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Unlocking the Door to Access and Success: The Keys Program

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UNLOCKING THE DOOR TO ACCESS AND SUCCESS: THE KEYS PROGRAM

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UNLOCKING THE DOOR TO ACCESS AND SUCCESS: THE KEYS PROGRAM

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The Keystone Education Yields Success (KEYS) program is a welfare-to-work program in Pennsylvania meant to promote financial independence through education. Across the community colleges in the state of Pennsylvania, the KEYS program has often allowed financially disadvantaged students to succeed on par with – and often surpass – their non-KEYS classmates, defying metrics that typically suggest that low-income students will struggle to succeed. The purpose of this study was to understand *how* and *why* the KEYS program at a single community college in Pennsylvania was able to foster that level of success. The study was conducted as an instrumental case study of one KEYS program at a Pennsylvania community college. Six student participants were interviewed using semi-structured interviews, developed around Shaun Harper's Anti-Deficit Framework. Four prominent themes arose from the interview data as potential reasons the KEYS students at this community college are successful: the presence of financial support, a focus on academic and career goals, the development of belonging and connection, and the creation of validation. These findings connect to some of the well-known student success theories in the literature, including Tinto's theory of social integration (1975, 1993), Schlossberg's theory of marginality and mattering (1989), Rendon's theory of validation (1994), and Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1977). The

study concludes with several implications that may be applied to promote student success

in a broader context. Several ideas for future practice and additional research also

emerged.

Dedication

This study is dedicated to the many students who have had to struggle to succeed, who have felt the odds stacked against them, and who have jumped into the waters of higher education, sometimes not knowing if they would sink or swim.

My part of this work is also dedicated to my fiancé Melissa, a social worker who has been fighting this fight alongside students and advocating for the less fortunate for as long as I have known her. Thank you for being my inspiration in this work and so much more.

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Introduction

In the current landscape of higher education, there is a great need to ensure the success of our students. This need has been exacerbated by the colonization of academia with elements of capitalism, but it is also reflective of the high costs of college, a growing disillusionment towards higher education, and a general distrust of many of the time-honored institutions of our society.

This trend to question the value of education is not new as enrollments have been decreasing in all sectors of higher education for over a decade (Horowitz, 2022). In fact, this distrust in education began perhaps as early as the creation of accountability-focused federal education mandates such as No Child Left Behind and other state-level legislation that began in the early 2000's and sowed the seeds of doubt for many Americans. That questioning of education and its value has continued over the course of the last two decades as the costs of college have skyrocketed well beyond the rate of inflation, as distance education and non-traditional educational options such as digital badging and MOOC's have continued to grow in popularity and acceptance, and as society has become obsessed with immediacy and the pragmatic value of such an investment of time and resources. All of these factors have combined so that "[m]ore potential learners [and, more importantly, their families] do not see, or do not trust, the value of investing in higher education" (Horowitz, 2022, para. 2).

The result is that many colleges, in light of the pressures to compete with other institutions for shrinking enrollments and to demonstrate the value of their educational

experience, seek programming and initiatives to promote student success, which has not only buoyed many private educational consulting and service firms but has also given rise to the popularity of student success movements such as Achieving the Dream, Guided Pathways, and Completion by Design, all designed specifically to help colleges promote student success.

Directly aligned with these challenges of higher education – and perhaps even more scrutinized beneath the microscopic examination of politicians and taxpayers – are social welfare programs, which often intend to lead students toward financial independence and away from reliance on social support networks. These programs have an extensive history in our country as society has long wanted to ensure individuals are self-sufficient and not simply taking financial support. Some critics have skeptically considered these social support programs as providing "handouts" and support that could lead to long-term dependence or learned helplessness (Thompson, 2018). Thus, over the last century, America has seen federal programs such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Civil Conservation Core (CCC), the Community Work and Training Program (CWTP) and the Work Incentive (WIN) program of the 1960's, and the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) of 1982. Over time, these federal welfare-to-work programs evolved to include education as an integral part of the equation, as evidenced in the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) training program of 1988 and the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1993 (and its reauthorization as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act [WIOA] in 2014. Given their appeal as a means of ensuring accountability, these welfare-to-work programs

were often adopted at the state level, with many states taking their own approach. At

both the federal and state level, these programs often require that participants using the

funds demonstrate outcome metrics that evidence a sufficient return on investment and

justify the expense of highly competitive federal and state funding—as well as to validate

the costs to taxpayers.

Amidst these challenges to higher education and social welfare programs exists

Pennsylvania's Keystone Education Yields Success (KEYS) program, a welfare-to-work

program meant to move participants from financial dependence on financial assistance

programs such as Supplement Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary

Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and into financial independence and

self-sufficiency as the result of education. Started by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

in the early 2000's, KEYS is one of a slate of employment and training programs offered

by the state's Department of Human Services (DHS). *The Cash Assistance Handbook*

(n.d.) for the DHS describes KEYS in this way:

> KEYS was developed in response to growing research that shows that people who
> earn a career-specific credit or non-credit bearing certificate or an associate's
> degree are better able to get jobs at family-sustaining wages with benefits and
> have greater opportunities for advancement. Educational studies show that
> individuals who earn a career-specific credit or non-credit bearing certificate or
> associate's degree earn more money after graduation than those who have not
> attended.

In this way, the KEYS program is meant to leverage education and training as a means to

ensure that some of society's most financially at-risk individuals are given supports that

help them persist, complete, and succeed in ways that foster equity. It is also meant to be

an investment in the state's future, helping more individuals ensure economic

independence through increased education, which also stabilizes the state's workforce and the growing need for workers with college degrees, while also protecting taxpayer's investments.

By mandate, the KEYS program is offered at each of the different Pennsylvania community colleges, though the size and scope of each program varies across institutions. At each institution, employees known as KEYS facilitators work with students and provide case management supports that help students overcome barriers, stay connected to the college and its resources, and provide motivation needed to foster retention and success.

The KEYS program at all of Pennsylvania's community colleges is funded by a grant through the DHS and administered by that department's Bureau of Employment Programs (BEP). Each community college appoints a director, who manages the spending of their allocated funds for staff, programming, incentives, and resources that support student success. What differs about KEYS when compared to other welfare-to-work programs is its close collaboration with the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges and the state's 15 community colleges – and its focus on helping students gain the education and training needed to get better, higher-paying jobs. The KEYS program has done just that, with program outcomes at most of Pennsylvania community colleges allowing financially disadvantaged students to succeed on par with – and often surpass – their non-KEYS classmates. For example, according to one KEYS director at a Pennsylvania community college, in the academic year 2020-2021, their students had a retention rate of 86%, compared to a rate of 66.8% for non-KEYS

students. This college's KEYS students also had a course completion rate of 79% during that same time period, and the program ended 57% of their students with a positive termination, which is defined by the Pennsylvania BEP as program completion, attainment of sustained employment, or a closure of welfare benefits.

But those KEYS successes are not just limited to one school. Students in many of Pennsylvania's other community college KEYS programs have had similar successes relative to their non-program counterparts as well. Some of those successes are outlined in Table 1. This data was provided by leadership of the BEP and represents the summative data for all 15 community colleges. Unfortunately, the BEP was unwilling to provide college-level data simply to protect the individual colleges.

Results like these led Peter Zurflieh of the Community Justice Project, a nonprofit that provides legal assistance to benefits recipients, to describe the KEYS program in these words: "It's probably the best or one of the best post-secondary education programs in the country" (Hughes, 2019). These words underscore the success of a program that many Pennsylvania citizens know little about and characterize what many consider a "hidden gem" in the realm of higher education.

The KEYS program has also been recognized for its success by various other sources and outlets. A December 2023 article published in *The Journal of Higher Education* recognized the KEYS program for its intrusive interventions, its institutional agent support, and its support of student-parents (Sallee et al., 2023). A dissertation published in 2018 also explored the KEYS program and its connection to the persistence

Table 1

Highlights of Retention and Program Outcomes of PA KEYS Programs: 2020-2021

Data	Metric
Retention	
Calculation: Total unduplicated enrollment minus all terminations that did not meet a successful outcome divided by the total unduplicated enrollments.	Highest Provider Outcome: 95% Median Provider Outcome: 86%
Program Outcomes	
Calculation: Number of successful outcomes terminations divided by the total number of terminations.	Highest Provider Outcome: 83% Median Provider Outcome: 53%
A successful termination outcome is any of the following:	
• *completed their educational activities, such as receiving a certificate or degree; or*	
• *obtained employment of 20 or more hours per week prior to completion of their education activities; or*	
• *transferred to another post-secondary education institution or another E&T program prior to completing their educational activities; or*	
• *had their public assistance benefits that made the individual eligible for the KEYS program closed prior to completion of their education activities*	

and success of single, low-income mothers (Beeler, 2018). The KEYS program has also received recognition in a publication from the Center for Post-Secondary and Economic Success (Bone, 2010), as well as a 2019 article by Sarah Anne Hughes, a BCTV segment and story in 2019, and a 2024 news segment and article by Liz Kilmer.

Additionally, these KEYS outcomes outlined in Table 1 above are most exciting when one looks closer at the students who are achieving these results at the various

institutions. In many instances in education generally, and higher education more specifically, there is a clear correlation between a student's socioeconomic status and their success in the classroom. Far too often economically disadvantaged students face barriers that place them behind their peers. In a 2006 study, Sara Goldrick-Rab found "students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely than are economically advantaged students (net of prior academic preparation) to follow pathways that are characterized by interrupted movement. Such pathways appear to be less effective routes to the timely completion of degrees" (p. 61). But something about the KEYS program helps students overcome these traditional barriers to educational success. And while many socioeconomically students flounder or struggle with the barriers that are seemingly inherent with that status, many of Pennsylvania's KEYS students have demonstrated unprecedented success rates in course completion, retention, and positive termination. The purpose of this study, then, is to explore what specifically promotes and allows for that success at one Pennsylvania community college. This college cannot be identified by name due to restrictions set by its Institutional Review Board (IRB); therefore, it will be referred to generically as the "selected community college." In the study, the researcher will use an anti-deficit framework (Harper, 2010) to examine what makes this community college's KEYS students successful. This framework allows for the exploration of this community college's KEYS program in a manner that is focused on the success and possibilities despite the challenges the students face, instead of focusing on the students' shortcomings as is the traditional approach in far too many research studies.

Conceptual Framework

In examining the underpinnings for this study, there are several potential theories from previous research that could apply and provide an understanding of why KEYS students at the selected community college are able to succeed at rates higher than their non-program peers. These theories include the following:

1. Vincent Tinto's theory of social integration (1975, 1993);

2. Laura Rendon's theory of validation (1994);

3. Nancy Schlossberg's work with mattering and marginality (1989); and

4. student agency theory (Bandura, 1977, 2001).

Due to the social integration achieved from a range of the college's KEYS programming initiatives, as well as the regular check-ins with their KEYS staff, students are connected to something larger than themselves. Thus, Tinto's theory (1975, 1993) could apply for the students' becoming part of a network of support, similar to a team, that fosters a feeling of belonging and connection and promotes success. That explanation could also align to Schlossberg's work with mattering and marginality (1989), which also underscores the notion of belonging and community as a key component to success. Rendon's theory of validation (1994) may also apply in the sense of validation that the students get from their regular interaction with their facilitators, as well as from the incentives they earn for achieving academic progress and milestones. The selected community college's KEYS program could also be an example of student agency theory as defined by Bandura (1986, 2001) as it helps to develop agency in students through

decision making, through interaction with quasi-mentors who attend KEYS events and demonstrate possibilities, and through taking ownership of their own learning experience.

The value of completing this study went beyond just the KEYS program. For example, determining what allowed for success in the KEYS program could lead to a scaling up of the factors that contribute to KEYS students' success to a broader spectrum of college students at this community college and beyond, perhaps creating greater equity for some of an institution's more historically disadvantaged students. Such a result would be vital – and very welcome – in the current climate of higher education.

A range of previous studies have examined programs aimed at promoting student success, particularly in a manner that promotes access for underserved or minoritized populations (Bausmith & France, 2012; Bowman et al., 2018; Heisel, 2005; Zeiser et al., 2015). Still others have focused on the ways to move students away from welfare and into financial independence (Barrett, 2002; Dyke et al., 2006; London, 2006; Mazzeo et al, 2003). However, the focus of those studies has often been couched in a deficit approach, looking at what needs must be addressed as the result of a cohort of students' perceived deficiencies. The focus in this study, on the other hand, was determining what this community college's KEYS students feel and/or what elements of this KEYS program allow the students in the program to succeed. The study sought to identify those contributors to their success within the bounded system of this specific community college's KEYS program, which made the study an instrumental case study. Since this case study focused on what allowed this community college's KEYS students to succeed, despite the challenges and obstacles that could derail them and that disrupt so many of

their non-program peers, the study applied an anti-deficit approach similar to that applied

by Shaun Harper (2012) in his ground-breaking anti-deficit framework with minoritized

men. That framework asserts that researchers focus on the achievements of students and

what enables them to succeed instead of perpetuating stereotypes and social castes

associated with different demographic groups. In this way, we honor the students as

individuals, their agency, and what they can teach us about student success. That

approach flips the traditional approach used by most researchers, where the focus is on

the deficit and the student (the victim) is considered responsible for their shortcomings

(Davis & Museus, 2019).ba That traditional approach on the student's behavior only

serves to amplify failures and offers few solutions to improve education.

Research Questions and Methodology Overview

In conducting this research, the researcher employed several research questions to

guide the study. These research questions were vital to understanding the why and how of

the issue or problem to be studied relative to the KEYS program at the selected

Pennsylvania community college. In short, this research aimed to understand how and

why this college's KEYS program has demonstrated successful results in student success

and in providing an opportunity for students to obtain upward mobility.

Guiding Research Question

What contributes to students' experiences in the KEYS program?

Additional Research Sub-questions

1. *What components, unrelated to the KEYS program, facilitated students'*

   success at this college?

2. *What components of the KEYS program at this community college helped*

    students succeed?

Using open-ended questions such as these allowed for the researcher to explore the

underpinnings of the students' success in an exploratory, inductive manner.

This study employed an instrumental case study approach, which allowed for the

exploration of phenomenon and the building of understanding of a bounded case in the

KEYS program at the selected community college. Stake (1995) indicated that "an

instrumental case study uses a particular case (some of which may be better than others)

to gain a broader appreciation of an issue or phenomenon." This qualitative approach

worked well here because of the ability to capture deep, rich, and intensive data from

participants, which helped to uncover why students in this specific KEYS program are

successful. The instrumental case study format – with its focus on a single issue or

phenomenon (Creswell, 2007) – allowed for that deep examination of the phenomenon

for why this community college's KEYS students are successful, even when their non-

program peers are not. Additionally, using an instrumental case study approach allowed

for the exploration and testing of theories and their application to real-life settings—and,

in this case, with the study of how KEYS programs support their students and help to

empower their success. Yin (2009) indicates that case studies can be used to "explain,

describe or explore events or phenomena in the everyday contexts in which they occur,"

and in this way, the case study format was uniquely suited to understanding the why and

how because it allowed for exploratory questions and additional probing. Such layering

of data across interviews with several students within the case was helpful to gain the deepest data set possible for analysis.

The primary vehicle for data collection in this research was interviews with KEYS participants at the selected community college, either those who are still in the KEYS program and nearing completion or those who graduated within the previous semester. The interviews were semi-structured to allow for data collection on specific topics but also open-ended enough "to allow the researcher to respond to the situation at hand" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This questioning format allows the researcher to proceed topics that arise from the participant's responses to questions and, in the spirit of an anti-deficit approach, honor the participant's voice and experience.

This bounded case was situated in a single community college in Pennsylvania, with an enrollment of 3,924. The college is located in a relatively urban area, and offers up to 40 degrees, certificates, and diplomas. With an overall retention rate of 59% for its full-time students, this institution is a good option to examine the experiences of its KEYS program participants, who regularly outpace that retention rate.

Assumptions

In this study, the basic assumption was that the KEYS program at the selected Pennsylvania community college has contributed to the success of its students. That assumption did not take away from the experiences, skills, and qualities that each student brought with them, but it did imply that something in the KEYS program allowed the students to leverage those characteristics for success in the college setting.

A second assumption was that the current climate in higher education and its various challenges—student success, cost, benefit of attending, and return on investment—will continue to be an issue for college leaders, students, and their families. That assumption made uncovering the reason for success of this community college's KEYS students, often considered to be an "at-risk" group, important for institutions as a means to expand their student success efforts and remain viable as institutions.

A third assumption was that in using an anti-deficit framework for the research, the researcher would be going against what has surely been a more traditional, deficit focused experience for the students in the KEYS program. This assumption relied on the fact that students such as those in the KEYS program have long been treated as the problem, that minoritized and at-risk students are more likely to fail than succeed (Davis & Museus, 2019).

Delimitations

In choosing this topic for research, the research was limited to a single case: one KEYS program, at one community college in Pennsylvania. Likewise, the research focused on a successful program and strove to reveal why its students attain success at levels above their non-program peers. The qualitative case study approach being used in the research helped to allow for deep exploration of the topic with program participants. It was important to note that this type of study, particularly with an instrumental case study, may prevent generalization of the results to other non-KEYS programs or even other Pennsylvania community colleges with KEYS programs.

Limitations

There are several potential limitations in this research study. First is that the researcher has a personal connection to the director of a KEYS program at another Pennsylvania community college and is thus very knowledgeable of the various programs in the state. Though the researcher is in no way personally connected to the KEYS staff or KEYS students at the selected community college – or any other person at the selected community college —just there being a connection could pose a limitation and introduce potential bias that could impact the results. To address this concern, the researcher will use a random and blind process for the selection of participants.

A second limitation lies in the number of student participants that can be included in the study. With a limited set of participants, the results of the study are less generalizable outside the selected community college's KEYS program. Additionally, participant responses are focused on their experiences at that community college, so that also limits the generalization of the results. However, a lack of generalizability is associated with qualitative studies, and case studies in particular (Maxwell, 2013).

A third limitation rested in the fact that the researcher could not control other factors that could have impacted the success of KEYS student participants. For example, with the randomized and blind selection process, the respondents selected could be skewed toward a single school at the college or could represent a number of schools and programs. Likewise, stronger students or weaker students could be selected as participants.

A final limitation is that the researcher was prevented from some data collection efforts by the IRB team at the selected community college. The researcher was not permitted to collect data from any means other than interviews with students who volunteered to participate. Thus, other data that would have been helpful, such as interview of KEYS facilitators, additional interviews with the program director, or other related program data from the college, was not available and prevented triangulation of the results. More information about overcoming this limitation will be explained in Chapter 4.

Definition of Terms

Anti-deficit framework/approach—First identified by Shaun Harper (2012), the anti-deficit framework aims to highlight the inherent traits or skills in a person or an approach that allow them to succeed, rather than highlighting their deficits or potential shortcomings.

Associate's Degree—An undergraduate degree awarded by an institution, in which the student typically pursues a program of study consisting of approximately 60 credits for the purpose of entry into a career or transfer to a baccalaureate program.

At-risk—A controversial (and sometimes pejorative) term often used in a "catch-all" manner to describe individuals who appear to come into their education with some deficit that disrupts their ability to succeed. In most situations, this study aimed to avoid the at-risk moniker for students and attempted to use an anti-deficit approach to understand what allowed students in the selected community college's KEYS program to succeed.

Bureau of Employment Programs (BEP)—A unit of the Pennsylvania DHS that focuses on programming to help welfare recipients seek education and sustainable employment.

Certificate—A credential awarded by an institution for programs of study of approximately 30 credits.

Department of Human Services (DHS)—The Pennsylvania department responsible for human services, including welfare and welfare-to-work programs.

Diploma—A credential awarded by an institution for programs of study of approximately 15 credits.

KEYS Program—Keystone Education Yields Success, a welfare-to-work educational program in Pennsylvania that is the result of collaborative efforts between the state's Department of Human Services and its 15 community colleges.

SNAP—Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, provides financial support for nutritional support for individuals or families in need.

TANF—Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, provides financial support to help families become self-sufficient.

Welfare-to-work programs—Any of a slate of programs aimed to help individuals move from public assistance (welfare) to financial independence.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lay in several factors that could benefit both public policy and educational leaders and decision makers. First and foremost was the development of an understanding of *why* and *how* the selected community college's

KEYS students were able to succeed at rates exceeding their non-program peers. This understanding could be beneficial to both educational and public policy leaders in that it can help in the development of new programs aimed at student success and financial independence -- and leverage the results and conclusions of this study. Additionally, these educational and public policy makers could also use the results to gain a better understanding of students who are considered "at-risk," particularly those with financial challenges, in order to support that demographic of students and individuals. Long term, that understanding could help colleges and human services departments better serve individuals who get financial assistance and could lead to better programming to help them move to financial independence.

Summary

This study endeavored to help us understand *why* and *how* the KEYS students at one Pennsylvania community college were able to succeed despite the perception that the "cards are stacked against them." The KEYS program at this college has been unlocking the door to access and success for students for many years; now it is time to understand why.

Chapter 2

Framework

A consistent belief that has held across decades is the critical American attitude

toward its poor and the assistance programs meant to support them. A 2016 *Los Angeles*

*Time*s survey, "illustrates how attitudes about poverty have remained largely consistent

over time despite dramatic economic and social change" (Lauter, 2016, para. 3). Chief

among those 2016 survey findings is skepticism toward the efficacy of government

assistance programs and concern that any financial assistance creates cycles of permanent

poverty, with recipients of assistance rarely reaching financial independence. This

attitude still persists today, and individuals who subscribe to the notion of the American

Dream often are often believers in meritocracy, which was articulated in a study by Hoyt

et al. (2021):

> Meritocracy is an ideology that maintains that outcomes in a society, from
> jobs to wealth, are distributed based on one's individual merit, including effort,
> work ethic, experience, and abilities. The principle that people have equal
> opportunities to succeed is a fundamental element of the American dominant
> stratification ideology, also referred to as the American Dream. As a result, a
> portion of American society still believes the poor are responsible for their own
> standing in life – and if they just work harder they can get ahead. (p. 204)

Thus, there is often resistance to public investment in programs that support low-income

citizens, for there is some belief that that those in need of assistance have the power to

improve their circumstances, if they just "pull themselves up by their own bootstraps," as

the common phrase goes. Additionally, among many Americans, but particularly

working-class whites, there is a general resentment toward anyone who has to rely on

public assistance and a belief that poverty is permanent, therefore rendering any

welfare-to-work programs ineffective (Lauter, 2016).

Unfortunately, those negative attitudes also spill over into misconceptions about

low-income individuals in education and are only compounded by unimpressive and

shocking college success data for low-income students. For example, low-income

students are more likely to drop out than their peers: "[M]ore than two-thirds of college

dropouts are low-income students, with family adjusted gross income (AGI) under

$50,000. High-income students with a family AGI of $100,000+ are 50% more likely to

graduate than low-income students" (Kantrowitz, 2021, para. 5). Low-income students

also face challenges that are more significant than those faced by their higher

socioeconomic status peers. That adversity begins early in the life of low-income student

and often continues throughout their educational journey. "Children from disadvantaged

homes tend to grow up with less resources, books, educational materials and toys, as well

as exposure to quality preschool programs. This sets the course for their education and

may affect them throughout their entire school career" (Lynch, 2016, para. 3). That

educational disparity also continues with college degree attainment, with students from

lower socioeconomic backgrounds being more likely to pursue and obtain a lower-level

degree, such as an associate's degree or an occupational certificate, and fewer of those

students likely to pursue a bachelor's degree (Lynch, 2016). As a result of such data,

there develops the myth that in some way the low-income student is unable to succeed as

easily as their higher socioeconomic status peers, or perhaps that they are deficient in the

skills – academic, social, and professional – that would allow them to be successful in the

context of higher education. These misconceptions about low-income students, though often deeply entrenched, reflect a deficit mindset and a way of thinking that perpetuates inequity.

As a result, this study sought to use an anti-deficit framework, based off the work of Shaun Harper. Harper developed the anti-deficit framework as part of his 2010 study, "An Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework for Research on Students of Color in STEM" as "an example of how to explore and better understand the enablers of minority student achievement in STEM" (p. 64). He later expanded on that work with his 2012 research "Black Male Student Success in Higher Education: A Report from the National Black Male College Achievement Study." In that work Harper focused on what allowed Black men to be successful in their STEM college experiences, thus changing the narrative away from a more traditional, deficit-thinking approach that would focus on the men's shortcomings. By changing the narrative in this manner, Harper was able to focus on the lived experiences of the men in his study, as well as what they drew on to be successful, therefore providing them context and value that were often missed when reduced to a set of incomplete deficits. Harper's intent was to break the cycle of grouping individuals into deficit-focused stereotypes that serve little purpose and often only perpetuate inequity.

Harper's framework (2010) was divided into three categories: Pre-College Socialization and Readiness, College Achievement, and Post-College Success. Each category explores what is relevant to help the individual reach academic and professional success in the STEM field. This approach allowed Harper to take a more holistic view of what enabled the individuals in his study to succeed and recognized that each human is a

complex array of influences and elements that ultimately determine their behavior and outcomes. That is contrary to a more traditional approach to the examination of minoritized or disadvantaged students, which all too often focuses any disparity in educational attainment and success on what are construed as deficits in the individual. Such a traditional approach only reinforces long-standing stereotypes and perpetuates inequity. By using an "instead of" approach and reframing more traditional deficit-focused questions to deliberately attempt to discover what allowed students to be successful, Harper was able to re-focus the work on how the men of color in his study succeeded in STEM, and his approach paves the way for other researchers to break free from the bonds of those limiting and inequitable practices.

The decision to use Harper's framework for this study rested in several cogent points. First, since this study sought to identify and underscore what allowed the KEYS students at the selected Pennsylvania community college to succeed at rates that outpace their peers, using an anti-deficit approach highlighted what about the students – and the program – allowed them to succeed. Second, the choice to use an anti-deficit approach allowed for a more equitable approach to the research, de-emphasizing the low-income status of the students, which has long caused the KEYS students to be marginalized, just as Harper's framework did to explore the success of Black men. Finally, the three-tiered approach of Harper's framework also allowed for a more holistic understanding of what students brought to each experience, how they interacted with that experience, and how they prepared to take those experiences forward into the workforce. And while this study

Figure 1

Harper's Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework
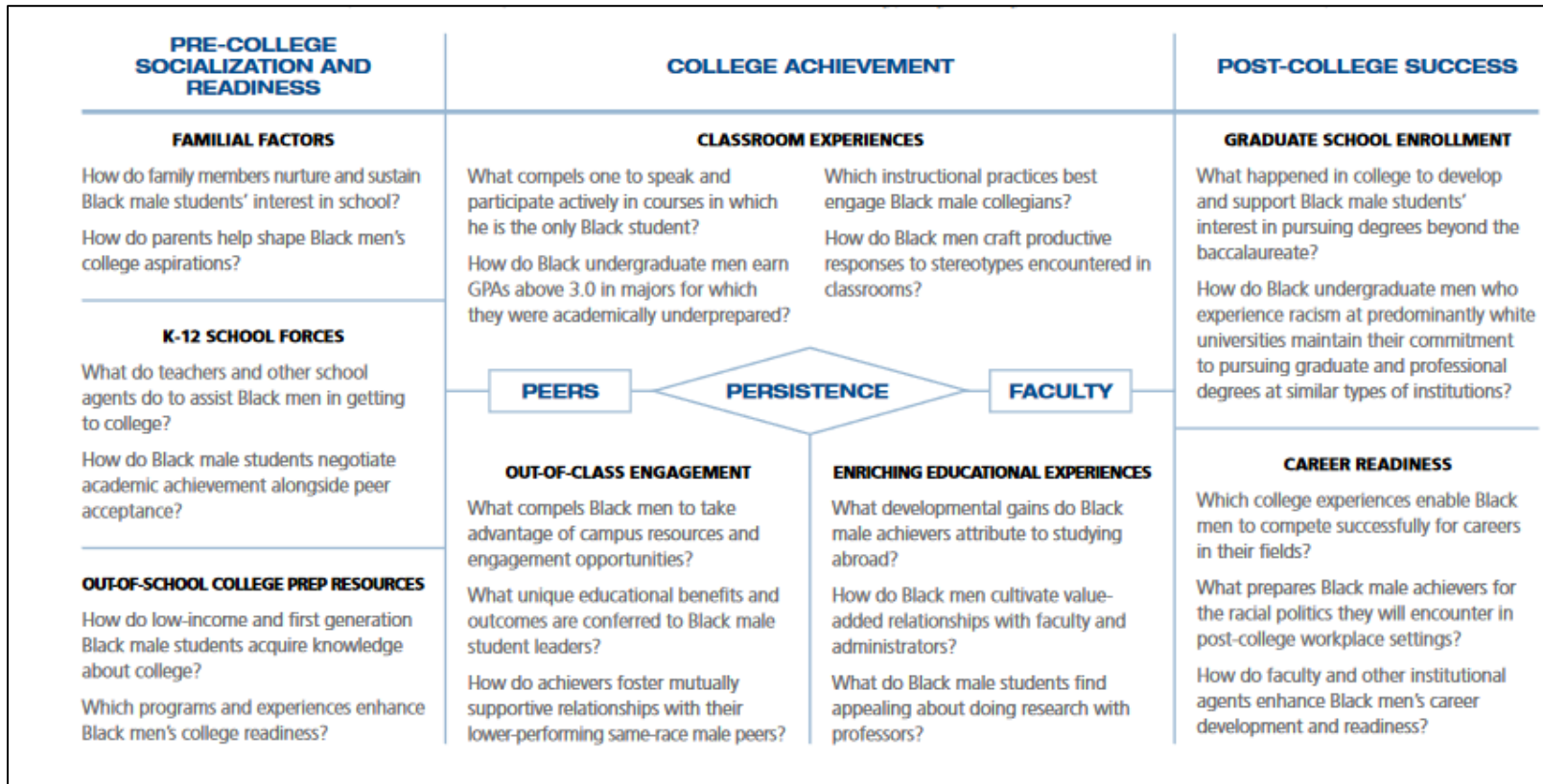
did not follow the exact pathway of Harper's original research, the overall framework,

the anti-deficit approach, and the underlying focus on elevating and empowering

minoritized or underserved individuals was the same.

Literature Review

As a program that has grown out of Pennsylvania's Department of Human

Services (DHS), the rationale for KEYS is not grounded in any specific higher education

theory but instead draws on the sociological and economic impact that employment and

self-sustainability provide. Couple that with the fact that welfare programs are often a

political hot button, one that many politicians and their constituencies would like to

constrict or eliminate altogether, and there is rarely an appetite for social support

programs that move participants from welfare toward financial independence. Thus,

Pennsylvania's KEYS was developed out of research that demonstrates that higher levels

of educational attainment – in this case an associate's degree or certificate – lead to a

greater likelihood of self-sustaining employment and a lower incidence of poverty and

reliance on public support (Barrett, 2002; Dyke et al., 2006; London, 2006; Mazzeo et al.,

2003). The ultimate goal of programs such as KEYS is to move SNAP and TANF

recipients away from these forms of government assistance to financial independence,

using education as the vehicle of change.

While the genesis of Pennsylvania's KEYS program rests in social and political

elements and did not arise directly from education theory, its implementation and

deployment certainly could relate to several educational theories that may help to explain

its success, particularly in its iteration at the selected community college. Among these

possible theoretical connections for institution's KEYS program are Vincent Tinto's student integration theory (1975, 1993), Laura Rendon's validation theory (1994), Nancy Schlossberg's concepts of mattering and marginality, and, potentially, elements of student agency theory (1989). What follows, then, is an exploration of some of these theories – and perhaps others – and their connection to student success, their relationship to empowering students, and their potential to relate to the success that these KEYS students have unlocked.

Tinto's theory of student integration (1975, 1993) may apply to the KEYS program for its reliance on the notions of community, relationship, and commitment. According to Tinto (1993) commitment is needed to avoid student departure and improve the likelihood of retention. In his various works, Tinto (1993) has emphasized the students are more likely to stay enrolled when they feel some type of commitment, which he broke down into two categories in his 1993 work *Leaving College*: goal and institutional commitment. Tinto defined goal commitment as related to the students feeling connection to an academic, career, or personal goal that they want to accomplish. He defined institutional commitment as the level of a student's desire to stay enrolled and finish their academic, career, or personal goals "within a given higher educational institution (p. 43).

Tinto's integration theory (1993) also asserts that most student departures from college are voluntary in nature and "mirror the degree to which the [individual's] experiences serve to integrate [them] into the social and intellectual life of the institution" (p. 50). Thus, programs that develop community and relationships, both among the

student participants and between the students and their institutional agents, help to build

connections that prevent two significant items that Tinto believes lead to student

departure: incongruence and isolation.

> Incongruence, or what is sometimes referred to as a lack of institutional fit, refers to that state where individuals perceive themselves as being substantially at odds with the institution. In this case, the absence of integration results from the person's judgment of the undesirability of integration. Isolation, however, refers to the absence of sufficient interactions whereby integration may be achieved. It is that condition in which persons find themselves largely isolated from the daily life of the institution. (Tinto, 1993, p. 50)

> In this manner, Tinto (1993) asserted programs that develop connections help

students stay integrated and that prevent isolation, thus allowing them to find success,

even in the face of adversity. This sense of community is something that Tinto (1993)

emphasizes as a key component of student success and retention:

> [T]he success not only of retention programs but of education programs generally hinges on the construction of educational communities at the college, program, and classroom level which actively involve all students in the ongoing social and intellectual life of the institution. […] Educational communities that are themselves striving toward educational excellence will in turn engender a similar striving among students. (p. 210)

Over the years, many other researchers have explored Tinto's original findings,

taken related approaches, and expanded his work. Cody Davidson and Kristin Wilson

(2013) confirmed many of the findings of Tinto's original work, indicating that students'

relationships – academic and social – on campus make a difference in retention. Karp

et al. (2010) also confirmed those findings but explained their relevance in the

community college setting, discrediting the myth that community college students do not

have time or a desire for social connections through sports, clubs, or other social events.

They also found that the majority of community college students do develop an

attachment to their institutions, and those attachments can be leveraged to improve

retention and student success. In addition, Douglas Guiffrida (2006) tackled a common

criticism of Tinto's theory – that it did not consider minority perspectives and was too

Euro-centric in its approach. Guiffrida found that Tinto's notion of "breaking away" from

past associations and traditions is problematic for minoritized students from more diverse

backgrounds. Instead, Guiffrida (2006) argued for connections beyond just those

established at the institution as a means of cultivating educational success and retention:

> Higher education and cross-cultural psychological literature clearly indicate that a cultural advancement of Tinto's (1993) theory by recognizing the need for minority college students to remain connected to supportive members of their home communities. While Tinto's theory recognizes the impact of family on pre-college commitment, to truly be descriptive of students who espouse collectivist cultural orientations, the theory must also recognize the potential of families and friends from home (or what I refer to broadly as home social systems), to support students once they arrive at college. (p. 456)

Still other researchers have studied various aspects of Tinto's original theory, including

Choi et al. (2019), who studied the impacts of social and academic integration on the

persistence of pharmacy students; Sidelinger et al. (2016), who found that instructor

rapport corresponded to students' out of class communications with instructors and their

likelihood to seek support from campus resources; and Jones (2010), who examined the

differential impacts of social integration on men and women.

Laura Rendon's theory of validation (1994) grew out of recognition that the

changing demographics of higher education needed a new approach to teaching and

learning, not the traditional model that was Euro-centered and focused on a history of

serving white males from privileged backgrounds. She asserted that students who did not

fit that traditional background often felt "alienated and intimidated by college culture"

(p. 34). Thus, Rendon believed that college culture and the approach taken to serve its increasingly diverse student body, including both women and minoritized students, needed to change. In particular, her research found that those non-traditional students – especially "community college students, first generation students, Hispanic and African American students, and students who had been out of college for some time" (p. 37) – often had doubts about their efficacy to succeed in college, but that those feelings of doubt could be erased with in-class and out-of-class academic and personal validation. Furthermore, Rendon's research (1994) identified the six key elements of validation:

1. Validation is an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development.

2. When validation is present, students feel capable of learning; they experience a feeling of self-worth and feel that they, and everything that they bring to the college experience, are accepted and recognized as valuable. Lacking validation, students feel crippled, silenced, subordinate, and/or mistrusted.

3. Like involvement, validation is a prerequisite to student development.

4. Validation can occur both in- and out-of-class. In-class validating agents include faculty, classmates, lab instructors, and teaching assistants. Out-of-class validating agents can be 1) significant others, such as a spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend; 2) family members, such as parents, siblings, relatives, and children; 3) friends, such as classmates and friends attending and not attending college; and, 4) college staff, including faculty who meet with students out-of-class, counselors/advisors, coaches, tutors, teaching assistants, and resident advisors.

5. Validation suggests a developmental process. It is not an end in itself. The more students get validated, the richer the academic and interpersonal experience.

6. Validation is most effective when offered early on in the student's college experience, during the first year of college and during the first weeks of class. (pp. 44-45)

Rendon's theory (1994) is couched in the notion of affirmation, both academic and personal, that creates a sense of self belief within the student. Therefore,

programming that promotes that validation and affirmation is vital to creating self-belief. Programs can create that affirmation and validation through regular contact between the student and an agent of the program, through regular encouragement, through reinforcement and celebration of successes and accomplishments, and through a recognition of the student's growth. The result of all these elements is the creation of validation for low-income, and often first-generation, students, and that "[v]alidation help[s] these kinds of students to acquire a confident, motivating, 'I can do it' attitude, believe in their inherent capacity to learn, become excited about learning, feel a part of the learning community, and feel cared about as a person, not just a student" (Linares et al., 2011, p. 15).

Other researchers and studies have also explored various aspects of Rendon's work in regards to validation and affirmation. For example, Donna Ekal, Sandra Rollins Hurley, and Richard Padilla (2011) did work at the University of Texas El Paso and found that "validation is an enabling, confirming, and supportive process" (p. 141) that requires an agent, usually a faculty or staff member, to offer "repeated aspirational and academic encouragement throughout the time of their studies in higher education in order to successfully complete their degrees" (p. 142). Likewise, Tara Falcone (2011) included Rendon's validation theory as an important component of her new model for student success, noting this about validation:

> it is not the number of interactions in the formal and informal academic and social spheres of the college that matter for students, but *the quality* of these interactions that matter. [...] students who have interactions in the formal and informal academic and social realms of the college that are validating experiences *for them* will feel a sense of belonging in the academic and social lives of the college as a result.

Thus, it is important that faculty, college employees, and administrators who hope to use

validating experiences for students to promote student success consider what matters *to*

the student as a means of validation. Nancy Acevedo-Gil1 and associates (2015) also

examined the importance of validation in a study of Latinex students in community

college developmental education coursework. They found that the structure of

developmental education, inequitable and seemingly arbitrary placement practices, and

even unapproachable faculty can be invalidating experiences for students. However,

those negative experiences could be overcome by validating agents – usually faculty –

who were approachable and friendly, who recognized and acknowledged students' social

identities, and who held their students to high expectations. Finally, Laura Rendon herself

also echoed some of these same sentiments about validating agents in a 2021 presentation

to NACADA:

> Advisors need to work with an ethic of care that fosters a sense of belonging and
> validates student "voice," the whole notion that the ideas students bring to college
> are valued, regardless of the student's background. Advisors also need to validate
> students in a way that enables them to believe in themselves and to internalize and
> articulate the belief that: "College is for me. I belong here. I can do this."

Additionally, work by Shameka Powell (2015) explored sponsorship as an element that

seems related to validation and the creation of students' feelings of affirmation. Powell

asserted that institutional agents have the power to "groom students for greatness" with

their actions and words – and through the provision of access to resources.

Nancy Schlossberg's work with mattering and marginality also explores the ways

in which minoritized and marginalized students can be supported for academic and

college success. Schlossberg (1989) noted that "feelings of marginality often occur when

individuals take on new roles, especially when they are uncertain what that new role entails" and that "when individuals feel marginalized, they worry if they matter to anyone" (as cited in Patton et al., 2016, p. 36). These feelings are more likely when individuals are at points of transition such as entering a new college and are even greater when students are low-income, first-generation, or from minoritized groups and thus more at-risk to feel isolated and alone. Therefore, group meetings or opportunities to interact with others, which help to build connection, begin to lay the groundwork to eliminate students' sense of marginality and to create a feeling of "mattering" as they provide several of the key aspects that Schlossberg noted as important: attention, importance, ego-extension, dependence, and appreciation (Patton et al., 2016). The contrary to a sense of not mattering is obviously feelings of being isolated, marginalized, or disconnected, which can be particularly problematic for students who might already be questioning their decision to participate in college. The result can be that students who do not feel as if they "matter" or who feel as if their presence will not be missed can be more likely to drop out in the face of adversity.

Similarly, several studies have examined Schlossberg's theory of the impact of mattering on mitigating feelings of marginality. Much of this research connects to the way in which college agents and programs create a sense of mattering – and mitigate marginality – for students. For example, J. Mark Pousson and Carolyn O'Laughlin (2022) recently studied the impact of mattering and marginality on LGBTQIA community college students and found that faculty creating positive opportunities for engagement and the creation of a LGBTQIA resource center enhanced students' sense of mattering.

Additionally, Andrea Dixon Rayle and Kuo-Yi Chung (2007) found that "college friend social support was the most powerful predictor of mattering; mattering to the college was the most powerful predictor of academic stress levels" (p. 21). And J. Mark Pousson and Mina Sagan (2021) also examined the impact of mattering on students with disabilities at a Jesuit university. They found that people feel marginalized when they question their belonging or mattering and those feelings can lead to disruptions in students' persistence, academic success, and mental health. Certainly, students with disabilities are at risk to experience those feelings, and Pousson and Sagan (2021) found that mattering can be enhanced by educating faculty and staff through conversations "at the institutional and departmental levels on the impact ableism has on sense of mattering, development, and success for students with and without disabilities" (p. 365).

Student agency theory also appears to have a connection to student success. Student agency theory focuses on the aspect of students believing they have control over their decisions, their work, and their outcomes. As a theory, it presumes that students can expand their sense of agency and that "[b]y exercising their agency, students exert influence on their educational trajectories, their future lives, and their immediate and larger social surroundings" (Klemenčič, 2015, para. 1). In particular, student agency theory, which is rooted in the work of Bandura (1986, 2001), focuses on the perception of power or control that an individual – in this case a student – has over their circumstances. Students with less agency believe that they have less control; those with greater agency assume greater control. That point underscores the interactive and transformative potential of social agency to the educational process, institutional agents, and intentional

programming. As institutional agents work and programs are developed, strategically

aiming for the creation of student agency so that students "understand their own

relationship to the past (routine), future (purpose) and present (judgment) make a

difference to their actions" (Klemenčič, 2015, para. 17). And therein lies the power of

student agency, according to Bandura (2006):

> [T]o influence intentionally one's functioning and life circumstances. In this view, personal influence is part of the causal structure. People are self-organizing, proactive, self-regulating, and self-reflecting. They are not simply onlookers of their own behaviors. They are contributors to their life circumstances, not just products of them. (para. 2)

Additional research on student agency has been done by Emma Groenewald and

Adre le Roux (2022), who found that college campuses are often spaces with

asymmetrical power relations, which can lead to limits on student agency. They,

therefore, examined how students can develop agentic power through challenging

institutional culture and power dynamics, predominantly by self-reflection on past

actions, evaluation of present choices, and imagining future states of being. Allison

Cook-Sather (2020) also examined student agency and found that giving students voice,

particularly in the development of curriculum or the analysis of classroom activities, can

lead to the development of student agency through the democratization of the educational

process. Maria Hvid Stenalt (2021) also looked at the importance of student agency but in

the context of online learning. Stenalt's findings indicate that students in an online

learning environment can build agency through relationships and that the social nature of

interactions is vital to the creation of student agency. Research by Simone Titus and

Nicolette Roman (2019) echo this need for social interactions to build student agency:

> Findings in this study showed a positive association with student agency and learning support offered by the departments in which they were enrolled. This means that academic departments who offer support with regard to academic and non-academic activities, encouraging interactions with other students, providing adequate learning spaces and adequate supervision amongst other, mediates student agency and is a reliable predictor for student success. This appears to be helpful and is appreciated by students as they feel supported through their academic journey in a faculty that promotes and strategically places interprofessional education in its curriculum. This paper contends that higher education institutions that foster interprofessional practices should ensure that adequate support mechanisms are in place for students in order to provide a unique space for the development of student agency. (p. 311)

The common thread in these various studies and research – and others on the subject (Castillo-Montoya & Ives, 2021; Varghese & Fuentes, 2020; Vaughn, 2020) – is that students develop agency when given voice, when provided with opportunities for engagement and empowerment, when taught how to be self-reflective and make decisions, and when provided with a social context that empowers them.

Closely related to student agency theory is the work of Alfred Bandura (1977) on self-efficacy as part of social cognitive theory. Bandura asserted that people exist in the environment of a social context and are influenced and change as a result of interactions with that environment. In this way, Bandura defined self-efficacy as a person believing that they not only have control over their actions but also that those actions can shape their future outcomes, whether positively or negatively. Bandura noted four key ways to improve self-efficacy: mastery experiences, social modeling or vicarious experiences, social or verbal persuasion, and emotional and psychological states (Moore, 2016). Additionally, Bandura believed that self-efficacy (and agency) could be developed in anyone, given the right circumstances (Moore, 2016), which provides opportunity for institutional agents and the programming they develop.

There are also many other studies and programs focused on expanding access, promoting student success, or helping low-income individuals gain financial independence. Among the programs meant to increase access are those that often fall under the umbrella of TRIO, which was instituted as the result of the Higher Education Act of 1965 and its various reauthorizations and is intended to support various populations of low-income and underrepresented students. As the result of TRIO, many colleges have instituted programs as an outgrowth of TRIO's Student Support Services (SSS) program. For example, Kankakee Community College (KCC) in Illinois instituted several types of TRIO-funded support programs, focusing on low-income, first-generation students, as well as students with disabilities. Some of the special TRIO-funded programming, practices, and supports for these KCC students included "helping students gain career clarity, providing intensive academic planning, monitoring academic progress, developing comprehensive transfer services, offering learning enhancements, and recognizing achievements and resources that contribute to student success" (Walsh, 2000, p. 4). According to Julia Walsh, TRIO program director at KCC, students served by the TRIO program at KCC had a greater than 80% persistence rate. Other colleges around the country have implemented TRIO programs and seen similar results. In fact, a study of persistence and completion at TRIO schools demonstrates that TRIO participants have higher levels of persistence and completion than their peers (Zeiser et al., 2015).

Other programs have aimed to support low-income students gaining greater college access through awareness and preparation before arriving to college. Among these programs are TRIO's Upward Bound and the Gaining Early Awareness and

Readiness for Undergraduate Program, more commonly called GEAR UP. A study by Bausmith and France (2012) found that GEAR UP provided improved college readiness based on a variety of measures. Other studies of GEAR UP programs, such those by Bowman et al. (2018) and Heisel (2005), have found similar benefits in Iowa and New Jersey, respectively.

Colleges, too, have implemented their own local programming to ensure that low-income and underrepresented students have access to college and can begin successfully. For example, many colleges have implemented summer bridge programs, which are often meant to help low-income and/or first-generation students prepare for college expectations. While these summer bridge programs are more common at four-year schools, there is evidence of them at community colleges. Kallison and Stader (2012) reviewed two such programs at two different Texas community colleges and found benefits for economically disadvantaged students. Additionally, many colleges, such as Harrisburg Area Community College (HACC), have created bridge-type programs to improve the access and success of underrepresented and low-income students. HACC has an English bridge program with a neighboring urban high school, which allows students to circumvent developmental coursework if they pass a high school course that was developed as a mirror of the college's highest-level English developmental course. The program has provided an on-ramp into college-level coursework for many students and helps to prevent the likelihood that they will get caught up in the cycle of developmental education.

Additional research exists on the need for colleges to provide equitable opportunity to all students and to help mitigate the barriers that often exist in our racially and economically stratified systems. Mudge and Higgins (2011) examine some of the key elements that are necessary to close education gaps and eliminate barriers for low-income and underrepresented first-generation populations. Other researchers have examined various other aspects of college access for low-income and minority students (Castro, 2013; Cokely et al., 2016; Martinez & Klopott, 2005; Pitre & Pitre, 2009; Purnell et al., 2004; Tovar, 2015).

Still more research exists that examines the effects of welfare-to-work programs, including those grounded in education and skills training and focused on helping individuals end the use of or proactively avoid a need for welfare. A nearly two-decades old study by Garry Barrett (2002) found that educational attainment has a significant impact on the welfare exit rate – and even more for women than men. Likewise, Gayle Hamilton (2002) in a report titled "Moving People from Welfare to Work," which focused on 11 different welfare-to-work programs, found that all welfare-to-work programs increased employment and earnings and decreased welfare dependence. Hamilton also found that the programs that were "well-funded, well-run, integrated case management-based programs offered advantages" over programs that were more traditional in nature. Still other studies have examined the benefits and outcomes of welfare-to-work programs, the value of education in those programs, and the outcomes (Eberts, 2017; Greenberg & Cebulla, 2008; Greenberg & Robins, 2011; Jordan & Altman, 2018; Pizzolato & Olson, 2016).

Summary

This chapter has outlined the anti-deficit framework that was used to approach this study of the selected community college's KEYS program. That framework was appropriate to help understand how and why these KEYS students were successful in ways that often surpass their non-program peers. Likewise, as indicated by the previous anti-deficit work of Harper (2010), by focusing on the positive aspects of what a person can do – and not on their deficits – this study aimed to uncover what specific elements of the selected KEYS program supported participants' success and enabled them to succeed, despite what would appear to be potential challenges that could derail them.

Depending on the outcome of this research, additional avenues for further research may exist. For example, it may be feasible to do comparisons of this college's KEYS program outcomes to one or more of the other fourteen KEYS programs at the remaining Pennsylvania community colleges. Another research option may include exploring the outcomes of why this college's KEYS students were successful and determining if other programs at the college or other institutions have created similar conditions for student success. A third potential avenue for additional research could be expanding the research of the initial case study to include not only a larger sample of this college's KEYS students but also to include a study of KEYS artifacts that may influence student behavior. Finally, a fourth compelling idea for related research could be to compare elements of this school's KEYS facilitators relationships with their student participants to successful coach-athlete relationships and determine what similarities

exist. In any respect, the outcomes of this research study present a range of options that offer to expand the canon of knowledge relative to student success.

Researching the selected Pennsylvania community college's KEYS program, a program that provides increased access and equity to low-income and underserved populations, offered a potential recipe for improving the community college experience if we can discern the characteristics that make the KEYS program successful. There is much to learn about the success of the KEYS program, and we can unlock those doors to opportunity, success, equity, and access if we determined the right KEYS.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Introduction

This study explored *how* and *why* the KEYS program students at the selected

Pennsylvania community college were able to attain academic success and outpace their

non-program peers in retention and other success metrics. What makes this study

particularly compelling is the composition of most KEYS programs in Pennsylvania,

including at the selected school. Serving only students who fall at or below the poverty

line, the 15 different KEYS programs at PA's community colleges face adversity in

promoting student success simply based on what historical data indicates about lower

income students. As established in Chapter 1, students who are economically

disadvantaged are far less likely to complete a college credential and are more likely to

stop out than their more economically advantaged peers (Goldrick-Rab, 2006). And yet,

the KEYS program students at many Pennsylvania community colleges, including the

school in this study, are defying the odds and seeing unparalleled success. This research

will endeavor to understand the *how* and *why*; what enables these KEYS students to

unlock the door to success?

As a process framework, the research used an anti-deficit approach first identified

by Shaun Harper (2010). With this in mind, the research attempted to uncover what in the

institution's KEYS program promotes student success and allows the participants to

outpace their non-program peers, despite the adversity and disadvantages that many face.

Unlike in more traditional research studies, the anti-deficit framework focuses on

uncovering what allows participants to be successful instead of what factors put them at risk. The research was guided by the following research questions.

Guiding Research Question

> *What contributes to students' experiences in the KEYS program?*

Additional Research Sub-questions

> 1. *What components, unrelated to the KEYS program, facilitated students' success at this college?*
>
> 2. *What components of the KEYS program at this community college helped students succeed?*

Methodological Design

In deciding upon a design for this study, the qualitative approach seemed to be a natural fit for its ability to help the researcher gather thick, rich data about KEYS students' experience at a particular community college and uncover more about the phenomenon of their success, which runs counter to what others such as Sara Goldrick-Rab (2006) have established about lower-income student success. From the various types of qualitative studies, the case study format rose to the fore of options due its ability to allow the researcher to explore a phenomenon within a case. According to the work of Stake (2005), a "case study is not a type of methodology but a choice of what is to be studied." Therefore, since the focus in the study was on the case or unit of analysis – the KEYS program at this community college – a case study is an appropriate methodological tool:

> Since it is the unit of analysis that determines whether a study is a case study, this type of qualitative research stands apart from other types

> described in this chapter. The other types of qualitative research – such as ethnography, phenomenology, narrative, and so on – are defined by the focus of the study, not the unit of analysis. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 39)

In this way, the KEYS program at the selected community college was the bounded case and each student participant in the study was a sub-case.

    This study used an instrumental case study approach to conduct the research. The instrumental case study approach was selected for a number of reasons but predominantly because it allowed the researcher to isolate and collect data specific to this institution's KEYS program within that bounded case. The case study approach was also an appropriate choice because the focus is not just on why or how students learn but more on why or how *within (and because of)* their participation in this select community college KEYS program, which qualified it as an intrinsically bounded case for the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The KEYS program also fits as a bounded case according to Crowe et al. (2011):

> [E]ach case should have a pre-defined boundary which clarifies the nature and time period covered by the case study (i.e. its scope, beginning and end), the relevant social group, organisation or geographical area of interest to the investigator, the types of evidence to be collected, and the priorities for data collection and analysis.

Furthermore, the instrumental case study is an appropriate selection for the research design because of its focus on one issue or concern within a bounded case (Creswell, 2007).

    Within this case, the student participants were sub-cases, each providing data about the research being conducted on the case itself. As a result, their story and experience within the bounded case of the KEYS program, each providing another layer

of rich data for analysis. Yin (2003) indicates that case studies that use multiple cases, or even sub-cases within the same overarching case, gain some benefit from "the logic of replication." The use of these sub-cases, too, fits well with the anti-deficit framework, as each sub-case then gives voice to each participant as a member of the case.

The primary method of data collection was through semi-structured interviews. The decision to use semi-structured interviews allowed for the researcher to have a consistent approach to the questioning of participants and the collection of data to uncover patterns of responses while at the same time giving the interview process some flexibility to understand the varying experiences that each participant has to offer regarding their time in the KEYS program. Such an approach demonstrated the value of each participant's unique experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The use of a semi-structured interview protocol also paired well with the anti-deficit framework espoused by Shaun Harper (2010). Since KEYS students are often marginalized and disadvantaged for their socioeconomic status – and given the historical data that evidences the poor academic success rates of lower-income students (Goldrick-Rab, 2006) – there is often a tendency to focus on their shortcomings and failures. However, in interviewing the participants, the questions were constructed to ensure a focus on what allowed the participants to succeed in this college's KEYS program, instead of focusing on what caused them hardship or struggle. Vital in the research design and questioning was Harper's assertion in his 2010 framework: We can "learn much by inviting those who have been successful to offer explanatory insights into their success" (pp. 71-72).

The research questions consisted of some demographic questions but were predominantly focused on teasing out the students' experiences in the KEYS program and what allowed them to succeed. Most of the questions were open-ended to allow for the student participants to share their experiences and help the researcher uncover patterns in the data. Many of the questions also contained potential sub-questions for follow-up, depending on the direction the participant's answers take the response; however, the researcher was mindful to ask those questions only in follow-up or if the participant was unsure how to respond in order to prevent any sense of leading the response. For example, one of the questions for the interview and its potential follow-up question was as follows:

- Tell me about your experience and interactions with your KEYS facilitator.

  o How often did you meet with your facilitator? How would you meet with the facilitator?

  o Were you required to attend any special meetings or sessions with your facilitator or other students? If so, please describe the meetings.

  o What types of conversations would you have with your KEYS facilitator?

  o How did your facilitator make you feel about being a student? About being at the college? About yourself? About your goals?

  o Do you feel that your facilitator helped you be successful as a student? Why or why not?

Sample Population

The research site for the study was a community college in Pennsylvania, one of the sixteen community colleges in Pennsylvania. Though the student participants were current students or recent graduates at the selected institution, no interactions actually occurred on the college campus as all interviews were conducted remotely. The student participants selected for the research had to meet the following criteria:

- be at least 19 years of age, pursuant to Nebraska state law;

- be current students in the selected institution's KEYS program or recent graduates (within the last two semesters); and

- have adequate experience with the KEYS program . . . current KEYS students must have participated for at least one year of enrollment in the program to qualify.

To begin the process, the researcher prepared a flyer to advertise the opportunity to participate in a research study about the KEYS program and to offer a $25 gift card for participation. This flyer was shared with the KEYS director, and she recruited students to participate through email outreach that she sent. The researcher also asked the program director to post the flyer near the campus KEYS office and on any program social media pages.

The study engaged 6 participants in the interview process. In order to ensure an unbiased approach, the college's KEYS students were given a deadline by which to apply for participation. Since more than 6 students responded (initially there were 17 inquiries), the potential participants were selected randomly using a blind selection process, with

priority selection given to the earliest email responses. Student volunteers not selected to participate were sent an email to thank them for volunteering.

Prior to research beginning, the study received approval from the IRB process at both the University of Nebraska and the selected Pennsylvania community college.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Once the sample size of participants was selected, data collection occurred though remote/virtual interviews conducted through Zoom. The interview process was recorded so that data from the interviews could be transcribed for coding and analysis. Even though the interview was not scheduled without receipt of the informed consent documents, the interview began with the researcher confirming consent again verbally and informing the participant of their ability to cease participation at any time. Then the interview began and consisted of a series of seven demographic questions and ten content-focused questions meant to explore the students' experiences at the college and with the college's KEYS program more specifically. The questions were developed with an anti-deficit framework in mind to ensure the data underscored the participants' experiences and what has helped them be successful.

To protect the participants' identity and provide anonymity, each student participant's name was replaced with a general moniker (Student 1, Student 2) at the beginning of their interview session. That process took place at the very beginning of the interview process, before any other steps, and the researcher used that general moniker to address the participant throughout the remainder of the interview process. All materials relating to the interview data and recorded sessions were stored using that moniker on the

researcher's personal computer, and only the researcher will have access to the list that links the moniker to the student participants' actual identities.

In regards to timeframe, it was expected that the recruitment period from the time of outreach to the time of participant selection would take 2 to 3 weeks, unless the initial responses failed to garner 6 participants, at which time additional outreach would be needed and an extended deadline of another 1 to 2 weeks would be provided. Once the participants were selected, all interviews were scheduled within a 2-week period to minimize the opportunity for participants to engage with one another and skew any data responses. It was anticipated that most interviews would last between 40- and 60-minutes in duration. Aside from potential member checking with the participants, no additional follow up will be needed with participants, unless clarifications were needed for any responses.

Data Analysis

To maximize the potential for successful data analysis (Maxwell, 2013), the researcher listened to/review all the recorded Zoom interviews and make notes and memos, developing tentative categories and potential relationships. Then all Zoom interviews were sent to Rev.com for transcription.

Following transcription, the researcher began the process of exploring, categorizing, and coding the data. During this step, the data was analyzed using the constant comparative method—and a coding scheme to organize the data into themes, categories, and codes was employed. As the data was coded, categories were established to determine if/when participant responses connected – or did not connect – to existing

research and theories on student success. In particular, the researcher examined the extent

to whether some of the theories outlined in Chapter 2 and the literature review were

related to KEYS students' success at the selected community college. Some of these

potential theoretical tie ins and underpinnings included the following:

    a. Vincent Tinto's theory of social integration (1975, 1993);

    b. Laura Rendon's theory of validation (1994);

    c. Nancy Schlossberg's work with mattering and marginality (1989); and

    d. Student agency theory (Bandura, 1977, 2001).

Ethical Considerations

While the potential for harm to participants is expected to be negligible, the

researcher took steps to protect the participants. First and foremost among those steps

was to ensure the participants were informed and provided consent, not only on the initial

signed consent form – but also verbally prior to the start of the interview process. During

this period, the researcher also ensured that the participants knew their rights and

understood that they could cease participation at any time without repercussions of any

sort.

Early communications to recruit participants also outlined participants' rights and

underscored the fact that participating – or electing not to participate – would not hurt

their standing with the college's KEYS program in any way. Those communications also

outlined the manner to raise concerns or complaints and clearly articulated steps taken to

protect the privacy of participants.

One of the key steps to protect the rights and privacy of the participants, as mentioned earlier, was the use of a general moniker in lieu of participant names on all data. Only the researcher had access to the list linking the monikers (and the corresponding data), which will be saved under a password protected file on the researcher's personal computer for the duration of the project.

Trustworthiness

In order to provide validation and trustworthiness to the data collected in this research study, there are several steps the researcher took. First, the researcher used member checking to ensure data accuracy. Participants had the opportunity to review their transcribed interviews, offer feedback, make corrections, or reject portions of the interview that are inaccurate. Member checking is an effective way to ensure that data is correct and can be used to analyze and draw conclusions (Mertens, 2015). Three of the six participants responded to the member checking outreach and agreed with the content of the transcripts, indicating that no changes were necessary to the transcripts of the interview.

The researcher performed awareness checking with an objective third party familiar with the KEYS program and who provided informed evaluation and gave perspective for the data uncovered about the selected college's KEYS program and its participants. This awareness check was conducted by an assistant vice president of learning enhancement at a Pennsylvania community college, who formerly had oversight of the KEYS program at her institution.

These two processes provided additional credibility, trustworthiness, and validity to the data, particularly since the researcher was limited in data collection by the IRB of the community college.

Assumptions

The researcher made the following assumptions in launching this research study.

1. The researcher assumed that participants would respond openly and honestly to all research questions during the interview process.

2. The researcher assumed that the sample size and composition would be adequate to provide results and data that add value to the outcomes of the research process.

3. The researcher assumed that selected college's KEYS students will want to participate in the study and that the $25 gift card incentive would motivate participation.

Research Limitations of the Study

Given that this is a case study, there were expected to be limits on the transferability of the data that is collected and the outcomes that are recorded. Those limitations were further compounded by the small sample size of the participants to be interviewed. However, the focus of the study was not necessary to generalize the results beyond the initial study but instead to understand better how and why the selected community college's KEYS program students were successful. To expand the limits of the study to improve generalizability, the study could be broadened to include more participants or could be expanded to a comparative case study with multiple Pennsylvania

community college KEYS programs included. An additional limitation could arise with

the participant sampling, even though randomized. Students had the ability to volunteer

to participate, and the researcher could not control who volunteered. Thus, there could be

disproportionate representation from one demographic group, one major or school at the

college, or some other grouping of students. There could also be a limitation if the study

had failed to get an adequate number of participants. Finally, the most pressing limitation

of the study was that the researcher was limited in the data collection by the selected

community college's IRB.

Delimitations

In focusing on the success of KEYS students and the underlying reason for that

success, one community college in Pennsylvania was chosen to bound the case study

approach. It did not include students outside the KEYS program at the selected college or

KEYS students from other colleges.

Researcher Subjectivity

The researcher was mindful of subjectivity in this study. He openly acknowledged

that he has familiarity with the KEYS programs at Pennsylvania's community colleges

due to his work experiences with the program and their students, as well as his personal

relationship with the KEYS director at one of the community colleges. For that reason, he

elected to work with the different KEYS program because he did not know anyone at that

institution.

The researcher is also a college administrator, an adjunct professor, and a student

success professional at a Pennsylvania community college, though not the selected

college. Thus, he had to be wary that his experiences, his assumptions, and his perceptions do not influence the research.

Those potential biases and subjectivity concerns only heightened the need for member checking and awareness checking throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Summary

Through the use of an instrumental case study approach, this study explored *how* and *why* the KEYS program students at a select Pennsylvania community college were able to attain academic success. This study will provide value to colleges and human services departments in helping them understand how to better serve low-income individuals and how to help them break free from financial dependence on social support programs.

Chapter 4

Qualitative Results

The research in this case study was conducted through participant interviews from an anti-deficit framework, similar to the one first created by Shaun Harper (2012). In this framework, questions that are asked attempt to elicit what allows a student to be successful as opposed to the more traditional approach of examining why an individual failed and believing the fault lies within that person. This anti-deficit approach was helpful in trying to determine why the KEYS program students at the selected Pennsylvania community college were successful at rates that often outpaced their non-KEYS peers—and it was especially useful for what has often been an underserved and marginalized population (low income students).

During the study, the KEYS director at the selected community college shared the researcher's flyer (Appendix C) with qualifying student participants view their college email and directed them to contact the researcher by phone or email if interested in participating. Seventeen students reached out to the researcher with interest, and six KEYS students were selected and interviewed, using a first-come, first served approach.

To participate in the study, the students had to be active participants in the KEYS program at the college or recent graduates within the last year – and they needed to be at least 19 years of age, pursuant to Nebraska law. The interviews were recorded on Zoom, and the recordings were later transcribed through an external provider, Rev.com. The transcripts were coded using a hybrid format of deductive/inductive analysis described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) as the researcher came in with some pre-conceived ideas for

themes and categories; however, the majority of the themes and categories arose from

analysis of the transcripts. Codes were recorded on the left column of the transcripts, and

as themes arose, they were recorded on the right column of the transcripts.

To increase trustworthiness of the data, member checking was performed by

student participants and awareness checking by a third-party reviewer familiar with the

KEYS programs in Pennsylvania, respectively. Five of the six participants responded to

outreach for member checking, and all five confirmed the accuracy of their interview

transcripts with no changes. Likewise, the assistant vice-president who did awareness

checking for the research offered these words in her analysis and review:

> The conclusions are presented in a way that effectively address the research
> question. The findings are integrated with the theory employed in the first chapter,
> Harper's Anti-Deficit Framework (2010) and the body of knowledge presented in
> literature review (Chapter Two).

Additionally, there were some limitations with the ability to triangulate the data

collected from the interviews because of restrictions placed by the IRB committee at the

selected community college. While triangulation is considered an important part of data

validation for case studies, Fielding and Fielding (1986) indicate "[I]t is not true that

triangulation automatically increases validity." They note that any tool used for data

collection is subject to potential bias and invalidity concerns. However, with the

completion of the member checking and the awareness check, some of that concern is

mitigated. Furthermore, the existence of the different participant voices as sub-cases

within the larger case of the KEYS program, as well as the consistency provided by the

semi-structured interview protocol, there is a greater assurance of validity and reliability:

"Multiple-case studies reduce concerns about external validity somewhat, as consistent

findings across your cases can be used to counter the argument that you are describing some idiosyncrasy of your specific participants" (Lazar et al., 2017). The same would seem to be true, as well, for a single-case design with multiple participants as sub-cases.

Demographic Data

At the start of the interview process for each participant, after confirming consent verbally (which had also been collected in writing prior to the interview), the researcher asked a series of demographic questions that participants could opt out of answering. Participants were informed that there was no penalty for not answering the demographic questions, but all 6 student participants elected to share their information. The 6 KEYS participants from the study represent a range of demographic diversity, though all of the participants in the study were adult students over the age of 25. All 6 students were parents, and 5 of the 6 were working at least part-time. One (1) of the students was not currently working due to a disability that had forced him to seek a new career path following an automobile accident. A summary of this demographic data is outlined in Table 2.

These demographic data points are important because they help to provide context for many of the students' experiences and likely influenced their interactions with the KEYS program.

Study Participants

Student 1 was an Asian male in the 35-45 age grouping. He was a parent, who worked part-time while attending college. He learned about the KEYS program at the college when he was applying to the school and was seeking financial assistance

Table 2

Participant Demographic Summary

	Age Range	Gender	Race	Parental Status	Work Status
Student 1	35-45	Male	Asian	Parent	Working part-time
Student 2	25-35	Female	Black	Parent	Working – part-time when in class, full-time between semesters
Student 3	35-45	Female	More than one race	Parent	Working part-time
Student 4	45+	Female	White	Parent	Working part-time
Student 5	45+	Male	White	Parent	Not working
Student 6	35-45	Female	White	Parent	Working – part-time

through scholarships. The KEYS program was recommended to him by a college employee. Student 1 was in the nursing program, and he hoped to complete his RN program at the college and enter the workforce, with perhaps a longer-term goal to seek his Bachelor's degree in nursing. He was in his final semester at the college, with hopes of graduating in May 2024.

Student 2 was a Black female in the 25-35 age grouping. She was a parent of young children, and she worked part-time during the school year and picked up extra hours during times off from college, working full time in summer and over winter breaks. Her mother helped her with childcare when she was working, so she indicated she had some flexibility to focus on school and work. She had an associate's degree in criminal justice but was not working in that field. Ultimately, she aspired to be a nurse, but she did

not pass her TEAS exam to qualify for entry to the nursing program, so she was currently in her final semester to become a medical assistant. She was doing her externship in spring 2024, and she hoped that working as a medical assistant will be her stepping stone into nursing.

Student 3 was a multi-race female in the 35-45 age grouping. She was a parent and worked part-time in the college work study program, helping students with financial aid. Student 3 learned about the KEYS program when she needed additional financial support after a medical issue forced her to quit working and return to school. During that time, she had to go onto welfare to support herself and her child, and her caseworker informed her about the KEYS program. Then she was able to meet one of the college's KEYS facilitators at an event and got enrolled at the selected community college – and joined their KEYS program – shortly thereafter. Student 3 described herself in these words, "I'm a helper. I've always been in the helping professions." Following in her grandmother's, mother's, and aunt's footsteps, Student 3 initially joined the nursing program, but she found it "too draining" physically. Thus, she transferred to the Addictions Studies/Human Services program with the hope to help others. This career goal also reflected her experience as an addict in recovery and her desire to help others reach that goal. Student 3 was just past the halfway mark of her associate's degree and hoped to complete her program of study after three more semesters.

Student 4 was a white female in the 45+ age range. She gave birth to a child, but was not raising the child. Student 4 worked part-time in the college's work study program in the financial aid office, processing FAFSA's and helping students with financial aid

questions and indicated that she loves the job. Student 4 learned about the KEYS

program on the college's website while doing research herself. She was in the Addictions

Studies/Human Services program and aspired to be a recovery specialist in the future.

Student 4 self-reported a past addiction and notes that as the inspiration she needed to

leave her previous job in customer service and pursue this new venture to help others like

her. Student 4 expected to graduate in May 2024.

Student 5 was a white male in the 45+ age range. He was a parent of a 2-year-old

daughter, and he did not work while in school. Student 5 previously worked in the

automotive industry, doing auto repair and collision work, but he had to change careers

after an accident that led to him being paralyzed from the waist down. Student 5 self-

reported former addictions and a criminal background. That background – as well as a

desire to help others who are like him – has led him to a career goal of a drug counselor.

Thus, Student 5 was studying in the Addictions Studies/Human Services program at the

selected community college. He anticipated graduation in May 2025, so he was just over

a year away.

Student 6 was a white female in the 35 to 45 age range. She was a parent, who

worked part-time while a student at the community college. She indicated that she was

notified about the college's KEYS program through the county's CareerLink after she

began getting cash assistance (SNAP). Student 6 reported a past history of criminal

charges and drug abuse, so she entered from the Addictions Studies/Human Services

program at the college and graduated in May 2023. Student 6 was currently taking

additional coursework with the intention of transferring to Southern New Hampshire

University to continue her education on the way to being an addictions counselor. In

regards to her career goals, she stated:

> With going into drug and alcohol addiction studies, I'm not limited anymore to, not being able to get a job. They don't hold that over my head. And I just feel that, like I said, with my background, I am able to help back by helping others with everything I've been through.

Qualitative Findings

The interview process was centered around the key research question: *What*

contributes to students' experiences in the KEYS program? The semi-structured

interview protocol, then, consisted of 2 screening questions, 2 consent confirmation

questions, 7 demographic questions, and 6 content questions, with 11 probing

sub-questions. Findings are situated around 4 themes of the KEYS program's role in

helping students find academic success:

- the overall sense of benefit of participation in KEYS,

- the experience of working with the KEYS facilitator,

- the impact of connections with the KEYS program and other KEYS students, and

- the student's perception of the KEYS program's capacity to help them (and others) become financially independent.

These 4 themes were identified from the review and analysis of interview transcript data,

and data was collected and tallied based the number of occurrences a particular code – or

a related code – was used to describe some aspect of a participant's experience in the

KEYS program.

In the following pages, the qualitative findings around these four themes are described in greater detail.

Overall Sense of Benefit of Participation in KEYS

Four of the six student participants in the study have had very positive experiences with the KEYS program at the selected community college and spoke highly of the impact of the program in their success. One student had a neutral experience, though he indicated that there were some benefits of the program that have helped him. The final student has a less positive experience with the KEYS program, which she attributed to working with a brand-new KEYS facilitator because she reported her friend, with a more experienced facilitator, had a much different – and more positive – experience.

Student 1 had a largely neutral outlook on his interactions with the KEYS program and felt that the program provided limited benefits to him as a student. He felt this way because he was expecting the KEYS facilitator to provide greater support for him academically. He indicated that the greatest benefit to him from KEYS was for the financial support, though he had hoped they would be providing more money to help him than was provided. He described his feelings in these words:

> Well, the main thing is they focus on your financial side. They try to help as much as they can, and kind of for educational [support], they're not much. Because they have those facilitator in case program and all the facilitators are not trained for certain [academic] programs. So, suppose my facilitator, she's not that good on our science program or our nursing program. So, it's a harming concern if I'm passing or not passing. Is it I'm doing well, or not? She couldn't give me any additional information if I needed, because she is on probably different course related, she's more comfortable. So, academically, I don't get much help, but financially they do as much as they can. [sic]

Student 2 had a more negative experience with the KEYS program and ultimately left the program because she felt as if she had not been helped. Student 2 reported that she felt misled by the KEYS program facilitator because she was told they would pay for her books but did not do so after her first semester. She described the situation in this manner:

> So my first semester it was good, they did help me buying the book. But the second and third one, no. My caseworker . . . I like to be on time. When I got my schedule, I went and give it to them. They never send it in. So they're late to send it in. And sometime, she said that I'm not communicating, which I did, like I email her and stuff like this, because I don't like to be late on nothing.

Student 2 also reported issues with communication between her and her caseworker that led to other disconnects with her support from the facilitator, including not receiving gas money to pay for transportation expenses to classes. Student 2 felt as if her issues with the program were more related to her facilitator being less experienced and more newly hired because she reports that her friend in the KEYS program had a much more positive experience:

> My caseworker was new, so I think she was learning on me, I think, I don't know. But her have so many experience already for the program. But mine, I don't know. It's because she was new, that's why all this was happening.

Students 3 through 6 had a more positive report on the impact of their participation in the KEYS program at the selected community college. Student 3 described her KEYS facilitator as a "dog" because she "fights for me to get something [that I need]." She also noted that her KEYS facilitator always came through with anything she needed for support and allowed her to stay focused on school: books, bus passes, food, gift cards, and anything else that she fell short of on a part-time salary while

attending school full time. Student 3 also indicated that her participation in KEYS had made a significant difference in her time at the community college: "They have nothing but helped me be successful."

Student 4 echoed these sentiments about her participation in the KEYS program. She really stressed how her KEYS facilitator made her feel "at ease" with coming to school, particularly since Student 4 was significantly older than many students at the community college. Student 4 also indicated that the financial support of the KEYS program is a real benefit as they have helped her with bus passes, secure housing (which is not something the KEYS would normally help with), finding scholarships, and purchasing books. All of this support, both financial and interpersonal, has made a major difference in supporting the success of Student 4. In fact, she described the KEYS program with these words: "That program, it's just wonderful."

Student 5 also felt that KEYS had helped him with his success at the college. Being wheelchair bound and not able to work while he embarked on his new career path through education, Student 5 relied on the financial support he gets from the KEYS program to stay in school. He noted that KEYS helping with the purchase of books, materials for class, and other needs was vital to his success and eliminated his financial worries, which was his biggest concern with returning to school. However, he also noted that KEYS staff are both accessible and supportive: "Anytime I've ever had a question, just pop into the office and they're very helpful."

Student 6 shared that the KEYS program had helped her overcome the negative stigma of being lower income and on public assistance:

Sometimes you get a backlash on being on, in assistance programs. And I was never made to feel that way in the KEYS program. And they made me understand that the whole point of the program was to get you to a point where you don't need to be on assistance anymore.

Student 6 also indicated that the KEYS program gave her something else to be proud of and that "It gave me a sense of pride to be in the program and the fact that I never thought I was ever going to finish school, and here I finished."

The Experience of Working with the KEYS Facilitator

Student participants in the study were asked about their experience working with the KEYS facilitator and the relationship they had developed. Students in the KEYS program at this community college were expected to meet with their KEYS facilitator at least once a month. Most of the students reported meeting face-to-face in the post-COVID era, but nearly all report that flexibility existed to meet over Zoom or via phone if needed. Four of the six participants reported a very positive relationship with their KEYS facilitator; one participant reported a more perfunctory relationship, grounded in the necessity of meeting; and the sixth participant was critical of her relationship with her KEYS facilitator.

Student 1 was mostly neutral about his relationship with his KEYS facilitator and described their interactions as very routine and transactional. He indicated that the facilitator tried to establish a connection with him by routinely asking at each session, "[H]ow's things going, how's family, how's work, and how's study." However, Student 1 did not seem to be interested in forging a connection with his facilitator and instead seemed to be more interested in what financial support he could obtain from the program. He stated that after the routine introductory period of each meeting, the facilitator then

would ask, "'Do you need anything?' And then we go through what I can have and what I don't have. So, those are the very same every meeting."

As previously reported, Student 2 was disappointed in her interactions with her facilitator. She marked this disconnect up to the facilitator being "new." Her statements in the interview also pointed to frustration about not receiving funds to purchase books, but from the interview it was not clear the exact cause of why those funds were not provided, outside what Student 2 reported about the facilitator being new to the job.

Students 3 through 6 reported much more positive connections with their KEYS facilitator. Student 3 went so far as to say, "I think if not for KEYS and my facilitator, I probably would not have made it." She indicated that her facilitator was always available to support her and to offer financial support, and she described her facilitator as her "biggest cheerleader outside of my family." The willingness of her facilitator to "fight" for her needs also helped to create a bond and some loyalty between the facilitator and Student 3, as well.

Student 4 also reported a theme of caring and support from the KEYS facilitator that led to her feeling more comfortable, especially as an older woman returning to school with many younger classmates. Student 4 reported that her facilitator "always treated me with respect and she's a wonderful person." She also said this about her facilitator: "She knows everything about my life."

Student 5 reported that the best thing about working with the KEYS facilitator was the personal connection they build with the participants through meetings and follow ups – and just showing compassion and care. Student 5 described the KEYS facilitators'

relationship with the students in this manner: "Very familiar with everyone. Very personal, which makes it a much more comfortable situation for a non-traditional student like myself going back." Student 5 also indicated that the facilitator was very responsive to his needs and outreach, which further cemented his trust in her.

Student 6 shared her story of support and care from her regular monthly check-in appointments with her KEYS facilitator. Most of those meetings took place in person, but regardless of the setting, Student 6 indicated that even when she was not meeting with her facilitator, even if they were just passing in the hallway, the facilitator would ask if Student 6 needed anything or how she was doing. This lead Student 6 to describe her facilitator as someone "who cares" instead of someone who's "just there for a check." Student 6 also reported that the encouragement from her facilitator was a factor that helped her keep progressing.

Connection with the Program and Other KEYS Students

During the interview process, the six participants were asked about their interactions with other KEYS students. This question was meant to address the types of interactions that the participants had with other KEYS students, if they developed connections with those students or the program, and the potential impact of those connections, particularly since such connections can often lead to better academic success.

The data indicated that two of the study participants reported that they had relatively limited to no interaction with other KEYS students at their community college.

The other four students all report connections with other KEYS students that were either

established or blossoming over the course of their time in the KEYS program.

Student 1 and Student 2 were the participants who reported limited interactions

with other KEYS students. Student 1 felt some frustration that KEYS did not do more

group sessions beyond the initial welcome session or the end of semester sessions:

> At the end of the session, they do a celebration. Other than that, they don't. And
> to be honest, other day I just find out that three of the other students from my
> class is part of the KEYS program, but I don't know them. So it's kind of
> scattered.

Student 1 also felt that there was limited effort from the KEYS program to allow students

to connect:

> No, I don't think there is a policy we can interact with each other, because there is
> no group message or group session. So, there's no chance. It's the only way you
> can know who's part of the program or not, is the initial meeting or the end of
> semester meeting, celebration.

Likewise, Student 2 really felt limited connection to the program overall, including to

other students.

Students 3, 4, 5, and 6 all reported much stronger connections with fellow KEYS

students and with the larger context of the program. Student 3 reported that she has "a

few KEYS people that are literally my good friends." She reported spending time with

those KEYS friends outside of school and that they share commonalities that allow them

to connect beyond just being students. Student 4 also reported having KEYS friends,

some of whom she connected with through her job in the financial aid office. She also

indicated that with the KEYS friends, she felt a sense of commonality that allowed her to

have a better connection: "[W]e just have so much more in common than we ever

thought." Student 6 also echoed these sentiments of connection and commonality about

the program, even though she did not interact with other KEYS students outside of school

or outside the program:

> It's [being in KEYS] is not really something we discussed in the out in the open. I know when I went to a couple of gatherings, there were students there that I didn't even know who were in the KEYS program that I was in class with. I'm like, 'Oh my gosh, you're a KEYS student, too?' I guess I was so focused on academics and on school, I didn't feel any different than really any of the other students. There was a lot of times that I would forget I was even in KEYS, because everything was so normal.

Such normalizing of participation in the KEYS program as described here by Student 6

was something that the data demonstrated across the spectrum of the participants and was

facilitated by the sense of connection they felt with the program. Even Student 5, who

admitted he was just starting to become more involved with college activities at the

gaming center and sports center lounge, shared that he was connected to some of his

fellow KEYS students and that while he did not know who they were initially he came to

interact with them because "a lot of them have been in my classes." He described how he

first learned of his fellow KEYS participants and how that connection then grows: "A lot

of the people that I've, honestly, it just comes up in conversation. You see each other

passing through the office. Then you end up being in class together. Next thing you

know, you end up talking, hanging out."

The data for the four students who reported the strongest connections to their

fellow KEYS students and the KEYS program – Students 3, 4, 5, and 6 – also showed

that they all felt a sense of belonging at the community college because of those

connections. Student 6 indicated that this sense of connection continued even after her

completion of the associate's degree at the community college and during her

continuation of the KEYS program on the way to her bachelor's degree at a four-year

school because her facilitator remained committed and "she's making sure I will not fail."

Perception of the KEYS Program Impact on Financial Independence

The primary goal of the KEYS program in Pennsylvania is to use education as a

vehicle to transport individuals on financial assistance programs (SNAP and TANF) to

financial independence from government support. Given that stated goal of the KEYS

programs in Pennsylvania, the six participants from the selected community college were

asked the following question in the interview protocol that was meant to elicit "big

picture" responses about the selected KEYS program and its impact on their financial

independence:

> One of the stated goals of the KEYS programs in Pennsylvania is to help
> community college students move from using government support such as SNAP
> or TANF to financial independence. Do you feel that participating in the KEYS
> program will/has helped you move toward financial independence?

Data from five of the six participants demonstrated that the students felt the KEYS

program had some level of positive impact in moving them toward financial

independence.

Student 2 was the sole outlier in regards to this question. She did not feel that her

experience with the KEYS program set her up for financial independence.

Student 1, for most of the interview process, remained neutral to somewhat

negative about the KEYS program and his participation in the program. However, even

he had some sense that the program was going to benefit him longer term, though he

repeated that the KEYS program did not provide sufficient funds to help him enough

during his enrollment. He stated, "I wouldn't say it's independence, but kind of helped." Earlier in the interview process, Student 1 had also stated that just being in the nursing program and getting some financial support from KEYS to help him stay enrolled will help him reach his goals.

Student 4 indicated that one of her ultimate goals was to not need food stamps any longer because, as she described it, "It's embarrassing" and "It's always a negative." Therefore, she reported that she looks forward to the day when she can "be a person to pull out my debit card and not my food stamp card in line." Student 4 felt that the KEYS program had set her up to achieve that financial independence: "I know now that they have given me the resources in my future so that if you complete the program the way you're supposed to, there's no reason that you don't [shouldn't achieve financial independence]."

Student 3 also believed the KEYS program has made a difference that will lead her to financial independence, and she answered that interview question in this manner:

> Yes, I believe so, and that's because they help me get an education I need in order to move to self-sufficiency. Because once I get a degree, that makes me more hirable. And because they are helping me through this process where I can focus full-time on my studies.

Student 5 also reported that the KEYS program will help him move away from public assistance, but he credited that largely because of their financial support to help him gain credentials along his educational journey: "In August I'll be able to take my CRS [Certified Recovery Specialist exam], which the KEYS will actually finance for me, which that'll be a big help of me becoming a peer specialist and getting back into the workforce." He noted that this support was essential to helping him re-enter the

workforce following his accident and the subsequent lower extremity paralysis that led to

him exiting the workforce.

Finally, Student 6 probably best summarized the overall sentiment of the final

four students as she also believed that the KEYS program had set her up to have longer

term success and financial independence. In response to the question about financial

independence, she stated the following:

> I know, once I've done school, I'm going to have a career that. . . . I'm going to
> have access to health insurance to where I'm not going to need government help.
> I'm going to be financially stable to where I'm not going to need help buying
> food for myself and my child every month. Had the KEYS program not helped
> me achieve these goals, I don't know if I would ever be able to come off, be able
> to take care of myself fully.

Analysis and Discussion of Themes

Through the course of coding and analyzing the data from the interviews, four

recurrent themes arose that speak to the larger aspect of KEYS and its influence on

promoting student success and the move toward financial independence. These themes

were determined by reviewing the coding of the interview transcripts and looking for

repeated ideas and patterns of thought. This process from the creation of codes on a

transcript to the categorization and development of themes from those codes is a "highly

inductive process" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), in which the researcher attempts to make

meaning from the data. Additionally, this type of coding analysis, as described in

Maxwell (2013), is meant to be more than just a tabulation of occurrences but also a

"fracturing" of the data to show what does and does not align. Table 3 outlines these

themes that arose from that "fracturing" and their occurrence in the responses of the six

participants.

Table 3

Themes in the Participant Transcript Data

Theme	Recurrence in the Transcript and Codes
Financial support	Student 1 – 5 times Student 2 – 5 times Student 3 – 5 times Student 4 – 9 times Student 5 – 6 times Student 6 – 3 times Total = 33 times
Academic or career goals	Student 1 – 1 time Student 2 – 5 times Student 3 – 2 times Student 4 – 5 times Student 5 – 10 times Student 6 – 8 times Total = 31 times
Connection / Belonging	Student 1 – 0 times Student 2 – 3 times Student 3 – 2 times Student 4 – 6 times Student 5 – 7 times Student 6 – 8 times Total = 26 times
Validation	Student 1 – 0 times Student 2 – 0 times Student 3 – 6 times Student 4 – 4 times Student 5 – 1 time Student 6 – 7 times Total = 18 times

The theme of financial support arose 33 times in the data that was coded from the transcripts of the 6 participants. All 6 of the participants used language in their responses that pointed to financial support being a significant benefit of their participation in the KEYS program at the community college. Even Student 1, who had a neutral to slightly

negative overall perception of his participation in KEYS, mentioned some aspect of

financial support 5 times, which was more far more than any of the other recurrent

themes for that participant. The preponderance of this data being the highest mentioned

of the 4 recurrent themes aligns with the fact that financial stressors is one of the top

reasons college students drop out. Data from the Education Data Initiative shows that

"42% of college dropouts indicate they left due to financial reasons. Financial sacrifice

and related stress are among the most common reasons former students give for dropping

out" (Hanson, 2023). Perhaps the greatest proof of this truth is in the words of the study

participants, including Student 4, who stated this about why the KEYS programs cultivate

success for their students:

> I think it goes back to the financial aspect. […] It is because a lot of the biggest
> stressor in life, I feel, is money. I feel if I didn't have these things, or if this
> program was not available to me the way it was, I don't think I would've been
> able to finish school. I do not think I would have been able to continue. I'd be
> stuck in the same rut.

Another of the recurrent themes that arose from the data was the notion of

academic or career goals. The 6 participants' responses gave rise to this theme 31 times

in the analysis of transcripts. Based on the responses of the 6 participants, it is clear that

the KEYS program keeps students focused on the development of academic and/or career

goals. Colleges across the nation have traditionally employed career services and

academic advising professionals to help to ensure that students enter college with clear

academic and career goals – and then continue towards those goals – because there is a

clear correlation between a lack of said goals and college success. In fact, a recent study

titled "The Impact of Academic Aspirations and Career Uncertainty on Students' College

Outcomes" found that lack of a clear goal or plan while attending school leads to worse college outcomes for a student (Edwin et al., 2022). Thus, the fact that all six of the participants in this study of the KEYS program made some mention of academic or career goals during the interview protocol indicates that the KEYS program at this community college, through its KEYS facilitators, tries to develop a solid focus and plan around a student's academic and professional goals. Student 5 described this aspect of the KEYS program by saying why KEYS students succeed, "A lot of it is their guidance. I would say a lot of it would be the guidance they give us. They put us on a path to succeed."

A third recurrent theme, which arose in the data analysis 26 times, was related to connection and belonging. Five (5) of the 6 participants in this research study responded to interview questions about what aspects of the KEYS program impacted them with language that described or referred to the existence (or absence, in the case of Student 2) of a connection or belonging, with their KEYS facilitator, with other KEYS students, or with the program as a whole. Four (4) of the 6 participants referenced some sense of connection or belonging with some aspect of the KEYS program and indicated it contributed to their success to some degree. Research from a range of studies in the past 20 or more years has pointed to the importance of connection and belonging to students' retention and success, with studies about marginality and mattering (Schlossberg, 1989) and belonging (Strayhorn, 2012) emphasizing the need for students to feel connected to the college in some manner in order to succeed. The fact that the vast majority of the

participants in this study touched on this theme of connection and belonging only underscores their innate knowledge of its importance, as well.

There may be some concern about the fact that two of the student participants – Students 1 and 2 – did not report a strong sense of connection or belonging, counter to what Students 3 through 6 experienced. It is important to address that topic momentarily. Student 1 noted that he was aware that his facilitator wanted to create connections for him (and with him); however, his responses seemed to indicate that he was largely in the KEYS program for the financial support. In his interview, he implied that he did not care to belong or get connected any more than was necessary. His participation in end-of-semester programming or the monthly meetings was out of necessity as required by the program – and for him only a means to an end (financial support from KEYS). Likewise, Student 2's experience with a new, inexperienced facilitator seemed to limit her opportunity to forge a sense of belonging or connection. For Student 2, the blockage resulted from her books not being paid for in her first semester at the college, and that created a barrier to trust or feeling connected with the KEYS facilitator (or program) from that point forward, even though she reported her friend had a positive experience in the program. While its important to make note of this divergence in the data, its existence does not undermine the data and, in fact, adds some level of nuance and reflects the fact that studies like this one are working with people, who cannot be simplified into widgets.

The final recurrent theme in the study data was validation. While none of the students ever used the word "validation" in their responses, the words they chose to describe their experiences with the KEYS program equate to validating experiences. This

theme was only evidenced in the responses of Students 3, 4, 5, and 6, the four students

who also demonstrated the highest levels of satisfaction with KEYS. This validation

came in many ways for these four student participants. Several of the students spoke of

how their KEYS facilitator provided encouragement and a sense of self-belief that kept

them going, even in hard times. Student 3 described this validation in these words:

> She's the reason I got sober. She's the reason I've been in school for over a year
> now. She's very, what's the word, I don't want to say uplifting, encouraging. She
> encourages me in a way that I've never had before. […] I've always had that
> feeling and people telling me, 'You'll never be anything, you'll never do
> anything.' But then she seen something in me that I didn't see in myself, and I
> don't even know how she saw it, but she did. And she encouraged me and
> encourages me a lot. I think, literally, if it was not for her and this program, I
> would not have made it this far.

For some of the students, this sense of validation also came through end-of-

semester events, where accomplishments were celebrated and students were applauded

for their efforts. For some of the students, these celebrations were one of the few times

they had ever been recognized for their academic performances and was part of what

created a sense of pride they had not experience before. Student 6 describes this pride in

this way:

> They made me feel proud. It's like I mentioned before, I kind of had a. . . . It was
> a bit shameful for a long time about, feeling like I, needing handouts, you know,
> that I couldn't do it on my own. And they took that feeling I had and turned it into
> a sense of pride that I'm doing. . . . That is this whole purpose of the program.

This validation experienced by the KEYS students echoes the work of Rendon (1994) for

the affirmation and sense of self-belief that is created by participation in the KEYS

program. That validation is compounded by the sense of care created by the KEYS

program facilitators and is only heightened by the ongoing support and consistent availability provided for the students.

       The next chapter, Chapter 5, will explore these findings in more detail and will offer recommendations based on the findings.

Chapter 5

Discussion

This study came about as the result of a pattern of strong success metrics for retention, course completion, and graduation of students in KEYS programs at several Pennsylvania community colleges that belied the norm – and in a population that often struggles to find success without intervention: financially disadvantaged students. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to examine how the KEYS program at a single Pennsylvania community college was helping students to be successful. The study aimed to address the following research question:

What contributes to students' experiences in the KEYS program?

The research was conducted as a case study analysis of that single community college and consisted of semi-structured interviews that were focused on teasing out the underlying reasons for the students' success. Six (6) participants were interviewed in the process, and those 6 participants were chosen from 17 initial respondents, using a first-come, first-served approach. Participants completed an informed consent document prior to the interview process, and then met with the researcher in interviews that lasted approximately 35- to 50-minutes in duration, depending on the responses of the student.

Additionally, the study was grounded in Harper's Anti-Deficit Framework (2010), and while it did not focus on the typical attributes of that framework—Pre-College Socialization and Readiness, College Achievement, and Post-College Success—through the interview protocol it did delve into aspects of each of those attributes as part of the student's educational journey. The primary reason for using Harper's framework was to

emphasize the success of the KEYS students, who are a traditionally underserved population and who, far too often, are stereotyped as the result of their socioeconomic status. Harper's anti-deficit approach promoted the use of interview protocol questions that emphasized student success and the students' ability to succeed rather than any shortcomings or adversity they faced.

In the course of the participant interviews, four predominant themes arose in the data that provided insight into the success of KEYS students at the selected community college when compared to their non-program peers, who often face fewer financial and personal roadblocks to success. The next few pages will discuss these four themes – financial support, academic or career goals, connection and belonging, and validation – as essential components of the KEYS students' success, either individually or in combination with the other components.

As established in Chapter 1 of this study, socio-economically challenged students often fare more poorly than their peers academically and are more prone to drop out (Goldrick-Rab, 2006). Therefore, it is of little surprise that one of the themes that arose from the data was that of financial support. All six of the participants interviewed in the study pointed to the financial support of the KEYS program as a significant factor in their continued enrollment and success at the selected community college. Several of the students attributed their ability to focus on their academics as a benefit of that financial support from KEYS, and whether the support was in the form of participant reimbursements for essential needs, funds to help defray books or materials costs, or money to help with transportation, the message from the participants was clear: Financial

support is a huge benefit of the KEYS program, which is underscored by each participant mentioning it and by the fact that even Student 1, who had a relatively neutral attitude towards the KEYS program, noted that he benefitted from the financial support.

This theme of financial support is vital and plays a significant part of student success and is one of several reasons that the KEYS students are doing well. The findings around this theme also echo what we know about previous research that demonstrates that students facing financial hardship or stress are more likely to drop out or perform poorly (Baker & Montalto, 2018). Yet the many financial supports built into the KEYS program help to break down that common barrier for many students. Several participants made note of this benefit in their interviews, indicating that the financial support of KEYS allowed them to focus on their academics, which was why they were ultimately in college.

Another top theme that arose from the data was academic and career goals. While all the KEYS participants have academic advisors assigned at their community college, those academic advisors, just as at most colleges in the country, have large caseloads, making it a challenge to develop strong connections to their students or to give them focused time and attention beyond meeting once or twice a year to discuss course registration and planning. In fact, "a 2011 NACADA study found that the median number of advisees per adviser was 296. That's a large number, but many adviser caseloads today are much higher" (Flaharty, 2023). With advisee numbers that high, it is easy to see why students sometimes do not get adequate time devoted to the connection between academic and career goals – or to meet regularly with their advisor and have that

individual follow up with them to ensure they have all that is needed to be successful or to find resources when in need. That is where the KEYS participants have the advantage of having an assigned KEYS facilitator whose much smaller caseload, usually fewer than 40 students at most of the Pennsylvania community colleges, enables them to provide the time and attention needed to promote success and to keep the students focused on their academic and career goals. These KEYS facilitators are required to meet with their assigned participants monthly and to collect data about them that gets entered in the state of Pennsylvania's Commonwealth Workforce Development System (CWDS) data base to track accountability of taxpayer funds to student outcomes. Therefore, KEYS students rarely find themselves without support, both at times with emergent needs and all the times in between. Several of the study participants reported meeting with their facilitator more regularly than the required monthly meetings, with several noting they could "pop in" when help was needed and others indicating they made a point to see their facilitator more regularly. The result is that KEYS students rarely feel isolated in ways that their non-program peers do, and their KEYS facilitators keep them motivated because every month they are talking not only about the students' academic goals but also what lies ahead when the student graduates because the ultimate goal of KEYS is financial self-sufficiency. Those conversations also lay the groundwork for the KEYS participants' financial independence.

This theme of a focus on academic and career goals – and the intrusive, regular connection or support provided by KEYS facilitators – is vital for students from underserved and first-generation students, who can easily get lost in the unknown culture

of college. As established in Chapter 4, not having a pathway or direction – and not staying focused on academic and career goals – will lead to less favorable outcomes for students (Edwin et al., 2022). But the other benefit of these regular meetings and that repeated focus on academic and career goals is the development of student agency. Through the repeated discussions about these goals, students become more self-aware and able to self-manage in ways they could not before. Those regular meetings build students' confidence and provide the scaffolding necessary for students to become more independent. Several studies and researchers have explored aspects of this realm, including Klemenčič (2015), whose research examined how students' awareness of past, present, and future actions and steps creates a sense of agency, and that is certainly the case with repeated academic and career goal discussions. Likewise, the work of Cook-Sather (2020) indicates that such regular discussions on the topic will give students a voice that they could not previously articulate and would develop their self-efficacy as described by Bandura (1977). Finally, the style of advising incorporated in the KEYS program goes beyond the traditional process used in most advising offices. Advising within the KEYS program is "intrusive" in nature, meaning that the KEYS facilitators assert their presence into the students' academic and career journey. This type of intrusive advising is grounded in the notion that the development of a connection with an agent of the college improves retention and student success, so that agent proactively engages their advisees to facilitate the connection (Varney, 2007). This intrusive format is partially created by the program's required monthly meetings, but it is also the larger expectation of the program that its facilitators work with students in this manner.

A third key theme from the data relates to connection and belonging. We know from the research of Tinto (1975, 1993), Strayhorn (2012), and Schlossberg (1989) that students are more likely to be successful when they feel connected to their institution, to agents of that institution, or to other students – or when they feel as if they belong at the institution. Five of the six KEYS study participants reported that they felt some level of connection to the KEYS program as a result of the regularly required meetings with their facilitator. Four of those participants went a step farther to indicate that their participation in KEYS made them feel as if they belonged to something, that they belonged at the college, and/or that they were not alone. The forging of those connections through the required monthly meetings and the regular availability of their assigned facilitator, whose primary role is to help their small caseload, pays significant dividends for the students in terms of retention and student success. KEYS students in this program felt as if they belong and matter, and that made all the difference.

Student participants described this theme of connection to the facilitator or other KEYS students in a number of ways, with Student 5 indicating that the facilitator was "very familiar" with all students and with his life circumstances specifically. Student 3 described the facilitator as her "cheerleader," and Student 6 described the facilitator as very caring. Several students also indicated that friendships with other KEYS students, both in an out of the college, were important to them. Relationships and rapport with the KEYS facilitator and other participants allowed the sense of belonging to develop and helped the KEYS participants to feel connected and as if they were a part of something

larger than themselves. Those are key factors in preventing student drop outs because when students feel connected or believe they matter, they are more likely to persist.

The fourth and final theme relates to student validation. Due to their academic and financial background, KEYS students frequently lack a sense of belief in themselves in regards to academic success. Several of the study participants spoke to their lack of belief in themselves as students for a variety of reasons: being older than many of their peers, being out of school for many years, and lack of past academic success, just to name a few. And yet, four out of the six participants, those individuals who spoke most highly of their participation in KEYS, expressed a sense of validation from their work with their KEYS facilitator. Through their regular meetings and end-of-year celebrations, KEYS participants get recognition and validation for their successes that keeps them motivated to continue moving forward. Student 6 described this validation as helping to develop a sense of pride in being in the program, and other students expressed that the program normalized their being in college. Student 3 reported that she felt a newfound belief in herself through the facilitator's encouragement.

These feelings reported by the students are feelings of validation. As described in Chapter 2 of this study, "validation is an enabling, confirming, and supportive process" (Ekal, Rollins Hurley, and Padilla, 2011). With this consistent and regular review of their academic progress by their facilitator, the KEYS participants were held accountable to be successful and to stay in the KEYS program, they were supported and given encouragement along the way, and when they met those expectations it was validating to the student. This ongoing student validation cycle, which occurs in a consistent and

ongoing manner through the regular KEYS meetings, reflects the work of Rendon (1994) and underscores a vital element of the KEYS program that helps often marginalized students feel more like others around them.

This study set out to identify exactly what aspect of the KEYS program helps its students succeed. It focused on the research question "How would you describe what most contributed to your success at this college?" From the data collected, it became clear that these four elements – the availability of financial support, a focus on career and academic goals, a sense of connection or belonging, and a sense of validation – all contributed to KEYS students' success. While the KEYS students may enter the college (and the KEYS program) behind their peers in many respects and sometimes with more challenges, the existence of these types of support and interventions through the KEYS program not only ameliorated that deficit but also enabled the students to thrive.

Implications

While we know that data from case studies is limited in its generalizability, there are some key factors or takeaways that may be used by administrators at both the selected community college or other schools to emulate the success of this KEYS program. Each of these elements could be implemented individually but from the data in the study, they seem to complement each other and promote success in concert.

1) *Financial Support*

Knowing that one of the top reasons that students withdraw from college or fail to succeed is due to financial hardship, colleges need to make investments in financial support to help mitigate those barriers. Many colleges already

have institutional funds (scholarships) and emergency assistance funds when

students have emergent needs; however, this recommendation goes beyond

that to include regular and consistent financial support of students with needs

such as child care, transportation, and books. The KEYS program provides

these types of financial resources to students – as well as paying for

certification tests, entrance exams, and other unexpected costs – to keep

KEYS students moving forward without interruption. By providing this level

of consistent and expected financial support in place, students are then able to

focus on academics without worrying about missing a bill or not being able to

afford something that is required for their success.

2) *Assignment of a Case Manager or Student Success Coach*

This implication combines two themes, connection and belonging and focus

on academic and career goals, as found in the data. These themes are

combined into one implication or recommendation simply because both are

the result of an institutional agent. Therefore, colleges are recommended to

add this institutional agent and should make an investment in employees

whose role extends beyond that of an academic advisor for their assigned

students and who "fill in the gaps" that academic advisors can rarely

accomplish with their high caseloads. There are several important goals of

these case managers or coaches, who should be assigned a caseload small

enough to allow for regular and consistent interaction at least once per month.

a. Focus on Academic and Career Goals – The assigned case manager or coach should make review of and focus on the students' academic and career goals a prioritized component of every interaction. This level of consistent accountability raises expectations and paves the ways for students to experience validation when they meet expectations.

b. Connection and Belonging – The assigned manager or coach must develop a rapport with the student through regular connections and a culture of care. Students need to feel as if they belong, and that occurs when their case manager or coach is reliable, trustworthy, and invested in the student. Promoting additional connection to other students is also valuable through social gatherings that bring together students with common backgrounds, interests, and goals.

3) *Validation*

Schools need to find ways to validate their students, especially their first-generation students and minoritized students. This validation should come through many means, including from recognition and support from the case manager or coach. The schools should also create opportunities to celebrate student achievements and provide tangible rewards to students for special academic or career milestones, as well as ensure that employees are imbuing a sense of self-belief into students through the validation process.

The key element in these three recommendations is that schools need to make an investment of resources into providing adequate personnel and resources to support

students holistically and ensure they are financially supported, connected, focused on their goals, and validated throughout their educational process. The challenge is that all these recommendations cost money, and they require dedicated resources, just as the Pennsylvania KEYS programs have established. But it is only through such focused and concerted efforts that effective programs can be built. Such steps are vital not only for the success of students and the health of the intuitions, but they also get to the very reason for the existence of education: to help others learn and grow. Likewise, institutions also need to ensure the success of students because the economic viability of our local economies is reliant on an educated workforce – and because individuals with higher educational attainment are more financially independent, helping to mitigate the need for tax dollars to be used for social welfare programs.

The application of the anti-deficit framework, the results of the study, their connection to existing literature and theory, and the resulting implications are captured in Figure 2.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are many additional avenues for future research based on the findings of this study. One potential would be to expand the study at the selected community college and include more participants in the case study for a more expansive data set. A second option for additional research would be to develop a comparative case study using two or more Pennsylvania community college KEYS programs to determine if the success at the various institutions is connected or the result of the same reasons. A third option would

Figure 2

The Anti-deficit Framework in Action with the KEYS Program

Areas of Exploration	Overall Sense of Benefit from KEYS	Experience Working with the KEYS Facilitator	Impact of Connection with the KEYS Program and KEYS Students	KEYS Program's Capacity to Lead to Financial Independence
Findings / Themes	-Academic and Career Goals -Financial Support -Connection / Belonging	-Academic and Career Goals -Connection / Belonging -Validation	-Academic and Career Goals -Connection / Belonging -Validation	-Academic and Career Goals -Financial Support -Connection / Belonging -Validation
Student Quotations	-Student 4: "That program, it's just wonderful." -Student 3: "They have nothing but helped me be successful."	-Student 6: "It gave me a sense of pride." -Student 3: "I think if not for KEYS and my facilitator, I probably would not have made it."	-Student 4: "[W]e just have so much more in common than we ever thought." - Student 5: "Next thing you know, you end up talking, hanging out."	-Student 3: "[T]hey help me get an education I need in order to move to self-sufficiency." -Student 6: "[O]nce I've done school, I'm going to have a career [,,,] I'm not going to need government help."
Related Literature or Theory	-Tinto (1975, 1993) -- Theory of Integration -Schlossberg (1989) -- Marginality and Mattering -Bandura (1977) -- Self-efficacy	-Rendon (1994) -- Validation -Tinto (1975, 1993) -- Theory of Integration -Schlossberg (1989) -- Marginality and Mattering -Bandura (1977) -- Self-efficacy	-Rendon (1994) -- Validation -Tinto (1975, 1993) -- Theory of Integration -Schlossberg (1989) -- Marginality and Mattering -Bandura (1977) -- Self-efficacy	-Rendon (1994) -- Validation -Tinto (1975, 1993) -- Theory of Integration -Schlossberg (1989) -- Marginality and Mattering -Bandura (1977) -- Self-efficacy
Implications / Recommendations	-Provide Financial Support -Provide a Case Manager or Success Coach	-Provide a Case Manager or Success Coach -Increase Validation	-Provide a Case Manager or Success Coach -Increase Validation	-Provide Financial Support -Provide a Case Manager or Success Coach -Increase Validation

be to develop a comparative case study between a KEYS program and another student

success program at that college or at another school. A fourth option could also be to

explore the voices of individuals, such as Student 1 and 2, who had less favorable

perspectives on the KEYS program to determine why and how that might be addressed.

Finally, a future study could include an examination of how sponsorship, as defined by

Shameka Powell (2015) could also be connected to the work of KEYS facilitators and the

KEYS program as a specific case for study.

A Final Note on Trustworthiness in the Study

As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, the limitations placed on the research by the

IRB at the community college did create some challenges for the study. Not being able to

speak to the KEYS program director or the KEYS facilitators, and being limited from

specific, KEYS-program level data, did complicate the study. Some may question the

trustworthiness of the data due to those limitations and the difficulty, then, of

triangulating the data collected.

These challenges to the trustworthiness of the data were addressed by several

factors. The use of member checking and awareness checking, as outlined in more detail

in Chapter 4, helped to confirm that the data collected was accurate and true to the

intentions of the student participants. The awareness checking also added a layer of trust

to the outcomes because the administrator who performed the awareness check had

several years of managerial experience with another community college's KEYS

program. Additionally, the use of six sub-cases (the student participants) in support of the

larger case of the community college KEYS program provides some assurance when

there is consistency of responses and "logic of repetition" (Yin, 2003). Furthermore, it

has been established by Fielding and Fielding (1986) that triangulation itself can become

problematic and biased and sometimes only creates an illusion of validity or

trustworthiness. Finally, there are also times, as indicated by Merriam and Tisdell (2016)

when "[i]nterviewing is sometimes the only way to get data" (p. 109).

The result of this reflection, then, is that the study does arrive at data that can be

trusted, despite the heavy-handed limitations that were placed on the researcher. The

consistency of the student participants' responses – and the themes that arose from the

interviews, as well as the measures taken to increase internal validity – do lead to clear

findings about *how* and *why* KEYS students are successful in the selected case, and the

resulting implications are trustworthy.

Conclusion

This study sought to identify what about the KEYS program at the select

community college allowed its students to be successful at rates that often outpaced their

non-program peers. Through the anti-deficit approach, the interview protocol probed for

what about the KEYS program, students' interactions with their facilitators, and students'

interactions with other KEYS students could be responsible for the surprising outcomes.

Results of the qualitative research indicate that there were several factors at play that

work together to promote greater student success for the KEYS students. Through the

deployment of financial support, a strong focus on academic and career goals, the

creation of a sense of belonging, and the validation of students, the KEYS program is

unlocking doors to opportunity for its students, doors that would otherwise remain

locked.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions for Participants

Screening Questions:
- Are you – or have you within the last year – been a student in the KEYS program?
- Are you at least 19 years of age?

Consent Questions
- You have signed the informed consent document (investigator shares screen to show the signed consent form). Do you wish to continue your participation at this time?
- Do you have any questions about the process before we begin?

Demographic Questions
This information is collected only to help demonstrate the range of voices represented in the study.
You may decline to answer any of these questions without penalty.
- What is your age?
  - Under 24
  - 25-35
  - 35-45
  - 45+
- How do you identify by gender?
- How do you identify by ethnicity?
  - Hispanic or Latinex
  - Not Hispanic or Latinex
  - Some other ethnicity or origin
- How do you identify by race?
  - American Indian or Alaska Native
  - Asian
  - Black or African American
  - Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - White
  - More than one race
  - Some other race or origin
- Are you a parent?
- Are you / were you employed while attending _____?
  - Part-time
  - Full-time

- How did you learn about the KEYS program?

<u>Guiding Research Question</u>:
- How would you describe what most contributes/contributed to your success at _____?

<u>Content Questions</u>
- Tell me about yourself and your professional or academic goals after graduation? How close are you to graduation?

- How did participation in the _____ KEYS program help you with your success at _____?
  - What did you find to be helpful about the program?
  - Do you believe the KEYS program has helped you be successful as a student? How or why?
  - Did being part of the KEYS program make you feel "special" or "unique" from other students at _____?

- Tell me about your experience and interactions with your KEYS facilitator.
  - How often did you meet with your facilitator? How would you meet with the facilitator?
  - Were you required to attend any special meetings or sessions with your facilitator or other students? If so, please describe the meetings.
  - What types of conversations would you have with your KEYS facilitator?
  - How did your facilitator make you feel about being a student? About being at _____? About yourself? About your goals?
  - Do you feel that your facilitator helped you be successful as a student? Why or why not?

- Tell me about any interactions you had with other KEYS students at _____.
  - Were you able to interact with other KEYS students regularly?
  - Did you spend time with other KEYS students in class or outside of school?
  - Did you feel any sense of belonging with the KEYS group and its students?

- One of the stated goals of the KEYS programs in Pennsylvania is to help community college students move from using government support such as SNAP or TANF to financial independence. Do you feel that participating in the KEYS program will/has helped you move toward financial independence?

- At many of the community colleges in Pennsylvania, including here at _____C, KEYS students do better academically than their peers who are not in KEYS.

From your experience with the _____ KEYS program, what do you think most helps students succeed?

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

IRB Project ID #: 22537

Participant Study Title: Unlocking the Door to Access and Success: The KEYS Program

Hello!

My name is Tim Barshinger, and I am conducting a research study as part of my doctoral studies at the University of Nebraska. The purpose of this research is to understand how your participation in the KEYS program has influenced your experience as student. If you are a current student in the KEYS program or have graduated in the past year and are 19 or older, you may participate in this research.

Participation in this study will require approximately one hour of your time. You will be asked to participate in an interview with me and answer questions about your experience with the KEYS program. ***Participation will take place via a remote Zoom meeting, so no travel is required***.

You will receive a stipend of $25 for participating in this study through a gift card mailed to you or an electronic Venmo payment, per your preference.

Reasonable steps will be taken to protect the privacy and the confidentiality of your study data; however, in some circumstances I cannot guarantee absolute privacy and/or confidentiality. Research records will be stored on a private computer in a password protected file, and your personally identifiable information will be removed from the data. Records will only be seen by the research team and/or those authorized to view, access, or use the records during and after the study is complete. Additionally, all records will be destroyed once the project is completed.

If you have questions about this project, you may contact me at timothy.barshinger@gmail.com or (717) 586-7646.

If you have questions about your rights or complaints about the research, contact the University of Nebraska Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (402) 472-6965 or irb@unl.edu.

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can withdraw at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator, the University of Nebraska, or the KEYS program. You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. By participating in the research, you have given your consent to participate in the research. You should print/keep a copy of this page for your records.

By signing this form, you are providing your consent to participate.

Participant Name:

_____
       Name of Participant: Please print

Participant Signature:

_____   _____
       Signature of Research Participant   Date

To participate in this research, please complete and sign the form above and send it back to me at timothy.barshinger@gmail.com. *You may take a picture with your phone and send the picture.*

Please direct any questions to me at timothy.barshinger@gmail.com *or via phone at 717-586-7646.*

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln wants to know about your research experience. This 14 question, multiple-choice survey is anonymous. This survey should be completed after your participation in this research. Please complete this optional online survey at: http://bit.ly/UNLresearchfeedback.

Appendix C

Participant Recruitment Flyer

Volunteers Needed For Research Study:

<u>Unlocking the Door to Access and Success: The KEYS Program</u>

A doctoral student from the University of Nebraska is conducting research to find out about students' experience with KEYS at ▮▮▮▮.

To be eligible to participate, a student must be:

- Currently enrolled at ▮▮▮▮ or a graduate within the last year
- Participating in ▮▮▮▮'s KEYS program
- At least 19 years of age

You will be asked to participate in an interview with the researcher and answer a variety of questions about your time at ▮▮▮▮, particularly about your involvement with KEYS. Interviews will be conducted remotely via Zoom. Participation will take approximately one hour. Participants will receive a $25 stipend for participation.

Please call 717-586-7646 or
email timothy.barshinger@gmail.com
with any questions or interest.
IRB [#]: 22537

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