, previous research has found that grades are still the single best predictor of student persistence and eventual degree completion (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 1999).

External validity examines the extent to which the study's results can be generalized to other populations, settings or time periods. Although the data for this study were gathered from one department within a single institution, it is possible that findings may apply to African-American, first-generation, female students from other departments and universities who are academically at risk.

CHAPTER IV – FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter presents the results of data analysis using an exploratory mixed-method design. The design included two phases to evaluate the effects of a goal-based study skills course on the academic success of African-American female students. The first phase of the design used quantitative data to compare term-GPAs of at-risk students who completed the goal-based study skills course to at-risk students who did not enroll in the course. Quantitative data was also used to identify the relationship between class absences, study session attendance, and assignments completed to term-GPAs of those enrolled in the study skills course. The quantitative data from Phase I was used to inform the qualitative interviews in Phase II. Interviews were conducted with course participants to further expand upon characteristics of the goal-based study skills course.

Phase I Analysis: Quantitative Results

A propensity score matching (PSM) analysis was used to match participants from the control group to the treatment group, based on the following covariates: pre-course academic standing, pre-course term GPA, and pre-course overall GPA. A caliper or match tolerance of .25 was selected to estimate the differences in means (Austin, 2010). This ensured that all matches not equal to or within .25 standard deviations of each covariate were dropped. Before PSM, the control group consisted of 22 potential participants; the PSM analysis identified 15 control group participants that fell within .25 standard deviations of each covariate. A total of 7 potential control group participants did not meet the match criteria and were eliminated.

The mean starting term GPA for the control and experimental groups were similar; with a mean of 1.87 for the control group and 1.95 for the experimental group (M = 1.87, SD = 1.033; M = 1.95, SD = .569).

Table 2

Phase I: Starting Term-GPA in Experimental and Control Groups

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SEM	SD
Experimental	18	3.25	.000	3.25	1.87	.243	1.03
Control	15	1.91	.750	2.66	1.95	.147	.569

The mean starting overall GPA for the control and experimental groups were not as similar, with a mean of 1.74 for the control group and 2.01 for the experimental group *(M* = 1.74, SD = .587; *M* = 2.01, *SD* = .192).

Table 3

Phase I: Starting overall GPA in Experimental and Control Groups

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SEM	SD
Experimental	18	.730	1.66	2.34	2.01	.045	.192
Control	15	1.98	.680	2.66	1.74	.152	.587

The academic standing of the groups was also compared and found to be similar. A majority of both groups had a starting academic status of probation continued or suspension. From the experimental group, 44% of students (n=8) were either on probation continued or suspension (22.0% and 22.2%). Similarly, the control group had

53.4% of students (n=8) on probation continued or suspension (26.7 % and 26.7%). No individuals from either group had a starting academic status of probation.

Table 4

Phase 1: Experimental Group Starting Academic Status

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Good Standing	10	55.6	55.6
Probation Continued	4	22.2	77.8
Suspension	4	22.2	100.0
Total	18	100.0	

Table 5

Phase 1: Control Group Starting Academic Status

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Good Standing	7	46.7	46.7
Probation Continued	4	26.7	73.3
Suspension	4	26.7	100.0
Total	15	100.0	

Group Differences in GPAs and Academic Standing

A mixed factorial ANOVA was conducted to compare the pre- and post-term GPAs for participants who enrolled in the academic success course and those who did not. The results indicated that there was a statistically significant interaction between academic success course completion and pre- and post-term GPA, F (1, 31) = 4.18, p =

.049. This indicates that individuals who completed the academic success course increased their term GPAs, as shown in Figure 1.

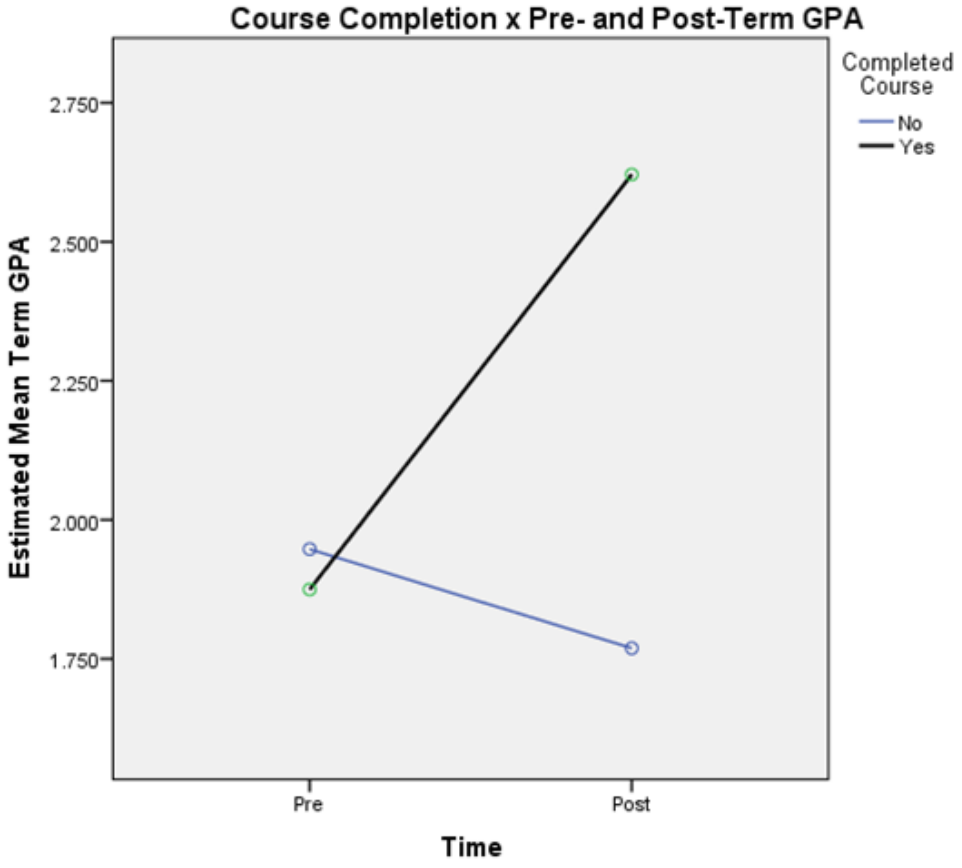

Figure 1. The interaction of course completion and pre- and post-term GPA.

Due to the statistically significant interaction between pre- and post-term GPA and the completion of the academic success course, a simple effects analysis was conducted to explore the nature of the interaction. A simple effects analysis compared the difference between pre- and post-term GPA for participants who completed the study skills course and those who did not take the course. The simple main effects analysis showed that there were no significant group differences in pre-term GPA (p =.810), but after completion of the study skills course there was a significant difference in term

GPAs between groups (p = .019). The mean post-term GPA for course participants was 2.62 (SD = .86), whereas for non-course participants it was 1.77 (SD = 1.12).

Group differences were further examined using a Pearson's chi-square test. There was not a significant association between the academic standing of treatment and control group participants before entering the academic success course χ^2 (2) = .259, p = .999. However, there was a significant relationship between academic standing for individuals in the treatment group who completed the academic success course when compared to individuals in the control group who did not enroll in the course χ^2 (3) = 10.13, p = .012. After completing the course, 72% of participants were in good academic standing, compared to only 20% of the control group. The experimental group had an increase in the number of students in good academic standing by 16.6 percentage points, whereas the control group experienced a decrease. The number of students in good academic standing in the control group decreased 26.7 percentage points, from 46.7% to 20%.

Table 6

Phase 1: Experimental Group Academic Status Post Course

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Good Standing	13	72.2	72.21
Probation	1	5.6	77.8
Probation Continued	1	5.6	83.3
Suspension	3	16.7	100.0
Total	18	100.0	

Table 7

Phase 1: Control Group Academic Status Post Course

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Good Standing	3	20.0	20.0
Probation	6	40.0	60.0
Probation Continued	1	6.7	66.7
Suspension	5	33.3	100.0
Total	15	100.0	

Predictors of Post-Term GPA

After identifying that a statistically significant difference existed between the treatment and control group, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to identify variables within the academic success course that help predict the post-term GPA of participants. The following variables were examined: number of missed classes, number of missed study sessions, and number of missed assignments.

The results indicated that the model explained a large amount of the variability in the outcome. The predictors: classes missed, study sessions missed, and assignments missed, accounted for 56.6% of the variation in post-course term GPAs.

An omnibus test further determined whether the above model was significantly better at predicting the outcome using the mean as an estimate (Field, 2009). With a statistical significance of $p < .05$, it is interpreted that the above model significantly improved the ability to predict the outcome variable of post-term course GPA, $p = .007$.

Additionally, the *b*-values help explain the relationship between post-course term GPA and each predictor (Field, 2009). Positive *b*-values indicate positive relationships whereas negative *b*-values indicate negative relationships. Negative relationships were found with all the predictor variables, meaning that as the number of study sessions missed, classes missed, assignments missed increased, the post-term GPA of participants decreased. However, statistical significance was not found at the individual predictor level, which may due to the low sample size of the study. Still, even though the *b*-values were not statistically significant, the lack of statistical significance may support the finding that the independent variables are working collectively as predictors.

Table 8

Phase 1: Unstandardized and Standardized Coefficients

		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	3.07	.191		16.10	
	Assignments Missed	-.175	.328	-.153	-.533	.602
	Study Sessions Missed	-.165	.094	-.435	-1.76	.100
	Classes Missed	-.250	.303	-.249	-.825	.423

Multiple assumptions were also tested and examined. The Durbin-Watson statistic informed of the plausibility of meeting the assumption of independent errors. According to Field (2009), the closer to two the value is, the better. The Durbin-Watson statistic for this model is 1.908, which is close to two, so the assumption of independent errors has most likely been met. It is also assumed that the residuals in the model are normally

distributed, with a mean of zero. Due to the small sample size of residuals, a normal probability plot was used to judge the distribution of residuals. The normal probability plot should produce an approximate straight line. As indicated below, the line is mostly straight with only small departures.

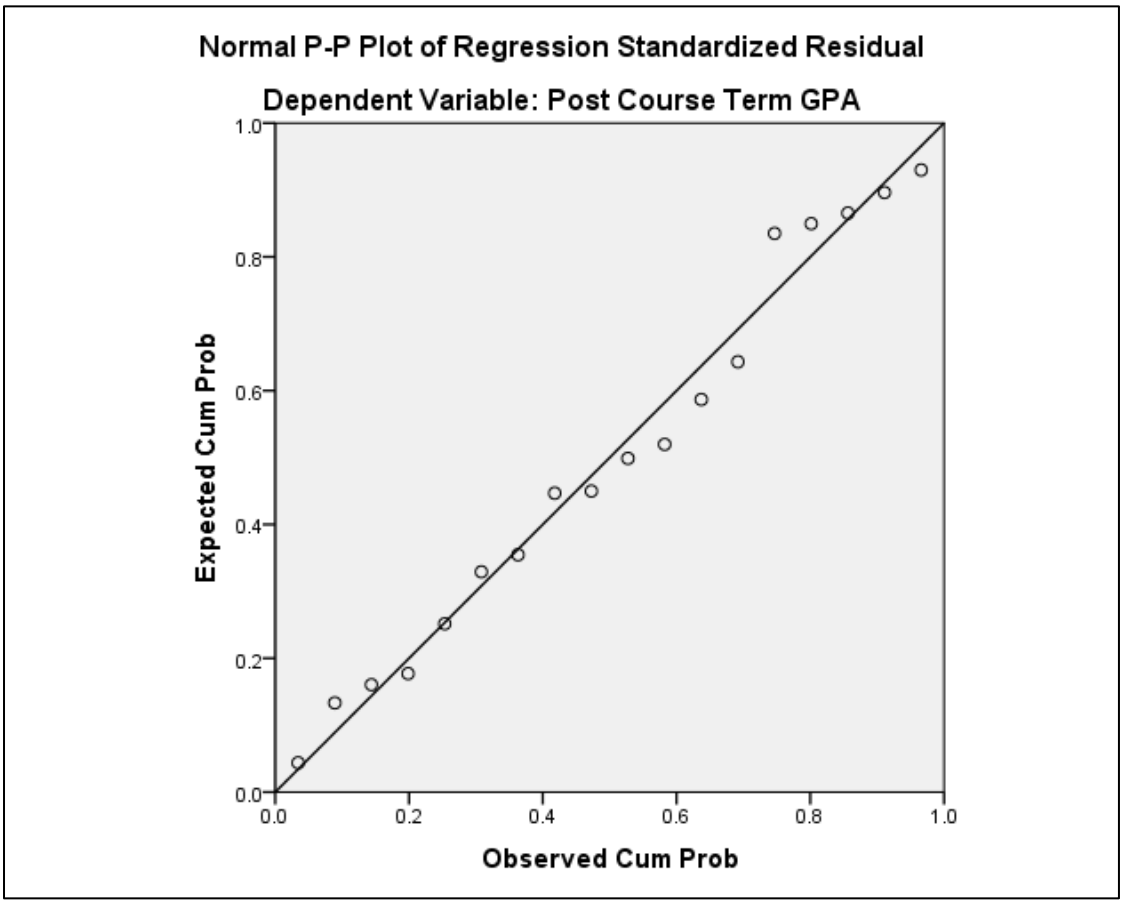

Figure 2. Distribution of Residuals: Normal Probability Plot.

The assumption of no multicollinearity is also made when conducting a regression analysis. The VIF and tolerance statistics provide insight of whether there is collinearity in the data (Field, 2009). According to Field, if the largest VIF is over 10 there is cause for concern, and if the average VIF is substantially greater than one, the regression analysis may be biased. The VIF values for this analysis are all less than 10 and range

between 1.96 and 2.94, with a mean of 2.51. To further confirm there are no issues of multicollinearity, the tolerance statistic was used. A tolerance below 0.2 indicates a potential problem and a tolerance below 0.1 indicates a serious problem with multicollinearity (Field). The tolerance statistics for all predictor variables were above 0.2, with a range of 0.34 to 0.51. This indicated that there is little concern for multicollinearity in the data (Field).

Homoscedasticity was also visually analyzed as this assumption tests the similarity of the variance of error terms in the independent variables. The residual scatter plot in Figure 3 shows some clustering of scores with an outlier. This indicates the assumption of homoscedasticity may be violated; the variance of errors differs among the independent variables. However, according to Tabachnick and Fidell (1996) slight heteroscedasticity has little effect on tests of significance.

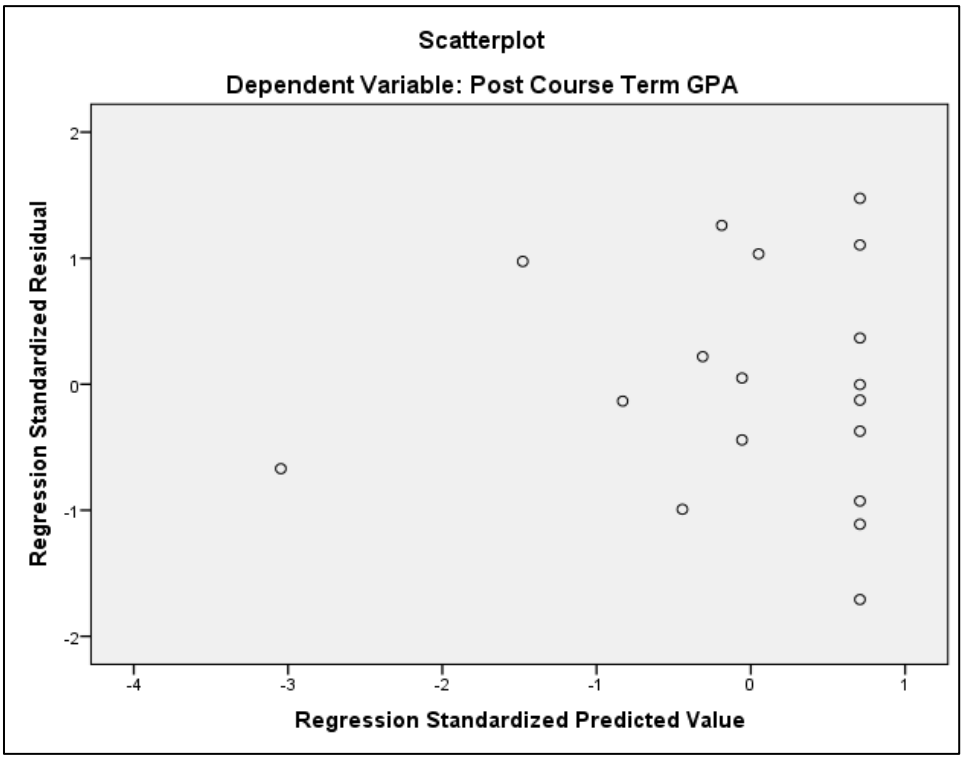

Figure 3. Residual Scatter Plot: Testing for Homoscedasticity.

Phase II Analysis: Qualitative Results

A qualitative analysis was also conducted to expand upon the quantitative findings above. Interviews were conducted to document students' perspectives of the efficacy of the goal-based study skills course. The qualitative results of the semi-structured interviews are presented in the following sections: 1) Profile of Participants, 2) Data Coding Process, and 3) Results.

Profile of Participants

The researcher contacted students who participated in the goal-based skills course. There were six students who agreed to participate. All students were African-American, female, and enrolled full-time at the University. Their ages ranged from 21 to 29, with a mean age of 24.

Data Coding Process

The qualitative data was analyzed using a three-step coding process, which consisted of transcribing, analyzing and grouping the data. The first step was to transcribe all interviews. The next step involved a thorough reading and analysis of the text whereby codes were assigned to certain words or short phrases. Codes are labels that are assigned to individual words or chunks of data (Merriam, 2009). This early coding assisted with the process of grouping data into themes to form central ideas gained from the interviews, a process recommended by Creswell (2005). Table 9 shows the codes that were utilized to identify subsequent themes. The themes that emerged were used to answer the following research questions:

1. What characteristics of a goal-based study skills course increase participant's academic success and achievement of short-term goals?

2. Through what process do participants transfer this learning to other courses?

Table 9

Phase II: Codes for Student Interview Data

Code	Label
Code 1	Learning Techniques
Code 2	Goal Setting
Code 3	Professors and Instructors
Code 4	Peers
Code 5	Timing of Course
Code 6	Confidence and Positivity

Interview Results

Three themes emerged from analyzing the qualitative data codes, *Building Relationships, Building Skills, and Building Hope.*

The first theme, *Building Relationships,* emerged as the researcher reviewed codes assigned to participant's perspectives of their professors and peers. Participants identified the relationship with the instructor and their peers as being instrumental to their academic success. The participants perceived the instructor for the goal-based study skills course as caring, perceptive, and available. "She [the instructor] cares, and you can tell from the beginning that she wants the best for each student in there. And that helps out a lot because going in that course, you know, you know that most of the students are having a hard time…that's why they're signed up for it. And of course, we all know that you know, instructors care about us, but it's not easy coming here, you know speaking to

y'all about, you know, having a hard time." Another student stated that "when you have people that care, it's always easier for you to come back and get the help that you need." As students discussed their instructor, they also noted how perceptive she was, "She can like, she noticed when something was wrong, you come in class late, you know she will pull you to the side, 'Is everything okay?'…she stayed in tune." Participants also mentioned that the instructor "helped us find out where we are and where we need to be" and "she, you know, really made sure that all of our needs were met." Additionally, participants highlighted the instructor's availability, "I can always refer to [the instructor]. I can always refer to her because I can send an email or, you know, ask her something, and she's good about helping if she can". And, "you can come back and anytime you need help she [the instructor] says, 'just make an appointment,' that's all you've got to do, and yeah, she will be glad to help you."

Participants also talked about how the relationship with their instructor continued after they completed the goal-based study skills course. "Even if you are out of the class, you can always come back, and she will be glad to help you…Because I came back." Another student commented that "I've emailed her; I've talked to her a few times after [the class]… and she was helpful, and the first thing she said was, 'Hey, how you doing? How's student teaching? How's everything going? Are you almost done'? And, you know, that made me feel like she really did care because she's still concerned about where I'm at in school and how I'm doing."

Participants also highlighted the significance of building relationships with their classmates during the goal-based study skills course. "At first I thought the course was for people on their last leg…but I walked in [to class] looking like 'Oh, you're in here

too?'" Another student furthered this idea by stating that "you learned so much about each other. Now we can see each other on the street, and one of us would be like, 'Hey!' Like something we would have probably never done in the first place, but it made you aware of other people's problems, and the world doesn't revolve around you." Another participant said, "I learned, which is weird, how to be aware of other people's needs."

Many participants noted that the small class size helped build relationships with the instructor and peers. "It was small, it was a small setting, therefore [the instructor] had a lot of time to put into each student, and I liked that. It's pretty hard going through [the University]…it's hard to find a small class setting". Another participant stated that "It was a small class, so it was very intimate. We got to learn about each other and get to know each other. Uh, it was more open for discussion and suggestions. It was kind of like a support system inside of a class, so it was really good." The idea of a support system was also voiced by another participant "So, it was good to have a lot of students in there who had, you know, similar experiences. Maybe not the same, but we all had something in common. And so that smaller classroom setting made it seem kind of like our own little family—our little school family." Theme 1 is summarized in Table 10.

Table 10

Phase II: Theme 1: Building Relationships

Building Relationships with the Instructor
• "I really liked [the instructor]. Um, you could tell from the beginning of the course that she cares."
• "She wants the best for each student in there."
• "She [the instructor] cares, and you can tell from the beginning that she wants the best for each student in there. And that helps out a lot because going in that

Table 10 (continued).

course, you know, you know that most of the students are having a hard time…that's Why they're signed up for it. And of course, we all know that you know, instructors care about us, but it's not easy coming here, you know speaking to y'all about, you know having a hard time."

- "When you have people that care, it's always easier for you to come back and get the help that you need."
- "It's just when somebody takes that time out to just help you, that's what makes, you know, doing class, having your classes easier."
- "She was just such a nice person. I don't know it was just, she's sweet, and she cares, so that's what made me come back."
- "She can like, she noticed when something was wrong, you come in class late, you know, she will pull you to the side, 'Is everything okay?"…she stayed in tune."
- " [She] helped us find out where we are and where we need to be"
- "She, you know, really made sure that all of our needs were met."
- "She cared about our grades and our success. Um, she was very dedicated in that course."
- "I don't know; it's just, I guess, the patience she had with us was what helped me out, because I've been all over the world, and I just finally found something.
- "I mean, she was just if you needed anything she would try to help you, so it was just refreshing to have that in a person as an instructor."
- "The instructor was really great. She, you know, made sure that all of our needs were met. If we didn't understand something, you know, she was always there to get with us if needed."
- "I can always refer to [the instructor]. I can always refer to her because I can send an email or, you know, ask her something, and she's good about helping if she can."

- "You can come back and anytime you need help she [the instructor] says, 'just make an appointment,' that's all you've got to do, and yeah, she will be glad to help you."
- "And she clearly, you know, remember everything she knew about you."
- "Even if you are out of the class, you can always come back, and she will be glad to help you…Because I came back."
- "I've emailed her; I've talk to her a few times after [the class]… and she was helpful, and the first thing she said was, "Hey, how you doing? How's student teaching? How's everything going? Are you almost done"? And, you know, that made me feel like she really did care because she's still concerned about where I'm at in school and how I'm doing."

Table 10 (continued).

Building Relationships with Peers

- "At first I thought the course was for people on their last leg…but I walked in [to class] looking like 'Oh, you're in here too?" "And, you learned so much about each other. Now we can see each other on the street, and one of us would be like,

Table 10 (continued).

'Hey!'. Like something we would have probably never done in the first place, but it made you aware of other people's problems, and the world doesn't revolve around you."
- "I learned, which is weird, how to be aware of other people's needs."
- "We were able to help each other, like, "Oh so you're having a hard time with this, and so I can help you with that."
- "We got a chance to find out who each other was and, you know, most of us been in the same classes."

Table 10 (continued).

The Implication of Class Size on Relationships
• "It was small, it was a small setting, therefore [the instructor] had a lot of time to put into each student, and I liked that. It's pretty hard going through [the University]…it's hard to find a small class setting".
• "It was a small class, so it was very intimate. We got to learn about each other and get to know each other. Uh, it was more open for discussion and suggestions. It was kind of like a support system inside of a class, so it was really good."
• "So, it was good to have a lot of students in there who had, you know, similar experiences. Maybe not the same, but we all had something in common. And so that smaller classroom setting made it seem kind of like our own little family—our little school family."
• "Pretty much is was good to have a small class. The smaller classroom was better for me".

As participants discussed their experiences of the goal-based study skills course, the second theme of *Building Skills* emerged. Participants discussed three main skills they acquired throughout the course that contributed to their success: planning and organization, sitting up front, and talking to professors.

Participants were required to have a planner for the goal-based study skills course, and many students reflected upon the benefits of this. As one student put it, "Planning was a big word over there!" And another student stated "Like, I remember at the beginning of class [the instructor] said 'ok everybody needs to have a planner and you have to have your planner', and then she sat down and told us to bring all our syllabus and write down all of the assignments that were due…that's how I became organized." Students talked about how previously, before the goal-based study skills course, they had

not been organized, “I didn’t plan the way I needed to, that’s why I was working so much.” A second student further commented that “I wasn’t a very organized person, so we were required to have a planner, and it helped me be more of a structured student.” Even though many students weren’t initially enthused about using a planner, they appeared to see the benefits over time. “I was like ‘Oh my gosh, I’m spending $11.00 on a planner?!’ But, that was the best 11 bucks I’ve ever spent.” Similarly, another student noted that “I hated sitting there writing a planner out, but I got fancy with it. I did every class in a different color.” In time, students began to see the planner as an important tool in their success. One student stated, “I swear to you, I have everything listed: the times it’s due, the day it’s due, what class, everything!” And a second student even began sharing the importance of a planner with her peers, “[Having a planner] helped a lot. I even told other people, some of my friends that were having trouble. I was like, ‘y’all need to do this…it will help you, I promise.”

Participants also highlighted another skill they learned which was to sit up front in their classes. As one student stated, “a technique that I learned, that I always do now, is sit in the front of the classroom.” Another student also commented that “I learned to just go ahead and just walk to the front. Don’t even try to sit in the back—just go to the front! The very front row!” Another student highlights this by emphasizing, “not even the middle—just the front!” Participants also discussed the reasons for the new technique of sitting up front. “You’re very distracted, and if you sit in the back, you’ll be liable to be on your computer, you know, on your phone, doing something. But, if you’re in the front you basically have no other choice but to pay attention.” Similarly, another student stated that “If you’re in the back, you tend to not listen. You’re on your phone; you’re doing

something that you're not supposed to be doing, honestly." And, another commented that "I've learned to sit in the front because the more they see you, the more you're willing to learn and when they call on you…you're listening."

Participants also discussed the importance of talking with class professors. "When I first got here, I did not meet with anybody. I just did what I had to do. And that was it. And, it didn't work. It does not work. So, I met with my instructors as often as I could about assignments, especially if I wasn't quite sure if I was heading in the right direction." Similarly, another student said, "I try to make sure I also get feedback from my instructor. Like if an assignment is due, I will ask or email my instructor and say, you know, 'Hey, can I turn this in early and have you look over it to see if this is what you're looking for?'".

Students also discussed how there is fear associated with talking to professors. "I know some people are afraid to meet with their instructors." Another student recognized this fear by stating, "Don't be afraid to go to your teacher's office hours when they're available." Additionally, two students acknowledged the importance of talking to professors but still being afraid to do so. "I can email them [my professors], but talking in person, I probably wouldn't do." Likewise, when discussing future goals to work on, a student stated, "I think just talking to professors is what I still need to do." The second theme is summarized in Table 11.

Table 11

Phase II: Theme 2: Building Skills

Planning
• "Planning was a big word over there!" • "Like, I remember at the beginning of class [the instructor] said 'Ok everybody needs to have a planner and you have to have your planner', and then she sat down and told us to bring all our syllabus and write down all of the assignments that were due…that's how I became organized." • "I didn't plan the way I needed to, that's why I was working so much." • "I wasn't a very organized person, so we were required to have a planner, and it helped me be more of a structured students." • "I mean, because if you know what you need to do, then you can do it." • "I was like 'Oh my gosh, I'm spending $11.00 on a planner?!' But, that was the best 11 bucks I've ever spent." • "I hated sitting there writing a planner out, but I got fancy with it. I did every class in a different color." • "I never thought I'd use a planner." • "I swear to you; I have everything listed: the times it's due, the day it's due, what class, everything!" • "[Having a planner] helped a lot. I even told other people, some of my friends that were having trouble. I was like, 'y'all need to do this…it will help you, I promise.'" • "Use a planner. Use a planner! I will buy one from now on."
Sitting up Front
• "A technique that I learned, that I always do now is sit in the front of the classroom." • "I learned to just go ahead and just walk to the front. Don't even try to sit in the back—just go to the front! The very front row!"

Table 11 (continued).

- "Not even the middle—just the front!"
- "But now I sit in the front. The front row."
- "If you sit in the front row, you can't tell what's behind you and you're just focusing on what the teacher's saying. I have, I did change that method because I used to sit in the back."
- "I didn't sit in the front of the class at first, but now I sit in the front of all my classes, and you can tell a difference because when you're in the back, you get distracted by everything that's in front of you."
- "You're very distracted, and if you sit in the back, you'll be liable to be on your computer, you know, on your phone, doing something. But, if you're in the front you basically have no other choice but to pay attention."
- "If you're in the back, you tend to not listen. You're on your phone; you're doing something that you're not supposed to be doing, honestly."
- "So. I've learned to sit in the front because the more they see you, the more you're willing to learn and when they call on you…you're listening."

Talking to Professors

- "I've learned to email and meet with my instructors as soon as possible."
- "I also talk with my instructors to make sure, you know, I am on the same page that they're on as far as, you know, turning in my assignment."
- "Which, when I first got here, I did not meet with anybody. I just did what I had to do. And that was it. And, it didn't work. It does not work. So, I met with my instructors as often as I could about assignments, especially if I wasn't quite sure if I was heading in the right direction."
- "I try to make sure I also get feedback from my instructor. Like if an assignment is due, I will ask or email my instructor and say, you know, 'Hey, can I turn this in early and have you look over it to see if this is what you're looking for?'".
- "Before the course, I felt like, you know, instructors were kind of busy."

Table 11 (continued).

- "I feel like I reach out to them [professors] more."
- "I know some people are afraid to meet with their instructors."
- "Don't be afraid to go to your teacher's office hours when they're available."
- "I can email them [my professors], but talking in person, I probably wouldn't do."
- "I think just talking to professors is what I still need to do."

A final theme of *Building Hope* emerged as students reflected on their experience of the goal-based study skills course. It became clear that the success students experienced during the semester they enrolled in the goal-based study skills course transferred to feelings of hope and positivity; and confidence in their future abilities. As one student noted, "[the course] makes you want to go to higher heights. And, I was like, 'I can do this; I can get my degree…I can do whatever I want to even though it's taking me a little while. I can do it." Similarly, another student said, "I'm one class away from graduating. I'm gonna make it!"

A sense of pride also emerged for some students, "going through what I've been through and my journey through school, I mean, as hard as it was, it's good to be in this place now, and so like I said, I'm really proud of myself this semester." For some participants, this sense of pride transformed into a desire to make their current semester or academic year, the best ever. "I want to be the best student that I've ever been this year." Another student noted, "this is going to be a good year for me. Like, I'm focused, and I am ready." Likewise, a student state that, "whatever your passion is, it'll reflect in you. And, I haven't been letting it reflect in me. And I want my passion to shine through

me this year. I want to do my best work this year." The third theme is summarized in Table 12.

Table 12

Phase II: Theme 3: Building Hope

Building Hope
• "[the course] makes you want to go to higher heights. And, I was like, 'I can do this; I can get my degree…I can do whatever I want to even though it's taking me a little while. I can do it."
• "I'm one class away from graduating. I'm gonna make it!"
• "When you can see graduation, you gotta keep going."
• "It is really exciting. I, I really thought that it was gonna take either such a long time, or I was gonna have to quit at some point."
• " I want to learn how to get ready for my future."
• "Going through what I've been through and my journey through school, I mean, as hard as it was, it's good to be in this place now, and so like I said, I'm really proud of myself this semester."
• "I want to be the best student that I've ever been this year."
• "Um, academically, I want to complete with a really high or high as I go, possibly, GPA. And, um, I intend to proceed on with what I'm doing, um, after I finish, you know."
• "This is going to be a good year for me. Like, I'm focused and I am ready."
• "Whatever your passion is, it'll reflect in you. And, I haven't been letting it reflect in me. And I want my passion to shine through me this year. I want to do my best work this year."

In conclusion, Phase I and Phase II of this study identified the impact of a goal-based study skills course on term-GPA, and the unique course characteristics that contribute to success, according to student participants. Building relationships, skills, and

hope were identified as influential factors to success. This success was seen when the term-GPAs of course participants were compared to non-participants.

CHAPTER V – DISCUSSION

Overview

This study explored the benefits of a goal-based study skills course to assist academically at-risk African-American female students. The results of this study could inform administrators at various college levels within a university, from Presidents to Chairs to faculty, on the benefits of department led support courses for at-risk students. The specific purpose of this explanatory mixed-method design study was to investigate the effectiveness of a goal-based study skills course by comparing term-GPAs of participants and non-participants; examine the relationship between class absences, number of missed assignments and number of missed study on term-GPA, and interview participants to gain an experiential-based understanding of the course. As such, the study was completed in two phases. Phase I utilized quantitative methodology. The Phase I experimental group consisted of 18 participants who completed the goal-based study skills course and 15 control group participants. Phase II used qualitative methodology whereby semi-structured interviews were conducted with six students who completed the course; this was done to capture the voice of the student and expand upon the quantitative findings.

In Phase I, the following archival data was gathered for all participants: academic standing, term GPA, and overall GPA. Additional data was gathered from experimental group participants to examine the following academic variables from the goal-based study skills course: final course grade, the number of class absences, the number of study sessions missed, and the number of assignments missed. A mixed factorial ANOVA was used to determine if there was a significant difference in term-GPA between the

experimental and control group. A multiple regression analysis was then conducted to expand upon the ANOVA findings, and identify whether the following variables help predict the post-term GPA of course participants: assignments missed, study sessions missed, and class absences.

In Phase II, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six students who completed the course. The researcher asked each student a core group of questions, and participants described and explored their experiences of the goal-based study skills course. Participants were also asked to describe the perceived value of the course, the most and least beneficial aspects of the course, and any lasting effect they may continue to experience as a result of the course.

Summary of Findings

Phase I

The following research questions guided the statistical analysis and subsequent findings of Phase I: (1) What impact does a goal-based study-skills course have on term-GPA of participants, compared to non-participants? (2) What impact does a goal-based study skills course have on the academic status of students on academic probation? (3) What is the relationship between assignments completed, study sessions attended and class absences in a goal-based study skills course and post-term GPA?

Term-GPA and academic status for participants and non-participants. Results showed a significant difference in the post-term GPA of academically at-risk students who completed the course when compared to those who did not complete the course (p = .049). The starting term GPA for the control and experimental groups were similar, with a mean of 1.87 for the control group and 1.95 for the experimental group. However, upon

completing the goal-based study skills course, the experimental group increased their term GPA mean to 2.62, while the control decreased their mean to 1.77.

As a result, students who enrolled in the course were able to increase their academic status more quickly than non-participants. Before completing the course, 55.6% of course participants were in good academic standing; after completing the course, 72% of participants were in good standing. In contrast, students who did not complete the course experienced significant declines in their academic status. Control group participants started with 46.7% in good academic standing; however, one semester later, only 20% were still in good academic standing. As noted by Combs (2001), academic failure can be a turning point that encourages students to bring their grades up. However, without the proper support of an academic success course, it appears very challenging for students to do so. Thus, making it more likely that students will be involuntarily dismissed from the university.

Predictors of a goal-based study skills course on post-term GPA. After achieving statistical significance when comparing post-term GPAs of the experimental and control groups, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to identify specific variables of the goal-based study skills course that may predict post-term GPA. The model, which included the number of assignments missed, the number of study sessions missed and the number of classes missed was statistically significant in predicting post-term GPAs (p = .007). All variables in the model had a negative relationship with post-term GPA, though none were statistically significance, possibly due to the low sample size. However, the negative relationship of the variables used in the model with post-term GPA indicates that as students miss more assignments, study sessions, and classes, their term-GPA may

decrease. Because the goal-based study skills course was only one-credit hour, it would not impact a student's GPA as much as a three-credit hour course. Therefore an assumption could be made that a student's performance in the study skills course is indicative of their performance in other courses, as indicated by the statistical significance found when comparing the term-GPA of the control and experimental groups.

Phase II

The following research questions guided the analysis and findings of Phase II: (1) What characteristics of a goal-based study skills course increase participant's academic success and achievement of short-term goals? (2) Through what process do participants transfer this learning to other courses?

Characteristics of the participants. The semi-structured interviews shed light on demographic characteristics of the course participants. The students interviewed demographically matched many of the characteristics of students on academic probation, as noted by researchers. Students on probation are more likely to have outside work obligations and children living with them; thus leading to challenges balancing school, work and home obligations (Hutson, 2006; Isaak, Graves, & Mayers, 2007). All six of the students who participated in the semi-structured interview process of Phase II maintained a job, and five out six (83%) were working full-time while attending school. Likewise, four out of six (67%) had children. Literature also noted that first-generation students are more likely to begin their post-secondary education at a two-year institution (Bui, 2002); this held true for participants of this study in that five out of six (83%) started their post-secondary education at a community college.

Engagement Characteristics Contributing to Academic Success.

The goal-based study skills course appeared to increase student engagement. Students reported engaging with their instructors, classmates and the larger university more deeply and frequently. A contributing factor that opened the doorway for greater engagement was the supportive relationship that students developed with the study skills course instructor. All six participants highlighted the instructor as being key to their academic success. As one student noted,

> You could tell from the beginning of the course that she cares…she wants the best for each student in there. And that helps out a lot because going in that course; you know that most of the students are having a hard time… that's why they're signed up for it. And of course, we all know that you know, instructors care about us, but it's not as easy coming here, you know speaking to y'all about, you know having a hard time…I felt like I could probably go talk to her about an issue that I'm having.

The feeling of being supported was noted by other participants as well,

> She [the instructor] was just such a nice person. I don't know it was just, she's sweet, and she cares, so that's what made me come back [to the university], and when you have people that care, it's always easier for you to come back and get the help that you need. Yeah, you can come back and anytime you need help she just [says] 'make an appointment,' that's all you've got to do, and yeah she will be glad to help you.

In addition to feeling cared for and supported, students also highlighted the importance of the instructor's consistent availability:

> The instructor was really great. Um, she, you know, really made sure that all of our needs were met. If we didn't understand something, you know, she was always there to um, get with us if needed. And that's what I got from the class…people are here to help you, and they're not here to shun you, they're not here to make you feel like you're sub par.

These finding support previous research that indicates that creating quality relationships with faculty in environments that cultivate respect and sincerity can increase student engagement (Flowers, 1998; Good et al., 2002; McGrath & Burd, 2012). The positive relationship that participants developed with their study skills course instructor appeared to serve as a gateway to developing relationships with other faculty, thus furthering engagement and fostering more connections. One student expressed that she began to reach out to faculty at the beginning of the semester:

> [the semester after the success course] I got my syllabus at the beginning of the year; I emailed all of my professors, and so I was like 'so I've been here for a while, and I've had some struggles before' and so I was saying that I wanted to do things differently this time.

The willingness to foster relationships with faculty using face-to-face methods was also expressed:

> I also, talk with my instructors to make sure you know I am on the same page that they're on as far as you know turning in my assignments…I reach out to them more, you know, but before the course, I felt like, you know, instructors are, you know, kind of busy. You know they have 80 students in a class…if I need to, I will make it my business to try to come and see the instructor face to face.

Students not only expressed greater faculty engagement but also greater engagement with their classmates. As noted by Astin (1975), if a student's campus engagement is lacking it may be more difficult for students to receive peer support. As such, first-generation African-American female students are more likely to experience loneliness and isolation (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). The study skills course provided opportunities for students to engage with their classmates in a smaller, more intimate setting:

> It was a really small class, so it was very intimate. We got to learn about each other and get to know each other. Uh, it was more open for more discussions and suggestions. It was kind of like a support system inside of a class, so it was really good. It was a nice size for a good class.

The small class size increased engagement by helping students feel less alone in their struggles as they realized their peers had similar experiences:

> I guess we all had a common reason for being there; I guess we all had had issues before, semesters before…so it was good to have um, a lot of students in there who had um, you know similar experiences. Maybe not the same but we all had something in common. And so the smaller classroom setting made it seem kind of like our own little family, our little school family.

As noted by another student:

> [At first,] I didn't want anyone to know that I was in this success course. And I walked in, and I automatically knew two people [laughter]. So I was like, 'Ok, this is gonna be ok.' And it was. And I had a good semester because of it.

In addition to engaging with faculty and peers, students also reported an increased willingness to engage with the larger university. One student stated that:

> I'm looking forward to getting involved on campus. When at first, I wasn't [laughter]. I mean I'm looking forward to getting to know people in the department and actually letting people get to know me.

Another student expressed that the success course increased her awareness of university services, which led to more engagement:

> [I learned] how to use the [advisement] center [laughter] because I had never used it before that class but afterward I've been, faithfully [going] to get help…I knew about it, but I never went. So just the class introduced me. It was like 'Oh I could really use this place' not just for the class but just to come as a regular student outside of the class.

Many students noted that the main factor that hindered their engagement was the challenge of balancing multiple employment, family and school obligations. One student expressed that:

> I had to realize that I can't work forty hour weeks and come to—and go to school full time. But that's what I've been doing this entire time. And I'm lacking. And it [the success course] helped me realize that right now, yes, my education is more important.

Similarly, another student noted that:

> Work kind of sometimes gets in the way of that [academics]. Just trying to balance work and go to school at the same time. Well, I feel like I work full-time,

but I work part-time. But I think that's the main thing is just work. So if I didn't have to work I'd probably be fine but, I work too.

In sum, Kuhl et al., (2002), noted that freshman persistence increased when relational engagement occurs between students and their faculty, peers, and institution. The findings of this study are similar and highlight the importance of engagement for upper-class students. The study skills course appeared to increased student engagement in all of these areas, and all students noted that they had plans to persist to graduation and earn their degrees.

Skill-Based Characteristics Contributing to Academic Success

The literature has abundantly documented that students are increasingly underprepared for post-secondary education. Tools for academic success, such as study skills and time management are often lacking (Arcand & LeBlanc, 2012). Students on academic probation are also more likely to have a history of procrastination, disorganization, and poor concentration. The study skills course appeared to help students increase their study skills and time management and decrease their procrastination, disorganization and poor concentration. Many students highlighted that they learned basic study skills from the course:

> Because at first before I took the class I, I mean I could study, but it was kind of hard because I really wasn't as focused as I was supposed to be but after taking the class and figuring out like, how to do certain things, it helped out.

Another student noted that her outlook on studying changed as a result of the success course:

> I mean I studied, but I guess I wasn't studying to know it, I was just studying to remember it [laughter]. But now my whole outlook on studying is different. Instead of studying like three days before I do weeks before.

Students also noted that becoming more self-aware of their learning styles and habits was helpful:

> I will say the biggest thing that I picked up in that classroom was about my studying habits [laughter]. I read when my readings were assigned instead of at the last minute, um it made a big difference for me. And I think learning my study habits and how I learn makes it good.

In addition to developing effective study habits, students consistently stated that being required to have a planner increased their organizational skills:

> I wasn't a very organized person so we were required to have planners and it was just more to help me be more of a structured student. To see everything, to focus more, and it just helped with organization really.

The instructor held them accountable for maintaining an up to date planner, which appeared to incentivize organization:

> Another thing that worked for me…was putting things in a planner. I hated sitting there writing a planner out. But I got fancy with it, and I did every class in different color ink, and so when I saw the ink, I knew what class I had to do things for. And she [the instructor] checked the planner…so she was, she was a stickler kind of, but she made it work. And it worked for us. It was for our benefit.

Students also noted that they continued to use a planner after the completion of the success course. The organizational skill of using a planner transferred to other semesters, and students even highlighted sharing this skill with others:

> That was helpful, like she, like I remember at the beginning of class she said 'ok everybody needs to have a planner and you have to have your planner', and then she sat down and told us to bring all of our syllabus and write down all of the assignments that were due on each page of the um, of our planner. That's how I became organized [laughter]. I have to have a planner with my books. I swear to you, I have everything listed: the times it's due, the day it's due, what class, everything. It helped a lot. I even told other people, some of my friends that were having trouble. I was like 'Y'all need to do this, this, and this it will help you I promise!'

While in the success course, students also learned skills to increase concentration. The main skill that students consistently reported using was sitting in the front of the classroom:

> Like, for instance, some students will come in, and if you're a very dedicated student, you will sit towards the front of the, you know, the front of the class. And that's very helpful because you know if you're in the back, you're distracted. You're very distracted, and if you sit in the back you'll be liable to be on your computer, you know, on your phone, doing something, but if you're in the front, you have basically no other choice but to pay attention you know, so.

Not only did this increase concentration but also class engagement:

> I've learned to just sit in the front because the more they [faculty] see you, the more you're willing to learn, and when they call on you, it's easy to call on a person in the front. And you're listening. So once you get an answer right, you feel good. It's like 'yeah…' If you're in the back, you tend to not listen. You're on your phone; you're doing something that you're not supposed to be doing, honestly. And I learned to just go ahead and just walk to the front. Don't even try to sit in the back; just go to the front. Not even the middle, just the front [laughter].

At-risk students need assistance developing basic skills to enhance time management, study techniques, organization, and concentration. Universities have limited control over many factors that impact student success, such as parental SES and high school preparation. However, as demonstrated by the study skills course, certain skills that increase academic success can be taught and learned, thereby increasing the likelihood of student success.

Transference of Learning

The goal-based study skills class appeared to instill a sense of hope in the participants. Participants appeared hopeful about their academic future and more confident in their abilities. It is possible that this sense of hope created a paradigm shift in the belief system of students and how they saw themselves as learners. As noted by Dweck (2005), students who are at-risk academically are more likely to believe that intelligence is a fixed ability, rather than a product of purposeful engagement. Participants who completed the study skills course expressed how their new, purposeful engagement contributed to educational success. As indicated above, study participants

were able to identify how using a planner, employing effective study skills and sitting up front in their classes contributed to academic success. One student expressed how seeing positive changes in herself, as a result of the study skills course, motivated her to work harder:

> You can expect some changes within yourself. Especially you can see quality traits enhance in you. Um, it makes you want to study harder. Um, as long as you do your work, and you're there on time it will help you… [I learned] test taking skills. I utilized those during my exams this year. I actually remembered the steps she [the instructor] told us to take while taking a test. And I did great on all of my exams this past year. And I was like ok, there's some truth to that too.

Many students who are at-risk academically have experienced multiple setbacks, which leads to the belief that goal attainment is implausible thereby making it less likely that students will pursue mastery goals that demonstrate their competence. Students in the study skills course appeared able to transform the belief that ability is fixed to one where ability is malleable. With the help of their instructor, they were able to create and achieve academic goals. As noted by Harter (1996) and Wentzel (1995) students are more willing to form goals of academic achievement when they believe teachers care about them as people and students. The assumption can be made that the positive relationships forged in the study skills course contributed to the goal development and attainment of students. The examples below demonstrate student's displaying personal agency and hope as they achieve self-determined goals:

> I never thought people would think [good] things about me, but they do, and it makes you open yourself up to new possibilities. Makes you want to go to higher

> heights. And I was like 'I can do this; I can get my degree from [the university]'. I can do whatever I want to even though it's taking me a little while. I can do it…I want to be the best student that I have ever been this year…And I want my passion to shine through me this year. I want to do my best work this year. It's my last year, so I really have to make it count. I can't make up for all the other times, but I can make this year count for me as a person…I have to push myself, and I am willing to do that now.

Another student explained that:

> Last semester was like a real self-esteem booster and so I guess really having that class is what, like got me on track…what really helped me as far as recognizing that I'm capable of doing what I want to do. Well, really I have a different perspective on school. Because I think I was here for a whole lot of other reasons. At first, and I think that's why I really didn't get a lot out of [school] because I was thinking you know 'my mom wants me to graduate', you know 'I want to make my dad proud', which really I do, but that was like the main…my focus when I did things. Yeah, instead of really focusing on really what I wanted to do. And so with the class, it helped me to understand like, um…well, the reasons why I was not as successful as I wanted to be. And so by me recognizing how I studied and how that affected me…it put [it] in perspective.

The results of this study further demonstrate the findings of Dennis et al. (2005), positive self-concept, along with supportive individuals can sometimes be more predictive of academic success for minority students than SAT scores and other traditional measures.

General Recommendations for Universities

This study identified characteristics of a goal-based study skills course that helped increase the academic success of students. The need for this study was great as more students are under-prepared for higher education and first-generation and minority students continue to represent a growing body of the student population. This information could be used to guide university policy, intervention programs, and strategic planning to increase student retention and persistence. As previously noted, there are many factors that impact student success that university officials do not have control over. However, they can identify students who are at-risk, early on, and create effective courses designed to offer holistic support.

Universities need to demonstrate a campus-wide commitment to students of all academic ranks, freshmen through seniors, and implement a variety of strategies to help students reach their academic goals. Most universities offer programming to orient freshmen to college life. However, programming needs to extend beyond the freshmen level. Of particular note, five out of six qualitative study participants (83%) were transfer students, and even though they expressed gaining multiple benefits from the study skills course, four out of six (67%) indicated that this was a course they needed when they first arrived at the four-year institution. As highlighted by one student:

> "[This course] was really what I needed. It really was um, I'm getting emotional thinking about it. Um, it was like, I wish I would have taken it in the beginning when I first got here because it would have helped me…and I feel like some of

my low grades, you know, wouldn't have been to the point that they were if I would have taken that class because it really helped me.

As students transfer from two-year institutions to 4-year institutions, particular attention should be given to those students to ensure they receive the support necessary to be successful. After universities identify students in need of support courses, curriculum can be developed that emphasizes effective study habits, how to engage in a collegiate classroom, and become an active member of the campus community. Perhaps most importantly, students and faculty need opportunities to engage with one another and build personal, positive relationships. Faculty can help students build positive self-concepts and gain confidence in the midst of academic challenges.

Limitations and Recommendations Further Research

The study's limitations offer opportunities for further research. Recommendations for further study include: expanding the sample size, expanding the location, and including comparisons by gender, ethnicity, and voluntariness.

The current study was limited to a specific population of academically at-risk African-American female students at one Southern university. It is recommended that the study be expanded to other public universities across the United States. The study could be replicated further by focusing on other minority students, such Latina women from the Southwestern United States. Native American women from the Western United States would also add to the body of knowledge to better understand differences among ethnically diverse, first-generation college students.

Additionally, comparing the experiences of academically at-risk, first-generation male and female students would add to the literature. It is possible that male students

experience a goal-based study skills course differently than female students. Expanding the population and location would also increase the sample size of the study. Furthering the study in these directions would help increase the generalizability of the findings. The current findings are not all-inclusive and may not be generalizable to at-risk students at other universities.

Lastly, the participants in the experimental group of the study self-selected to voluntarily enroll in a study skills course. Although, there was a statistically significant difference between participants and non-participants in terms of GPA, that difference may not be the result of the study skills course. It is possible that students who volunteered for the course were already displaying more motivation and goal-based behavior than students who did not volunteer.

In conclusion, in spite of its limitations, this study can add to the body of existing literature supporting the positive impact of support programs for academically at-risk students. This research can inform university officials on the need to identify students who are at-risk, and develop curriculum to support students at all levels of their college career. University policies, practices, and strategic planning can be adjusted to better meet the needs of students and support retention and persistence efforts.

APPENDIX A – IRB Approval Letter

THE UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
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NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the "Adverse Effect Report Form".
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months.
  Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 14061801
PROJECT TITLE: The Efficacy of a Goal-Based Study Skills Course for Academically At-Risk, First Generation, African American, Female Students
PROJECT TYPE:
New Project
RESEARCHER(S):
Sarah Garrison
COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Education and Psychology DEPARTMENT: Educational Studies and Research FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: N/A
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited

Review Approval PERIOD OF APPROVAL:
06/18/2014 to 06/17/2015

Lawrence A.

Hosman, Ph.D.

Institutional

Review Board

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