SUPPORTING THE INVISIBLE STUDENT: A CASE STUDY OF ONE INSTITUTION'S INTERVENTIONS SUPPORTING DEGREE ATTAINMENT FOR STUDENTS FROM LOW-INCOME BACKGROUNDS

by

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SUPPORTING THE INVISIBLE STUDENT: A CASE STUDY OF ONE INSTITUTION'S INTERVENTIONS SUPPORTING DEGREE ATTAINMENT FOR STUDENTS FROM LOW-INCOME BACKGROUNDS

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This study was a case study to explore the interventions being offered at one institution to support students from low-income backgrounds. The institution experienced higher than average graduation rates compared to low-income serving institutions with similar characteristics. The purpose of this study was to discover the institutional interventions that were helpful for the persistence to degree completion for students from low-income backgrounds.

The study employed three data collection methods to learn about the interventions. The methods used were individual interviews with professionals who supported students from low-income backgrounds, group interviews with students from low-income backgrounds who earned at least 60 credits, and the review of the relevant documents that pertained to supporting low-income students. The data gathered from this study found that the institution had institutional initiated, professional initiated, and impeding interventions on the persistence to completion for students from low-income backgrounds.

The institutional initiated interventions were supported with funding, human resources, or by the documents of the institution. These interventions were directly or indirectly helpful for students from low-income backgrounds and included bridge programs and external alliances, the

deconstruction of access and success barriers, emerging persistence and attainment initiatives, a financial aid office oriented for student success, and the targeting of intersecting populations with lower than average graduation rates.

The professional initiated interventions were provided by the professionals of the institution, or advocated for by the professionals and obtained some assistance from the institution. These interventions were also helpful for supporting students from low-income backgrounds and included the informal network, optimism for support and success, and the survival initiatives.

The impeding interventions were institutional strategies that had the unintentional consequence of causing additional challenges for students. These interventions had an adverse impact on the persistence to completion for students from low-income backgrounds and included a conflict of support for the current and espoused population, the counter initiatives, fiscal and human resources limitations, and an unclear coordination of interventions.

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PREFACE

I have a list of people to thank. I am not sure how I would be in this position without my advisor, Linda DeAngelo. You are an amazing advisor but more importantly an encouraging mentor. You have pushed me beyond my horizons both academically and professionally. I appreciate you challenging the potential in me that sometimes I did not recognize in myself. Rubin Hurricane Carter states that "optimism built the airplane but pessimism built the parachute". In life, you can choose to fly or sink. You have certainly been the wind beneath my wings to continue flying through this doctoral degree journey. I greatly appreciate you Dr. D!

Moving forward, I want to thank my committee members: Michael Gunzenhauser and William Redmond. I appreciate all of the time, feedback, and encouragement that you provided throughout this process. As the old saying goes it takes a village to develop a person and you have certainly been contributors in my village.

I want to thank my brother and mother for all of their support throughout my life. My brother has always supported me through life's challenges. My mother is the most resilient woman I know. She raised two hard-headed little boys as a single mother. As I take care of my own children with my wife, I have a better appreciation of the challenging times my mother overcame through my upbringing.

Last but not least, I thank my kids and wife for their support. My children have been patient with me along this journey. This journey has been challenging for them. My wife held all

of the pieces together and at times played the role of mom and dad. There were some dark days throughout this journey and you brightened up my days as you always do. Thank you sunshine for all of your support throughout this endeavor! I greatly, greatly, appreciate you!

1.0   INTRODUCTION

Attaining a college degree is a crucial component of our nation's opportunity structure (Engle &
O'Brien, 2007; Horn, 2006; Kezar, 2011; Walpole, 2007). The acquisition of a bachelor's degree
is a stepping stone for economic success, social mobility, and other attributes that enhance the
quality of life. While the data on college enrollment validates increased access to higher
education during the last several decades, postsecondary persistence and student success remain
serious concerns. Graduation is one of the rare outcomes that has substantial significance to
students and institutions (Berkovitz & O'Quin, 2006). Just a little more than half of all college
entrants complete degrees in a six-year time period (Boatman & Long, 2016; Kinzie, Gonyea,
Shoup & Kuh, 2008). According to the *Condition of Education Report* of 2016, an average of
59% of students complete the undergraduate degree in a six-year period (National Center for
Education Statistics, 2017). As the access rate to higher education continues to increase, but the
rate of college completion remains stagnant, institutions will continue to be challenged to
improve graduation outcomes. Campbell and Voight (2015) stated, "to obtain a more educated
society it will demand innovation and excellence from our nation's colleges and universities and
will rely on the success of the very students that our postsecondary system has often left behind,
students from low-income backgrounds" (p. 1).

Further, graduation rates are even more troubling by race, parental education, and income
status. Although substantial benefits are associated with the attainment of an undergraduate

degree, certain groups of individuals are less likely to attend and graduate from American higher education institutions and enjoy these benefits (Ishitani, 2006). Researchers that study quantitative attainment outcomes observed a reduced likelihood of obtaining an undergraduate degree for marginalized groups compared to other students (Campbell & Voight, 2015).

Students from low-income backgrounds experience some of the largest disparities in educational attainment. The attainment gap between high-income and low-income students has not changed for the last 30 years (Brock, 2010; Cerven, 2013; Engle & O'Brien 2007; Kezar, 2011; Rubin, 2011; Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2007; Walpole, 2008). Some data indicate that by the age of 24, 12% of students from low-income families will earn a bachelor's degree compared to 73% of high-income families (Engle & O'Brien, 2007) and other research articulated that 60% of high SES students obtained an undergraduate degree compared to 14% of low SES students in 2012 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Researchers frame and disseminate the data from different perspectives. The prevalent fact is that students from low-income backgrounds are far behind higher-income students in terms of educational attainment outcomes, resulting in reduced undergraduate degrees for the population that need them the most.

1.1   DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

The following terms will be helpful in understanding the institutional interventions that support degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds at a low-income serving institution. Most of the terms had consistent meanings throughout the literature although a couple terms had varied definitions for different studies. The terms are as follows:

1.1.1 Low-income Serving Institution

A low-income serving institution (LSI) is considered to enroll a substantial concentration of students from low-income backgrounds. These institutions are more likely to have minimally selective admissions standards and lower graduation rates (Horn, 2006). In 2004, the median six-year graduation rate was 39% for low-income serving institutions compared to 56% of institutions that were not low-income serving. Low-income serving institutions are more than likely to be public or private with religious affiliations (Horn, 2006). Larger proportions of minority students attend LSIs and approximately one-fifth of all Historically Black College and Universities are low-income serving (Horn, 2006). Unlike other Minority-Serving institutions, low-income serving institutions do not obtain Title III funds from the federal government (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

The criterion to be classified as a low-income serving institution was 25% of Pell Grant recipients for some studies (Walpole, 2007) and 30% of Pell Grant recipients for other studies (Horn, 2006). Low-income serving institutions are identified in the private, public, and community college sector. Because this study is concerned with the bachelor's degree attainment the community college sector was not considered as a study site. Very few low-income serving institutions were identified in the private institution sector; therefore, the public institution sector was the focus of this study. For the purpose of this dissertation in practice, a low-income serving institution is defined as an institution that enrolls 30% or higher undergraduate students who receive the Pell Grant.

1.1.2   Students from Low-income Backgrounds

Students from low-income backgrounds are typically defined as students who come from families that report income levels in the poverty range (Engle & O'Brien, 2007; Horn, 2006; Walpole, 2007). In 2016, the poverty threshold was 24,500 for a family of four and 12.7% or 40 million people were in poverty in the United States during this time (U.S. Census, n.d.). Some low-income families report incomes that are three or four times lower than the poverty threshold. Recurring fallacies in most research on students from low-income backgrounds assume that these students are underprepared, unintelligent, uninformed, and unsuccessful beings that need extensive support to succeed (Engle & O'Brien, 2007; Horn, 2006; Kezar, 2011; Walpole, 2007). The only consistent difference between students from low-income backgrounds and other students is their family income. This proven limitation of fiscal resources presents students from low-income backgrounds with affordability challenges in higher education.

Despite the income challenges and assumed deficiencies mentioned in most research about students from low-income backgrounds, the most important characteristic is often overlooked; namely, students from low-income backgrounds are still viable students. Just as any other student, they want to learn, have infinite potential, and desire the opportunity to achieve success. For this study, a student from a low-income background is defined as any student who is eligible to receive the Federal Pell Grant. Eligibility for the Pell Grant is based on a financial need formula determined by the U. S. Congress and the enrollment in an accredited higher education institution (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2013). To receive the Pell Grant a student must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and not have a federal or state drug conviction of any sort (Federal Student Aid Handbook, 2017).

Academic Support: Described as resources needed to increase student success including the use of tutoring services, writing centers, and connecting with academic support personnel (Morales, 2014).

At-Risk Student: Academically underprepared and economically disadvantaged students that present risk factors that decrease the likelihood of obtaining an undergraduate degree (Valentine, Hirschy, Bremer, & Novillo, 2011).

Bridge Programs: An early form of intervention for at-risk students consisting of intensive academic and residential experiences that are meant to strengthen the academic foundation that students bring to college (Bir & Myrick, 2015).

Early Alert System: Computer-based programs that monitor academic performance and provide an opportunity for institutional administrators to intervene after obtaining a notification (Engle & O'Brien, 2007).

Financial Assistance: A need-based financial resource affording students from low-income backgrounds an opportunity to access college (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2013). Financial assistance also encompasses removing potential barriers such as application fees, administrative fees, technology fees, and other miscellaneous fees that hinder success (Cunningham & Leegwater, 2011) and offering institutional aid to students from low-income backgrounds (Price & Davis, 2006).

Institutional Commitment: The willingness to support attainment for students from low-income backgrounds explicitly through language, policies, programs, and procedures (Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, & Arellano, 2012) and implicitly through the vision of the institution, leadership, and practices (Rubin, 2011).

Institutional Interventions: The policies, practices, procedures, and programs that are implemented by the institution to support persistence to graduation for students from low-income backgrounds. Interventions and strategies will be used interchangeably in this dissertation.

Intrusive Academic Advising: Combines the general principles of providing guidance on academic programs and course selection with required meetings and formal expectations (Brock, 2010; Engle & O'Brien, 2007).

Mission Statement/Institutional Leadership: Using inclusive well-rounded language where at-risk students and other marginalized backgrounds feel welcomed on campus (Hurtado et al., 2012; Kezar, 2011). Leaders were noted as developing missions for the institution and implementing strategies for success that prioritized students from low-income backgrounds (Rubin, 2011).

Pell Grant: A federal financial aid policy that authorizes grant money based on need and does not require repayment (NASFAA, 2013). Created through the Higher Education Act of 1965 to help students from low-income backgrounds access higher education (NASFAA, 2013).

Remedial Education: Attempts to bolster necessities for academic success by providing academically underprepared students with additional knowledge and skills (Brock, 2010; Colyar & Stich, 2011; Nora & Crisp, 2012).

1.2   PROBLEM AREA

Institutions have college completion gaps by income status. Despite the college completion challenges of institutions, the focus of most research continues to be on external dimensions and individual characteristics (Edwards, 2011). Uncertainty about the institutional dimensions that

promote student success continues to be a prevalent issue. Kezar (2011) argues that there is insufficient knowledge about the institutional interventions that support college completion for students from low-income backgrounds. In order for institutions to improve the graduation outcomes for this population (Edwards, 2011), more inquiry is necessary into the strategies that are helpful for students from low-income backgrounds on college campuses (Kezar, 2011).

Low-income serving institutions (LSI) struggle with six-year graduation rates the most. Regardless of the institution's Carnegie classification graduation rates were inversely related to the number of students from low-income backgrounds enrolled. The average six-year graduation rate for the selective public master's university sector was 58% for institutions that served 20% or fewer students from low-income backgrounds, 49% for institutions that served 21-39% of students from low-income backgrounds, and approximately 40% for institutions that served 40% or more students from low-income backgrounds (Horn, 2006). The statistics were provided as the result of a study that measured six-year graduation outcomes for students from low-income backgrounds for the 1998-2004 cohort. A more recent study has not been conducted by the researcher to date.

Campbell and Voight (2015) conveyed that college completion gaps provide opportunities for institutional improvement in the areas of student persistence and attainment. Instead of ignoring the opportunities to examine our institutions, higher education professionals and researchers need to build on this momentum and determine what is helpful in supporting degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds. The critical examination of institutional policies, practices, procedures, and programs could develop additional strategies to support students from low-income backgrounds attain their undergraduate degree.

1.2.1 Degree Attainment

Graduation, completion, and persistence to degree have all been used to describe degree attainment rates. These interchangeable terms are expressed as the rate or percent of students who complete a degree within a specified time period (Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012). The commonality in these terms is the emphasis on finishing the degree. The calculations are created for cohorts of students who enter college during the fall term or a 12 month period from September 1 to August 31 (Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012). Completion rates are measured consistently from institution to institution, tracked in national data bases, and discoverable to external users (Bailey & Xu, 2012). This information is of great interest to institutions, students, and policymakers. The U.S. Department of Education publishes six-year (150% of normal time to complete a degree) and eight-year (200% of normal time to complete a degree) graduation rates for all Title IV-eligible institutions (Bailey & Xu, 2012). Most state governments rely on completion rates to assess college performance. Although degree completion and progression are not perfect measures of success, they are the most consistent measures of college performance available (Bailey & Xu, 2012).

Some studies use the term retention interchangeably with persistence and attainment. Retention is an institutional metric that focuses on tracking the full-time enrollment of students from one enrollment period to another (Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012). While retention is an important characteristic of graduation it is not concerned with the acquisition of the undergraduate degree.

In U.S. higher education there is a distinctive stratification of degree completion between more advantaged and less advantaged families (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Roska, 2011). Students from families with more advantaged backgrounds are more likely to enter a four-year

institution and complete their undergraduate degree than less advantaged students. Socioeconomically advantaged families seek qualitatively better higher education opportunities resulting in an effect that sociologists frame as "effectively maintained inequality" (Roska, 2011). While some authors argue that access to higher education has improved over the last 30 years for lower-income families (Walpole, 2007), and others argue that access for lower-income families has not changed much in this time frame (Roska, 2011), most literature supports the findings that degree completion for students from low-income backgrounds remains substantially disproportionate compared to higher-income peers (DeAngelo & Franke, 2016; Engle & O'Brien, 2007; Horn, 2006; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Roksa, 2011; Walpole, 2008). Access to higher education was the previous metric of scrutiny but the attention has increasingly turned to college attainment rates (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). Student success, attainment, persistence to degree completion, college completion, and graduation outcomes will be used interchangeably in this dissertation in practice to describe degree attainment.

1.3   STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Most studies have assumed that degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds is a person-centered problem and have focused on the deficiencies of this population (Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). A deficit perspective assumes low degree completion rates for students from low-income backgrounds is the result of being less academically prepared, pursuing a less rigorous high school curriculum, having lower college entry scores, delaying entry into postsecondary education, taking classes part-time, and stopping in and out of college (Engle & O'Brien, 2007). Researchers often frame student support in the predominant context of majority

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populations and tend to overlook equitable solutions for minority students (Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). Although some of these factors are consistent with students from low-income backgrounds they do not explain the successful low-income completers. An asset based perspective recognizes that various structural forces of society including economics, families, schools, and communities could have an impact on attainment outcomes for students from low-income backgrounds (Walpole, 2007) and that the focus should not be on their limitations but rather supporting their talents and strengths (Kezar, 2011). This perspective validates that students from low-income backgrounds confront challenges and have lower success rates than higher-income students, not because of a lack of ability, motivation, or a deficiency but rather a system that defines merit in a way that does not value their attributes (Walpole, 2007). The unresolved dilemma is this; should students from low-income backgrounds have the sole onus of fighting these forces alone or should higher education institutions embrace their visions of inclusivity and enhance the advocacy and agency for the success of students from low-income backgrounds?

Kezar (2011) asserts that institutions have spent less time examining underlying structures related to the ways that students from low-income backgrounds are or are not well served. What is known from previous research is that students from low-income backgrounds for various reasons do not obtain undergraduate degrees at the same rate as their higher-income peers. Not as well understood are the institutional strategies in supporting the college completion for students from low-income backgrounds. The ultimate issue is a lack of knowledge of institutional interventions and how they operate to support undergraduate degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds. This issue is even prevalent at low-income serving institutions that enroll substantial numbers of low-income students. These limitations present

intellectual space to conduct a deep discovery of what will be helpful for an institution in its local context to support degree completion for students from low-income backgrounds. More research is needed to provide further explanations of helpful interventions that support low-income students at a low-income serving institution.

1.4   PURPOSE OF DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

The purpose of this dissertation in practice is to conduct an in-depth investigation at one low-income serving institution to learn more about the interventions that support undergraduate degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds. While some of the other identities of race, ethnicity, parental education status, and family income share similar experiences, this study focuses on students from low-income backgrounds. Ideally, this research discovered some institutional strategies that support persistence to degree attainment for all students from low-income backgrounds. When initially engaging in this inquiry, the research sought to discover solutions deemed helpful for low-income serving institutions in supporting graduation outcomes for students from low-income backgrounds.

In this dissertation in practice, I explore the policies, practices, procedures, and programs that are employed at an institution to support students from low-income backgrounds in attaining their undergraduate degree.

Using an instrumental case study I examined one low-income serving institution in depth to determine what initiatives were helpful to support students from low-income backgrounds. The institution is public and recognizes the accessibility principle of a public education. The

institution is a part of a complex state system and enrolls students from various ages, levels of college preparedness, ethnic backgrounds, and income statuses.

The policies, practices, procedures, and programs that support students from low-income backgrounds are framed as institutional interventions in this study. I focus on institutional interventions that support degree attainment for this population as obtaining an undergraduate degree credential could be more fruitful in society. Students from low-income backgrounds continue to overcome obstacles that limit their chances of obtaining a degree (Walpole, 2007). The U.S. Department of Education (2016) expressed, "that our nation's colleges and universities must succeed in helping all hard working students regardless of their income, race, or parents' education to enroll in college, graduate, and go on to rewarding careers" (p.2). This statement was articulated in the *Fulfilling the Promise, Serving the Need* report that summarized the access and completion trends for students from low-income backgrounds and highlighted some institutions that were excelling in these quantitative metrics.

Further, this dissertation in practice will appeal to various audiences and stakeholders who have an interest in the success of students from low-income backgrounds. These stakeholders are low-income serving institutions, students from low-income backgrounds, low-income families, campus leaders responsible for student attainment, and community organizations that invest in partnerships to support students from low-income backgrounds. Low-income serving institutions have the greatest stake in this study as they serve the most students from low-income backgrounds and have to report graduation metrics to the federal and state government for accountability purposes.

Some literature uses unfavorable terms such as at-risk to describe students that have lower graduation outcomes or frames institutional interventions from a deficit perspective. Some

of these terms or the deficit framing are written in this dissertation as I am referencing the literature. I want to clarify that it is not my perspective that students from low-income backgrounds are at-risk or any other derogatory framing of the interventions that emerge from the literature. In my opinion, these students are the most resilient students on college campuses and their ability to overcome obstacles can be a great supplement for supportive institutional interventions.

1.5   SUMMARY

Studying institutional interventions at one low-income serving pubic institution can help to better understand how to support students from low-income backgrounds with persistence to graduation. The rationale for this study was to discover some helpful institutional strategies from an institution that enrolled a significant amount of students from low-income backgrounds and learn about what it was doing to support these students.

2.0   THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND LITERATURE

In this chapter, I review the theory that serves as the theoretical foundation for this study. This study is focused on the institutional strategies that support undergraduate degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds and complexity theory is useful for understanding the institutional interventions. A discussion about institutional interventions follows as well as the results of empirical investigations into the strategies that support students from low-income backgrounds persist towards completing their degree. Some of the solutions were identified in the community college, private institution, and Minority-Serving Institution sectors as there were not many examples discoverable in the public master's institution sector. Although some of these institutions are different from the institution for this dissertation, the literature is relevant. The section concludes with a discussion of the gaps in the literature as more information is desirable to better understand the interventions that support students from low-income backgrounds at public master's institutions.

2.1   THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

2.1.1   Complexity Theory

This study used complexity theory as a theoretical framework to understand the institutional interventions that support degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds. This theory magnifies the dynamics of the organization. Complexity is inherent in supporting students from low-income backgrounds and I used this theory to embrace and deconstruct the explicit and implicit factors contributing to institutional solutions for supporting this population. Through interpreting the various elements of complexity, and the manner in which they interact, the institutional support for students from low-income backgrounds was further understood.

Complexity theory originated in the natural sciences but has morphed into the social sciences (Dooley, 1997). Complexity is defined as adaptive systems made up of a large number of agents where each individual agent behaves accordingly to a set of rules (Davis, Dent, & Wharff, 2015; Dooley, 1997; White & Levin, 2016). This set of rules progresses into population-wide patterns where individual agents adjust their actions based on the interactions with other agents. The focus of this theory is on the local interactions of the organization's agents. A micro-level look at the internal organization is taken as opposed to a macro level view of the organization as part of an external system (White & Levin, 2016).

2.1.1.1 Complexity Theory Principles

Three main principles of equilibrium, emergence, and feedback loops are prevalent components of complexity theory. Equilibrium refers to the state of stability of the organization and a willingness to construct transformational change by disrupting the equilibrium (Dooley, 1997;

White & Levin, 2016). Emergence is a measurement of the change that happens over time as a result of the interdependent individuals within the organization. Feedback loops are the social networks created by agents that are the result of a group of actors who are connected to one another through a set of different relationships (Dooley, 1997; White & Levin, 2016). The theory conveys the notion that organizations are multifaceted entities and that embracing the various nuances of the organization provides awareness of the intricate components working in unison to achieve organizational goals. Dooley (1997) stated that "systems can be understood by looking for patterns within their complexity, patterns that describe the potential evolution of the system" (p. 76).

Specifically, the principle of emergence deepened the theoretical understanding of this study. The effectiveness of the interventions was contingent on the staff, resources, and information being shared across office boundaries to provide adequate support for students from low-income backgrounds. The coordination of institutional interventions across campus resources was equally as important as the individual intervention offered to students. Learning about the coordination of the institutional interventions or the lack thereof was helpful to determine if the interventions were used extensively or if they could be more useful in supporting students from low-income backgrounds. Emergence allowed me to evaluate if the institutional interventions were interdependent and maximizing support for students from low-income backgrounds, or if there were deficiencies in the collaborative nature of the interventions, therefore, providing limited support for students from low-income backgrounds.

Complexity theory enhanced my understanding of institutional interventions that support degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds by providing a theoretical framework that embraces the dynamics of the institution. Institutional interventions do not occur

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in a vacuum. This theory allowed me to analyze interrelated pieces of an intervention to better understand how it was designed and implemented to support students from low-income backgrounds. The theory provided the necessary tools to deconstruct the implicit and explicit strategies employed by the institution. Additionally, complexity theory challenged me to embrace the complications of institutional interventions from a viewpoint of complex adaptive systems. A holistic explanation of the intentionality that institutions should employ to adequately support students from low-income backgrounds is identified in this framework. Supporting students from low-income backgrounds is more effective with a systems approach and complexity theory provides a blueprint of the necessary components of the system.

2.2   INSTITUTIONAL INTERVENTIONS

Several institutional interventions were mentioned in the literature to support degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds. Some literature on students from low-income backgrounds intersected with the literature on at-risk student populations, but the interventions were relevant for both populations. The strategies are categorized into the main themes of academic support, institutional commitment, and financial assistance. Some literature on institutional interventions presented a singular strategy to help students from low-income backgrounds obtain their undergraduate degree. Rarely did a study view various institutional interventions to understand the comprehensive impact on attainment for students from low-income backgrounds. The rare studies that analyzed these interventions collectively discovered compelling findings and challenged future researchers to learn more about the success of students from low-income backgrounds from a collective lens. Whether viewed from a singular

or collective perspective the interventions were intentional to the low-income or at-risk student populations and designed to aid in their success. The institutional interventions identified in the literature are below.

2.2.1 Academic Support

Academic support was one of the most prevalent interventions in the literature of supporting students from low-income backgrounds. Types of academic support discovered were intrusive advising, remedial education, and early alert systems. These forms of academic support were targeted for at-risk students or viewed as integral for students from low-income backgrounds.

2.2.1.1 Intrusive Academic Advising

Intrusive advising was conveyed as a specific form of advising that was helpful for students from low-income backgrounds. This form of advising was deemed helpful for students who may need additional guidance navigating academic requirements for a campus (Brock, 2010; Engle & O'Brien, 2007). Two different studies looked at intrusive advising as an institutional intervention and determined conflicting results.

The first study sampled 50 at-risk students from private institutions, public institutions, and community colleges (Morales, 2014). The at-risk criteria were parental education attainment of a high school diploma or lower and self-identification as an ethnic minority. The faculty member provided the advising and was charged with establishing a relationship and connecting more with the student. Through intentional interactions and conversations, the study found that advisors were able to build self-efficacy among students with their academics, help students appraise their own strengths and weaknesses in reference to their skill level, and encourage

students to seek help before dropping out or stopping out of college (Morales, 2014). The study framed college completion as student success but did not measure metrics such as persistence rates or graduation rates. Morales (2014) found that the personal guidance to students and the intentional interactions instilling confidence in the students' abilities were important attributes of this intervention. The author conveyed that this level of interaction was time-consuming and may not be feasible for all institutions. The study was compelling as it focused on the talents of at-risk students and found ways to use their skills to obtain student success. Although quantitative metrics were not collected, the study conveys qualitative outcomes that indicate student success. This study is useful for the dissertation in practice as it highlights the importance of challenging at-risk students to be successful while at the same time embracing their individual talents.

Another study yielded mixed results in employing intrusive advising. Intrusive advising was conducted in the community college setting with intensive, personalized, and smaller advising ratios (Brock, 2010). A sample of 2100 students from a community college was assigned to control and experiment groups. The study found that student success was achieved in the semester during the intrusive advising and the semester directly after the advising (Brock, 2010). Student success was not recognized more than a semester after the intervention and intrusive advising produced a short-term impact. The number of resources to offer intrusive advising at this particular community college was not sustainable on a long-term basis (Brock, 2010). A strength of this study is the experimental design and the thorough data collection methods that enhanced the validity of the findings. While it is hard to know what aspects of the intervention were fruitful, it was clear that intrusive advising was helpful in the short term. This study did not validate favorable results for college completion. However, it is useful for this

dissertation in practice as it articulated the challenges of offering intrusive advising as a quick fix strategy.

2.2.1.2 Remedial Education

Remedial education was commended and criticized in supporting degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds. Most institutions offered some form of remedial courses targeted for students who did not meet an admissions requirement. Valentine, Hirschy, Bremer and Novillo (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of studies that provided an intervention for students who met the at-risk criteria and provided some form of a quantitative evaluation to assess student success outcomes. The studies measured GPA, retention of students enrolling in the same institution, and cognitive development. Eleven studies identified an intervention that had a relationship with retention and six studies identified some form of remediation as the strategy that enhanced retention (Valentine et al., 2011). The studies primarily measured retention for one and two semesters after the remedial courses concluded and one study measured retention three and half years afterward. Remedial courses had a positive effect on student retention in all six studies and the findings suggest that remedial courses had positive implications on student persistence (Valentine et al., 2011). The quantitative metrics for completion outcomes were unclear, but the qualitative outcome of student success was identified in the studies. This study is valuable to the dissertation in practice as it presents positive implications for remediation of at-risk students. The design provided a broad overview of several studies on remediation.

Other resources articulated mixed results about remediation programs. A different study looked at remedial course enrollment and the impact on second-year retention to help understand disparate graduation gaps for Hispanic, African American, and first-generation populations (Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008). Five institutions participated in the study and 1,336

students made up the sample. The study used the term basic skills courses to describe remedial classes and measured the retention of students who took zero courses, up to three courses, and more than three courses (Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008). The study found adverse retention implications as the number of attempted basic courses increased. African American students who took zero basic courses, up to three basic courses, and more than three basic courses had retention rates of 88%, 91%, and 74% (Kinzie, et al., 2008). Hispanic students who took zero basic courses, up to three basic courses, and more than three basic courses had retention rates of 89%, 89%, and 77%. First generation students who took zero basic courses, up to three basic courses, and more than three basic courses had retention rates of 89%, 87%, and 70% (Kinzie et al., 2008). These researchers were apprehensive about remediation conveying that remedial courses do not count towards the undergraduate degree causing for increases in withdrawals, incompletes, and no-credit repeats (Kinzie et al., 2008). Demonstrating the adverse correlation to increased remedial courses and retention rates was the biggest advantage of this study. Offering the optimal amount of remedial courses was provided as a useful strategy for closing the graduation gap. This study is relevant to the dissertation in practice as the populations of the study share similar challenges as students from low-income backgrounds and the findings convey when remedial courses could deter college completion.

A different study analyzed remediation courses and the impact on students from low-income backgrounds at a large public institution. In addition to being low-income, these students were also academically underprepared for post-secondary enrollment (Colyar & Stich, 2011). This study evaluated a summer remediation course for at-risk students. The course placed 190 participants into six cohorts based on academic performance and entrance exams (Colyar & Stich, 2010). The researchers discovered that program participants viewed themselves as

different than other college students and interpreted the summer remediation course as an abnormal college expectation. This remediation course presented a psychological burden for program participants and made the transition to college more challenging (Colyar & Stich, 2011). Quantifiable data about persistence and college completion rates were not collected for this study. The qualitative data suggested that the psychological implications of feeling different than the other students had an adverse impact on the self-efficacy of students from low-income backgrounds in that environment (Colyar & Stich, 2011). The researchers argued that remedial education divided at-risk students from academically prepared students and delayed the completion of the undergraduate degree (Colyar & Stich, 2011). This study is useful for the dissertation in practice as it demonstrates the limitations of remedial education. Not only was the challenge of increased time to complete the degree presented, but the study identified psychological harm caused to students by remediation courses. While some authors suggest that remedial education enhances access to higher education by providing educational opportunities to students that may have been denied this chance (Nora & Crisp, 2012), others argue that remediation is counterproductive to student success (Colyar & Stich, 2011). Institutions need to be extremely careful in how they design and administer remedial education.

2.2.1.3 Early Alert Systems

Early alert systems were the emerging intervention in supporting students from low-income backgrounds. Engle and O'Brien (2007) produced a report titled *Demography Is Not Destiny* which focused on increasing the graduation rates at large public universities that serve students from low-income backgrounds. This report was the compilation of a comprehensive study conducted with institutions that had large quantities of students from low-income backgrounds but experienced higher than average or lower than average graduation rates compared to the

national average. The study had a sample of 15 institutions and evaluated the practices and policies utilized at the institutions to support graduation for students from low-income backgrounds (Engle & O'Brien, 2007). All of the institutions categorized as "high high" (high number of low-income students and higher than average graduation rates) and "high average" (high number of low-income students and average graduation rates) had some form of an early alert system (Engle & O'Brien, 2007). Institutions deemed as "high low" (high number of low-income students and low graduation rates) and "low low" (low number of low-income students and low graduation rates) did not utilize an explicit early alert system. Even though the early alert system was not the mutually exclusive strategy evaluated for higher graduation rates, nor was it the only program or practice that had an influence on graduation rates, it was clear from the study that the early alert system was a distinguishing factor for institutions that served students from low-income backgrounds and experienced higher graduation rates. Compelling elements of this study are the design and the ability to analyze several low-income serving institutions extensively. The study used a team of researchers who completed site visits and engaged in an extensive investigation of the institutions. This study is relevant to the dissertation in practice as the findings introduced an institutional intervention that is fruitful for low-income serving institutions.

Talbert (2012) draws on the importance of an early alert system in improving graduation outcomes. Administrators at public institutions were challenged to think about how they can improve enrollment, retention, and graduation rates at public four year institutions and community colleges in the state of Minnesota. Researchers conducted a quantitative study with administrators responsible for improving graduation outcomes for public institutions. Participants were required to have at least five years of experience in their current role and be

willing to share ideas of how they increased enrollment, retention, and graduation for their students (Talbert, 2012). One hundred and four participants were surveyed, all considered as having some level of expertise in enrollment, retention, and graduation management. Consistent with the findings in the *Demography Is Not Destiny* study, the researcher conveyed that an early alert system was integral to student success at the four year public institution and the community college. Talbert (2012) found that colleges and universities need to establish tracking systems to review students' failures and achievements and be intentional about tracking high-risk students. The study relied on the self-reporting of proven student success strategies and did not require the persistence and graduation data from the administrators or their corresponding institutions. The design of targeting student success administrators with some form of expertise in enrollment management was an advantage of this study. The study provided practical solutions to enhance attainment outcomes for at-risk students. The ultimate goal of this dissertation in practice is to discover practical solutions for a similar student demographic. Early alert systems are recurring institutional strategies in the attainment literature for students from low-income backgrounds.

2.2.2   Institutional Commitment

The institutional commitment was vital in supporting students from low-income backgrounds. One intervention discovered in this area was the combined institutional commitment of inclusive mission statements, dedicated leadership, and supportive services. The other intervention discovered was the summer bridge program.

2.2.2.1 Mission Statements, Dedicated Leaders, Supportive Services

Siegel (2011) conveyed that plans to improve persistence for at-risk students must include a comprehensive institutional plan of tailoring the approach to a campus's needs, use of proven research, the involvement of a wide range of campus constituents, and be planned with student interests in mind.

Researchers at a private liberal arts institution experienced these components working collaboratively to increase socioeconomic diversity of the student body. In 1973 two percent of the student body at Amherst College received the Federal Pell Grant (Rubin, 2011). As of 2010, this number increased to 18%. A case study was conducted at this private liberal arts institution and identified three main attributes that increased enrollment for students from low-income backgrounds. These factors were:

- A transformational president who magnified students from low-income backgrounds concerns with the board of trustees and prioritized institutional support;
- A rededication to the mission statement of educating a diverse student body by launching a diversity fundraising campaign and increasing financial aid packages to students from low-income backgrounds;
- The establishment of other services to help with their persistence (Rubin, 2011).

While Amherst has a student population of 1700 students and is a highly selective liberal arts institution, the findings suggest that efforts to improve outcomes for students from low-income backgrounds can be impactful if they are well supported, consistent, and embedded in the institutional commitment (Rubin, 2011). This study is relevant to the dissertation in practice as it identifies specific strategies to increase enrollment for students from low-income backgrounds at

an institution. Not only do the researchers articulate strategies to improve access but identified other solutions to sustain increased enrollment and success for students from low-income backgrounds.

A different type of institution employed these similar principles and experienced favorable outcomes with students from low-income backgrounds. Ninety-six low-income women pursuing an associate's degree at a community college were investigated in a five-year mixed methods study (Cerven, 2013). The study found that a dedicated mission to serve underrepresented students, leaders in advising, and the institutional commitment of deliberate student support services were integral to the college completion of these students. Student support counselors served as leaders in the study and provided influential feedback to students, critical information about college processes, and spent more time with students from low-income backgrounds than other offices (Cerven, 2013). The commitment to low-income students created adaptable institutional practices such as after hour counseling services to continuously serve at-risk populations (Cerven, 2013). The community college commitment to an inclusive mission, employing dedicated leaders, and providing institutional support yielded favorable completion outcomes for students from low-income backgrounds. A benefit of this study was the useful college completion interventions articulated from the student perspective. This study highlights the importance of having a dedicated staff working with students from low-income backgrounds that is committed to student success.

2.2.2.2 Bridge Programs

Walpole (2007) expressed that bridge programs demonstrate evidence of increased persistence and attainment, more interactions with faculty, and increased engagement around campus. Some

of the summer bridge program studies aligned with this perspective while others conveyed divergent findings.

Aligning with Walpole were the findings collected from a summer bridge program at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). The Creating Higher Expectations for Educational Readiness (CHEER) program was evaluated for its impact on college outcomes (Bir & Myrick, 2015). The program was offered during the second summer term to developmental students with a high school cumulative GPA of a 2.3 or lower. The purpose of the study was to investigate if the progress towards success in the summer bridge program had a significant effect on retention, progression, and graduation (Bir & Myrick, 2015). A sample of 1891 full-time students taking 12 or more credits was created for the analysis. Positive findings were revealed in this study for CHEER participants compared to non-participants. The average four-year graduation rate was 21% for participants and 16% for non-participants (Bir & Myrick, 2015). The average six-year graduation rate was 40% for CHEER participants and 34% for non-participants. While the data for four-year graduation rates were substantially lower than the six-year graduation rates, the findings illustrate positive differences for CHEER participants compared to non-participants. This study was chosen because it showed the impact of a summer bridge program at a Minority-Serving Institution. Although low-income serving institutions have different characteristics than HBCUs, Minority-Serving Institutions are more similar than dissimilar. The study is relevant to the dissertation in practice as the summer bridge program had a practical design that could be implemented at various institutions to help students from low-income backgrounds.

Cabrera, Miner, and Milem (2013) discovered positive results in their analysis of a summer bridge program. The New Start Summer Program (NSSP) is a comprehensive six-week

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summer bridge program that orients participants to college life by enrolling in courses, living in the residence halls, engaging in social activities, and learning about various academic and social support services on campus. The researchers conducted a dual method investigation of NSSP. Longitudinal NSSP data was collected from 1993 to 2009 for program participants and non-participants and survey data was collected from two constructed surveys for participants and non-participants. These surveys were administered during the fall semester and the second semester of their first-year (Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013). The sample of the longitudinal data was collected for 6570 subjects and 544 subjects completed the surveys. The purpose of the study was to measure the impact that NSSP had on retention at a public university. The researchers found that first-year retention was 76.8% for NSSP participants and 71.2% for non-participants from the longitudinal data and 89.5% for NSSP participants and 83% for non-participants from the survey data (Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013). This study had a thorough research design by using two data collection methods to measure the impact of the intervention on student retention. First-year retention is a lower outcome than student attainment but retention metrics are fruitful predictors of college completion. The study supports the dissertation in practice as it provides the findings of a larger well-coordinated summer bridge program.

A different perspective of summer bridge programs was presented in a study with public institutions in Texas. The Developmental Summer Bridge Program (DSBP) was offered to students eligible for remedial courses and provided accelerated instruction, student support, instructions on college-going skills, and a stipend of $400 (Wathington, Pratlow, & Barnett, 2016). The purpose of the study was to determine the effect of the summer bridge program on student persistence. Persistence was measured two years after the summer bridge program was implemented. A sample of 1318 students participated in the study from eight institutions and the

sample was divided into a program experiment group of 793 students (60%) and a control group of 525 students (40%) (Wathington, Pratlow, & Barnett, 2016). Adverse results were discovered for the impact of DSBP on student persistence. Two years after DSBP 63.9 % of the experiment group enrolled in courses compared to 65.8% of the control group. When evaluating the cumulative semesters enrolled by participants and non-participants no significant difference was observed. Wathington, Pratlow, and Barnett (2016) discovered that the control group enrolled in 3.4 semesters and the experiment group enrolled in 3.3 semesters. The use of a deliberate control and an experiment group minimized the other factors that could contribute to persistence rates and enhanced the reliability of the findings. The findings illustrate no significant difference in the cumulative semesters enrolled and validate an adverse impact on two-year persistence for program participants. The study recommended the extension of the bridge program to a one-year or two-year intervention to improve persistence outcomes (Wathington, Pratlow, & Barnett, 2016). This study is helpful in understanding the dissertation in practice as an extensive summer bridge program was rigorously evaluated and demonstrated contrary findings. Institutions considering a summer bridge program as an intervention will have to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of this strategy in its local context.

2.2.3   Financial Assistance

Financial barriers prevented 48% of college-qualified, low income, high school graduates from attending 4-year institutions and 22% from attending any college at all (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2013). Some of the strategies employed to dissolve financial barriers are framed as financial assistance and include decreased financial barriers and institutional financial aid.

2.2.3.1 Decreased Financial Barriers

Decreased financial barriers were a progressive strategy employed by institutions. In the community college context, an experiment was conducted on the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) to measure the attainment outcomes of program participants and non-participants. ASAP removed all financial barriers for students to pursue an associate's degree at the New York City Community College (CUNY). The program covered all educational expenses to include transportation, tuition, meal plans, unmet need gaps, and other educational expenses for low- income students (Kolenovic, Linderman, & Karp, 2013). The study found that associate's degree attainment increased by 30% for ASAP participants compared to the non-participant group (Kolenovic, Linderman, & Karp, 2013). Although this solution was used in the community college context, the practices could be fruitful for low-income serving four-year institutions. The study provided creative strategies for addressing affordability challenges of students from low-income backgrounds.

2.2.3.2 Institutional Financial Aid

Institutional grant aid was the supplemental assistance in helping students from low-income backgrounds dissolve unmet financial need challenges (Perna, Lundy-Wagner, Yee, Brill, & Tadal, 2011). According to Price and Davis (2006) money provided by colleges and universities has become the second largest source of grant aid to students. Perna et al. (2011) conveyed that as federal and state financial assistance still leaves shortages in aid for students from low-income backgrounds another solution is necessary to help with college expenses. Institutional grant aid covered 44% of unmet need for students attending public institutions (Perna et al., 2011).

A study was conducted with 6,952 students who received an institutional grant and were enrolled at a four year institution (Price & Davis, 2006). The sample consisted of students who

reported a family income of 200% of the federal poverty threshold or higher. The data were collected from the *Beginning Postsecondary Student Longitudinal Study* conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics. The study found that students who received an institutional need-based grant in the first year of their college experience graduated at a 62% rate from a public institution in six years (Price & Davis, 2006). Larger institutional grants offered to students in the first year reduced work hours and provided more time for studies and other academic engagement activities (Price & Davis, 2006). An advantage of this study was the unique focus on institutional aid and degree completion. Price and Davis (2006) argued that most studies on institutional aid do not focus on student success and are more concerned about the ratio of institutional aid compared to federal and state dollars. Contrary to most literature on students from low-income backgrounds, institutional grant recipients obtained college completion rates higher than the national average (Price & Davis, 2006). Philosophically, this study is congruent with the dissertation in practice. Obtaining institutional financial help to overcome the hardships of poverty is not viewed as a limitation, but rather an equitable institutional solution to support students from low-income backgrounds.

2.3   LIMITATIONS AND GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

The literature on students from low-income backgrounds and students identified as at-risk converged and identified various strategies of support for these populations. The primary themes of academic support, institutional commitment, and financial assistance were integral institutional interventions found throughout the literature to support degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds.

A gap in the literature existed in identifying studies that focused on multiple interventions at an institution to support students from low-income backgrounds. A comprehensive review of interventions designed to increase persistence rates among at-risk college students has not been conducted to date (Valentine et al., 2011). Additionally, most literature assumed a student-centered approach to the problem as opposed to a situation-centered approach (Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). These perspectives tend to magnify the deficits in students from low-income backgrounds instead of their talents. McGrath and Tobia (2008) conveyed that the post-positivist paradigm dominates the research on student success and that these methods are primarily focused on the individual student and quantitative designs.

Singular interventions were examined in several studies that analyzed success for students from low-income backgrounds. Community colleges, private institutions, and Minority-Serving Institutions were more prevalent study sites for examining these interventions. There was a shortage of literature on the public master's institution and the coordinated interventions offered to support degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds. Even less research analyzed a low-income serving institution and the strategies from a coordinated institutional perspective.

This dissertation addresses the gap in the literature by investigating a low-income serving institution. The low-income serving institution chosen for this study is a public master's institution. This study took a situation-centered approach in determining what institutional interventions were being employed to support persistence to degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds. In addition to the individual interventions, this dissertation examined how coordinated the interventions were in providing comprehensive support for students from low-income backgrounds.

3.0   METHODOLOGY

Students from low-income backgrounds enter higher education with many complex challenges and can use additional support by the institution to adequately assist this population (Engle & O'Brien, 2007; Kezar, 2011). Overall, research has focused on the individual student and their resiliency in attaining the undergraduate degree. Rarely have studies focused on the institutional solutions that support degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds (Kezar, 2011).

The purpose of this study was to investigate one low-income serving institution in depth to learn more about the strategies that support persistence to graduation for students from low-income backgrounds. Institutional policies, practices, procedures, and programs were explored to determine what was occurring at Atlantic University. Engaging in this research provided a deeper understanding of the institutional interventions that supported degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds. I utilized a case study design to learn how a low-income serving institution was supporting the college completion for these students.

3.1   INSTRUMENTAL CASE STUDY

An instrumental case study is the intentional selection of a case to learn more about a specific issue, problem, or concern (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The issue or concern is the essential

rationale for the inquiry and the case is a mere opportunity to explore the issue or concern (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Very little is known about the institutional interventions at low-income serving institutions and even less is known about what is helpful for undergraduate degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds. The instrumental case study was my opportunity to obtain an understanding of the policies, practices, procedures, and programs that support graduation outcomes at a low-income serving institution for students from low-income backgrounds. Yin (2014) states "that a case study should be used to investigate a phenomenon in depth within its real-world context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (p. 16). The exploration of how and why this low-income serving institution obtained more success than institutions with similar characteristics was intriguing. Learning holistically about these resources was interesting for a qualitative inquiry. Specifically, learning about the intentional interventions targeted for students from low-income backgrounds, from the professionals providing the services, the actual students who have demonstrated success by persisting to their junior and senior year at Atlantic, and some pertinent documents of the institution was an astounding benefit of this study. The strategies that support students from low-income backgrounds can be complex. Interacting directly with the individuals delivering and receiving the support, and inquiring about the additional details in the documents, enhanced what was discovered about supporting students from low-income backgrounds.

3.2   RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Using an instrumental case study design I explored the following research questions:

1) What policies, practices, procedures, and programs are being implemented at a low-income serving institution to support attainment outcomes for students from low-income backgrounds?

    a. How are policies, practices, procedures, and programs being adjusted at a low-income serving institution to support persistence through graduation for students from low-income backgrounds?

    b. How are the support structures designed at a low-income serving institution to assist low- income students?

2) How are students from low-income backgrounds utilizing campus resources to navigate the challenges of obtaining an undergraduate degree?

3.3   RATIONALE FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative research is ideal when trying to learn more about a phenomenon in the rich context of its own setting. Lincoln and Guba (1985) conveyed that the phenomenon and the setting are one and attempting to study either in isolation will lead to a partial understanding of the phenomenon. A qualitative design was essential to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the institutional interventions at Atlantic University that support students from low-income backgrounds. The ability to speak to people, learn from nonverbal cues, review documents, experience the culture of the campus, and obtain a sense of the morale of students from low-

income backgrounds was a profound learning experience. As the primary instrument of this study, I had the enlightening experience to collect and analyze information in the actual setting and make adjustments accordingly to maximize the learning about this topic (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Being on campus enhanced my knowledge of the institutional interventions that support students from low-income backgrounds. The power of the human instrument is unequivocal in qualitative design. The opportunity to engage the subjects in a discussion about institutional interventions for students from low-income backgrounds, and hear the emotion in their voices, the passion in their actions, or interpret the nonverbal cues on certain questions was a powerful learning experience.

The recognition of tacit knowledge is also appreciated in qualitative research. Tacit knowledge is legitimized in qualitative research because unique solutions are deemed valid for the issues endured in a specific setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). There were interventions constructed at Atlantic that were uniquely designed for its local setting. Obtaining supplemental information from the professionals that employed these interventions enhanced the quality of the inquiry.

Most importantly, a qualitative design provides flexibility to seek additional data or pursue supplemental information to broaden the knowledge of a topic (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Several institutional factors played a pivotal role in degree attainment for low-income students and it was possible that these factors were informal and unrecognized at this institution. The understanding of supporting students from low-income backgrounds from persistence to completion is complex. This study aspired to engage in a rich exploration of this phenomenon at an institution that served a substantial number of students from low-income backgrounds. Various data collection methods, tacit knowledge, and emerging solutions were investigated that

enhanced the understanding of the institutional interventions that support students from low-income backgrounds persist through completion.

3.4   RESEARCH SITE

The site for this research project was Atlantic University (AU), a public comprehensive master's university in the Northeast region of the United States. According to the AU website, the institution is a member of a state system that governs public higher education and was founded in the 1800s. AU offers more than 100 undergraduate degree programs. The cost of attendance is approximately $12,000 for in-state tuition and fees and approximately $22,000 for out-of-state tuition and fees annually. Room and board costs are approximately $14,000. Approximately 30% of Atlantic's undergraduate population received the Federal Pell Grant.

Graduation rates at selective public master's universities decrease as the number of students enrolled from low-income backgrounds increase, causing an inverse relationship between these outcomes (Horn, 2006). The average six-year graduation rates for selective public master's universities were: 58% for institutions that served 20% or fewer students from low-income backgrounds, 49% for institutions that served 21-39% of students from low-income backgrounds, and approximately 40% for institutions that served 40% or more students from low-income backgrounds (Horn, 2006). The statistics were discovered in a degree attainment study on institutions that served students from low-income backgrounds that measured six-year graduation outcomes for the 1998-2004 cohort. A more recent study was not conducted by the researcher.

Atlantic University was an appropriate case to explore as its graduation rate of 62% is higher than the average six-year graduation rate of public master's universities serving between 21-39% of students from low-income backgrounds. In addition to performing better than its cohort of institutions, Atlantic ranked among the top 20% of public institutions in the state in which it was located in terms of six-year graduation rates (IPEDS, 2016). Conversely, it was hard to know from an external perspective if this above-average graduation rate proportionately applied to students from low-income backgrounds or if other populations were graduating at disproportionately higher rates than students from low-income backgrounds. The higher than average graduation rates within its cohort of low-income serving institutions made AU an interesting case to explore. Through this research, I learned how the low-income serving institution employed solutions that supported undergraduate degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds and how those interventions were operationalized.

3.5 SAMPLE AND DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

I worked with a faculty member at Atlantic University who agreed to support this study. Initially, the faculty member and I wrote two letters to the institution's provost informing him of the study and obtaining his support. Obtaining the support of the provost was helpful in approaching other staff and administrators about participating in the study.

3.5.1 Administrator Recruitment

Five key informants were contacted initially that were identified as having some level of responsibility for supporting persistence through graduation for students from low-income backgrounds at the institution. These professionals were in the areas of enrollment management, financial aid, and student support services. Then, a snowballing technique was utilized to retrieve the four additional professionals to interview that had significant responsibilities for supporting students from low-income backgrounds at the institution. These professionals supported low-income students as part of their job duties, in their role on a committee, or through guidance in the mentor and mentee relationship. Snowball sampling allows the researcher to start with key informants that are knowledgeable about the issue and solicit other knowledgeable informants that may have useful information (Mertens, 2015). The five key informants referred four professionals to me that had some level of responsibility in supporting students from low-income backgrounds. I planned on interviewing 10 professionals at the institution. Only four viable referrals were provided to me by the initial key informants and I interviewed nine professionals.

A semi-structured interview was used with the professionals. The semi-structured format provided flexibility to the interview by allowing me to adapt to the flow of the conversation and obtain emerging views on the topic from the respondents (Merriam, 1998). The interview of the professionals followed an interview protocol (see Appendix B) that consisted of main questions, probing questions, and follow up questions (Merriam, 1998; Rabionet, 2011; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The initial questions of the protocol were ice breaking in nature but correlated with the focus of the study. The remaining questions were directly related to a research question in the study. Sixteen main questions and 44 probing or follow up questions made up the protocol. All the questions were open-ended to extract information pertinent to the overarching research

questions. All interviews were conducted in the comfort of the professional's office. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and some interviews surpassed 60 minutes as the professional shared extensive information. The interviews were audio recorded using a portable digital recorder. The recordings were transcribed verbatim from the audio recordings. All of the interviews began with an opening statement that introduced me to the participant, established some rapport for the interview, included a consent and confidentiality statement, and provided some context for the scope of the research (Rabionet, 2011). All of the participants were thanked for their time and contributions to the study.

3.5.2   Student Recruitment

Participants for the group interview were requested in a similar fashion. I contacted a professional in the financial aid office and asked for assistance in identifying students for the group interview. This professional had access to all of the Pell Grant recipients at the institution and the financial aid office had established relationships with students from low-income backgrounds. The professional from the financial aid office was a participant in the study and the additional assistance with the students was requested through email and phone call exchanges. An administrative assistant in the financial aid office sent an initial email to a list of Pell Grant recipients that informed them of the study and invited their participation. The prospective participants were asked to send me an email if they were interested in participating in the study. I sent a second and third email to all of the students who contacted me and provided more details of the study, requested their participation, and coordinated the actual times and locations of the group interviews. Some students required four to six email exchanges to coordinate a time that was conducive to their schedule.

I used three group interviews to interview 12 Pell Grant recipients. The group interview, also referred to as the multiple respondent interview (Frey & Fontana, 1991), was chosen to obtain the student perspective. A group interview is helpful when more subjects are sought for their various perspectives and the interviewer wants to minimize their influence on the interviewee (Frey & Fontana, 1991). The participants completed at least one semester on the Atlantic Campus, successfully entered their junior year with 60 or more earned credits by the spring 2018 semester and received the Pell Grant in the 2017-2018 school year. The students were chosen utilizing a purposeful random sampling technique. Purposeful random sampling allows for the selection of a relatively small sample of participants that have in-depth information about the problem or concern (Mertens, 2015). There were three groups of four participants each and the groups are named Delta, Gamma, and Theta for the purpose of this dissertation. All of the students were Pell Grant recipients who earned 60 or more credits and completed at least one semester at the Atlantic Campus. Seven of the 12 student participants were seniors who accumulated 105 or more credits. These students were scheduled to graduate during the spring 2018, fall 2018, or spring 2019 semesters. Five of the 12 student participants were juniors who accumulated 65 to 80 credits. These students were scheduled to graduate during the spring 2019, fall 2019, or spring 2020 semesters. While some literature conveyed that the ideal number of participants for a group interview is three to five participants (Eckhardt & Bengston, 2010), and other literature conveyed that six to nine participants is ideal for a group interview (Cyr, 2016; Mertens, 2015; Morgan, 2012), other literature did not specify any explicit number of participants (Frey & Fontana, 1991). I aspired to coordinate two group interviews of six participants but three group interviews with four participants provided more flexibility to accommodate the students' schedules. The interviews took place after regular business hours

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between the hours of 5:30 p.m. and 9:30 p.m. to accommodate the students' schedules. The purpose of interviewing the students was to obtain their perspective of the institutional policies, practices, procedures, and programs that aided in their persistence towards graduation.

The group interviews took place in the student union building which was central to campus and had various private meeting rooms. The group interviews were guided by a group interview protocol. Interview protocols are used to provide structure and direction to the conversation (Frey & Fontana, 1991). The protocol consisted of six main open-ended questions and 19 probing or follow up questions (see Appendix C). I served as the facilitator of the group interviews and probed as necessary to enhance the conversation. The protocol started with simple introductory questions that connected to the topic and evolved to complex questions about the students' experiences with institutional interventions. The group interviews began with me explaining the purpose of the study, a general overview of the types of questions that were asked in the session, and an inclusivity statement welcoming different answers to the questions (Morgan, 2012). The group interviews lasted approximately 75 minutes and were recorded on a digital audio recorder. All recordings from the group interviews were transcribed verbatim from the audio recording for further analysis. The participants of the group interviews were thanked for their time and contributions to the study.

3.5.3 Document Review

The documents for this study were requested by me. I initially called the appropriate professionals informing them of the study and asked for the documents needed for review from their areas. I then sent an email to the professionals requesting the same documents. The proper arrangements to retrieve the documents were coordinated through email with the researcher. For

one of the documents requested, I emailed, visited the professional's office, and called the professional to politely remind the professional to send the documents.

The documents were collected in this study to learn more about the research questions. Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating both printed and electronic materials (Bowen, 2009). The purpose of collecting documents was to supplement the research data (Bowen, 2009). Documentation plays an explicit role in case study research as it provides supplemental evidence and allows the researcher to develop additional inferences (Yin, 2014).

The documents collected for review followed a document review protocol. The protocol (see Appendix D) provided the type of data sought from the documents, the list of documents that contained this information, the corresponding professional who provided the information, and the alignment of the data sought to the research questions (Bowen, 2009). The Pell recipient matriculation reports for the past five years were requested from the institutional research office. I searched for the graduation metrics of students from low-income backgrounds in these documents and the trends of these outcomes over the last five years. This information provided some additional context of the attainment rates for students from low-income backgrounds at the institution. The mission statement of the institution, strategic plan, and any reports from the areas that support students from low-income backgrounds were requested to review as well. Specifically, I searched for any intentional policies, practices, procedures, and programs utilized at the institution to support persistence through attainment for students from low-income backgrounds, that supplemented the other information obtained in the interviews and group interviews. Additionally, I searched for the commitment to students from low-income backgrounds through the explicit and implicit language of Atlantic's documents.

3.6   DATA ANALYSIS

In qualitative inquiry, inductive data analysis is recommended for analyzing and interpreting the data. In inductive analysis, the analysis derives from specific raw units of information to inclusive categories that define local working hypotheses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Two essential sub-processes of unitizing and categorizing are essential to the inductive analysis approach. Unitizing is the process of coding in which raw data are systematically transformed and aggregated into units that are interpretable in the absence of any additional information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Categorizing is the process whereby previously unitized data are organized into categories derived from similar looking characteristics that begin to formulate progressive explanations of the data.

Unitizing was done initially by coding the data in its rawest form. Saldaña (2016) recommends descriptive coding as an option to accomplish this goal. This form of coding summarizes in a short word or phrase the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data (Saldaña, 2016). This provided me with the opportunity to unitize the raw data into the actual interventions described from the individual and group interviews or the review of the documents.

Categorizing of the inductive analysis approach was addressed by using structural coding. Structural coding allows the data to be categorized into comparable segments, commonalities, differences, and relationships (Saldaña, 2016). This additional level of coding identified categories in the data which were fruitful for further analysis. Coding forces the researcher to make judgments about the meaning of contiguous blocks of text (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). I identified the categories that were most prevalent in the data and transformed them into themes. Themes combine similar codes into comprehensive explanations of the data (Ryan & Bernard,

2000). These themes were compared to the corresponding research questions to develop the final stage of analysis for the researcher.

The last stage of analysis entailed memo writing. Memo writing allowed me to develop deeper interpretations of the data while analyzing what the data was suggesting about institutional interventions. I transformed the themes into narrative form with the memos. These memos served as the guiding documents for the findings section of this study. I analyzed the connection of the findings to any preexisting literature to enhance the trustworthiness of this study. Yin (2014) conveyed that the better case studies are the ones in which the explanations reflect some theoretically significant propositions. The interventions found, and the emergence principle of complexity theory, magnified the importance of the interventions working interdependently to support students from low-income backgrounds. This provided a better understanding of the support offered at Atlantic University and the implications of its institutional interventions.

All of the findings were organized by the data collected, the method, and linked to the original research question. Organizing the information in this fashion allows an external observer of the study to trace the findings back to the original source of data. This functional tracking mechanism is referred to as a chain of evidence which is a transparent link that connects the findings with its original source of data collection (Yin, 2014). Establishing a chain of evidence strengthens the reliability of the case study by enhancing the research procedures (Yin, 2014).

The data were stored in electronic and physical files. These files included interview, transcripts, protocols, and coding files for the study. All research records were stored in a locked file on the primary investigator's computer and a locked file cabinet in an office that was accessible only to the researcher.

3.7   CREDIBILITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

A couple of strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of this study. Feedback debriefing was done on a recurring basis at various stages of this project. The faculty advisor of the dissertation extensively vetted all facets of this study and provided critical feedback.

Member checks were the other way that I enhanced the credibility of this study. Member checks are the verification of the data collected and inferences made by the researcher from the participants in the study (Mertens, 2015). Once all the interviews were transcribed, I shared the transcriptions and main points from the individual interviews with the professionals who participated in the semi-structured interviews. The participants informed me if their perspective was captured completely with the collected information. Five of the nine professionals responded to the transcriptions and main points sent. Three of the five professionals approved their perspectives of the information verbatim and two professionals had a few changes. After receiving the revisions from the two professionals, we exchanged emails to ensure their perspectives were captured accurately. I provided them with one last opportunity to include any final thoughts to me about the institutional interventions that support students from low-income backgrounds. Four professionals did not respond to the transcripts and information sent. If there was no response from the participants after three business days, I moved toward the analysis phase.

3.8   REFLEXIVITY

The majority of my family is considered poor and would have met the low-income threshold for this study. I watched my mother, brother, nieces, nephews, and at least 15 cousins settle for a high school diploma because they were discouraged to attend college. Three of my other cousins pursued an undergraduate degree but were forced to withdraw for affordability or other transitional challenges. I recall profound memories from my own undergraduate experience when I was almost forced to drop out for a lack of information or affordability hardships. Some additional mentoring in one instance, and the personal exploration of a financial solution in another instance, were the integral interventions that afforded me the opportunity to complete my undergraduate degree.

Students from low-income backgrounds value education. There are brilliant students from low-income backgrounds that could be more successful in obtaining an undergraduate degree with additional support and guidance. I engaged in this research to discover institutional solutions for students from low-income backgrounds that want to pursue an undergraduate degree. These students can be transparent on a college campus and institutions lose sight of their progress. The aspiration of this research was to discover the fiscal, human, and other resources provided by the institution to support the persistence to graduation for students from low-income backgrounds.

3.9   RESEARCHER ROLE

I worked with students from low-income backgrounds formally as an admissions counselor and informally as a mentor. For approximately six years I recruited students from low-income backgrounds and helped them resolve various administrative challenges of attending college. Currently, I serve in a more informal role with students from low-income backgrounds as a mentor. I provide these students with guidance on various issues ranging from social adaptation through career exploration. Students from low-income backgrounds are extremely resilient and college attainment for this population could be enhanced with additional institutional support. In working with students from low-income backgrounds I observed that they pursue the undergraduate experience with a sense of urgency. They genuinely want to finish their undergraduate degree although they may need a little guidance at times.

This information is useful for the study as I am exploring those institutional interventions that can serve as the additional guidance to support students from low-income backgrounds. As a professional, I will have a better understanding of how an institution can provide support for the persistence to graduation of these students. This information can be useful to improve efforts at the study site or other institutions seeking guidance on supporting students from low-income backgrounds.

3.10   RECIPROCITY

This project will be shared with the low-income serving institution of this study to inform them of the practices that support students from low-income backgrounds and the opportunities to

enhance the support. An executive summary will be prepared of the study's major findings and shared with the institution.

Additionally, the findings were presented at a regional conference. The conference was hosted by the NASPA Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education association. The session was about the institutional interventions that support students from low-income backgrounds and a few major findings were presented. The session was well attended and the post session evaluations requested presentations on similar topics in the future. As a result of this demand, I will present at other conferences in the next year.

3.11   RESEARCHER'S EPISTEMOLOGY

I approached this research from a constructivist paradigm. In constructivism, knowledge is created as a direct interaction between the investigator and the object of investigation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The reality or truth sought is not defined in an absolute sense but rather as manipulative constructions that are intangible, socially and experientially based, and local and specific in nature (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). I believe that knowledge is created from individuals and their interactions with various situations. In reflecting on my own life journey, it was resilience and the support from others that allowed me to obtain an undergraduate degree. Reality is contingent on the life experiences of the individual. These epistemological and ontological orientations align with constructivism and these beliefs are the foundation for this study.

There were several possibilities that explained the institutional support for students from low-income backgrounds. The researcher interacted directly with the participants to learn more

about the phenomenon. Through these direct interactions, I learned about the explicit institutional interventions and those tacit strategies of support that were not formally recognized by the institution. More importantly, when conducting the individual interviews, group interviews, and document review I obtained a comprehensive understanding of the helpful interventions and the institutional challenges in supporting students from low-income backgrounds.

The purpose of this research was to obtain a better understanding of the institutional interventions that support undergraduate degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds and not to find the exclusive solution to this problem. As such, this study is rooted in constructivism and the findings will serve as an informative agenda to provide awareness of the institutional interventions for those interested in supporting the persistence to graduation for students from low-income backgrounds.

3.12 LIMITATIONS

This study had a few limitations. The design of the study was constructed on the assumption that a low-income serving institution with above-average graduation rates was doing more than other institutions to support students from low-income backgrounds. This assumption could be inaccurate and the low-income serving institution may or may not have offered any interventions to support the persistence to graduation of students from low-income backgrounds.

Additionally, some interventions were constructed intentionally for students from low-income backgrounds and other interventions were constructed as a result of another intersecting characteristic. Students from low-income backgrounds do not have a physiological identifying

characteristic, and if they were not identified intentionally by the institutional intervention, the support was offered via an intersecting identity.

Moreover, this study was conducted at one institution in the individualized context of that institution. A case study of a single site is not generalizable to all higher education institutions. The findings may be applicable to other public master's universities with similar characteristics but are not generalizable to other types of institutions. The findings may not be applicable to private institutions, large research universities, and community colleges.

Lastly, the researcher is a former student from a low-income background. There could be assumptions that the data analysis from this study is skewed by the researcher's experiences in obtaining an undergraduate degree as a student from a low-income background. I am far removed from the undergraduate experience and will be able to ethically collect, analyze, and report the data and assure that the findings emerge from the data.

4.0   RESULTS

This chapter presents the analysis of the data collected from the research site from the professionals, students, and documents in support of students from low-income backgrounds. Some of the interventions were mentioned consistently in supporting students from low-income backgrounds while other interventions were mentioned sparingly. The consistently mentioned interventions were conveyed by professionals, students, and or documents of the institution and generally had a substantial level of financial or human resources committed from the institution. The sparingly mentioned interventions were conveyed by professionals, students, or documents and generally lacked the financial and human resources commitment from the institution. Some of the strategies were sustained at the institution over a 10 year period while others were more recent interventions emerging at the institution in the past one to three years. Some of the interventions were explicitly disseminated throughout the institution while other interventions were disseminated by word of mouth. Information about other interventions was not disseminated at all and presented a gap in awareness about some of the institutional interventions.

Emerging from the data were three distinctive trends of institutional interventions that support students from low-income backgrounds. To obtain a better understanding of the institutional interventions that support low-income students, the findings are framed into the institutional initiated interventions, the professional initiated interventions, and the impeding

institutional interventions. I will start with those interventions that were initiated by the institution. These interventions were embedded in the job functions of an office or created by the institution to support the persistence to graduation for students from low-income backgrounds and or other marginalized identities. Next, there were those interventions initiated by the professionals of the institution. These interventions were outside of the scope of responsibilities of the professionals, and students discussed some of these interventions as an integral reason for persisting to graduation at the institution. Lastly, there were the impeding institutional interventions that had an inhibiting impact on the persistence to graduation for students from low-income backgrounds. These interventions were delaying the time of completion to obtain an undergraduate degree or causing additional completion barriers for students from low-income backgrounds. Framing the findings in these overarching constructs provide more context of the institutional interventions that support or cause challenges for low-income students. Under these overarching constructs, several themes of institutional interventions are discussed in the following sections. A table of all of the interventions is listed first in each section of the findings as only the most recognized or innovative interventions are discussed.

4.1   INSTITUTIONAL INITIATED INTERVENTIONS

I begin with the interventions that were supporting students from low-income backgrounds that were initiated by the institution. These interventions were the most explicitly communicated at the institution and were deemed helpful by the professionals, students, or documents in supporting the persistence to graduation of students from low-income backgrounds.

In critically examining the data, five themes initiated by the institution emerged as supporting students persist to graduation. These themes were bridge programs and external alliances, deconstruction of access and success barriers, emerging institutional persistence and attainment initiatives, a financial aid office oriented for student success, and targeting intersecting populations with traditionally lower graduation rates. A table of the institutionally supported interventions is below.

Table 1. Institutional Initiated Interventions that Support Students from Low-Income Backgrounds

Themes	Interventions	Mentioned by		
		Documents	Professionals	Students
Bridge Programs and External Alliances	Bridge Support 4.0	*X*	*XXX*	
	Extensive Relationships with Students		*XXX*	*X*
	Community Collaborative	*X*	*XX*	*XX*
	External Partnership		*X*	
	Summer Bridge 2.0	*XXX*	*XXX*	
Deconstruction of Access and Success Barriers	Hands-on Matriculation Support		*XX*	
	Flexible Leave and Reentry Policy			*XXX*
	On the Spot Admissions		*X*	
	Targeted Recruitment in Dense Low-income Areas	*X*	*XXX*	
Emerging Institutional Persistence and Attainment Initiatives	Early Alert System	*XX*	*XXX*	
	Housing Grant		*XXX*	*X*
	Registration Rally		*XX*	*X*
	Retention Committee	*X*	*XX*	
Financial Aid Office Oriented for Student Success	Empathetic Staff		*XXX*	*XX*
	Discretionary Dollars for Pell Eligible Students		*XX*	*X*
	Comprehensive Financial Aid Office		*XXX*	*XXX*
	Financial Dissemination to Financial Counseling		*XXX*	*XXX*
	Institutional Loan Program		*X*	
	Scholarship Information Dissemination			*XXX*
Targeting of Intersecting Populations with Traditionally Lower Graduation Rates	Accommodating to the Needs of Low-income Students			*XXX*
	Awareness of Low-income Student Concerns Increased	*X*	*XX*	
	[Name of Committee]	*XXX*	*XXX*	

Table 1 (continued)

Hispanic Leaders Retreat	**XX**
Men's Group Mentoring	**XX**

XXX = Often (Mentioned > 5 times) XX= Sometimes (Mentioned 3 to 5 times) X = Rarely (Mentioned 1 to 2 times)

4.1.1 Bridge Programs and External Alliances

The institutional commitment to students from low-income backgrounds was captured from a programmatic perspective with some intentional programs. The strategies under this theme included the bridge support 4.0 program, extensive relationships with students, the community collaborative, an external partnership, and the summer bridge 2.0 program. Some of the resources were an institutional commitment to a program designed to improve persistence and graduation outcomes through increased professional and administrative support. While others were collaborations with external stakeholders to improve completion outcomes. The most discussed interventions under this theme were the community collaborative, the summer bridge 2.0 program, and the bridge support 4.0 program.

One of the innovative institutional interventions in supporting students from low-income backgrounds was the community collaborative. This was a collective effort between Atlantic University, a local high school, and local businesses. The strategy was innovative because it mirrored a creative example out of the CUNY system where a similar collaboration was able to significantly increase degree completion rates (Kolenovic, Linderman, & Karp, 2013). Local businesses and the local high school wanted to improve high school completion, college

awareness, and college graduation rates for local students and the institution wanted to improve its graduation rates for these same students. The community collaborative was established to provide the local high school with a college professional to increase college awareness. This professional would visit the local high school for a certain amount of hours a week and provide college awareness resources and support. Additionally, the local businesses developed a financial incentive for participants that enrolled at the institution and persisted in the program from year to year. This incentive included a $2000 annual scholarship for up to five years that increased gradually based on certain academic accomplishments. Lastly, the institution provided additional support for these students by assigning them to a success coach and allowing these students to obtain similar support services as the bridge support program students. The community collaborative was established for more than 15 years according to the professionals who administer the program.

Professionals discussed the advantages of the community collaborative. Professionals discussed the ability to work with the students of the community collaborative on a one on one basis to actively monitor their success. Yvette, a professional in the student support area, discussed how having established relationships in the high school awareness program of the community collaborative provided a seamless opportunity to help students seek scholarships to pay for college in the quote below:

> I work really, really hard with my kids from the school district of [our city] because I get to know them. So when they get to their senior year, we're working on scholarship searches, so really making sure that they're utilizing all the resources and applying for every scholarship. Other students that I don't have that relationship with, that come to me after, it's too late.

Paul, a professional in the enrollment management division, recognized the origins of the community collaborative as a high school completion and college awareness initiative, but

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explained the evolution of the community collaborative from high school completion to college completion in the quote below:

> Our [program] that we have at the University in partnership with [the high school] was originally created to increase graduation rates out of high school, but has now really turned to the point where we're trying to work on how to improve retention, persistence, and graduation rates once the students get to the campus.

The students I interviewed described the community collaborative with passion. Students discussed the importance of the community collaborative as the fundamental reason they were enrolled at the institution or had the means to afford the institution. Students elaborated on how they were brought to the institution through the community collaborative or were able to obtain additional support as a result of the relationships through the community collaborative. A student in group interview Beta stated the following about receiving help from a professional through the community collaborative and how that support ranged from college awareness to financial solutions in the quote below:

> [Name of Professional]. She is the coordinator for the Academic Student Affairs Office at [Location of Office]. She helps out a lot, especially for her community collaborative and summer bridge program students. Let's say, like this past winter I needed help through a scholarship to take a winter class. She was able to let Financial Aid know it was okay to use one of my scholarship payments toward my winter class. So she helped me a lot through that. It was so helpful.

> When it comes to meeting [Name of Professional], I met her when I was in high school through the [Name of Program]. That program isn't only a scholarship program, it also brings you to the University, and it helps to tell you "This is how you should study, this is how you should be prepared for how college writing is. This is how a lecture is." It's not as rigorous as the [Name of Program], but it's still like, here's some information. When I was in high school, I actually didn't know about the program until I heard about it from a friend talking about it.

The documents of the institution prioritized the evolution of the community collaborative. A statement from the Atlantic University strategic plan conveyed the following as an institutional priority about the community collaborative:

Strengthen initiatives like the summer bridge 2.0 program and the community collaborative program so that under-represented minority students succeed at or above the Atlantic University average.

Of all the interventions mentioned under the bridge programs and external alliances theme, the summer bridge 2.0 program and the bridge support 4.0 program were the most consistently recognized by the professionals, students, or the documents of the institution. The summer bridge 2.0 program originated as a state program similar to the Federal Gear Up and Upward Bound Programs. Approximately ten years ago, state funding diminished and the state summer bridge program lost all of its financial support. The institution had to make a critical decision to dissolve the program or replicate the program with its own funding. According to professionals, Atlantic chose the latter and has been operating the summer bridge program fiscally independent of the state. The program targets students who live in poverty conditions and may not meet one of the institutional admissions requirements. The summer bridge 2.0 program engages students with discussions about college, campus visits, and help with the admissions application process. Students who decide to enter the program and enroll at the institution attend a four-week long summer transition camp approximately one month before the start of fall classes. Students receive a plethora of services and meet with campus partners to orient them to the various support offices.

After the summer bridge 2.0 program is over the students are grandfathered into the bridge support 4.0 program. The bridge support 4.0 program is the intentional engagement with a student to ensure they are consistently persisting to graduation. Any academic, financial, wellness or social problems identified with student participants are resolved by a professional or in collaboration with a campus partner. Additionally, the bridge support program requires study hall hours until a certain GPA expectation is met. Other workshops and programs are offered to

upper-class students who participated in the program. The bridge support 4.0 program is unique as bridge programs are typically geared towards the first semester or first-year success (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Walpole 2007), but the Atlantic bridge support 4.0 program is evolving to four years of support. According to the professionals of the student support area, the office is responsible for bridge support program students, but by proxy, the office supports far more students from low-income backgrounds than those enrolled in the bridge support 4.0 program.

The professionals of the institution described the bridge and the bridge support programs as one of the most recognized programs that supported students from low-income backgrounds. Professionals valued the opportunity to provide students with the critical skills necessary to be successful on campus. Professionals also valued making program participants aware of campus resources through various presentations and workshops. Helen, a professional in the student support area, conveyed the following about how the various components of the summer bridge 2.0 program were helping students from low-income backgrounds matriculate into the institution and utilize other campus resources to enhance their success in a quote below:

> Through our summer bridge 2.0 program, we bring in low-income, at-risk students during that program. They get six college credits while they're here. Free, this is all free – room and board, housing and everything. What we do in return is, we have the professors that work together, and we have a math workshop that helps them get started in advancing their math skills. Most of the low-income kids have been coming in with very low math skills. To help them get a jump-start on their majors, we use the math workshop, so that they could test out of the lower-level math and go into the math that they need with the rest of the students. The freshman year we connect them with different people that can help them use the resources on campus. So we have the tutoring services, we have the different departments that we have programs with, and they have their outreach counselors that they meet with weekly.

Helen would go on to add these comments below about the progression of the bridge support 4.0 program and the additional resources added to focus on four-year completion instead of just two-year persistence for bridge support 4.0 program participants:

Bridge support 4.0 is more of this newer idea where, realizing the difference they got there in services from them transitioning from summer bridge 2.0 into their freshman year, bridge support 4.0 originally focusing on that first two years, to be honest, probably even just that first year. Just making sure that they knew how to register, really some basic skills that they would need. Now, more or less looking at bridge support 4.0 being with the living community, that's bridge support 4.0, the priority registration, that's part of bridge support 4.0. That scholarship money is also going to be part of bridge support 4.0. So there are different incentives for students to stay engaged through bridge support 4.0. In the previous bridge support program 4.0, success was determined by a two-year mark – two-year retention. That's what they were basing it off of. Now this newer idea is okay – what does it look like for them to be successful for four years.

The documents of the institution described the evolution of the summer bridge 2.0 program to be more efficient and effective. The University was committed to this initiative and continued to provide resources through free college credits, free room and board for the summer program, and other incentives. Some of the documents of the institution provided the following updates on its commitment to the summer bridge 2.0 program through incentivizing below:

Goal: Create a four week, three credit summer program.
Progress: In 2016 the program was 6 weeks & 6 credits. In 2017, the program was 4 weeks for 6 credits.
Goal: Incentivize successful completion of the summer program (e.g., $500 bookstore credit for textbook purchases). Incentive free room and board as well as free six credits for the summer bridge 2.0 program.
Progress: Goal completed. (Nancy, 2017, p. 13)

Overall, the initiatives under bridge programs and external alliances were fruitful in supporting students from low-income backgrounds. The community collaborative was mentioned by the documents, professionals, and students of the institution as helpful in supporting the persistence to graduation for students from low-income backgrounds. The summer bridge 2.0 and bridge support 4.0 programs were discussed by the professionals and documents of the institution and were also mentioned as helpful in supporting persistence for program participants.

4.1.2   Deconstruction of Access and Success Barriers

One of the other institutional initiated themes found was the deconstruction of access and success barriers. Some students from low-income backgrounds had barriers that hindered their ability to enroll in college or persist to complete the undergraduate degree. Some of these barriers were the lack of guidance through college processes, the inability to visit the campus, and an unfamiliarity with support resources and programs. The institution started various initiatives to help with these challenges. These programs included hands-on matriculation support, a flexible leave and reentry policy, on the spot admissions days at the students' high schools, and recruitment targeted at dense low-income areas. It is unclear when some of these programs originated at the institution but their revival stems from the institution's commitment to decreasing the graduation gap for marginalized students. These initiatives supported students from low-income backgrounds by providing the means to matriculate into college. The targeted recruitment in dense low-income areas and the flexible leave and reentry policy were the most prevalent interventions and will be discussed in the following sections.

Professionals had more input on the targeted recruitment of dense low-income areas initiative and it was supported by the documents of the institution as well. Professionals viewed these initiatives as instrumental in reducing the accessibility gap for students from low-income backgrounds. They mentioned that some of the practices were time intensive but well worth the efforts to observe students persist and graduate from the institution. Professionals provided examples of how it could take an average of 10 hours with one student to complete all of the processes to enroll at the institution. Professionals also discussed the very intentional data analysis process that evaluated the high schools' free and reduced lunch levels to determine what schools were eligible for the bus visit program. Elaine, a professional in the enrollment

management division, described how the institutional bus visit program is removing the

transportation barrier for students from lower income areas to enroll in the institution:

> We pay for buses to bring students to campus, because they might not necessarily have parental figures that are going to bring them to campus visits, so we'll bus students in from schools in from certain areas. Particularly in the areas of [Name of City] recruitment, and recruitment in [Name of City], [Name of City], [Name of City], [Name of City], areas that we traditionally see underrepresented students and students with lower income, the initiatives that we focus on are really to remove barriers the students would have to accessing the admissions process.

Elaine added the following about a program that is intended to deconstruct access for students

from low-income backgrounds by having the students visualize being a member of the campus

community:

> We have a program called [Name of Program], which is basically an open house for lower-income or underrepresented students. I think any initiative we can do to physically get the student to campus during the admissions process. That's what the data tells us. The data tells us they're more likely to enroll. The data tells us that, for underrepresented students and students that have barriers to access, what we know is that, if we can get them to campus and show them and help them see themselves as an Atlantic student, that goes a lot further than us going to their school and doing a presentation about the University. That's just a thought in their head. If we can get them here, and model to them what it would be like for them to be here, that goes a much longer way.

The documents of the institution mentioned these initiatives in its goals to increase access

and graduation rates for underrepresented students. The documents of the institution revealed

that a [Name of Committee] goal about bus visits for targeted areas was met in the following

statement:

> Goal: Reinstate campus bus visits for schools in [Name of City], [Name of City], [Name of City] and [Name of City].
> Progress: The goal for admissions to sponsor bus visits from high schools from these areas was met. (Nancy, 2017, p. 19)

The flexible leave and reentry policy was primarily discussed by students. The students I

interviewed described the flexible leave and reentry policy as an opportunity to take a temporary

pause in pursuing the undergraduate degree for life circumstances. Students discussed the ability

to take a semester or a year away from school and seamlessly transition back to the institution. This reinstatement back into the institution did not require a new admissions process or other barriers to enrollment. A student, in group interview Beta, expressed his gratitude for the flexible leave and reentry policy and the ability to take some time away and seamlessly rejoin the campus in the comments below:

> Something that has helped me is the fact that the university lets you take a leave of absence. Let's say you do not have the money to pay for next semester, so you need to just work for a year to save up money so you can come back. The university will let you do that, so you don't have to drop out and reapply and then you're a freshman all over again. You can go and take a break for a year and then come back and be able to be like, "Hey, I'm back, I want to get into my classes." It's kind of like a pause in your education. It helped me. I needed to take a pause so that I could save money so that I could come back.

Professionals mentioned the targeted recruitment at dense low-income areas as effective in having more students from low-income backgrounds enroll in the institution. The targeted recruitment at dense low-income areas was also mentioned in the documents of the institution. Students mentioned the flexible leave and reentry policy as helpful in persisting to graduate from the institution.

4.1.3 Emerging Institutional Persistence and Attainment Initiatives

One of the themes that was intentionally designed to support the persistence to graduation for students, including students from low-income backgrounds and or other marginalized students, was the emerging institutional persistence and attainment initiatives. Students from low-income backgrounds had a historical graduation gap from their higher-income peers at the institution. To address this challenge the institution created several solutions to improve graduation rates for low-income and other marginalized students. These initiatives consisted of an early alert system,

a housing grant, a registration rally, and the development of a retention committee. According to various professionals in the enrollment management division persistence and graduation rates were not at the optimal levels for Atlantic. One professional informed me that the University experienced a substantial decrease in persistence rates for Pell Grant recipients and other marginalized groups after their junior year. This metric obtained the attention of the university as the junior year retention rate was a metric that did not experience significant decreases for other populations. According to a professional, the institution started these initiatives to stabilize and improve persistence and completion outcomes. It was unclear when these initiatives started at the institution but the early alert system was established two years ago according to the institution's documents. The interventions recognized the most in this area were the early alert system and the housing grant and will be discussed in the next section.

The early alert system is a homegrown computer-based system that allows for the intentional tracking of a student's progress (Engle & O'Brien, 2007; Talbert, 2012). The local early alert system was designed with a reactive focus of creating warnings for students with issues that hindered persistence or student success. Some of the alert criteria included receiving a failing grade on a course assignment, missing classes, or failing a course. The current early alert system does not monitor all students from low-income backgrounds but monitors students who entered the institution under the summer bridge support program.

Professionals spoke about the early alert system as a tool to aid with persistence. Issac, a professional in the enrollment management division, conveyed these comments below about the capability of the early alert system and the subgroups in the system that were tracked:

We can talk about the Early Alert again because that's really moving. All students at the university can be flagged in our early-alert system. However, there are subgroups, like the summer bridge support program, athletics, returning students on probation, and this green group of freshmen, who rise to the top of the class list and are bolted as a

monitored group. And our office is charged with following up on any early alerts for green students. My gut tells me that in general, there's probably a bit higher percentage of green students who are in the Pell Grant recipient range.

Morris, a different professional in the enrollment management division, added the following comments about who is tracked and not tracked in the early alert system and how the system was trying to provide an opportunity to be more deliberate in supporting the tracked individuals:

> We have an early alert system which I talked about a little bit. One of the priority groups is the summer bridge support program specifically targeting some low-income students. Not all low-income students are tracked but mostly low-SAT students from [Name of City], [Name of City], the [Name of City] area, and we try to get them as a priority group, if they're struggling somewhere, the faculty can alert us and we can specifically reach out to those students and talk to them more about what's impacting them.

Some of the documents of the institution provided a focus for the goals of the early alert system. The system in its early stages was originated to address academic issues before a student failed a course and impacted a student's persistence to graduation. The documents of the institution conveyed the following about Atlantic's vision for the early alert system:

> Goal: An electronic system will be implemented to notify students and advisors when the student is at risk of failing a course (D or F).
> Progress: Goal was met. The system was implemented in fall 2016 – present.
> Goal: System allows faculty members to indicate the kind of problem the student is having and whom they should be seen by, (advisor, counselor, or professor) as an on-going warning system.
> Progress: Goal was met. The system allows faculty members to indicate the kind of problem the student is having and whom they should be seen by, (advisor, counselor, or professor) as an on-going warning system. (Nancy, 2017, p. 19)

The housing grant was an institutional initiative to enhance the affordability of university housing. Although it was not offered exclusively to a singular demographic at the institution, low-income students were recipients of the housing grant. According to the professionals, Atlantic invested in new residence halls to make the university more attractive for prospective students. In doing so, it increased the housing fees significantly. The increased housing costs were a barrier to living on campus for students from low-income backgrounds. The housing

grant attempted to minimize this barrier by providing an institutional scholarship to supplement housing fees for students who could not afford them.

Professionals understood the importance of living on campus for some students and the housing grant increased that possibility. Most professionals were aware of the housing grant with some of the professionals conveying uncertainty about the office that facilitated this initiative. Nancy, a professional that works with the [Name of Committee], had this to say about why the housing grant emerged as an institutional initiative:

> Our housing contract changed, and not only did the contract change but the costs changed. So the students often talk about how challenging it is for them economically to pay for on-campus housing. So through the steering committee, we're trying to look at the ways that the institution could support students who are struggling financially.

Students expressed that receiving the housing grant was the only way they could afford to live on campus. The few students that received the housing grant discussed how they live too far away from campus to commute to school or how living on campus minimized some of the challenges of commuting back and forth to home. Some of the students from the group interviews were aware of the housing grant but most students were not. Students who were recipients of the housing grant were more likely aware of it than other students. A student participant, in group interview Gamma, stated the following about the housing grant resource and the lack of information about the opportunity:

> I was contacted about receiving the housing grant as I had a financial need for the grant. The Housing Department reached out to me rather than me going and finding it. I think they have the student's information and they make the first move, rather than publicizing the grant. Not that that's the right way to do it, but I think that's the way that it is.

Overall, professionals discussed the early alert system and the housing grant as helpful institutional interventions in supporting students from low-income backgrounds. Students were unaware of the early alert system and had limited awareness of the housing grant. The documents

of the institution mentioned the early alert system prevalently but did not mention the housing grant.

4.1.4 Financial Aid Office Oriented for Student Success

Another theme of interventions discovered to support students from low-income backgrounds was the financial aid office oriented for student success. It was not surprising that a financial office was more explicit as the support of low-income students originated with federal policies around the Pell Grant and other Title IV funds (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2010; Engle & O'Brien, 2007). However, this particular financial aid office engaged students from low-income backgrounds far beyond the processing of financial aid. These professionals used the interventions of an empathetic staff, discretionary dollars for Pell-eligible students, a comprehensive financial aid office, financial dissemination to financial counseling, an institutional loan program, and scholarship information dissemination to support students. The additional connection with students was deemed helpful in knowing students' family situations, building strong relationships with students, counseling students through financial hardships, and connecting students with campus resources. According to a professional in the financial aid office, a vision change approximately 20 years ago changed the financial aid office from a clinical oriented process to a student success oriented experience. Of all of the interventions under the financial aid office oriented for student success, the empathetic staff and the financial dissemination to financial counseling were mentioned most prevalently at Atlantic.

Professionals at the institution discussed the empathetic nature of the financial aid office. Professionals stated that the financial aid office could be called anytime to assist a low-income student with a financial hardship. Other professionals described the financial aid office as a great

resource for mentoring low-income and other marginalized students through the challenges of college. Paul, a professional in the enrollment management division, stated the following about the financial aid professionals supporting students from low-income backgrounds beyond just financial aid processing:

> The Director of Financial Aid does tremendous work. The fact that he's a huge mentor for a lot of the low-income students on campus, the fact that they're going to be in this building now, just down the hall from him, it's going to allow that connection to become even more natural than it already is. You have the professional staff of the financial aid office that are extremely committed to student success. I think that there's strong commitment there.

The student perspective of the institutional financial aid office was similar in scope with a few students stating they were not as dependent on this office as others. Most of the students viewed the financial aid office, the programs, or the guidance obtained from the professionals as compassionate to their needs. Students discussed how the relationships in the financial aid area went beyond financial solutions. A student, in group interview Beta, conveyed the following about how a relationship with a financial aid professional helped him overcome some financial struggles and some disciplinary challenges at the institution to continue on the path to graduate:

> [Professional's name], he's a great guy. He always finds some loan for you, some grant, anything. He'll help you out. There are multiple resources, he helps you. He always breaks his neck. Like she said, he'll take your financial aid from previous semesters to help you with summer classes and things like that and break it down. Another thing, when I went through my little suspension it woke me up, and he told me this is serious, this is not a game. Those are things that he really helped me with.

The few low-income students that had minimal engagement with the financial aid office had prior awareness of navigating college funding through a parent who attended college, another professional at the institution who offered financial aid counseling, or their own self-awareness of financial aid processes. The general consensus of the supportiveness of the financial aid office

for students from low-income backgrounds was mentioned in the following comments from a student in group interview Beta:

> I have one thing to say. I feel like the financial aid office definitely helps out low-income students. I always got notifications for years, "Hey, we've got these scholarships coming. We're looking off the basis of your need for financial aid for the following year." So I applied, I always openly applied to their scholarships.

The students provided examples of how financial aid professionals proactively sought out students to provide additional information about financial solutions. Students from group interview Theta had this to say about the extra efforts of the financial aid office to discover additional scholarship opportunities for students:

> I know the financial aid director by his first name. One time at a campus-wide event, I can't remember the exact name, but it was just an event on campus, and the director took down my name. I said, "I'm applying for some scholarships and whatnot," and he took down my name. The director said, "I'll just be on the lookout." So I would say that the Financial Aid Office really does go that extra mile. If you're in a struggle, maybe they can really work something out with you.

Overall, students and professionals alike described the financial aid office as an integral resource for helping low-income students persist to graduation. Professionals valued the ability to create pragmatic solutions for students from low-income backgrounds and the overall mentoring of students through complex challenges. Students appreciated the willingness to help with personal and financial challenges and the additional information about financial solutions shared by the financial aid professionals.

4.1.5   Targeting of Intersecting Populations with Traditionally Lower Graduation Rates

One of the progressive themes discovered at the study site was the targeting of intersecting populations with traditionally lower graduation rates. Professionals and documents of the institution confirmed some of these interventions as the driving force of other institutional

initiatives that support students from low-income backgrounds. Some students from low-income backgrounds have intersecting identities of race, ethnicity, and biological sex that have historically experienced lower graduation rates at the institution. Specifically, African American, Hispanic, and male students had lower graduation rates when intersecting with the identity of low-income. The institution implemented several interventions to address the lower graduation rates for these intersecting students. These strategies included accommodating to the needs of low-income students, increased awareness of the concerns of low-income students, [Name of Committee], a Hispanic leaders retreat, and a men's group mentoring program. According to some professionals, these interventions improved the institution's knowledge about the challenges facing students from low-income backgrounds. Additionally, for the professionals that facilitated the Hispanic leaders retreat and the men's mentoring group they discussed improved grade point averages and persistence rates for participants of these programs that were from low-income backgrounds. It was unclear how long some of these programs were in existence at Atlantic University. The [Name of Committee] was recognized the most and will be discussed in the next section.

The [Name of Committee] was established to decrease the graduation gap for marginalized students. The [Name of Committee] is targeted towards Hispanic and African American students but professionals viewed this committee as assisting intersecting students from low-income backgrounds. Some of these initiatives have directly or indirectly helped students from low-income backgrounds. The committee was established at Atlantic in the past one to three years according to the professionals.

The professionals stated that the recommendations of this committee drove the bus visit program, the housing grant, and some of the improvements with the summer bridge 2.0 program.

Elaine, a professional in the enrollment management division, shared the following about how

the committee was helping students from low-income backgrounds by pushing initiatives to the

forefront of the institution's priorities:

> I'm sure there's a lot. I know there's a steering committee —it's the [Name of
> Committee], I think. There were nine charges from the committee. One of them was
> recruitment-related, and a lot of the pillars are. I basically was like okay, we'll do campus
> visits, get them here, things like that. One of them is increased scholarship money for
> low-income students, mentoring, stuff like that. I can't speak to the progress of where
> those are. Mine is number nine, increase enrollment for underrepresented students and I
> am working on that.

Yvette, a professional in the student support area, added this perspective of how the [Name of

Committee] is helping students from low-income backgrounds by making recommendations to

the summer bridge program and serving as general support:

> The other thing that I think has helped low-income students is the [Name of Committee]
> that they put together. They're the ones who made some suggestions about some changes
> to our summer program. It went from non-credit-bearing to credit-bearing. That group of
> people, I feel, are individuals that we can go to with some of our concerns that really help
> start that conversation with others about what resources we need. They have been a great
> support system for the programs that we run in this office, the [Name of Committee].

The documents of the institution conveyed extensive information about the [Name of

Committee]. Some of the overarching goals of this committee that were helpful for the

persistence and completion of the intersecting students from low-income backgrounds are below:

> Goal: Establish an accountability plan for the recruitment, retention and graduation of
> African American and Latina/o students.
> Goal: Generate substantial funding for African American and Latina/o student need-
> based scholarships and research opportunities ($10 million+ in new funds).
> Goal: Establish a clear vision for the [Name of Summer Bridge Program].
> Goal: Create an early warning system to identify students who are struggling
> academically and socially. (Nancy, 2017, pp. 1-17)

Overall, the [Name of Committee] was most discussed by the professionals and the

documents of the institution. This committee had momentum at Atlantic and recommended some

goals to increase the persistence to graduation for students from low-income backgrounds and

other marginalized identities. Although these programs were targeted for other marginalized identities, interventions were created that were helpful for students from low-income backgrounds.

4.2   PROFESSIONAL INITIATED INTERVENTIONS

In critically evaluating the data from Atlantic University three themes emerged as interventions that were initiated by the professionals of the institution. These themes were the informal network, optimism for support and success of students from low-income backgrounds, and the survival initiatives. The professionals surpassed the expectations in their formal job requirements to see these interventions come to fruition. At times these efforts were the advocating for additional resources to help students from low-income backgrounds, and other times professionals were using their own money or free time to help a student. A table of the various interventions is below as only the most recognized or innovative interventions are discussed in this section.

Table 2. Professional Initiated Interventions that Support Students from Low-Income Backgrounds

Themes	Interventions	Mentioned by		
		Documents	Professionals	Students
Informal Network	Faculty and Staff Providing Basic Needs for Students		*XXX*	*XXX*
	Encouragement to Connect with Other Students		*X*	*X*
	Professional Staff Members			*XXX*
	Relationships with Professors		*XXX*	*XXX*
Optimism for Support and Success	Administrators Advocating for Low-income Students		*X*	
	Biology Peer Mentoring Program		*XXX*	*X*
	Funds to Support Low-income Student Initiatives		*XX*	*X*
	Innovation Receptiveness		*X*	
	Receptive to Supporting Low-income Students		*XXX*	*X*
Survival Initiatives	Interlibrary Loan Program		*XXX*	*XX*
	Food Pantry Collaboration		*XXX*	*XXX*
	Leadership Roles with Financial Incentives			*X*
	Meal Donation Meal Swipe Program		*X*	
	Providing a Meal to a Student		*X*	
	Summer Employment with On-campus Living Privileges			*X*

XXX = Often (Mentioned > 5 times) XX= Sometimes (Mentioned 3 to 5 times) X = Rarely (Mentioned 1 to 2 times)

4.2.1 The Informal Network

One of the most influential institutional themes discovered in helping students from low-income backgrounds persist to graduation was the informal network. The informal network is a group of faculty, staff, and administrators who established an unstated rule to help students from low-income backgrounds and other marginalized populations persist through graduation. The

informal network used the strategies of faculty and staff providing basic needs for students, encouragement to connect with other students, professional staff members, and relationships with professors. According to the professionals, at times the support was minimal and may be as simple as connecting a student with an established resource. Other times this support was complex, and may include deliberately walking a student through the process to obtain health care, providing students with basic necessities such as food or money for transportation, and being the first contact person for a student when a problem emerged. The institution relied on these connections although they were not formally recognized or at times valued by the institution. It was unclear if the professionals viewed themselves as an official network but they certainly knew the other professionals on the campus that were reliable resources. Most of the faculty, staff, and administrators in the network have been employed at the institution from a range of 10 to 30 years. The faculty and staff providing basic needs for students and relationships with professors were the most prevalently mentioned and will be discussed in the following sections.

Professionals recognized the importance of providing basic needs to support students from low-income backgrounds and other marginalized populations. Yvette, a professional in the student support area, had this to say about how a professor of the informal network helped students with advising and other challenges:

> [Name of the Professor] who's the [Name of Program] [Title of Professional] in the [Name of Department], she's been wonderful at helping with our students. A lot of our students we'll send to her to advise if they have certain needs because she works really well with low-income students and knows their needs and can serve them the best way that she can. So there are random pockets of individuals that we know we can reach out to if we need an additional resource that can help us with something.

The same professional, went on to add these comments about a different professional who also provided for the basic necessities of students from low-income backgrounds that could not afford them:

> [Professional Name] in her office has a closet where she keeps toiletries, some deodorants, shampoos, toothpaste, toothbrushes, all those things, because students, not only can they not afford a meal, sometimes they can't afford their toiletries, and basic needs. We really didn't realize that until the summer that we had students who were coming from such low-income environments or no-income environments that they didn't even have money for their basic needs.

Nancy, a professional who works with the [Name of Committee], discussed this interaction in providing resources for a student to afford transportation to and from campus:

> She said in the focus group, and she did disclose this to me, that she couldn't even pay for gas to come to school now. We have nothing available for her. And so after class, she came in, I closed the door, and I said look. I know that you're struggling financially, and would you be insulted if I gave you some money for gas. She started crying. She said I'm embarrassed that I need that, but I'd be willing to take it. And so I gave her money for gas. But there is nothing structurally in place to meet the needs of students like her.

Other professionals discussed how the relationships with the professors in the informal network were fruitful in supporting students from low-income backgrounds. Professional participant Adam, a professional from the financial aid area, contributed the following comments about the scarcity of professionals that support students from low-income backgrounds and the institutional reliance on a professor in the informal network to fill the void:

> I believe that you need to have people in every major service area who understand the needs of this population at the institution. We do not have that right now. And what that has done is put an unfair burden on those offices that do understand.

> So what it means is, [Professor Name's] office, if you walk by there, there are four or five students sitting in there all the time. Even when she's not there, they're there. They sit there, they interact with each other. They go there because they know she cares. There are students who come here, even though we are a hike from where they hang out, they still come here because they know what they're going to get when they get here. And our concern is, when we leave, who's going to pick up that mantle? Who's going to be the one to point them in the right direction, because currently, we don't see that we have anything in place that will replace the adults that emphatically care.

Students credited at least one or two members of the network with reversing their educational path, which allowed them to graduate or prevented them from dropping out of the institution. A non-traditional Pell Grant student participant, in group interview Gamma, shared the following about the unrecognized support obtained from a couple of faculty members who provided creative solutions to ensure that she continued to progress through her studies:

> Oh, goodness, yes, actually. For as many negative stories as I just told, I actually have some really good ones. [Professor Name], [Name of Department], she told me I didn't have to show up for any of her classes, that she would make it work for me, because she understood. I had her for the semester right after [birth of my child], and she literally worked with me. She understood that I was falling asleep in class. She just got it. She made sure that the baby was fine, like she was always checking up on me. [Professor Name] allowed me to bring my baby to school with me the first couple of weeks. [Professor Name] scheduled her class break times around me needing to pump. [Professor Name] is my adviser. She always asks me how I'm doing, how my kids are doing. She's always giving me advice on how to get things done, that gets me where I want to eventually be in life in the shortest and easiest ways possible. I guess lastly, the major thing that sticks out to me is [Professor Name]. In the [Name of Department], when you get to your Professional II blocks, if you're a dual major, you are basically not given the option whether you will go to the [Name of Coursework] part of it or the [Name of Coursework] part of it. They choose that for you. The [Name of Coursework] comes with three weeks of field placement every day, and [Name of Coursework] comes with five, typically at the end of the semester, no less. I asked him for priority to have [Name of Coursework] this semester, so that I wasn't missing five weeks of work right before Christmas. He praised my self-advocacy skills and fully was onboard with it and made sure that happened for me, and I'm extremely grateful, because Christmas is going to suck to begin with this year.

Both students and professionals viewed the faculty and staff providing basic needs for students and relationships with professors as a valuable supplement to the success of students from low-income backgrounds. Some students described the support from these professionals as integral to their ability to persist towards completion at the institution.

4.2.2   Optimism for Support and Success

An emerging theme of the professional initiated interventions at the institution was the optimism for supporting students from low-income backgrounds. Professionals pursued different solutions to support students and increased the institution's awareness of the needs of students from low-income backgrounds. Some of the strategies included administrators advocating for low-income students, a biology peer mentoring program, funds to support low-income student initiatives, innovation receptiveness, and being receptive to supporting students from low-income backgrounds. According to some professionals, these strategies were deemed helpful in developing a supportive institutional culture for students from low-income backgrounds and were developed at the institution in the past three to five years. The biology peer mentoring program was mentioned as a flourishing program under the optimism for support and success theme and will be discussed below.

The biology peer mentoring program was started by a faculty member to attract and support students that pursued the biology degree less frequently. According to professionals, low-income and other marginalized students were least likely to pursue a biology degree at the study site. According to a student participant, the program was designed as a peer to peer mentoring model where junior and senior biology majors assisted first-year and second-year biology majors by orienting them to the program and helping them obtain success in rigorous courses.

Most professionals heard of the biology peer mentoring program and knew it was helpful in attracting low-income and other marginalized students to the biology major. Most professionals were uncertain of the explicit details of the program. Paul, a professional in the

enrollment management area, conveyed these comments about the origins of the biology peer

mentoring program:

> We have a faculty member in the biology program who created a mentoring program that just seems to keep growing. It was designed originally for underrepresented students, but it's really taken on a life of its own.

Helen, a professional in the student support area, stated the following about the biology peer

mentoring program in collaboration with the bridge support 4.0 program:

> I collaborated with the biology mentoring program to take in all of the freshmen of the [Name of Program] that are bio majors, so that first day they start classes, they have someone there that, if they fall into a slot where they need a tutor, boom, they're there right away, and they know what you're talking about, because they were in your class with you.

> The student perspective of the program was more detailed. One student in the group

interviews was a senior biology peer mentor. The student talked about how the biology peer

mentoring program was used to help underclassmen (freshman and sophomores) by supporting

students in the advisement process and assisting them towards success in difficult classes.

Additionally, the mentor helped the student connect with other resources on campus. The student

felt that the biology peer mentoring program was fruitful by encouraging and supporting students

to continue as biology majors. A student, in group interview Theta, had this to say about the

biology peer mentoring program.

> See there's a correlation between low-income students and underrepresented students. So in terms of changes that I've seen, within the Biology Department, there's this program called the Biology Mentorship Program for underrepresented students, where we try to help students in terms of their classes, mentoring them, giving them academic advice, and social advice. But there's this overarching concept that we want students to take classes once. We want them to be efficient with how they're getting aid. I think the University has this policy where, if you take a class twice you can no longer receive aid for that class anymore. So we try to educate students about these classes because some of them are under the assumption that "I can take a class as many times as I want," or "If I pay for the class once, I won't have to pay for it again." That's far from the truth. So I feel like we're starting to champion the idea of really priming the students academically so they can be

efficient with how they receive their aid and cut down or minimize the number of times they have to take classes, to graduate in the least amount of time possible.

The program was started from the vision of a faculty member but the students implement the vision. So it's practically student-on-student mentoring program, but there's faculty oversight.

The biology peer mentoring program was an emerging initiative in supporting students from low-income backgrounds and other marginalized populations to pursue biology degrees. The program was started by a faculty member and gained recognition at the institution among professionals and students.

4.2.3   Survival Initiatives

The most somber theme of professional initiated interventions was the survival initiatives. Students at Atlantic were without some of the essentials to survive. Some students did not have sufficient food, hygiene items, the ability to buy a textbook for a class, and a stable home to transition to for the summer. Professionals recognized these challenges and advocated for solutions to address these concerns. Some of the programs started were an interlibrary loan program, a food pantry collaboration, leadership roles with financial incentives, a meal donation swipe program, providing a meal to a student, and summer employment with on-campus living privileges. It was unclear when these programs originated at the institution. The food pantry collaboration and the interlibrary loan program were mentioned most frequently and will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

The food pantry collaboration was a professional initiated university partnership with an external organization. Students were able to visit the food pantry and retrieve food items for free

to take back to their residence hall room or their home. Additionally, the food pantry offered a

hot meal to students once a week and coffee and breakfast items during various days of the week.

Most of the professionals I interviewed mentioned the food pantry program as an

initiative directly helping students from low-income backgrounds. Professionals discussed how

students would obtain health services, if they felt ill, when the main problem was actually

malnutrition. They discussed how the food pantry helped to alleviate that problem. Yvette, a

professional in the student support area, mentioned the following about the basic needs that the

food pantry collaboration provided for students:

> So we do a lot with our food pantry that's associated with the campus. The [Name of Food Pantry Program]. The [Name of Building]. The one thing about serving low-income students, and we have a large population of students that are coming in from our local area, the school district of [Name of City], because of the partnership that we have with them. A lot of them are commuters because they can't afford the housing piece. It's expensive so if they can commute to and from home, they're saving on that huge housing bill. But then they can't afford the meal plan. So, they have a [Name of Food Pantry Program] in the [Name of Building] where students can go and they can get groceries, and so they have eggs, bread, milk, canned food, cereals, and they've been wonderful. Every Thursday they provide a meal for our students. A lot of our students will utilize that meal and will go over there and eat because they don't have a meal plan, and if you don't pack a meal, and students are in a rush sometimes, it's difficult. So they've been wonderful at helping with students who need to eat. We've been in talks with a lot of individuals about how can we better support low-income students that are hungry.

All of the student groups interviewed were aware of the food pantry collaboration.

Students, in group interview Beta, had this to say about the convenience of the food pantry:

> The [Name of Program], where you can fill out a slip and take some food that you don't have at home. Let's say you don't have enough money to feed yourself throughout the week. You can go there and get some food.

> They're also open throughout the week, so let's say you don't have five dollars to buy a coffee at Starbuck's. You can go to the [Name of Building] and get coffee for free.

The interlibrary loan program was a program coordinated with the professors and the

university's library. The professors identified certain textbooks for their classes and the library

obtained these books to provide for free to students. Students had specific terms of conditions to utilize the textbooks and returned them to the library once those terms were exhausted. The interlibrary loan program was a helpful resource for providing students with the necessary textbooks to be successful in class. Although every textbook for every course was not provided by the program, the library continues to work with more professors to offer more textbooks.

Professionals felt that the interlibrary loan program was a helpful intervention for the institution. I heard several stories from professionals who discussed students failing or not reaching their potential in a course because they could not afford the textbook. One professor I spoke to discussed the idea of advertising a no textbook requirement for courses to make the course more attractive for students. Nancy, a professional that works with the [Name of Committee], shared the following about the interlibrary loan program as a way to defer costs for students:

> We've talked in different venues about making sure faculty put a copy of their books on reserve at the library. There are not enough faculty doing that. I also talk to the students – all students – about using the Interlibrary Loan system, and I would say that I probably have more students using Interlibrary Loan than I do students renting books. But that's another thing I talk to them about, is you can rent books also through CHEG and other sources. But trying to find ways to defer those costs.

Morris, a professional in the enrollment management division, shared the following about collaborating with the library through the interlibrary loan program to provide textbooks to students in need:

> I know we're trying to solve an issue with books. Working with the library, we're trying to provide a book loan system where a low-income student could go in, and use a book they don't have access to for four hours or more and then bring it back. That way they don't have to necessarily buy the book.
>
> The University is trying to provide funding for that and get it started, and students can donate books and blah-blah-blah. They can do that. Over the last two years I think there's been a push, I guess, for that.

Students, in group interview Beta, had this to say about how the interlibrary loan program worked and helped dissolve some expenses:

> I got the majority of my textbooks this semester from there for free. You just borrow it across states for the semester. Another student stated, I used to do that as well to save on expenses for paying for books.

The food pantry and the interlibrary loan programs were helpful in supporting students from low-income backgrounds persist to graduation. These strategies reached beyond the typical persistence barriers and helped students with those fundamental elements needed to survive. Both interventions were mentioned by the professionals and students as fruitful resources.

4.3   IMPEDING INSTITUTIONAL INTERVENTIONS

For all of the positive interventions that were constructed or emerging to support students from low-income backgrounds, there were some interventions that were impeding the institution's efforts. Interestingly, these interventions were not constructed intentionally to deter student success but were rather the unintentional consequence of a combination of factors. Some of these factors included fiscal limitations of the institution, the inability to work collaboratively across departments, unclear communication about resources and support, and conflicting values of the institution. These factors undermined the persistence to graduation of students from low-income backgrounds and created an uncertainty, and at times hostility in the institutional environment in supporting students from low-income backgrounds.

The impeding initiatives were discussed explicitly and emotionally at the institution. The themes that emerged in this area include a conflict of support for the current and the espoused population of students, the counter initiatives, fiscal and human resource limitations, and an

unclear coordination of interventions. The table below lists all of the interventions, as only the most salient interventions will be discussed in this section.

Table 3. Impeding Institutional Interventions on Persistence for Students from Low-Income Backgrounds

Themes	Interventions	Mentioned by		
		Documents	Professionals	Students
Conflict of Support for Current and Espoused Population	Incongruence with Population Served and Espoused Population		XXX	
	President Vision Shift	X	XXX	
	Reactive Culture of Support for Low-income Students		XXX	
	Shift from Student Centered to Business Centered		XXX	
	Under-serving Low-income Students	X	XXX	
Counter Initiatives	Deterrence of Student Engagement BC Lack of Support		XX	
	Housing Increased Costs		XX	X
	Isolated Interventions		XX	X
	Pricing Out Low-income Students		XXX	
	Tuition Increased Costs	X	XXX	XXX
Fiscal and Human Resource Limitations	Assessment Incongruence Current and Espoused		X	X
	Frustration with being Token Staff		XXX	
	Ineffective Collaboration		XXX	
	Lack of Fiscal and Human Resources	X	XXX	
	Lack of Services for Non-traditional Students		X	XXX
	Inability to Package to Financial Need	X	XXX	
Unclear Coordination of Interventions	Incongruence Espoused Coordination and Actual Coordination		XXX	X

Table 3 (continued)

Ineffective Dissemination of Information	X	XXX	XXX
Inefficient Coordination between Offices		XXX	X
Uncertainty around Persistence Coordination		XXX	XX
Word of Mouth Limitations		X	XXX

XXX = Often (Mentioned > 5 times) XX= Sometimes (Mentioned 3 to 5 times) X = Rarely (Mentioned 1 to 2 times)

4.3.1 Conflict of Support for Current and Espoused Population

The first theme of institutional interventions that was adversely impacting the success of students from low-income backgrounds was the conflict of support between the current and espoused population of students. According to some professionals, the institution enrolled a high amount of students from low-income backgrounds but was not concerned about the persistence and college completion of these students. Additionally, there were comments mentioned about the institution shifting to serve a more affluent middle and upper class student body. Attracting international and out-of-state students also became a priority for Atlantic University. The documents of AU validated the institutional priority of increasing the number of international students and out-of-state students enrolled at the institution. The statements below from the institution's strategic plan, emphasizes this goal:

Increase campus diversity with an additional 200 international students and increase out-of-state enrollment by 400 students.

The challenges mentioned under this theme were the incongruence with the population served and the espoused population, a shift in the president's vision, a reactive culture for supporting low-income students, a shift from student-centered practices to business-centered

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practices of enrollment, and under-serving low-income students. According to some professionals, this conflict of support was causing tension between some professionals and the administration, and weakening the optimism for supporting students from low-income backgrounds. These conflicting strategies emerged in the last three to five years according to some professionals. One of the prevalently mentioned challenges under this theme was the under-serving of students from low-income backgrounds. This will be discussed in the following section.

Some professionals felt that Atlantic was under-serving students from low-income backgrounds. Students from low-income backgrounds need equitable support to be successful in college (Kezar, 2011). Professionals expressed concerns for not providing sufficient support for these students. According to the professionals, the under-serving of students from low-income backgrounds deterred persistence and college completion. Helen, a professional in the student support area, expressed the following about shifting resources away from students from low-income backgrounds to other populations and the overall concerns with the current administration:

> I'm going to go to the other end. I'm going to say that it's the lack of empathy. I think it might tie into the funding, but the lack of empathy and the lack of desire to invest in these students' professional development – different conferences and different opportunities for them to explore and understand certain skills and to get out there. It's not a huge value in exposing our students to different things.

> This leadership is not committed to low-income students as the previous leadership. You might have one or two administrators that are, "Okay, we can give you a piece of that. We know what you want, and we can give you an inch because we can't give you that yard yet because everyone didn't buy into it." That's the kind of feeling I have.

Morris, a professional in the enrollment management division, discussed the opportunity to improve support for students from low-income backgrounds as performance funding was being negatively impacted in the quote below:

> One of the things of our performance funding, it does heavily depend on students that are Pell-eligible. So it's about their graduation rates, their retention rates, how well they do compared to students that are non-Pell. So that has driven a little bit of that direction of, "All right, we need to figure out how to help low-income students a little bit better."

Professionals primarily discussed the under-serving of students from low-income backgrounds. The documents of the institution validated an institutional priority of increasing enrollment for international and out-of-state students. Under-served students from low-income backgrounds have caused another challenge in supporting undergraduate degree attainment for this population.

4.3.2   Counter Initiatives

The next theme of interventions that was adversely impacting the success of students from low-income backgrounds was the counter initiatives. These initiatives were intended to increase the fiscal stability of the institution but unintentionally deterred the success of students. The counter initiatives included a deterrence from pursuing some academic programs because of a lack of support, increased housing costs, isolated institutional interventions, pricing out low-income students, and the tuition increased costs. According to some professionals, the counter initiatives discouraged a supportive environment for students from low-income backgrounds. The counter initiatives around fiscal sustainability were developed in past three to five years according to the institution's documents. According to professionals, the lack of coordination was a reoccurring challenge of the institution although the feelings of discouragement appeared to emerge in the

past three to five years. The institutional tactics of the increased costs of tuition and the housing increased costs were mentioned prevalently as hindering student success and are discussed in the following sections.

Professionals mentioned the tuition increase in costs as having an adverse effect on student success. In addition to the increased overall costs, the structure in which tuition was being billed to students also changed. One of the conflicting effects mentioned was an adverse impact on the students' ability to consistently enroll in a full course load. This institutional strategy prolonged the time of completion for the bachelor's degree. Yvette, a professional in the student support area, explained the hurdle that the increased tuition expenses caused on students from low-income backgrounds:

> We switched from a flat-rate tuition model as well, so before, students could take six classes and it was one cost. Flat rate. If you took four, five, or six, you're full-time, it was one rate. Now we went to this per-credit model, and so if students take four classes, it's one cost, if they take five it's another, if they take six it's another cost. While that's not a huge deal to students who can afford it, it affects our low-income kids significantly. Taking four classes vs. five makes a huge difference in costs. But, if you look at the bigger, longer picture, if students can only take four classes because of costs, then they're going to be here longer. So the cost is still there.

> So I think of the per-credit model, and I know at budget times they were looking for creative ways to help with their budget. But I think that more than ever, for the students I'm working with, that are low-income, the costs factor has been more of an issue, the affordability piece.

Another professional, Paul, from the enrollment management division, shared mixed emotions in the comments below about the tuition change being beneficial for revenue but counter-productive to persistence:

> The tuition increase and model change has been great for revenue but it's adding some barriers for students that are low-income to persist and graduate.

Students conveyed similar concerns about the increased costs of tuition. Students were aware of the additional fees to pursue more courses in a semester at the institution. A student, in

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group interview Gamma, expressed the following concerns about the increased costs of taking

additional courses and the dilemma that caused a hardship with persisting through his major:

> We recently, within the last two or three years, changed our out-of-state tuition policy. So now, for us, or for me at least, I don't know about you guys, I'm in-state, so I pay by credit no matter what. If I were to take one credit, or if I were to take a million, it's about $300 a credit, if you want to do the rough numbers. But for an out-of-state standard, I think they pay one price for full-time. So anywhere from 12 to 18, they pay a flat rate, which can be very helpful. Especially as a student in the sciences, you get extra credits added on. I have been up at 18 or 19 credits, and it hurts. That's a lot to pay for, and the out-of-staters don't really have to worry about that as much. Now granted, they are paying more for out-of-state, but that's definitely sweetened the pot for them. I wish they would do that for us.

The increase in housing costs presented a different challenge for students from low-

income backgrounds. The inability to afford housing decreased the likelihood to live in campus

housing. Nancy, a professional that works with the [Name of Committee], expressed the

challenges below of the increase housing costs and how the change to the structure of the

housing contract caused additional barriers for students:

> Our housing contract changed, and not only did the contract change but the cost changed. So the students often talk about how challenging it is for them economically to pay for on-campus housing.

> But I have some regular-age students who also have said that they're financially stressed. I have had some students move out of the new residence halls, only to discover that they're still under contract, and they have to pay for the rest of the semester even though they've moved out. Yes. That makes them even more financially strapped, because then they have a whole other account, and they can't go anywhere else until they've paid that bill.

Tina, a faculty member of the informal network, stated the following about the dilemma that the

increased housing costs has caused for students:

> You remember the traditional dorms and you had a roommate. The room was smaller than this office, and maybe the size of this office, right, and you sucked it up. Remember the students got to pick their room, and they didn't always pick the least expensive. And that creates a gap. Because right now, at our school, the dorms are more expensive than the tuition. The biggest problem for most of our students are the dorm fees. It's not the

tuition, creating the gap, it's the dorm. Because if you notice, our dorms are more expensive.

The student perspective was similar as the professional's in regards to the increased housing costs. A student, in group interview Beta, expressed the following about the significance of the housing costs increase and the inability to stay on campus if it was not for being a student leader:

> I live on campus because I don't want to commute, because it would be almost a two-hour commute and I don't want that on my case. However, when they raised the fees of the residential dorms that pushed me to apply for Residential Assistant, because of the free housing. I didn't have to worry about that 80 grand per year cost. That's a lot of money, guys. I wouldn't be able to be a full-time student if that was on my bill, so that pushed me to get a job through the University, through the [Name of Department]. I'm no longer looking for money anywhere else.

Both professionals and students recognized the barriers of the counter initiatives. Professionals expressed the concerns with students' time of completion for the college degree and being unable to enroll in an adequate amount of courses. Students expressed the concerns about the increased costs of paying for each additional course. Professionals conveyed affordability challenges for students with the increased housing costs. Students discussed having to live off campus, commute from home, or seek a resident assistant role to afford the institution.

4.3.3 Fiscal and Human Resource Limitations

The next institutional theme of interventions that was having an adverse impact on student success was the limitations of fiscal and human resources. Equitable support services are necessary to foster an environment of success for students from low-income backgrounds (Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, & Arellano, 2012). Some of the fiscal and human resource limitations of the institution restricted the institution's ability to provide these resources.

The result of these limitations created the adverse institutional challenges of assessment incongruence with current and espoused practices, frustration with being the token staff, ineffective collaboration, lack of fiscal and human resources, the lack of services for non-traditional students, and the inability to package to a student's financial need. According to the professionals, these challenges were reoccurring at the institution but appeared to be emerging with more prevalence in the past three to five years. As the institution experienced more budget cuts and the reduction of employees, these challenges created a hostile environment for supporting students from low-income backgrounds, according to the professionals. The lack of fiscal and human resources was one of the frequently mentioned but most concerning challenges in this area. It will be discussed in the following section.

Professionals mainly discussed the limitations of fiscal and human resources. Professionals presumed that students from low-income backgrounds needed more than what was being offered. Additionally, professionals informed me of the unfortunate dilemma where students from low-income backgrounds had to stop their persistence towards the degree or withdraw and never return to the institution as a result of financial limitations. Morris, a professional in the enrollment management division, expressed the following comments about meeting the financial need of in-state and out-of-state Pell Grant recipients and the challenges these costs differences present for students:

> Initially, I'd say it's the costs of the University, because that gap that I talked about is very hard for students to be able to achieve. Especially students who are out-of-state and low-income. This is the one area where I have no solution. We talk about a $5,000 difference for students in-state. Out-of-state, their bills are $15,000 and the low-income student has to figure it out. Some of them have to do a parent-plus loan and originally thought that parent-plus was the simple answer. You had to have a good enough credit score. But every time you do a $15,000 parent-plus loan, it's a $15,000 car, it's a car payment, in 60 days you're paying for that payment. So it's not feasible for most. There's no way, maybe you're able to pay for year one, maybe year two, but you're not going to keep doing that. So that's one piece of it.

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The documents of the institution validated the challenges presented by the fiscal and human resources limitations. The institutional [Name of Committee] aspired to pursue a solution to make Atlantic affordable for African American and Hispanic students that demonstrated a financial need. The committee disseminated the information below in a progress report which discussed the institution's lack of fiscal and human resources to bring the solution to fruition:

> Goal: Renewable need-based scholarships for regular admit African American and Latina/o students will be established to cover full tuition, fees, room and board for a maximum of eight semesters (debt-free for first two years; gpa minimum, career planning, and community service requirements for each semester).
> Progress: Not met. No new scholarships were established fitting these criteria. Financial aid office is not awarding based on race/ethnicity because of potential statewide litigation. Awarding is based on need. Board of Governors' scholarship prioritizes high achieving under-represented minorities.
>
> Goal: By 2020, all African American and Latina/o undergraduate students with financial need will have performance-based scholarships instead of federal and private loans.
> Progress: Not met. No progress has been made on this benchmark. (Nancy, 2017, pp. 4-5)

Moreover, professionals experienced a high level of frustration, anger towards the administration, and exhaustion in supporting students from low-income backgrounds. Helen, a professional in the student support area, expressed the following frustration with the administration for not providing sufficient human resources to support students from low-income backgrounds:

> What do I like the most? There's not a lot I really like about how they're handling things. But I'll find out because I'm writing up a proposal now to get more help. So it's going to be interesting what happens, because like I said, since I've been in this position I feel like they took, took, took, took, but our numbers have been going up, up, up. They expect you to take care of these students. Our low-income students need more help than just a room, some books, and a professor. They need a lot of support. I get called in the evening. I get students who come in here and we have to walk them over to counseling. We have a lot of students like that. I don't think that we get the support that we need from the University, but I think that this office knows how to handle some things on our own that makes it easier for our students, but they don't know how hard it is for us.

Professionals that were consistently the point of contact for resolving student issues were exhausted and frustrated with the lack of additional help. The fiscal and human resources limitations hindered this institution's ability to equitably support students from low-income backgrounds. This challenge caused frustration towards the administration in supporting students from low-income backgrounds and was mainly discussed by the professionals.

4.3.4   Unclear Coordination of Interventions

The last adverse theme captured from Atlantic University was an unclear coordination of institutional interventions. According to the professionals, these interventions caused additional difficulties in supporting students from low-income backgrounds. The unclear coordination caused a lack of communication about institutional strategies, a lack of awareness of institutional resources, and uncertainty of which office or area was responsible for administering an intervention. The challenges mentioned under this theme were an incongruence of espoused coordination and the actual coordination of interventions, ineffective dissemination of information about resources, inefficient coordination between offices, uncertainty around persistence coordination, and word of mouth limitations. The time frame of when these challenges emerged was unclear at Atlantic. The challenges of the ineffective dissemination of information and the uncertainty around persistence coordination were discussed the most under the unclear coordination of interventions.

The ineffective dissemination of information was in relation to the inconsistent and ineffective means of communication at the institution. According to some professionals, there were resources offered at the institution to support students from low-income backgrounds, but the solutions were not publicized. Professionals were uninformed of who to contact or how to

obtain resources for a student in need. Nancy, a professional working with the [Name of Committee], conveyed the following comments below about the concerns that the resources available to students from low-income backgrounds were not broadly advertised or readily available to those who may need them the most:

> We allegedly have a Meal Swipe program – it's not well-known, I just heard about it this semester – where students can donate their leftover meals from their meal plan, and then other students who need them can get access. This is new as of this semester, or maybe last semester, but you have to go to the [Name of Office] and ask for that, and it's not being publicized.

> But students can get housing grants, they can get small grants to help meet their financial needs. But again, it's all on the down-low. You need to know somebody who's going to tell you about that, and they're not going to tell you about that if they don't know your need. So we're not publicizing it in the paper, we're not putting it online, we're not putting it on maps. It's not publicly available, and I think that's intentional. But then how do people who really need it find out unless they go to the [Name of Office], and the [Name of Office] hands somebody a ticket and says, "You're eligible for this or that" Most people wouldn't know.

Students discussed these challenges from a lack of awareness perspective. In the group interviews, a student would express an intervention that they utilized and the other students were oblivious to that resource. A student, in group interview Gamma, captured the lack of awareness and unclear coordination in a conversation about a housing grant:

> One of the other offices, the Office of Housing, actually had a grant that I went for, and they sent me an email that said, "You've been awarded this housing grant for living on campus," and then, when my bill showed up, I took out a loan for the appropriate amount minus the housing grant. I called over and they said, "Oh yeah, it didn't show up on your bill, but it should come through real soon." I called them and called them and it kept not showing up. I found out the reason was that they didn't want to give me the housing grant because I was receiving the other money, even though they had already made the offer and had already done the loan. So in the end, it was the day before my bill was due, and I said either you fix this right now or I'm driving all the way from my house to Atlantic, which was kind of playing hardball because I didn't drive at that point. But lo and behold, they fixed it. But it's been kind of tricky, especially coordinating resources from different places. There's sometimes not communication between the departments.

The other student in the group commented, "I didn't know there was a housing grant" and a third student in the group stated, "I didn't either." A student, in group interview Theta, conveyed the following comments about the lack of awareness and underutilization of campus resources:

> I was introduced to a lot of this stuff just recently. I didn't really have any interactions with anyone. I never came for a freshman orientation or anything like that. I think a lot of people use the same old, very effective [places] – talk to the [Name of Office] and everything. There might be a couple of things that are underutilized. I'd say the reason for this is things are not advertised. I kind of stumbled upon everything that I've found. I know we have a Foreign Education Center, we have a Trainingship Center, a medical office, we have all these little things, little nooks and crannies all over the place that can help people, but they don't ever advertise them.

The documents of the institution conveyed similar concerns. As mentioned earlier in the targeting of intersecting identities section, students from low-income backgrounds were the benefactor of institutional initiatives that targeted other marginalized populations. The [Name of Committee], who was pushing various strategies forward, recognized the challenge of the ineffective dissemination of information at the University. In one of its reports the committee conveyed the following comments about meeting one of its goals to broadly disseminate persistence and completion metrics of marginalized students to the campus community:

> Goal: The President's three Commissions, cabinet members, unions, as well as the Council of Trustees will report publicly on how they have enhanced the recruitment, retention and graduation of African American and Latina/o students (with measurable outcomes and evaluation of efforts). These efforts will align with the strategic plan goals. Progress: Goal not met: This does not appear to be happening. (Nancy, 2017, p. 2)

Professionals expressed the uncertainty around the coordination of persistence initiatives. Professionals were unsure of who coordinated persistence initiatives for students from low-income backgrounds at the institution. Issac, a professional in the enrollment management division, expressed the following about the coordination uncertainty of interventions that support students from low-income backgrounds and one of the possible reasons for this uncertainty below:

I think if you walked into almost any committee meeting and said, "Is there an individual or even part of an office that has their eye on initiatives supporting those students identified as Pell Grant recipients," they'd probably look at you like you had two heads. Again, going back to the fact that, we're not even sure if Pell Grant recipients are a high-dollar target for retention. It's probably that factor and about four others that go along with that factor.

Another professional shared similar concerns about the interventions lacking coordination. Adam, a professional in the financial aid area, expressed these concerns about the lack of coordination of the institution's interventions and how that has caused some challenges in supporting the persistence to graduation of students from low-income backgrounds:

I don't think they are structured or put together. I think they very disjointed. It is based on the student, and what the student's interactions and relationships are. If those students don't have connections and networks, don't know who to talk to or where to go, they become ghosts. There are students who came in but disappeared and nobody knows where they are or what happened to them.

So I don't think we have a consolidated effort. I think there are things that they're trying to start. I just heard they're starting a Retention Committee.

Students expressed the uncertainty around the coordination of persistence initiatives as well. Students could not identify an individual at the University responsible for coordinating persistence initiatives for students from low-income backgrounds. A student, in group interview Gamma, expressed the following comments below as she did not feel the coordination of persistence initiatives for students from low-income backgrounds even existed at Atlantic:

Yeah, I don't have anything for you for that at all. Yeah. Nothing. Nothing's even coming to my head right now. I'm a talker, and I got nothing. To me, I don't think that even exists here. If you wanted to ask me that question, I don't think that's even here. I mean if you were to go to Financial Aid right now, since they work a lot with students, and ask that question and pretend to be a student, you probably won't get an answer.

The ineffective dissemination of information challenges were discussed via documents, professionals, and students. The uncertainty around persistence coordination for students from low-income backgrounds was mentioned by professionals and students of the institution. Both

challenges caused additional confusion in supporting the persistence to graduation for students from low-income backgrounds.

In closing, this chapter presented the analysis of the data collected from Atlantic University. The data is framed into the overarching constructs of institutional initiated interventions that support students from low-income backgrounds, the professional initiated interventions that support students from low-income backgrounds, and impeding interventions that hindered the persistence for students from low-income backgrounds. The institutional initiated themes included bridge programs and external alliances, deconstruction of access and success barriers, emerging institutional persistence and attainment initiatives, financial aid office oriented for student success, and targeting intersecting populations with traditionally lower graduation rates. The themes under professional initiated interventions included the informal network, optimism for support and success, and survival initiatives. Finally, the themes under the impeding institutional interventions included conflict of support for the current and espoused population, counter initiatives, fiscal and human resource limitations, and an unclear coordination of interventions. The most salient institutional interventions were discussed under each theme. Salience was determined by being mentioned five or more times, being mentioned by two or more data collection methods, or being innovative. Institutional interventions not discussed in this chapter were not consistently mentioned by the data collected for the study or were self-explanatory in the type of assistance that was provided to the student.

5.0   SUMMARY AND SYNTHESIS OF RESULTS

This study focused on institutional interventions that support persistence to graduation for students from low-income backgrounds. Students from low-income backgrounds historically have lower undergraduate degree attainment rates than their higher-income peers and most studies focused on the limitations of the student (Walpole, 2007). The primary purpose of this study was to learn about the policies, practices, procedures, and programs that were offered by the institution to support students from low-income backgrounds obtain their undergraduate degree. These components were framed as interventions and the study utilized qualitative data to discover the interventions offered at the institution. This chapter brings together the findings from the qualitative analysis to understand the institutional support of students from low-income backgrounds and discusses the implications of these findings. Next, the chapter discusses the future applications of these findings in the local environment and the broader context of institutions that support persistence to graduation for students from low-income backgrounds. The chapter concludes with future directions for research.

5.1   INSTITUTIONAL INTERVENTIONS DISCOVERED

The study was constructed on the premise that a low-income serving institution with higher than average graduation rates for institutions with similar characteristics employed some interventions

to support the persistence to graduation for students from low-income backgrounds. What was discovered at the institution was that some interventions were supportive for students from low-income backgrounds and other interventions had an impeding effect on the persistence to graduation for students from low-income backgrounds. The succeeding sections discuss the supportive and impeding institutional interventions discovered at Atlantic. I discuss the institutional interventions offered or changed to support students, the design of the institutional interventions, and the student use of the interventions for the supportive and impeding institutional interventions. These areas reflect the original research questions for the study and enhance the understanding of the implications.

5.1.1 Supportive Institutional Interventions

One of the purposes for studying a low-income serving institution was to learn more about the policies, practices, procedures, and programs that were offered at the institution to support students from low-income backgrounds obtain their undergraduate degree.

5.1.1.1 Institutional Interventions Offered or Changed

The findings support that Atlantic offered various interventions in this regard. Some of the interventions offered were helpful and ranged from providing assistance with matriculation into the institution, developing resources to accommodate the basic needs of students, and establishing a flexible policy to leave and reenter the institution. According to the students and the professionals, these interventions were helpful in orienting and transitioning students into the institution, allowing students to obtain essential support like books or hygiene items when in need, and providing a seamless transition back into to the institution after taking some time off.

Additionally, the analysis supported that several interventions were emerging at the institution in the past one to three years to address some of the additional challenges that students from low-income backgrounds faced. These interventions were helping some students with additional grant aid or scholarships to cover the increased costs of tuition or housing, providing more opportunities to monitor and connect with students when they experienced academic struggles, and increasing the support offered to students from low-income backgrounds with other useful strategies.

The interventions offered aligned with the literature on supporting students from low-income backgrounds. Students from low-income backgrounds struggle with affordability and offering institutional aid is helpful to mitigate financial barriers for this population (Perna, Lundy-Wagner, Yee, Brill, & Tadal, 2011). The housing grant and discretionary dollars offered at Atlantic were helpful in this regard. Additionally, past literature has discussed the importance of being able to monitor the progress of students from low-income backgrounds to improve persistence and completion outcomes (Talbert, 2012), and the Atlantic early alert system aligned with this practice. Based on the findings from this study and past literature, Atlantic has an opportunity to track more students from low-income backgrounds in its system moving forward, as only subgroups of students from low-income backgrounds are currently tracked. Moreover, the literature discussed supporting students from low-income backgrounds beyond the typical financial limitations and offering solutions that are unique to the concerns of this population (Kezar, Lester, & Yang 2010). The flexible leave and reentry policy, the bus visit and Atlantic student for a day program, the interlibrary loan program, and the professional staff providing for the basic needs of students were examples of Atlantic developing solutions specific for its low-income student population.

More specifically, students from low-income backgrounds had challenges with matriculating into and through graduation from the institution. Several interventions were offered including a summer bridge 2.0 program, a bridge support 4.0 program, a community collaborative, and external partnerships. What was found out about all of these interventions was that they were helpful in supporting students from low-income backgrounds, particularly for students who were program participants. Students developed excellent relationships with professionals, professionals dissolved personal and academic problems for students, and professionals connected students with additional campus resources. What was unclear about these interventions was the impact on college completion rates for program participants. One student in the group interviews participated in the community collaborative and was scheduled to graduate in the spring semester that I conducted interviews. This student exclaimed that the community collaborative relationship was integral to her success, and from that perspective, the program had a positive impact on college completion. Conversely, the bridge support 4.0 program developed some recent enhancements to its program offerings. According to professionals, the previous model of the bridge support 4.0 program was not reaching the targeted completion outcomes for program participants. The change to the new structure suggests, that although the previous bridge support 4.0 program did not achieve ideal completion rates, the institution was committed to improving completion outcomes for students from low-income backgrounds.

Walpole (2007) mentions that summer bridge programs can be fruitful for persistence, attainment, and engagement outcomes if designed with the right purpose. Other literature converges with this perspective and discovered favorable outcomes of grade point averages and graduation rates for program participants (Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013). The summer bridge

2.0 and the bridge support 4.0 programs were intended to improve accessibility and persistence for students from low-income backgrounds. Atlantic's bridge support 4.0 program is progressive as most bridge programs focused on first-year persistence. The documents and professionals of the institution conveyed that the recent changes to the program in the past one to three years were to improve completion outcomes for program participants. There is a gap in the literature about external partnerships and the impact on persistence to graduation for students from low-income backgrounds. Kezar, Lester, and Yang (2010) assert that there is an opportunity for additional research on external partnerships as very little is known about these dynamics in support of students from low-income backgrounds. The findings of this study begin to fill this gap. According to the professionals of the institution, the summer bridge 2.0, the bridge support 4.0, and the community collaborative are Atlantic's signature programs for supporting students from low-income backgrounds. Based on the findings of this study, there is an opportunity for Atlantic to evaluate and make adjustments to these programs to ensure that college completion rates are at an optimal level. An evaluation into the effectiveness of these programs would need to consider the difference in completion outcomes for program participants and non-participants from low-income backgrounds, and what specific activities of the programs are helpful in degree completion.

Lastly, the analysis discovered that the site institution offered various options for students from low-income backgrounds to obtain additional nourishment. A food bank, the faculty and staff providing meals to students, and a meal donation meal swipe program were offered as interventions by Atlantic University. The programs are collaborations with outside agencies, supported by the institution, or implemented by the staff of the institution. These interventions suggest, that students from low-income backgrounds struggle to maintain a sufficient enough

meal plan to accommodate their basic nourishment needs. It was documented in the testimonial by a professional, that the start of the food pantry collaboration was the result of students complaining to health services, about what was assumed to be some form of an illness, but was really a lack of nutrition. The lack of proper nourishment created a considerable challenge for students from low-income backgrounds to focus on their studies and their persistence to graduation. The interventions offered to address this issue were practical solutions.

Rubin (2011) found that the establishment of other services for students from low-income backgrounds was helpful in supporting the persistence to graduation for this population. Offering additional support programs to accommodate the nourishment challenges of students aligned with the recommendation of providing other services. Atlantic may need to increase the awareness of these interventions to improve their use amongst students. Students and staff were informed about the campus food pantry collaboration but the meal donation meal swipe program had minimal awareness around the campus. Atlantic will need to optimize the awareness of all its nourishment support interventions so that students from low-income backgrounds can obtain the necessary nourishment and focus on their curricular and co-curricular expectations.

5.1.1.2 Design of Institutional Interventions

The interventions at Atlantic University were designed as a single office coordination model or lacked coordination. The latter will be discussed in the impeding interventions section. There were some benefits to the single office coordination model. The student support area and the financial aid area were the centralized offices to support students from low-income backgrounds. Students obtained assistance with tutoring, advising, and all facets of support related to financial aid. The benefit of having a single office coordination model was that students knew where to obtain help and professionals established fruitful relationships with students.

Morales (2014) found that the intentional interactions and personal guidance to students were helpful in supporting student success. The single office coordination model fostered relationships with students that were used to help with personal and academic challenges.

5.1.1.3 Student Use of Institutional Interventions

The study interviewed 12 students from low-income backgrounds with 60 or more credits at Atlantic to learn more about the interventions they were using to persist to graduation from the institution. The analysis discovered that students obtained the most support when seeking direct guidance from a staff member or a professional, obtaining the basic needs of food or books, and receiving proactive or reactive financial counseling. Students discussed being helped by a professor through a course selection issue or obtaining personal accommodations in a class to mitigate some personal challenges. Students also discussed obtaining basic needs such as food throughout the week to resolve hunger challenges or obtaining a free book for a course when their financial means were exhausted. Lastly, students discussed the importance of being able to obtain guidance with the complex financial aid processes or being alerted to potential scholarship opportunities. The usefulness of these interventions was mentioned in every group interview by multiple students with the exception of the interlibrary loan program, which was not mentioned in one group interview.

The City University of New York system employed some interventions and experienced a significant increase in completion rates (Kolenovic, Linderman, & Karp, 2013). Some of the interventions included improved communication, financial solutions for administrative and miscellaneous expenses, and guidance through matriculation and registration processes to improve completion rates for low-income students. Various fees of the institution, administrative and registration tasks, and ineffective communication caused additional hurdles for students from

low-income backgrounds and these solutions dissolved those challenges. Atlantic offers helpful strategies with the deconstruction of access and success initiatives, the emerging institutional persistence attainment interventions, and the financial aid office oriented for student success initiatives that remove access and some financial barriers for students from low-income backgrounds. The institution could improve the intentionality and coordination of these interventions to experience completion improvements like the CUNY system.

5.1.2   Impeding Institutional Interventions

As this study sought to learn about the institutional interventions that were supportive of the degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds some unsupportive interventions were discovered.

5.1.2.1 Impeding Institutional or Changed Interventions

The analysis discovered some interventions that were having an adverse effect on the persistence to graduation of students from low-income backgrounds. The main challenge that was hindering the persistence to completion for students was the increase in tuition costs. Students had to pay additional money per every credit pursued causing an additional financial burden. The increased tuition model was implemented at Atlantic in the past three to five years to address some budgetary challenges. It is unclear if fiscal sustainability was the only reason for the changed tuition model, but it is extremely clear that this model has become an additional barrier for students from low-income backgrounds. The college completion for these students is prolonged as they are not pursuing the adequate amount of credits per semester. Students discussed the solution of taking 12 credits per semester and pursuing summer courses at the community

college to stay on track to graduate. Other students pursued 12 credits a semester and prolonged their degree completion. Other students pursued more debt to dissolve the additional costs, other students applied for more merit scholarship if the funds were not depleted, and lastly, a student in the group interviews took a semester off to earn additional money. The increased costs in tuition caused another challenge for the persistence to graduation of students from low-income backgrounds.

The challenges presented at Atlantic University with increased tuition costs mirrored the challenges of researchers that oppose remedial education. Similarly, to the adverse effects of remedial courses (Colyar & Stich, 2011), increased tuition costs is counterintuitive to student success and prolonged degree completion. Atlantic should critically evaluate the per credit costs tuition model with college completion outcomes and determine if it is the most effective way to dissolve the fiscal limitations at the University. AU could experience increased competition and students from low-income backgrounds may choose other institutions that are cheaper. Some professionals at the institution felt that Atlantic was pricing out low-income students and the university should evaluate the totality of circumstances that the increased tuition model has caused. Higher education in general is faced with the challenges of diminished financial support from the federal and state government, increased cost of goods, services, and human resources, and increased competition for students. These macro higher education factors have influenced some of the challenges observed at Atlantic.

5.1.2.2 Design of Impeding Interventions

As mentioned earlier the institutional interventions at Atlantic lacked coordination. The various institutional interventions were isolated to singular areas and most of the interventions failed to cross departmental or divisional boundaries. This lack of coordination diminished some of the

institution's efforts in supporting students from low-income backgrounds. Students were unaware of which office to contact to resolve certain problems or obtain a certain resource. Faculty and staff were unsure of which area was responsible for supporting persistence to attainment strategies for students from low-income backgrounds. Atlantic was faced with the unfortunate dilemma of employing a plethora of institutional interventions that lacked clear coordination and direction.

The challenges with the design of interventions at Atlantic University can be understood by examining complexity theory. The focus of this theory is on the local interactions of the organization's agents to achieve organizational goals (Dooley, 1997; White & Levin, 2016). Three main principles of equilibrium, emergence, and feedback loops guide the theory and these three principles are helpful to explore all of the nuances of the organization (Dooley, 1997; White & Levin, 2016). Emergence is a measurement of the change that happens over time as a result of interdependent individuals and will be most helpful in understanding the coordination of intervention challenges at Atlantic. The theoretical underpinning of this study is that if there are interventions offered at the institution to support students from low-income backgrounds, and if these interventions function interdependently to support persistence to completion, then the support for these students will be at an optimal level. The interventions that support students from low-income backgrounds lack interdependence and has caused additional hurdles in supporting students from low-income backgrounds at AU. The isolation of the interventions has forced an individual office mentality that lacks the institutional synergy needed to maximize the support for students from low-income backgrounds. For Atlantic to improve its efforts, the principle of emergence will need to be employed by individuals (offices and professionals) and

these agents will need to work interdependently on the institutional interventions that support students from low-income backgrounds.

5.1.2.3 Student Use of Impeding Interventions

Other than the tuition increase costs discussed earlier, the analysis discovered additional challenges with the housing increased costs. Students from low-income backgrounds were least likely to afford the increased housing costs. The increase in the residence hall fees increased the unmet need gap for students. An institutional housing grant was offered but was not well publicized to the student body. As a result, students from low-income backgrounds were commuting from home or pursuing leadership roles with financial incentives. Both solutions presented additional tasks for low-income students that detracted from their curricular and co-curricular responsibilities.

Decreased financial barriers were more fruitful to support the persistence to graduation for students from low-income backgrounds (Kolenovic, Linderman, & Karp, 2013). The institutions that have experienced success with college completion have found ways to decrease financial barriers for low-income students. The increased housing costs contradict what was found in the literature about decreasing financial barriers. Students from low-income backgrounds struggle with affordability. Although it was unclear what impact the increased housing costs had on persistence to completion for low-income students, it is clear that this increase caused another financial hurdle for this population.

5.2   IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The study of institutional interventions that support students from low-income backgrounds at Atlantic University has implications beyond knowing what institutional interventions are being offered. Specifically, this research represents the exploration into the institutional interventions that are supportive of the persistence to graduation of students from low-income backgrounds. It has implications for local practice and public institutions supporting degree completion for students from low-income backgrounds more broadly. The students interviewed were junior and senior students who successfully persisted and were on track to graduate from the institution. These students provided some powerful testimonials of overcoming the trials and tribulations of persisting to earn an undergraduate degree and what was helpful in embarking on this goal. Additionally, there were low-income students that could not navigate the challenges to persist and complete their degree. I was unable to obtain their perspective as they were no longer students at AU. As a result, the interventions that were supportive and not supportive of the persistence to graduation of students from low-income backgrounds were exposed in the local context. The discovery at Atlantic University informs the policies, programs, practices, and procedures offered at public institutions that are interested in learning more about supporting persistence to graduation for students from low-income backgrounds. The implications for the local institution and for higher education institutions more broadly are discussed in the succeeding sections.

5.2.1 Implications for Local Practice

The study at Atlantic University presented an opportunity to explore the institutional interventions employed to support the persistence to graduation for students from low-income backgrounds. As a result, a deeper understanding of the local context, a discovery of the strategies that were supportive and impeding, and the additional elements needed to support students from low-income backgrounds emerged. This exploration discovered interventions that were supportive and ones that impeded on the degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds. Implications of these discoveries and other implications from Atlantic are discussed below.

5.2.1.1 Supportive Interventions

Atlantic University employed various interventions to support students from low-income backgrounds. Some of these interventions were intentional such as the summer bridge 2.0, bridge support 4.0 program, the flexible leave and reentry policy, and the food pantry. Some of the interventions were reactionary namely, the housing grant and the early alert system. Other interventions were the result of targeting intersecting identities such as the committee constructed to improve graduation gaps for African American and Hispanic students. All of these interventions were intended to help students persist to graduation. Atlantic will need to be mindful of these interventions and ensure that they are having the intended impact of supporting the persistence through completion for students from low-income backgrounds. The literature conveys that some programs created to support students from low-income backgrounds do not reach their targeted outcomes. Kezar (2011) articulated that campuses create special programs to accommodate for the deficiencies of students from low-income backgrounds and as a result

could be making these students feel different than other students. Although the focus of this study was not on stigmatization, and the findings do not suggest stigmatization was an issue, Atlantic will need to critically evaluate these interventions and ensure they are not stigmatizing students. Stigmatization could infringe on the student success that these interventions are intended to accomplish and adversely impact students from low-income backgrounds.

Another intervention at Atlantic University was the informal network. This group of professionals and faculty members sacrificed their own time and resources to help students persist to graduation. This support is far beyond the scope of responsibilities of these employees and was seen as fruitful and at times integral to the success of a student. Support for students from low-income backgrounds is created and implemented by people. What is known from the literature is that people at the institution delivering the programs and policies are equally important as the programs and policies themselves (Cerven, 2013). A researcher studying the college completion of non-traditional students from low-income backgrounds discussed the importance of the people supporting these students as paramount to their success (Cerven, 2013). The informal network presents several different questions for Atlantic. First, what can be learned from the professionals of the informal network that can be emulated by other professionals and possibly holistically at the institution? What are these professionals doing to obtain the trust of students from low-income backgrounds and how do they employ the perfect balance of challenge and support to aid these students in college completion? Additionally, what can be learned about the other professionals that are not in the informal network? Why are students not seeking these professionals' help with the obstacles that arise during the undergraduate experience? Learning about the context of the informal network and why these professionals are sought for help and others are not could be fruitful for Atlantic.

5.2.1.2 Impeding Interventions

One of the consistently recognized challenges of Atlantic University was the lack of information disseminated about institutional interventions. AU created some helpful interventions to support students from low-income backgrounds, but the solutions were not communicated effectively throughout campus. Good initiatives like the housing grant and the meal donation meal swipe program could not be utilized by some students because they were unaware of the resources. Professionals discussed not knowing about how to connect students to some of the resources as well. Some of the interventions offered at Atlantic appeared to be offered under the assumption that everyone was fully aware of the intervention. It is also possible that AU narrowed the scope of communication about some of the interventions to preserve institutional resources. This information should be disseminated to students who could utilize the resources and professionals that may connect a student to the resources. Atlantic will need to think about ways to deliberately communicate the institutional interventions that support students more broadly, but also protect its resources to ensure the support reaches the maximum number of low-income students.

Another challenge of Atlantic University was the coordination of institutional interventions. Interventions offered to support students from low-income backgrounds were not well coordinated at the institution. The university lacked a clear leader or office that governed or even centralized all of the institutional strategies. This resulted in isolated programs being viewed as the hubs of support for students from low-income backgrounds. These offices typically lacked the adequate fiscal and human resources needed to support all of the students served by these areas. Additionally, the institution experienced extensive uncertainty about who was responsible for supporting these students once they matriculated into the institution. Improved institutional coordination of interventions could clarify what area is responsible for the

persistence to completion of students from low-income backgrounds and streamline resources to the areas that support these students the most. Additionally, professionals and offices working more interdependently could improve the campus synergy around supporting students from low-income backgrounds.

5.2.1.3 Other Implications

Atlantic has an opportunity to complete a comprehensive self-examination of its interventions in relation to supporting students from low-income backgrounds to determine what programs are effective and ineffective. Atlantic serves a significant number of students from low-income backgrounds and is considered to be a low-income serving institution. The University experienced a graduation gap between low-income students and their higher-income peers. It was documented from a professional, that diminished completion outcomes between Pell recipients and non-Pell recipients caused the University to lose some performance funding. AU has an opportunity to critically examine all of its institutional interventions that support students from low-income backgrounds. Interventions that are helpful in supporting persistence to graduation should be fostered, and other interventions that are validated as ineffective in accomplishing this goal should be changed or removed. This is an opportunity for Atlantic to determine the most effective strategies that support degree completion for students from low-income backgrounds. At a minimum, AU could determine what is helpful for improving the Pell recipient vs. non-Pell recipient completion rates incrementally to obtain its performance funding again.

Additionally, AU should evaluate the impact of the new tuition model on persistence and completion rates for all students, but particularly students from low-income backgrounds. Atlantic University was chosen as the study site because it experienced higher than average

graduation rates of institutions with similar characteristics. During the time this study was conducted that statement was true. However, AU may not enjoy its higher than average graduation rates in the future with some of the evolving challenges. An increase in tuition effects persistence to completion for all students not just low-income students. Atlantic University competes for students with other institutions in the state in which it is located and the Northeast region of the United States. The cost of an institution is an important factor in competing for students as public institutions offer a similar undergraduate education. Students from low-income backgrounds are impacted the most by the increased costs. Affordability is their most substantial barrier. Without a viable financial solution students are forced to drop out and pursue other options. The increased competition for all students, and the additional barrier on the persistence to completion for low-income students, could gradually decrease graduation rates for the institution. Atlantic would no longer enjoy higher than average graduation rates of low-income serving institutions with similar characteristics and possibly not ideal for this study.

5.2.2 Implications for Institutions that Support Students from Low-Income Backgrounds

As institutions continue to search for the best policies, practices, procedures, and programs to support the persistence to graduation for students from low-income backgrounds they should continue to look at successful institutions for strategies. Some institutions that enroll a high number of low-income students have very high completion rates. This study was an effort to look at a low-income serving institution that had higher than average graduation rates for institutions with similar characteristics to learn more about the supportive interventions. Kezar (2011) points out that past research on students from low-income backgrounds has examined the institution's problems and failures. This presents more opportunities to study institutions that are successful at

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supporting students from low-income backgrounds and evolve the institutional interventions that are deemed helpful in supporting persistence to graduation.

5.3   IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Examining institutional interventions at one low-income serving institution presented some findings that could be helpful for a public institution, and presented an opportunity for future research as well. Specifically, an opportunity emerged to develop more knowledge of the institutional dynamics of supporting students from low-income backgrounds and what can be learned about these organizational dynamics by exploring complexity theory. Additionally, conclusions for this study outline the importance of doing broader research on the equitable solutions that support students from low-income backgrounds, because it is clear from these findings that institutional support surpassed the typical monetary interventions.

5.3.1   Local Research

If Atlantic is committed to supporting the persistence to graduation of students from low-income backgrounds, there are some opportunities for a deeper exploration to examine its organizational dynamics. Some professionals, and it appeared to be the professionals that supported students from low-income backgrounds more than others, had concerns about the culture in supporting these students. At times they described the culture as hostile or through their non-verbal communication expressed anger and frustration with the executive management of the institution. Most of these professionals complained that the culture has digressed in the past three

to five years. There seems to be a natural opportunity at Atlantic to explore these organizational dynamics. Complexity theory can be further used in this exploration as it embraces the various nuances of the organization to obtain a better understanding of how the organization is working cohesively to accomplish organizational goals (Dooley, 1997; White & Levin, 2016). There is a clear distinction in the way that professionals described the supportive environment of students from low-income backgrounds before the 2012-2013 school year and how they describe the organization's culture now. Various changes have been made at Atlantic University including personnel changes, policy changes, and diminished state funding. It would be intriguing for Atlantic to explore these dynamics and learn more about how these nuances are impacting the environment for supporting students from low-income backgrounds. Comparing the organization's dynamics before the 2012-2013 school year with the organization's dynamics in the last three to five years would be particularly interesting.

5.3.2   Implications for Institutions that Support Students from Low-Income Backgrounds

The findings of this study clearly provide institutional interventions that are supporting students from low-income backgrounds far beyond financial solutions. However, still very little is known about the various ways that students from low-income backgrounds are disadvantaged beyond finances (Kezar, 2011) and the interventions being offered at institutions to address these disadvantages. Quantitative studies have explored the discrepancies in completion outcomes between lower-income students and their higher-income peers or the discrepancy in completion outcomes for a singular program that compared participants to non-participants. Some qualitative studies have explored students from low-income backgrounds to determine how they are selecting types of institutions or transitioning from high school to college. Very little is known

about the institutional interventions that support students from low-income backgrounds to persist to graduation. More research is needed on the institutional interventions, particularly those institutional interventions that are making college environments more equitable for students from low-income backgrounds. I suggest a qualitative design to learn more about the equitable institutional interventions as there may be some nuances to these strategies that can be discovered with a qualitative approach.

Additionally, very little is known about supporting different types of Pell Grant recipients or the students who live in poverty conditions but do not qualify for the Pell Grant. Studies on this topic lump all Pell students into one category and study them in the aggregate form. Although some studies have used different terms to describe students from low-income backgrounds, they have typically lumped all of these students together based on receiving the Pell Grant. A gap in the literature exists in knowing if different levels of Pell Grant recipients need different levels of support. Does a Pell Grant recipient with a $0 Estimated Family Contribution and no parental support need the same level of institutional support as a recipient with a $3000 Estimated Family Contribution and some parental support? This is just one example but there is an opportunity to disaggregate Pell recipients to determine the appropriate level of institutional support. Moreover, there are students that come from poverty conditions and barely miss the threshold to qualify for a Pell Grant. There is a gap in the literature on studying support for these students. Learning more about the interventions that support various types of Pell Grant recipients and students in poverty conditions that do not qualify for the Pell Grant, presents another opportunity for broader research.

5.4   CONCLUSION

In closing, this dissertation in practice explored the interventions offered at one low-income serving institution to support the persistence to graduation for students from low-income backgrounds. The institution offered various interventions in supporting students. Some of these strategies were well developed and others were emerging. Although the quantitative impact on the persistence to graduation rates was not measured in this study, the qualitative data suggested that the institution employed some helpful strategies for students from low-income backgrounds.

This analysis also discovered some interventions that were impeding the success of students from low-income backgrounds. Professionals reported a lack of fiscal and human resources, an unclear coordination of institutional interventions, and some other inhibiting initiatives that were making Atlantic University unattractive for students from low-income backgrounds. The institution's climate was experiencing divergent perspectives for the support of students from low-income backgrounds as a result of some of these challenges. It was unclear if some of these actions were the result of responding to the fiscal hardships of higher education or if the change in the institution's president in the past five years shifted the vision of the institution.

Atlantic has sustained higher than average graduation rates while enrolling high numbers of students from low-income backgrounds. Atlantic has some exemplar professionals and resilient students, but appears to be moving in the wrong direction. The institution is in a critical crossroad to determine what it prioritizes over the next five years. It has a great opportunity to continue to improve the persistence to graduation rate for students from low-income backgrounds, and in turn, continue to improve its institutional graduation rate. Atlantic

University should extensively review its policies, practices, procedures, and programs to clarify its commitment to supporting students from low-income backgrounds.

I conclude this dissertation with a personal saying and a quote: "When life deals you lemons, make lemonade." Students from low-income backgrounds are resilient young people but even a lemon needs a little sugar and water to make lemonade. I challenge higher education institutions and higher education professionals to be advocates or at a minimum to be aware of the challenges that students from low-income backgrounds endure. These students have been resilient their entire lives and it is our turn to meet them halfway. Our obligation is stated clearly in this concluding quote from the U.S. Department of Education. "Our nation's colleges and universities must succeed in helping all hard working students regardless of their income, race, or parents' education to enroll in college, graduate, and go on to rewarding careers" (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p.2).

APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT EMAILS

A.1   FOR INTERVIEWS WITH ADMINISTRATORS

Subject: Seeking participants for a study about institutional interventions that support undergraduate degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds

Hello,

You are receiving this email because you have been identified as an administrator or professional at Atlantic University. Your email address was obtained from the university website.

I am a doctoral student at the University of Pittsburgh and I am conducting a study on supporting degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds. This study is about interventions (policies, practices, procedures, and programs) that are offered by the institution to support students from low-income backgrounds in obtaining their undergraduate degree. If you participate in this research study, you will be asked to participate in a 45 minute, one-on-one interview. You will be asked about what institutional interventions are provided from your department and or what interventions you are aware of that support students from low-income backgrounds persist through college completion. The interview will take place in the comfort of your office at a time that is convenient for you.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me at rsw31@pitt.edu.

Thank you for your consideration,

Ron Wiafe

A.2   FOR GROUP INTERVIEWS WITH STUDENTS

Subject: Seeking participants for a study about institutional interventions that support undergraduate degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds

 Hello,

You have been invited to participate in a research study to understand the experiences of successful students who receive the Federal Pell Grant at Atlantic University. Your email address was obtained through the Office of Financial Aid. You are on track to obtain your bachelor's degree. I would love to learn more about how you used institutional resources on your undergraduate journey.

This study is about the institutional interventions (policies, practices, programs, and procedures) that are offered by Atlantic University to help students from low-income backgrounds obtain their undergraduate degree. If you participate in this research study, you will be asked to participate in a 75 minute, group interview. You will be asked about what institutional interventions you have used, or are aware of, at the University to support students from low-income backgrounds in completing their bachelor's degree. The group interview will take place at a future scheduled time that is conducive for your schedule. Pizza, wings, cookies, and beverages will be served and the interview will take place in a private room in the student union building.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me at rsw31@pitt.edu.

Thank you for your consideration,

Ron Wiafe

A.3   FOR DOCUMENT REQUESTS FROM ADMINISTRATORS

Subject: Requesting documents for a study about institutional interventions that support undergraduate degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds

Hello,

You are receiving this email because you have been identified as an administrator or professional at Atlantic University. You have some form of documentation that pertains to degree attainment

for students from low-income backgrounds that I am hoping to review. We spoke on the phone and or in person about the potential documents I would be requesting for this study. I obtained your email address from our communication.

This study is about the interventions (policies, practices, procedures, and programs) that are offered by the institution to support students from low-income backgrounds in obtaining their undergraduate degree. I contacted you via telephone to inform you about this study and to request specific documents that are directly or indirectly related to the success of students from low-income backgrounds. If you still agree to submit documents for this study, I am requesting to obtain these documents at this time. If it is inconvenient to send the documents electronically, I can arrange to pick up hard copies of the documents from your office. You will have no other obligations in this study once the documents are received. Your generosity with sharing these documents is greatly appreciated.

If you are still interested in sharing the documents for this study, please contact me at rsw31@pitt.edu.

Thank you for your consideration,

Ron Wiafe

APPENDIX B

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR PROFESSIONALS

1. Tell me about your position at Atlantic University?

2. How does your position interact with students from low-income backgrounds at Atlantic University?

3. Next, we will talk about how your role directly and or indirectly supports students from low-income backgrounds at this institution.

   Potential prompts and follow up questions:
   a. *What are the explicit responsibilities?*
   b. *How often are you interacting with students from low-income backgrounds in this capacity?*
   c. *Is there anyone or resource that helps you with these efforts?*
   d. *Do you provide support to students from low-income backgrounds that is not formally recognized by the institution?*
      i. *What does this support look like?*

Institutional Interventions that Support Attainment for Students from Low-Income Backgrounds

4. Tell me about the initiatives in your area that support students from low-income backgrounds to persist towards their undergraduate degree?

   Potential prompts and follow up questions:
   a. *Do you know how these initiatives were started at the institution?*
   b. *How are the initiatives meeting their goals?*
      i. *How are these initiatives impacting students from low-income backgrounds?*

      ii.   How are they impacting low-income student attainment from your perspective?
   c. How did you get involved in these initiatives?

5. From your perspective, what specific initiatives from your area have the greatest impact on helping students from low-income backgrounds obtain their undergraduate degree?

   Potential prompts and follow up questions:
   a. What does success look like for these initiatives?
   b. How do you know that the initiative is working?
      i. What metric or outcome is used to validate that the initiative is working?
   c. What specific office/department is responsible for implementing these initiatives?
   d. Do you know how long these initiatives have been in place at the institution?
   e. Who has a stake in these initiatives besides the students?
   f. What resources are needed to keep these initiatives available for students from low-income backgrounds?

6. What initiatives were changed or recreated from your area to help students from low-income backgrounds obtain their undergraduate degree?
   Potential prompts and follow up questions:
   a. What factors precipitated the change?
   b. What was the institutional response to the change?
   c. Was there any resistance?
      i. If so, how was the resistance resolved?
   d. How has this change or re-creation helped students from low-income backgrounds with attaining their undergraduate degree?

7. Are you aware of any other institutional initiatives from different areas that help students from low-income backgrounds obtain their undergraduate degree?
   a. How do these initiatives support degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds?
   b. Who can I speak with to learn more about these initiatives?

Design of Institutional Interventions

8. How are the initiatives that support degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds coordinated in your area?

   Potential prompts and follow up questions:
   a. Please describe.
   b. Do you have a flowchart or other artifact that can help illustrate this point?
   c. If there are no initiatives in your area, are you aware of how the institutional initiatives are coordinated?

9. Why are the initiatives that help students from low-income backgrounds from your area structured in this way?

   Potential prompts and follow up questions:
   a. *Are there any proposed adjustments to this configuration in the upcoming 5 years?*
   b. *Are these ideas in the discussion or planning phase?*
   c. *Do you have any insight on how the institution structures the support for students from low-income backgrounds?*
   d. *What is the long term plan for the configuration of support for students from low-income backgrounds?*

Climate of Support for Students from Low-Income Backgrounds

10. How receptive is the institutional culture to providing initiatives that support students from low-income backgrounds?

    Potential prompts and follow up questions:
    a. *What specifically influences your thinking on this issue?*
    b. *What do you enjoy the most about the institutions' efforts in supporting students from low-income backgrounds?*
    c. *What do you like the least about the institutions' efforts in supporting students from low-income backgrounds?*

11. How has the institution evolved in supporting students from low-income backgrounds?

    Potential prompts and follow up questions:
    a. *How so?*
    b. *How not?*

12. From your perspective what is the biggest institutional challenge at Atlantic in supporting students from low-income backgrounds?

Resources Used by Students

13. What resources in your area and around campus are students from low-income backgrounds using to support their educational success?

    Potential prompts and follow up questions:
    a. *How are the resources being used by students from low-income backgrounds?*
    b. *How do students from low-income backgrounds find out about these resources?*
    c. *When are these resources offered?*

     d.   Are these resources offered to all students from low-income backgrounds?
     e.   Are there any limitations on using these resources?

14. Which campus resources are being used the most by students from low-income backgrounds to help with earning a bachelor's degree?

     Potential prompts and follow up questions:
     a.   Why do you think these resources are being used the most by students from low-income backgrounds?
     b.   How frequently are these resources being used by students from low-income backgrounds?

15. Are there institutional resources that you would like to offer to students from low-income backgrounds that are not available at this institution?

Other Helpful Information

16. Is there anything else that you would like to add about institutional interventions that help students from low-income backgrounds graduate that you have not been able to articulate?

Conclusion

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. Your answers are integral to learning about institutional interventions that support attainment for students from low-income backgrounds!

APPENDIX C

STUDENTS' GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR STUDENTS

1) *Let's start with introductions.*

    i) Please tell us your first name, your anticipated graduation date, and how many semesters you have been enrolled at Atlantic University.
    ii) What were the factors that influenced your decision to attend this institution?
    iii) How has your experience been at Atlantic?

2) *Now that we covered introductions and you have all talked a little bit about your experience, let's discuss your awareness of institutional resources that support students from low-income backgrounds.*

    i) What institutional assistance, programming, or policies are you aware of that helps students from low-income backgrounds progress towards earning an undergraduate degree?
        (a) Which of these initiatives helped you with your persistence towards graduation?
        (b) Do you recall anything or anyone at the institution that provided additional support to help you stay on track to graduate?
            (i) What was done specifically to support you?
            (ii) How was this additional support provided?
        (c) Are you aware of any other programs that help students from low-income backgrounds persist to graduation?

3) *Now let's move forward to how you are using these resources to continue on your path towards obtaining your degree.*

i) What resources at Atlantic University have you found to be helpful in persisting towards your undergraduate degree?
    (a) How specifically do you use this assistance?
    (b) Are there resources or specific offices that you or other students are using more than others?
        1. Why?
        2. Why are these resources or offices used and not the others?

ii) Were there any anticipated or unanticipated setbacks that made your college entry or enrollment from semester to semester difficult?
    (a) Was there a person or resource at the institution that helped you with these challenges?
    (b) What did this person or resource do specifically?

4) ***Now let's move forward to how the resources and supports are structured at this institution to support attainment for students from low-income backgrounds.***

i) How does this institution coordinate the assistance, program, or policies for students from low-income backgrounds working to complete their undergraduate degree?
    (a) Do you know anything else about how the institutional assistance, programs, or policies are coordinated to support students from low-income backgrounds graduate from this institution?

5) ***Now let's move forward with any changes you noticed in the institutional assistance, programs, or policies that support attainment for students from low-income backgrounds.***

i) Were there any changes made in your time here to assist students from low-income backgrounds with the pursuit of their undergraduate degree?
    (a) Were there any changes made that helped you stay on track toward earning your degree during your time here?

6) ***Now let's move forward with the final question of this interview: Is there anything that you would like to add about institutional solutions that help students from low-income backgrounds stay on track towards earning their undergraduate degree that you have not been able to share?***

This group interview is one of three group interviews that I will be having here at this institution. Your comments were extremely helpful and you provided fruitful information for the study.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this discussion and I hope you have an excellent semester!

APPENDIX D

DOCUMENT REVIEW PROTOCOL

Date of Request ___/___/___   _____
                M   D   Y   Primary Requester

Name:_____

                                        _____

                                        Support Requester (if applicable)

Title:_____

Department:_____

Document Review Protocol				
Type of Data Sought	**List of Documents**	**Corresponding Professional**	**Alignment with Research Questions**	**Special Notes**
Persistence and graduation rates of students from low-income backgrounds.	Pell recipient enrollment and completion reports for the past five years.	Professionals in Institutional Research	*How are policies, practices, procedures, and programs, being changed at a low-income serving institution to support persistence through graduation rates?*	Obtained the five year Pell recipient enrollment and completion reports.
Resources being utilized by students from low-income backgrounds.	Annual reports of the summer bridge and bridge support programs that support low-income students. Estimated financial aid and costs worksheet.	Professionals in Student Support Professionals in Financial Aid	*How are students from low-income backgrounds utilizing campus resources to navigate the challenges of obtaining an undergraduate degree?*	Obtained the 2015-2016 bridge and bridge support reports. Obtained the estimated financial aid and costs worksheet.
Emerging initiatives that support attainment for students from low-income backgrounds.	Mission statement and strategic plan. The [Name of Committee] report.	Public web-site Chair of [Name of Committee]	*How are the support structures designed at a low-income serving institution to assist low- income students?*	Obtained mission and strategic plan. Obtained progress report.

Figure 1. Document Review Protocol

PROFESSIONALS SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

An Exploration of Institutional Interventions that Support Students from Low-income Backgrounds at a Low-income Serving Institution

You are invited to participate in a research study of institutional interventions that support low-income student attainment at a low-income serving institution. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study and participate in the interview. The principal investigator (PI) for this study is Ron Wiafe, doctoral student, in the Administrative and Policy Studies: Higher Education program at the University of Pittsburgh. The Atlantic University support professional is [Name of Professional], [Title of Professional] of [Name of Division].

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the institutional interventions that support attainment for students from low-income backgrounds. For the purposes of this study, a student from a low-income background is defined as any student who receives the Federal Pell Grant. An institutional intervention is defined as any policy, practice, procedure, or program that was developed or adjusted to help low-income students attain their undergraduate degree. Attainment is defined as persisting through the degree expectations. This study will attempt to learn more about the policies, practices, procedures, or programs that help students from low-income backgrounds persist and obtain their undergraduate degree.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an individual interview for approximately 45 minutes. The interview will be conducted in your office or a private room and will be audio recorded.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study

The interviewer will ask you questions about your knowledge of the institutional interventions that support students from low-income backgrounds. You are welcome to share as much or as little information as you wish. If you experience discomfort at any time you can ask the interviewer to terminate the interview. The foreseeable risk of this project includes the possibility of someone identifying the institution and your position in the study. Although pseudonyms will be used for you, your office and the institution, the general division in which you work will be mentioned in the study. The benefits to participation are: 1) the opportunity to share your perspective with a practitioner-scholar; 2) to participate in a study and learn more about the research process; 3) to help professionals learn about the institutional interventions that support students from low-income backgrounds.

Compensation

There is no compensation for participating in this study. The interviewer is grateful for your participation and will thank you for your time.

Confidentiality

The records for this study will be kept private and confidential. All reports, articles, or presentations I might publish will not include any personal identifying information that will make it possible to identify you as a participant. Research records will be stored securely and only I will have access to the records. All research records will be stored in a locked file on the primary investigator's computer and a locked office for the duration of the research project. I will have access to the interview transcripts and audio recordings. Transcripts and audio recordings will be destroyed after any resulting publications are completed.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Participation in this research study is completely voluntary. There are no substantial risks associated with this project, nor are there any direct benefits to you. You are free to withdraw from participation at any time during this study without judgment from the researcher or affecting any relationships at Atlantic University.

Contacts and Questions

The researcher conducting this study is Ron Wiafe (Principal Investigator).You may ask any questions that you have immediately. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact Ron Wiafe at 717-337-6909, or rsw31@pitt.edu or [Name of Professional] at [Contact Number of Professional] or [Professional Email Address].

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, or if you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact the University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board, at (412) 383-1480, or irb@pitt.edu or the Atlantic University Institutional Review Board at [IRB Contact Number] or

[IRB Email Address].

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in this study.

Participant signature   Date

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Investigator signature   Date

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APPENDIX F

STUDENTS' GROUP INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

An Exploration of Institutional Interventions that Support Students from Low-income Backgrounds at a Low-income Serving Institution

You are invited to participate in a research study of institutional interventions that support low-income student attainment at a low-income serving institution. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study and participate in a group interview.

The principal investigator (PI) for this study is Ron Wiafe, doctoral student, in the Administrative and Policy Studies: Higher Education program at the University of Pittsburgh. The Atlantic University support professional is [Name of Professional], [Title of Professional] in the [Name of Division].

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the institutional interventions that support attainment for students from low-income backgrounds. A low-income student is defined as any student who receives the Federal Pell Grant. An institutional intervention is defined as any policy, practice, procedure, or program that was developed or adjusted to help students from low-income backgrounds attain their undergraduate degree. Attainment is defined as persisting through the degree expectations. This study will attempt to learn more about the policies, practices, procedures, and programs that help students from low-income backgrounds persist and obtain their undergraduate degree.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a group interview with other student participants for approximately 75 minutes. The group interview will be conducted in a private room and will be audio recorded.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study

The interviewer will ask you questions about your knowledge of the institutional interventions that support students from low-income backgrounds. The interviewer will ask you briefly about your experiences at the institution using resources to persist toward obtaining your undergraduate degree. Specifically, the interviewer will ask you about the policies, practices, procedures, or programs that you directly or indirectly used that helped you on your path of attaining the undergraduate degree. The purpose of these questions is to obtain your perspective of the institutional support of students from low-income backgrounds. Depending on your unique experience retelling parts of your story may cause some level of discomfort. This discomfort should not be more than what you would experience in a typical classroom discussion where you discuss your personal background. You are welcome to share as much or as little information as you wish. If you experience significant discomfort at any time you can ask the interviewer to terminate the interview.
The benefits to participation are: 1) the opportunity to share your perspective with a practitioner-scholar; 2) to participate in a study and learn more about the research process; 3) to help professionals learn more about the institutional interventions that support students from low-income backgrounds.

Compensation

There is no compensation for participating in this study. The interviewer is grateful for your participation and will thank you for your time.

Confidentiality

The records for this study will be kept private and confidential. All reports, articles, or presentations I might publish will not include any personal identifying information that will make it possible to identify you as a participant. Research records will be stored securely and only I will have access to the records. All research records will be stored in a locked file on the primary investigator's computer and a locked office for the duration of the research project. I will have access to the interview transcripts and audio recordings. Transcripts and audio recordings will be destroyed after any resulting publications are completed.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Participation in this research project is completely voluntary. There are no foreseeable risks associated with this project, nor are there any direct benefits to you. You are free to withdraw from participation at any time during this study without judgment from the researcher or affecting any relationships at Atlantic University.

Contacts and Questions

The researcher conducting this study is Ron Wiafe (Principal Investigator). You may ask any questions that you have immediately. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact

Ron Wiafe at 717-337-6909, or rsw31@pitt.edu or [Name of Professional] at [Contact Number of Professional] or [Professional Email Address].

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, or if you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact the University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board, at (412) 383-1480, or irb@pitt.edu or the Atlantic University Institutional Review Board at [IRB Contact Number] or [IRB Email Address].
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You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in this study.

Participant signature   Date

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Investigator signature   Date

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