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A PORTRAIT OF ACADEMICALLY AT-RISK MALE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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by

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to deepen our understanding of the lived experiences of male undergraduates whose personal experiences contributed to their placement on academic probation and therefore put them at-risk to depart the university prior to earning an undergraduate degree. Interview responses from 12 undergraduate men on academic probation were subjected to phenomenological thematic analysis (Giorgi, 2007; Kleiman, 2004) and revealed personal experiences that created obstacles to the men’s academic success; these included disengagement from class, truncated interactions with other students, stunted motivation, inadequate discipline, lowered self-efficacy, negative emotions, and feelings of isolation. In particular, student interactions with the academic environment reinforced students’ negative experiences and contributed to their lack of social and academic integration (Tinto, 1975) on campus. An investigation of the men’s lived experiences was undertaken after data analysis of student records revealed that a gender disparity exists at The Pennsylvania State University main campus with men twice as likely to be on academic probation as women (Wilson, Choi, Wangler, Musser, 2013). Nationally, it is well documented that higher education completion rates for women outpace those of their male counterparts.

Student success and retention rates of undergraduate men are linked to cultural norms for male identity formation and student’s complex, multilayered interactions within their higher education institution. By examining the experiences of male undergraduates in higher education, this research adds to the dearth of literature on male student success and male identity. Constructed as a front-end analysis, a recognized tool used for the systematic
design of instruction, the research focused on learner entry behaviors and learner characteristics with the goal to facilitate implementation of preventative programs.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

This phenomenological study examined the success rates of male undergraduate students who were enrolled in The Pennsylvania State University's Division of Undergraduate Studies (DUS) program at University Park. Throughout North America and much of the developed world, enrollment levels of women in higher education are outpacing those of men. In all but the STEM fields, women are earning certificates and degrees at rates that significantly eclipse those of men (Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013). For example, quantitative research at Penn State found that male undergraduate students were twice as likely to be on academic probation and leave campus before they earn their degrees than their female counterparts (Wilson, Choi, Wangler, & Musser, 2013; Wilson, 2012). Higher education institutions serve the needs of those who aspire to earn a degree by enrolling students and accepting payments for courses and services; therefore, universities accept fiduciary responsibility to meet students’ needs and especially to help those who are known to be at risk of dropping out or departing early. When universities are not able to deliver on this promise, they should address the inequalities in transformative ways while involving the impacted learners in the process (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2003; Watson & Watson, 2013). The current concern over stagnant or declining levels of equity for male students at higher education institutions, both undergraduate and graduate, demands critical scholarly research (Brookfield, 2005) to uncover the possible role institutions play in perpetuating this environment (Kimmel & Davis, 2011).
It is critical to point out that while this study did not focus on African-American and Latino undergraduates, gendered patterns of student success and retention are even more pronounced in this population, with men accounting for 36.9% of African American undergraduates at U.S. colleges and 42.3% enrollment for Latino men; by comparison, African American women and Latinas earned 64.9% of associate’s degrees and 63.4% of bachelor’s degrees in 2011 (Harper, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). African-American and Latino men’s college participation rates, on the other hand, are less than 4%—the lowest completion rates of all racial and ethnic groups in the nation (Lederman, 2012). The culture of low expectations for minority students, single parent families, and unfamiliarity with college are critical factors that derail minority students’ efforts to attend college. A pattern known as “undermatching,” in that high school academic advisers dissuade promising minority male high school students from applying to the nation’s top schools due to cultural ignorance, institutional racism, and other factors (Jaschik, 2013), adds to this negative picture.

From the standpoint of systemic change, the field of Learning, Design, and Technology is well-suited to address gendered patterns of student success in an effort to better understand through basic research men’s specific needs in the higher education environment.

**Problem and Purpose Statement**

This study attempted to understand the broader issue of male identity formation and masculinity in the complex sociocultural and environmental context of the campus ecosystem at Penn State. It asked and answered the question, “What is the experience of
male undergraduates at risk of dropping out of Penn State?” Therefore, this research project could prove vital to better understanding the success rates of Penn State’s at-risk male student population.

Though the overall percentage of male students who are at risk of dropping out is lower than the national average at Penn State, static and/or declining completion rates for college men (despite a significant increase in male enrollment in the past few years) are arousing concerns of U.S. education policymakers and businesses leaders (“Higher Education,” 2012; Lewin, 2006; Roueche & Roueche, 1999). Inadequate levels of student success in colleges across the United States are creating an economic risk for millions of Americans, because investment in post-secondary education produces unequivocal economic benefits for individuals and society (“Building American Skills,” 2012; Schweke, 2004, p. 7). Once dominant in the world, the United States has now fallen to sixteenth place in the production of secondary degree and certificate earners (“Higher Education,” 2012, para. 2). These trends are exacerbated for members of powerless and/or disadvantaged groups.

**Background**

In the fall of 2012, advisers from Penn State approached Learning, Design, and Technology graduate students to discuss undergraduate male student retention. The head of the advising unit for undecided undergraduates, the DUS, specializes in helping students choose a major during their first year on campus. The program is popular; in fact, 25% of incoming freshman classes choose to enroll in DUS (T. Musser, personal communication, September 26, 2012). As part of its responsibilities, DUS administers the First Year Testing,
Consulting and Advising Program; online placement testing in math and chemistry; and the Educational Planning Survey (EPS), in an effort to enable first-year students to catch up and earn a degree within four years. Between 2007 and 2012, a preliminary statistical analysis was conducted by DUS, revealing that male gender was a factor in fluctuating or declining rates of male student success and retention. Seventy-two percent of those students dropped for poor academic performance began their PSU career at a campus other than University Park (T. Musser, personal communication, April 20, 2015).

A subsequent data analysis of 34,000 student records demonstrated a statistically significant odds ratio of 2:1 in which undergraduate men were twice as likely to be on academic probation and risk non-completion of a degree compared to undergraduate women. While only a small percentage of all students in this study failed academically with less than a 2.0 grade point average, the number of males who failed (651 men) was roughly twice that of females who failed (311 women). The results (confirmed by a Chi Square test) concluded that males are significantly more likely to fail academically than females; academic failure was also significantly associated with mother’s level of education in this study (Wilson et al., 2012). Since two separate statistical analyses by different researchers revealed a gendered pattern of student success on the Penn State University Park campus, this study examined more closely the phenomenon of male undergraduates’ experiences of academic failure by speaking directly with male students who had this experience.

This research sought to add to the growing literature focused on men’s issues related to academic success in higher education, drawing on a diverse body of interdisciplinary research that included studies on male identity formation, social constructivism, and systems theory. As such, it adopted a holistic, non-binary perspective
on gender. Since it is impossible to know the lived experiences of the research participants at Penn State by reading about them in other studies, this study took a phenomenological approach, seeking to identify those lived experiences by collecting and analyzing data from student experiences. Other theoretical frameworks were expected to surface as this research was underway, and it was hoped this study would expand the body of research on the male undergraduate experience of higher education.

This research was also critical to Penn State’s ability to continue attracting and retaining male undergraduate students. This research built on the existing theoretical and empirical groundwork for future research, and if necessary, could lead to the creation of interventions for at-risk male students by leveraging the analytical, technological, and practical tools of Penn State’s Department of Learning, Design, and Technology.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter reviewed important scholarly works relevant to the study, including the gender gap in higher education, a review of relevant empirical studies on men’s experiences within higher education environments and their academic success, hegemonic masculinity, gender role conflict (GRC), perspectives on the sociology of student retention, critical theory, and systems theory. The aforementioned knowledge domains provided an important context for this phenomenological study, designed to illuminate the lived experiences of at-risk male undergraduate college students at The Pennsylvania State University-University Park campus. This chapter first takes up issues of the gender gap and the significance of masculinity in a higher education context, followed by an examination of systems theory, sociological implications, and critical theory. The final section of the paper discusses the implications of this research within the context of the literature, and attempts to provide insightful information regarding the high dropout rates among males enrolled in higher education institutions.

The gender gap in higher education attainment for males is a cause for concern not only in the United States but also throughout the developed world. Many previous studies have quantified issues related to gendered differences in higher education, such as graduation rates, enrollment in STEM fields, and grades (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013). These studies have focused on statistics rather than on experimental or qualitative inquiry. Still, these statistics can be significantly compelling in understanding the crisis for men in higher education today. In a comprehensive study on male and female higher education participation and success rates, researchers at the United Kingdom’s Higher Education
Policy Institute concluded that on “virtually all measures women outperform men” (Thompson & Bekhradnia, 2009). In its “Report on the Gender Initiative,” the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) noted similar low levels of educational attainment for boys in industrialized nations in secondary through post-secondary school, though women still lag behind men and lack even basic access to education in underdeveloped nations (2011, p. 2). In another study of trends in the United Kingdom, Richardson found that women were more likely to earn a higher education degree and were more likely to receive academic honors, suggesting that this emerging pattern resulted from teaching and assessment practices in particular disciplines (Richardson, 2008). In another quantitative study that examined the gender gap and social influences on boys’ disruptive behavior, Bertrand and Pan (2011) analyzed the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS) and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY 97) and learned that boys from broken homes act out more, which “suggests that boys’ higher tendency to act out may be relevant to their relative absence in colleges” (2011, p. 28).

Fewer studies have explored the qualitative nature of men’s experiences in higher education institutions. Since advisers rank as a primary source of information on the undergraduate male experience at universities and colleges and can attest to the quality of their academic and social experiences, the insights of advisers offer a unique perspective in the core area of student success (Walsh, 2003). During a northeast regional student advising conference held at Penn State, about 50 student advisers were asked to compare their perceptions of the male undergraduates they advised to those of the female undergraduates they advised (Wilson & Musser, 2013). This exercise was designed as an icebreaker to start the presentation, but a stark and unflattering portrait of male
undergraduates emerged with which I was previously unfamiliar. The mostly female audience in attendance described its conceptualization of the typical male undergraduate as:

- Disorganized
- Have poor hygiene
- Too involved in video game play and sports
- Less likely to study
- Less serious about their academic pursuits
- Complacent
- Less likely to seek help when they need it
- Less likely to take their counselor’s advice
- Prone to binge drinking and drug use

These perceptions were consistent with hooks’ description of the negative consequences of hegemonic masculinity present in the United States (hooks, 1994) and are discussed later in this dissertation. Some of the advisers’ comments reflected Levant’s (1992) conceptualization of masculinity ideology and its seven components: 1) avoiding femininity, 2) restrictive emotionality, 3) seeking status and achievement, 4) self-reliance, 5) aggression, 6) homophobia, and 7) non-relational attitudes toward sex.

Unfortunately, many student affairs professionals are not trained to view undergraduate men’s issues through a gendered lens and thus often make unsupported assumptions that such a perspective is not worthwhile or that they already know men based on experiences, and research studies are limited primarily to Anglo men (Edwards & Jones, 2009).
The Significance of Masculinity in Higher Education

A significant aspect of this study concerned the concept of masculinity and its political, social and cultural ramifications for men at risk in higher education. This chapter defines masculinity and discusses literature relevant to this research, a definition for masculinity, and what it means for the research.

Scholars widely acknowledge masculinity as a learned construct that expresses itself within societal norms for expected behavior (Laker & Davis, 2011). Wagner offered a useful definition of masculinity for studies on college men and described it as “the experience and the social performance of conducting oneself in a fashion that is commonly accepted as ‘manly’” (2011, p. 212). As discussed later in this dissertation, gender is a constructed identity, and men and women are assigned particular roles and characteristics based on cultural contexts beyond any genetic dispositions (Wagner, 2011, p. 212). Other researchers are more explicitly constructivist in their views on masculinity and explain it as a social construct resulting from the complex interaction of culture, relationships, personal behaviors and other factors over time (Edwards & Jones, 2009; Kimmel & Messner, 2010).

Therefore, this research on gendered patterns of student success in higher education explored male identity formation, masculinity, and learning how to "be a man" as byproducts of societal processes that imbue men over time with masculinity that functions as social capital (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Bourdieu, 1986; Brod & Kaufman, 1994; Davis, 2002; Harper & Harris, 2010; Kimmel, 2008; Pollack, 1999; Sax, 2008).

In an empirical study of 10 male undergraduates, Edwards and Jones found men’s identity developed through societal expectations mediated by social interactions with
others in which the participants described “putting my man face on” (2009, p. 214) in order to meet the expectations of social contexts in which they found themselves that changed “over time, including different racial, socioeconomic, and sexual orientation contexts” (p. 222). In other words, the men in this study “acted” the part of being a man, even when their “acted out” behavior was inconsistent with their personal outlooks and philosophies. In another investigation, Sallee and Harris III (2011) found that male undergraduate and graduate students interviewed for a study on gender responded to interviewers’ questions by aligning their responses with traditional assumptions about gender roles and expectations (p. 409). Since the participants were aware of researchers’ interest in gender, they had a “heightened awareness of performing gender and acted accordingly” based on their “assumptions” about how to respond to interviewers as males (Sallee & Harris III, 2011, p. 410). In another study, Harris (2008) found that men exaggerated their male behavior and attitudes and expressed stereotypically masculine behavior to fit the context, even when such behavior was inconsistent with what the men identified as positive aspects of masculinity, for example, respect, integrity, and character. Instead, men in this study reported engaging in sexual activity, alcohol consumption, homophobia, and misogyny, all key aspects of hyper-masculinity. Harris (2010) also found that men’s notions of masculinity were already well-formed by the time they arrived on college campuses, and once on campus, men performed or acted in accordance with traditional conceptions of masculinity influenced by parents, interactions with male peers, and contact sports.

The relationship between academic success and masculine identity formation is a growing area of research that may provide clues to the problem of downward trends in undergraduate male student retention and student success on college campuses. Kahn,
Brett, and Holmes (2011) looked at the relationship between motivation in higher education and masculinity and found that since men viewed work as less important and spent more time establishing a manly image, their motivation for higher education decreased. Taken together, these studies indicate that the development of masculinity in U.S. culture carries with it side effects that might be playing out at Penn State and other higher education institutions in the U.S., as a consequence of hegemonic masculinity.

Exploring similar themes in a phenomenological study, Gale (1999) found that undergraduate men held consistent understandings of masculine ideology and based their understanding on their observations of society. Gale determined that male students experienced ambivalence and uncertainty about this ideology, and found that men struggled when confronted with changes in traditional masculine ideology. Masculinity in the United States too often escapes critical examination, and this lack of examination allows the perpetuation of hegemonic patriarchy or the status quo because “citizens in this nation fear challenging patriarchy even as they lack overt awareness that they are fearful, so deeply embedded in our collective unconscious are the rules of patriarchy” (hooks, 2004, p. 29). According to hooks, this is a significant problem because “there is no mass concern for the plight of men” (p. 30).

Ontologically speaking, a brief explanation of hegemonic masculinity normed in society and its relationship to male identity formation is necessary because this definition is critical for understanding the conceptualization of this dissertation. Male hegemony is linked inextricably with socially constructed male identity formation and the cultural and societal norms regarding masculinity. Connell (2005) defined hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the
problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (p. 77). In other words, the concept of maleness reinforces patriarchy (Lusher & Robbins, 2009), and, according to Wagner, hegemonic masculinity is the result (2011). Therefore, hegemonic masculinity is a social construct (Harris & Barone, 2011, p. 52) which in Brookfield’s (2005) view is “live [d] out a thousand times a day in our intimate behaviors, glances, body postures, in the fleeting calculations we make on how to look at and speak to each other, and in the continuous microdecisions that coalesce into a life” (pp. 96-97).

The socialization of undergraduate men in a society normed on hegemonic masculinity is a major source of inner conflict in males and may cause distress. O’Neil (1981) identified hegemonic masculine identity formation as a key source of male gender role conflict (GRC) and theorized that men, unable to express their masculinities according to societal norms, experience conflict and anxiety. Gender role conflict is “a psychological state occurring when rigid, sexist, or restrictive gender roles learned through socialization result in personal restriction, devaluation, or violation of others or self” (O’Neil, Helms, Gable, & Wrightsman, 1986, p. 336). In the absence of an acceptable male identity, O’Neil theorized that men might adopt society’s norms about expectations for male behavior and thus act out (O’Neil et al., 1986). Too often this takes the form of destructive, ‘boys-will-be-boys” behavior on college campuses, including “binge drinking, homophobia, risky sex, and in extreme cases, physical violence and sexual assault” (Harris & Barone, 2011, p. 58; van Eerdewijek, 2005). Therefore, GRC creates outcomes that limit an individual’s human potential or the potential of others (O’Neil & Crasper, 2011). This perspective is consistent with the findings of Bertrand and Pan (2011), cited earlier.
GRC mentions four levels at which conflict is experienced—on a cognitive level, an affective level, a behavioral level, and an unconscious level—and suggests that conflict in these domains results from socialized gender roles learned in sexist and patriarchal societies (O’Neil & Crapser, 2011). The abundance of statistics on non-performance of male undergraduates makes male identity formation and GRC both valuable perspectives when eliciting personal experiences in a phenomenological study of at-risk male undergraduates.

The literature offers important evidence to support the research approach described in this dissertation. O’Neil (2008) completed a comprehensive review of empirical research linked to masculinity ideology, gender role conflict and stress, and found men’s attitudes about masculine norms statistically correlated with a variety of psychological and interpersonal problems (O’Neil, 2010; O’Neil & Crapser, 2011); it is the first time that documented scientific evidence has linked men’s psychological and emotional problems to masculinity constructs (O’Neil & Crapser, 2011, p. 27), a critical reason why the research on college men should move forward.

In this respect, the current phenomenological study of at-risk male undergraduates may provide insights on the “black box” inner workings of the Division of Undergraduate Studies (DUS) at Penn State, in which some students are byproducts of a well-meaning but potentially hegemonic sociocultural system that inadvertently weakens inter-subjectivity for some, and predisposes a small but alarming percentage of men to drop out—perhaps due to a lack of social capital. The unstated assumption is that institutional power and patterns of male identity formation create tensions that lead to male student dropouts (Kimmel & Davis, 2011).
Systems Theory

It is logical to examine systems theory literature to illuminate the phenomenon of at-risk undergraduate male students and their frequent early departures from campus, because university campuses like Penn State are complex systems. In *An Outline of General System Theory*, von Bertalanffy (1950) theorized that “you cannot sum up the behavior of the whole from the isolated parts, and you have to take into account the relations between the various subordinated systems and the subsystems ... to understand the behavior of the parts” (p. 148). This integrated view of science provides educational researchers with a useful lens to conduct scientific observations. Further, Wagner (2011) supported systems theories, stating that “systems of domination ensure that one way of being and doing is elevated above all others” (p. 212).

This dissertation specifically viewed the issue of at-risk male students through the lens of the historical activity theory (a system in which artifacts are viewed while participants are embedded in a dynamic activity system [Engström, 2001, 2006]), defined as a community of teachers, students, and others situated within a sociocultural context that produces both desirable and undesirable effects: desirable in terms of the number of successful male undergraduates, and undesirable in the form of male dropouts. While this was a phenomenological study, cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) embodies a systemic perspective that promises a better understanding of at-risk male students in a much deeper sense. In a complex system such as a university, it is unlikely that the forces acting on male undergraduates can be confined to any single point source. Instead, this research had the potential to reveal more systemic forces at work that could lead to further study.
The community identified in this research was male undergraduates enrolled in the DUS at Penn State. Therefore, the interaction of environment, organization, and students was considered in a research exploring the experiences of male undergraduates at risk to drop out or fail at Penn State’s University Park campus (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1998, 2005; Banathy, 1968; Bertalanffy, 1950). Exploring the perspectives of male undergraduates who are at risk of dropping out of school prior to earning a degree is critical in developing a complete picture of the phenomenon, offering a possible explanation of how the Penn State campus system may contribute to unwanted outcomes. While systems theory offers a high-resolution perspective to explain the structural nature of male student dropouts in higher education, other useful perspectives may also be found in the social sciences. These perspectives, explored in the following section, come from the fields of sociology and critical theory.

**Sociology**

Tinto’s (1975) model for college dropouts was based on Durkheim’s (1951) sociological theory of human suicide. According to this perspective, student alienation from two major aspects of university life—its social systems and its academic systems—drives students enrolled in higher education institutions to drop out; stated conversely, an individual’s lack of sustained interaction with the academic and social systems of an institution most directly relates to his continuance in that college. Lack of engagement was identified as a key predictor of dropouts in the more recent community college-based Survey of Entering Student Engagement, or SENSE (Kuh, 2003; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012). Because schools are complex systems and masculine
identity formation is a social process, the analysis of systems that impact my research participants provided a theoretical framework in which to examine and contextualize the experiences that this phenomenological study sought to uncover. As stated by hooks (2004), “It may be difficult for those who have experienced subordination and who live within the web of oppression to hear emphasis placed on men being victimized by sexism; they cling to the ‘all men are the enemy’ version of reality ... While it in no way diminishes the seriousness of male abuse and oppression of women, or negates male responsibility for exploitive actions, the pain men experience can serve as a catalyst calling attention to the need for change” (p. 558). Laker and Davis (2012) also asserted several compelling reasons for change, stating, “If we understand how all people are harmed by adhering to the unconscious absorption of narrow standards that lead to confining and oppressive roles, we can begin the process of deciding for ourselves who we are and realize a more full human potential” (p. xii).

Throughout the United States, societal expectations transmitted to men reflect confining and troubling norms for male behavior. For example, in a quantitative study of 116 undergraduates on attitudes about alcohol use based on traditional gender-stereotyping adjectives and adjective phrases applied to two male and two female stimuli, researchers found direct evidence that expectations regarding beer drinking and getting drunk were aspects associated with traditional male gender roles (Landrine, Bardwell, & Dean, 1988). The results revealed that male stimuli were attributed stereotypically masculine traits, such as acting as a leader or showing a willingness to take risks, while female stimuli were attributed stereotypically feminine traits, such as sensitive and dependent (p. 783). These results indicate that by the time students enter college, norms
for behavior for both men and women are firmly established, with traits for masculinity that emphasize drinking and risk-taking that were not only learned but expected. Laker and Davis (2012) and hooks (2004) are among the researchers who pointed out the failure of colleges and universities to address men’s issues from a gendered perspective; in the vacuum, patriarchal notions of masculinity and identity fill the void.

As a critical analysis of male undergraduate success trends at Penn State, this dissertation explored male students’ identities and masculinity as revealed through the observations and experiences of the men themselves in the complex mix of sociocultural and academic experiences on the Penn State University Park campus. This study explored this mix of influences on men’s development and identity through their own experiences with Penn State’s campus culture (Laker and Davis, 2012).

Compelling counter-assumptions to the themes explored in this study deflate suggestions that men are not benefitting from the status quo, despite pervasive suggestions to the contrary (Lewin, 2006). King (2006) emphasized that men are benefitting, with more men entering, remaining enrolled, and graduating from college than at any point in history; however, situating men in the context of higher education demands exploration of their lived experiences in order to uncover what Harris and Barone (2011) described as the impact of “hegemonic masculinity on all students” (p. 51). The gender binary as a tool for social classification is increasingly limited (Harris & Barone, 2011). As such, this study sought to expand the definition of men to include males marginalized by terms such as “college men” and an examination of men who are homosexual, people who are transgender, men of color, and men who are members of the working class and often left out of university research. Therefore, this study included research participants from Penn
State’s University Park campus. In some sense, we all contribute to societal notions of hegemonic masculinity. Brookfield (2005) articulated a definition of hegemonic masculinity acknowledged by academics when he wrote, “Hegemony—the process by which people learn to live and love the dominant system of beliefs and practices—is not so much imposed on them so much as it is learned by them” (p. 36). Interpreting Brookfield in the context of this dissertation, it can be said of the evidence offered so far that male undergraduates have learned masculinity for better or worse, as they are driven by an internalization of beliefs and practices that work against them (Walters, 2012, p. 14).

Brookfield (2005) goes on to say, “Hegemony is lived out a thousand times a day in our intimate behaviors, glances, body postures, in the fleeting calculations we make on how to look at and speak to each other, and in the continuous micro-decisions that coalesce into a life” (pp. 96-97).

In addition to the issues surrounding masculine identity formation and hegemonic masculinity, other researchers have researched educational systems such as Penn State from a systems theory perspective (Banathy, 1968; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Dick, Carey, & Carey, 2005). In complex systems such as universities and colleges, the ecology of the environment demands exploration through interviews, structural factors, and sociocultural factors that exerted an influence on the men, to determine if their lived experiences illuminate reasons for their academic probation.

To summarize, the interpretation offered by Brookfield and others is that hegemonic masculinity has an impactful downside for men in the absence of socially acceptable alternative notions of masculinity, and this interpretation reinforced the
A conceptual approach to this phenomenological study, thus bringing a systems approach to this qualitative research dissertation (Watson & Watson, 2013).

**Critical Theory**

This research targeted male students at Penn State and was born out of a critical perspective that is shared by Penn State’s DUS, an organization whose very mission demands active engagement and prescriptive measures for deficient students. In this sense, the critical perspective is part of the culture at DUS. In the tradition of the Frankfurt School of German philosophers and social theorists, Horkheimer (1982) defined critical theory as distinct from traditional theory in that it seeks “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (p. 244). In addition, critical theory takes into account power relationships in systems that can help explain why some people come to know certain things while others do not; these were domains that Habermas (1996) described as technical interests, practical interests, and emancipatory interests (Kilgore, 2001). As part of the knowledge base required to earn a college degree and for employment purposes, academics qualify as a technical interest held by male students who drop out. Because critical theory rejects “objectivity in knowledge by pointing, among other things, to the fact that the object of knowledge is itself embedded into an historical and social process (Coradetti, n.d., chapter 2, para. 4); this perspective integrates elegantly with systems theory and social constructivism to form a three-pronged theoretical framework for research focused on at-risk male undergraduate students at Penn State (Kilgore, 2001).
Research Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this research was to better understand at-risk male students’ experiences at Penn State’s University Park campus, as a way to illuminate more precisely the issue or issues that put them at risk for early departure from university prior to earning a degree.

A systemic approach to the study of men in higher education has proven useful to other researchers, as outlined in the literature review, because as a social construct, masculinity develops through a variety of influences and social contexts. As a former community college faculty member working with underprepared and minority students, I know firsthand that students’ lack of classroom ability is usually not organic; it is context-based in the sense that multiple factors such as time management, lack of social support for the students’ college experience, lack of social capital, and family issues combine with low expectations in many schools to produce widespread inequities in a system of public education that willfully neglects some groups while privileging others (Kozol, 1991). Therefore, the research question this analysis sought to answer follows:

How do at-risk male undergraduates at Penn State University Park describe the experiences that put them at risk for dropping out or failing?

The systemic nature of public education, especially its failures that disproportionately impact people of color, led me to Watson and Watson’s Critical Systems Theory for Qualitative Research Methodology (2013). Its unique paradigm provided this researcher with a critical lens to “connect the dots” of diverse data produced through the analysis of the phenomenon under investigation. The goal of this study, then, was to
present a more comprehensive picture of the at-risk male undergraduate population at Penn State University Park, which could ultimately lead to effective preventative programs.
Chapter 3
Research Design and Methods

This chapter discusses the phenomenological research method relevant to the primary research question. It also introduces the research site and participants, and explains how the data will be collected and analyzed. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of trustworthiness in the study. As with many similar studies of culture and context that rely heavily on lived experiences, it can be difficult to predict the precise trajectory of the study. As Rossman and Rallis (2012) pointed out, studies unfold and require flexibility in the ongoing processes they employ.

Research Question

This study was designed around the following research question: “How do at-risk male undergraduates at Penn State University Park describe the experiences that put them at-risk for dropping out or failing?” In addressing this question, I explored the phenomenon of male undergraduates’ first-year on campus within Penn State’s DUS. The DUS and its issues with at-risk male students first came to my attention when I was an apprentice researcher in Dr. Carr-Chellman’s Instructional Systems 594 course. The DUS was responsible for shepherding undergraduate students with undecided majors toward degree programs that suit their skills, abilities, and outlooks. This explanation of the division’s work resonated with me because of my own work in higher education with underprepared students.
Researcher Identity

My interest in Learning, Design, and Technology grew out of my experiences as a community college faculty member in Developmental Writing. This subject regularly put me in close contact with at risk-students, both male and female. For nearly a decade I worked with these students and tried to understand how people in their late teens and early twenties with high school diplomas found essay writing to be extraordinarily challenging, and when they were able to complete an assignment successfully, the writing was at a fifth or sixth grade level. Many of the students in Developmental Writing shared my ethnic background as an African American, or they came from other ethnic minorities in the United States, including Hispanics and many international students whose first language was not English.

I struggled to understand why many found it so difficult to write simple paragraphs and short essays, something I have always accomplished easily enough. Direct instruction often exhausted my students and left them uninspired, so I searched for ways to make the instruction more palatable and meaningful. I developed the mindset that these students’ brains were sluggish, and that they could learn if only someone showed them first how to be good students. Once this was established, I hypothesized that I could teach them writing. I began to experiment with in-class meditations designed to help students focus. I created puzzle games in which students had to identify the parts of speech of words they’d drawn on blank sheets of printer paper and then assemble them into complete sentences with proper punctuation. I remember our vice president of instruction walking past my classroom when all of my students were sprawled across the floor, desks shoved out of the way, with some students writing on white boards and others gathered in small groups
putting their sentences together. It looked chaotic, but my students were engaged and learning.

Sometime later, I studied metacognition and attended professional development workshops sponsored by the National Association of Developmental Education in search of ways to improve my teaching and my courses. Sometime in 2006, I took a course in Applied Technology, Training, and Development at the University of North Texas near Dallas-Fort Worth. I was looking for a path forward to improve not only my own instruction but also these students’ experiences in higher education, because there existed a 10-year, 50% pass rate for basic writing students across seven campuses in my college district. In my personal opinion, failure in developmental education not only was common, it was tolerated. As a seasoned news writer and concerned citizen, it didn't make any sense to me. My instincts kicked in, and I set out to change the game for my students. These efforts culminated in a two-year research grant to improve writing instruction in which I designed and deployed a compressed, hybrid writing course structure that shortened the developmental writing course sequence and improved learning outcomes over the course of a two-year, $130,000-plus pilot program, funded by the State of Texas (Wilson, Dondlinger, Li, & Warren, 2007). Therefore, the bulk of my experience in higher education focused on student success and ways to increase levels of retention for underprepared students. Work on this project helped propel me toward graduate studies in Learning, Design, and Technology at Penn State.

My sociocultural background also played an important role in my research on student success issues. As one of four sons born to two black college professors, I spent my formative years in Tuskegee, Alabama, a stronghold of black intellectual life during the 60s,
when Jim Crow's South was at its worst. In my family, failure in school and in life was not an option, even with openly hostile attitudes toward blacks at the time. I always knew I would go to college, and I dreamed of one day becoming a fighter pilot just like my childhood heroes, the Tuskegee Airmen. Though my parents were smart and earned two doctorates between them, Dad at Columbia and Mom at New York University, my own school record was mixed for years after we moved to an all-white New Jersey neighborhood. It was a tough transition for a nine-year-old boy, and I remember often feeling like an outsider due to my race. In the North, my southern accent didn’t play well, and I was forced to take speech in grammar school despite a high level of ability in writing and speaking. These were emotionally painful times, but I remained determined to succeed, a gift of perseverance given to me by my mother and father. In college I struggled, too, compelled by low-test scores to take a semester of remedial math so I could be better prepared for my major, microbiology. Thanks to these and other struggles too numerous to mention here, on a fundamental level I believe even the most underprepared or marginalized students can succeed in twenty-first-century school settings if they are designed around learners’ needs and capabilities; this is my starting point for making progress toward increasing levels of educational attainment for all students in higher education institutions but especially those with whom identify, marginalized and underprepared students.

Research Site and Participants

The Division of Undergraduate Studies at Penn State’s University Park campus was selected as the research site during the fall semester of 2012. The study originated during
conversations with the DUS administrator, Terry Musser,\textsuperscript{1} who was concerned about the academic success and retention of male undergraduate students who did not seek the help of advisers despite their poor grades. The Research Assessment Team (RATS) was responsible for investigating student success, retention and enrollment trends throughout the Pennsylvania State University system at 19 different locations. The RATS mission is stated as follows:

To facilitate conditions that enable division colleagues to contribute to research relevant to advising by encouraging and supporting familiarity with the research literature in academic advising, nurturing the pursuit of original research among staff members, and creating conditions for the dissemination of research endeavors undertaken by DUS colleagues; to lead the division in articulating the agenda for assessment and encouraging the integration of assessment into program delivery with a focus on internal accountability and improvement; and to identify needs, set priorities, locate resources, and organize vehicles for data collection, analyses, and reports (Penn State DUS, 2014).\textsuperscript{2}

As the formal gatekeeper, Musser had the authority to grant access to the department and has provided access to the student records database consistent with Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and university regulations. In this, the research participants were all male undergraduates with undecided majors and grade point averages below 2.0 (Seidman, 1998, p. 37; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 252).

Fully understanding the lived experiences of at-risk male students demanded an examination of the critical relationship between advisers and the students. For this reason,

\textsuperscript{1} Dr. Musser is an LDT alumnus, and part of this setting emerged from work in LDT 594. 
\textsuperscript{2} At the time of publication, an update to the DUS Website eliminated this language.
student advisers were interviewed about their interactions with male undergraduates in the DUS and were approached through peers (Seidman, 1998, p. 39). Additional student advisers and undergraduate students were drawn from participants who chose to join the study after they responded to an e-mail soliciting their participation. Additionally, my personal observations and reflections were posted to a Penn State blog to raise a critical, productive awareness of the issue (Freire, 2009) and of the study results related to the success of male undergraduates represented in the at-risk group identified at Penn State.

**Pilot Study**

In a pilot phenomenological study completed in October 2014, a team of advisers from the Division of Undergraduate Studies at Penn State and I conducted 8 interviews with male undergraduate students on academic probation. This division, the largest program of its kind on campus, was responsible for guiding first-year students with undeclared majors through their initial academic experience on campus (DUS, Impact Statement, 2015). The participants for the pilot study were drawn from an electronically distributed survey for approximately 700 undergraduate male students at Penn State who were on academic probation. For the pilot and for the study outlined in this dissertation, academic probation was defined as any student who achieved a cumulative 2.0 grade point average in the previous semester. In addition, the research team collected interview data from a selection of the survey respondents who agreed to participate in interviews. Additionally, I made observations of the interactions between student advisers and students in the Grange Building, home to the Division of Undergraduate Studies. I used phenomenological thematic analysis on the eight interviews, and the results were
presented at a national conference for academic advisers (Himes, Musser, Schwartz, St. Pierre, & Wilson, 2014). The pilot study revealed enough to warrant further investigation and analysis for this dissertation. Some of the findings presented included:

1. At-risk male students’ perceptions of masculinity reveal that part of being a man at Penn State and in general means not quitting in the face of academic probation or other problems that threaten to derail them from their goals.

2. Peer groups and clubs on campus provided social support to the men at-risk, so connections with others can be meaningful in overcoming obstacles through shared activities such as social events in campus clubs or organizations.

3. Freedom on campus and multiple opportunities for social and academic engagement produced an environment in which male students encountered difficulty making decisions about the correct path to choose; therefore, they chose multiple paths with a resulting diffusion of effort that led them to academic probation.

4. Immaturity and the inability to set priorities surfaced were key reasons why male undergraduates wound up on academic probation.

**Phenomenology and the Problem of Essence**

I chose a phenomenological approach because it fit my inquiry into the lived experiences of at-risk male undergraduates. The focus was on the lived experiences (Creswell, 2013, p. 76) of male undergraduates that led them to be on academic probation rather than on specific students unable to succeed versus those who failed (comparison study), or a single student of interest who dropped out (case study). As stated by van Manen, the goal of phenomenology is to achieve an understanding of the very essence of
Van Manen (2007) further clarified phenomenology when he explained that "phenomenology is a project of sober reflection on the lived experience of human existence—sober, in the sense that reflecting on experience must be thoughtful, and as much as possible, free from theoretical, prejudicial and suppositional intoxication" (p. 11).

Stewart and Mickunas (1990) organized phenomenology into four broad philosophical perspectives, as 1) the search for wisdom and a return to the traditional tasks of philosophy; 2) the suspension of judgments and presuppositions; 3) intentionality of consciousness; and 4) reality is perceived within the meaning of an individual’s experience (Creswell, 2013, p. 79; Stewart & Mickunas, 1990; Schram, 2006, p. 99).

Unlike narrative analysis, this phenomenological study revealed shared patterns among several individuals of their lived experiences concerning the concept or phenomenon of academic probation, though in this study I did not limit my inquiry to only the shared patterns that surfaced in the lived experiences of the undergraduates (Creswell, 2013, p. 78). Nevertheless, I remained open to outliers whose individual experiences also shed light on the phenomenon under study because “Human experience maybe explained through the presence of phenomena such as insomnia, exclusion, anger, or undergoing coronary bypass surgery” (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, Hanson, Plano-Clark, & Morales, 2007, p. 252). As an example of one outlier’s experience gleaned from the pilot study, a U.S. military veteran of the special operations community with years of combat experience accused fraternities of being seductive and negative social environments for undergraduate men focused on drinking and girls. To curb this fraternity environment, this study participant suggested that regulated alcohol consumption be allowed on campus. The
student acknowledged that it would be unlikely for his solution to be adopted by the university. Because phenomenology relies heavily on philosophy and beliefs about the nature of knowledge, and on how phenomena come to be known, it was important to set out my own ontological and epistemological suppositions.

The foundation of scientific inquiry rests on positivist approaches for acquiring knowledge, and research has been grounded in this approach for hundreds of years (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). This perspective relied on the supposition that a reality outside the human mind and external to human experience could be perceived, quantified, and explained through the use of scientific tools that allowed the researcher to draw objective conclusions (Bernstein, 1976, 1983; Dondlinger, 2009). Conversely, the interpretivist point of view assumed that there was no objective reality external to human consciousness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, 2008; Guba & Lincoln, 1989) because interpretations are circumscribed by the biases and subjectivity of the researcher who made the observations. My personal research perspective remains based on constructivism because I believe reality is socially constructed through meaningful interactions—both positive and negative—between people and the organizations and cultures they occupy in both informal and formal settings (Bernstein, 1983; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). My personal perspective on the nature of reality of course influenced the conduct of this inquiry and my own perceptions of it.

**Intentionality of Consciousness**

The intentionality of consciousness refers to the consciousness of the researcher directed toward the focus or target of the research, which Creswell called the “object”
(Creswell, 2013, p. 77). Reality is then a duality, not separated into subjects and objects but in the “dual Cartesian nature of both subjects and objects as they appear in the consciousness” (p. 77). As the chosen pathway to illuminate the experiences of male students, this study concluded with a description of the essence of the men’s experiences and incorporated what and how they experienced the phenomenon of being at-risk in their first year under the threat of failure or being forced out of school.

**Bracketing and Intuition**

While bracketing is a commonly noted strategy in phenomenological research studies, my research assumed there was no real objectivity in the qualitative study described here (Creswell, 2013, p. 83). This was because my prior knowledge, experiences, sociocultural background, and interpretation of data incorporated biases and assumptions that I brought to the research (p. 83; van Manen, 1990). Rather, the researcher as an instrument was the proper stance for this type of inquiry because the phenomenon under investigation was illuminated by the research participants’ interview responses (Brodsky, 2008); Denzin (2004) characterized this process as art. In phenomenology, observations and interviews allow the researcher to see meaning—described by Rilke (1987) as “in-seeing into the heart of things.” Philosophically, “in-seeing,” relates to “in-being” (Heidegger, 1985), which van Manen (2007) characterized as our “everyday being-involved-with the things of our world” (p. 13). This point of view was consistent with my own intuition and background and my orientation toward constructivism and as an interpretivist social scientist.
This philosophical orientation connected with the term “experience” that formed part of the research question. Experience was a reference to the nature of interactions that male undergraduates lived through daily life on Penn State’s University Park campus within the context of their experiential, sociocultural relations with friends, family, professors, advisers, the environment, etc. These qualities of the lived experience then became the focus of the research and required the development of descriptions of the essences of these experiences—not of explanations or analysis (Moustakas, 1994). This interpretive exposition reflected the lived experience of the participants shared with the readers of this research. The phenomenology described in this research is best reflected in the procedures for transcendental or psychological phenomenology focused more on a description of the participants’ experiences than on the interpretations of the researcher (Creswell, 2013, p. 80; Moustakas, 2004). As a result, in this approach to phenomenology I viewed the problem of at-risk male students with “new eyes” (Moustakas, 2014, p. 34).

**Definition of Terms**

This section defined several key terms central to this research. Scholars on student advising offer several perspectives on the meaning of the term “at-risk student” (Walsh, 2014). According to Maxwell (1997), students are at-risk when their “skills, knowledge, motivation, and or/academic ability are significantly below those of the typical student in the college or curriculum in which they are enrolled” (p. 2). More in line with the parameters of my study was Ender and Wilkie’s definition (2000), which states [at-risk] students:
...are likely to display any number of other characteristics such as low academic self-concept, unrealistic grade and career expectations, unfocused career objectives, extrinsic motivation, external locus of control, low self-efficacy, inadequate study skills for college success, a belief that learning is memorizing, and a history of passive learning. (pp. 134-135)

These themes were reflected in the pilot study that analyzed a sample population of undergraduate men in DUS who fell below a 2.0 grade point average but remained enrolled to work on resolving their academic deficiencies.

Because the central source of the sample population was from DUS, understanding this organization and its functions were central to the research. DUS is Penn State’s largest unit of enrollment for first-year students and is the academic home for thousands of other students exploring programs and meeting requirements before entering majors (DUS Impact Statement, 2015). It is a data rich organization staffed with a team of approximately 20 advisers who collect and analyze significant data on students’ experiences at Penn State (e.g., survey instruments, data sets, spreadsheets, etc.) on every campus in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (T. Musser, personal communication, September 26, 2012).

**Data Collection**

**Observations**

I observed interactions between student advisers and male and female undergraduates served by DUS’s advising offices during normal business hours and at special orientation events organized by DUS on behalf of students and academic advisers.
Watching how the advisers worked with students who were at-risk was critical to understanding the nature of student experiences that lead to academic probation. I collected this data with the end-goal of obtaining “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) of the students’ experiences. Observations helped me establish the context for this qualitative research study and allowed me to become familiar with the environment and a complex sociocultural system (Rossman & Rallis, 2012) that gave rise to an empirically observed gendered pattern of student success in which undergraduate male student experiences that led to academic probation were empirically observed. Observations were guided by van Manen’s existential philosophy, “life-world.” I observed male and female undergraduates in DUS seeking counsel from advisers—a critical relationship for observation of these interactions within “lived spaces” (van Manen, 2003). Lived spaces included the DUS advising area offices and conference rooms, and one-on-one meetings between advisers and students. I observed interactions between DUS advisers and student—both male and female—in DUS offices in Grange Building during regular business hours (see Appendix C). Students scheduled appointments with their adviser in advance, but several participated on a “drop in” basis. Students in DUS are assigned an adviser and meet with their assigned person unless they choose a walk-in advising session in which case they speak briefly with the adviser on duty. The conferences took place in office settings with comfortable chairs and lighting, and many advisers adorned their workspaces with personal effects such as photos, plants, artwork, books, degrees, awards, and certificates. In one adviser’s office, a posted sign bears the name National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) and reads, “I advise. You decide.” During these sessions, the advisers engaged students in conversation with pleasantries as a kind of warm up before more asking more focused questions about
the students’ concerns, semester grades or other issues. The questioning style was gentle, and advisers tended to listen more than talk. During the appointments, advisers consulted multiple data sources on a computer including students’ individual academic records, the grade point average predictor, transfer policies, degree plans, and more. In these sessions, the students seemed animated and open to discussing issues related to their grades, choosing a major, and exploring their options for courses and degrees. The interviews lasted about 15-20 minutes. Once the students left the office, the advisers entered notes on their conversations with the students into a computer database using a unique system of letter codes and narrative commentary that described the issues discussed with the student, the tone of the meeting, and anything else deemed pertinent to the substance of the interaction. Once entered into the computer, the notes were accessed by authorized academic advisers and staff and used for future advising appointments with students.

I kept a research journal on a personal iPad secured with a password, and I documented my observations on a blog devoted to this project. These records and observations informed the dissertation. Additionally, I documented the unoccupied physical spaces where advisers worked with students using a digital camera. I also collected and reviewed advising literature given to students and analyzed them as part of this research. Finally, I examined Division of Undergraduate Studies’ social networking and Websites and explored the advising information available to all students over the Internet.

The observations included participant and non-participant observations as a way to develop an overall feel for the flow of students through the advising system. Since students enrolled in the Division of Undergraduate studies do not have majors and may therefore be
characterized as at-risk, it was important to observe both male and female participants in the advising process.

**Documents**

I gleaned information for the study from extant analysis of the DUS Web site, DUS pamphlets, the information packet from the National Academic Advising Association Conference 2014, notes and handouts from academic advising meetings at Penn State, a review of literature for the freshman orientation program for students, and informal assessments and evaluations of male students. Additionally, the researcher conducted a logistic regression of 34,000 student records obtained from the Penn State data warehouse that identified a gendered pattern of student success for male undergraduates of 2:1 versus females of similar age and socioeconomic background (Wilson et al., 2013). Third, I examined cultural artifacts such as survey results data analysis reports using information generated in the context of my “embed” within DUS.

**Background and Sampling**

This study relied on “purposeful sampling,” a technique in which the researcher selects participants and sites for the study because they inform the central phenomenon in the study (Creswell, 2013, p. 156). Because I investigated phenomena associated with at-risk students, I used “criterion sampling” to select the participants for the interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28; Creswell, 2013, p. 158). The criteria included: 1) research participants must have experienced academic deficiencies; 2) research participants were enrolled in DUS; 3) All interview participants were male; and 4) all interview participants had achieved lower than 2.0 grade point averages. DUS granted me access to the students I
wished to study, and the Office of Research Protections approved an IRB exemption for the study (#43216). The sample size for phenomenological studies can vary from one individual to over 300, and twelve students were enrolled and interviewed (Dukes, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1989; Riemen, 1986).

In December 2013, 13,000 male students participated in an Internet survey titled *Men At Risk Study Survey* that was run in collaboration between The Pennsylvania State University Department of Learning, Design, and Technology and DUS. From this survey, 500 male undergraduates with undeclared majors and grade point averages below 2.0 were identified for a pilot study on at-risk undergraduate men in which 8 participants enrolled. In Fall 2014, an additional 400 undergraduate men were identified as potential research participants using the same criterion sampling methodology; these students were solicited for their participation in the research via e-mail. I provide more information on the recruitment and final selection of research participants in Chapter 4.

Prior to the pilot study, other potential research participants were identified using the Penn State Data Warehouse, the central repository for millions of student records. Analysts ran my query for male undergraduate students who left campus without earning a certificate or degree or were on academic probation. While I did not anticipate running another data warehouse search, I attempted to investigate all suitable data sources. Because direct access to student records in the data warehouse was not accessible directly by me as a graduate student conducting research due to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA, 2014), my sample relied on academic advisers and the gatekeeper for the information (Terry Musser) to identify students appropriate for this study.
Nevertheless, this approach to recruitment met Moustakas’s (1994) standard for qualitative research participants set forth as follows:

...the research participant has experienced the phenomenon, is intensely interested in understanding its nature and meanings, is willing to participate in a lengthy interview and (perhaps a follow-up interview), grants the investigator the right to tape-record, possibly videotape the interview, and publish the data in a dissertation and other publications. (p. 107)

Interviews

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 student participants. The format for the interviews followed Seidman’s (2006) three-series phenomenological interview. To summarize Seidman’s (1998) approach to interviews for phenomenological studies, “interviewing provides access to the context of people’s behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior. A basic assumption of in-depth interviewing research is that the meaning people make of their experience affects the way they carry out that experience... Interviewing allows us to put behavior into a context and provides access to understanding their action (p. 4). The final questions emerged in response to what students said as interviews were conducted (Creswell, 2013). Questions were structured to produce in-depth and descriptive comments from research participants guided by the philosophical concept of “life-world,” an illumination of research participants’ ordinary, conscious experience of being at risk (Schram, 2006, p. 99). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using InQsScribe transcription software.
The setting for the interviews was on campus in locations created for students to conduct study groups, research, and conversations about their schoolwork. This effort was made to minimize the effect of any unseen power relationships or structures that might be present in the Grange Building, home to DUS. All interview data was stored confidentially on the researcher’s password-protected laptop and on Penn State’s encrypted storage media site, Box. All research participants were assigned pseudonyms, and the names of professors, staff, and course identifications were altered or deleted to protect privacy of individuals potentially impacted by this research.

Data Analysis

Higher education institutions are complex, environmental systems; therefore, this research required an approach that relied on multiple analytical methods and tools to examine situations and phenomenon in the given context so that the complex campus system could be better comprehended. In this approach, cooperative inquiry and participatory action research combine in a critical systems theory for qualitative research methodology (Watson & Watson, 2013, p. 16). This theory aligned well with the phenomenological approach used because underlying systems in higher education, such as advising, academic, and non-academic aspects of campus life, exert strong influences in an often-chaotic web of interconnected systems and personal relationships whose combined effects may impact the phenomenon under investigation. For this reason, this dissertation relied on a variety of perspectives and data sources that included personal accounts (Lancy, 1993), phenomenology (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), narrative analysis (Geertz, 1973; Reissman, 2008), and narrative authority (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).
The interviews were coded for themes using Kleiman’s (2004) framework for phenomenological studies. Typically applied in the field of nursing, Kleiman approached phenomenological data analysis in a straightforward series of steps that starts with reading the interview transcripts to establish an overall feeling of the whole. In the second step, the interview transcripts are read a second time more slowly with data grouped into meaning units. In the third step, these meaning units were grouped in a way that made sense according to the themes or foci they represented. In the fourth step, the data were then subjected to a process known as free imaginative variation. In Kleiman’s (2004) definition, free imaginative variation is “the process that determines which of the integrated or grouped meaning units are essential for and are made up of a fixed identity for the phenomena under investigation” (p. 17), in this case the experiences of at-risk students. Giorgi (1997) defines free imaginative variation as the method by which “one freely changes aspects or parts of a phenomenon or object, and one sees if the phenomenon remains identifiable with the part changed or not” (p. 243). As stated by Moustakas (1994), “From the invariant constituents, the researcher, using phenomenological reflection and imaginative variation, constructs thematic portrayals of the experience” (p. 131). In step five, I revisited the raw data descriptions and justify my interpretations of both the essential meanings and the general structure. In the sixth and final step, I performed a critical analysis of the data within the context of my research study. This verification step was critical and affirmed the following under the Kleiman framework: 1) concrete, detailed descriptions were obtained from the participants; 2) the phenomenological reduction was maintained; 3) essential meanings were have discovered; 4) a data structure was articulated; and 5) the raw data verified the results.
The unit of analysis for this phenomenology was the experience of academic probation for male undergraduates at the University Park campus of The Pennsylvania State University. The units of observation included the face-to-face interviews with students, the interview transcripts, my self-reflective interpretation of the transcript analysis, interactions between students, both male and female, interactions between advisers in the Division of Undergraduate Studies (DUS), observations of the physical space in DUS, observations of DUS’s Web site and its resources for students and advisers, and finally the social media presence for DUS (Facebook, etc.). Additionally, I kept audio field notes on all 12 interviews and wrote out my perceptions as a reflective practice in iPad notes (Schön, 1983) (see Appendix B), some of which appear on a blog dedicated to this research (Wilson, “Dissertation Notes,” 2015). To enhance rigor, the research used Guba and Lincoln’s evaluative criteria for credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (1985).

**Trustworthiness**

The issue of trustworthiness was of critical importance to this qualitative research, because evaluators must “persuade his or her audiences that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of” (Lincoln & Guba, 1990, p. 290). In the same work, Lincoln and Guba discussed four guidelines for trustworthiness and the techniques to guide researchers there. In an effort to increase trustworthiness, several data sources were used including a qualitative interview journal, prolonged engagement with participants, thick description (Geertz, 1973), and triangulation. In addition, a professor of
higher education at a research university in the southwest United States served as an uncompensated external evaluator for this research.
Chapter 4

Analysis and Results

Themes Illustrating the Experience of Academic Probation for Undergraduate Male Students

In this chapter, I offer a description of this study’s participants, their experiences of academic probation, the study’s findings and a discussion of the findings. The findings are the themes that emerged from interviews of male undergraduate students who described experiences that contributed to their placement on academic probation (Moustakas, 1994, p. 131). “A descriptive approach limits itself to what is given, and the argument is that a sufficiently rich description would include an intrinsic account of the phenomenon” (Giorgi, 1997, p. 242).

Backgrounds of the Participants

There were 12 participants in this research study. The 12 students were all undergraduates at the University Park campus of The Pennsylvania State University. After receiving IRB approval from The Pennsylvania State University Office of Research Protections, criterion sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28) was used to identify potential participants through a database search of student records in Division of Undergraduate Studies. Approximately 400 male undergraduate students with cumulative grade point averages less than 2.0 were identified. These students were sent an e-mail solicitation about the proposed study, and 12 students responded and agreed to participate in the research. Prior to each interview, participants indicated that they were 18 years of age or older and consented to study participation. Each interview was recorded, and the
audio was transcribed for analysis. Each co-researcher was sent a transcript of his interview as a member check. Pseudonyms were used to identify the participants in this report. The 12-participant sample was within the range for phenomenology suggested by Creswell (2007). At the time of the interviews, the participants were all full-time students attending classes on the University Park campus of The Pennsylvania State University. Each student self-identified his race and ethnicity, and the sample included African-American (2), Asian (4), Hispanic or Latino (1), and White (5) students. Each student received an incentive payment of $25 in cash or gift card in accordance with policy CR-2078 of The Pennsylvania State University Office for Research Protections. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in October and November 2014 in student conference rooms located in Knowledge Commons of Pattee-Paterno Library complex or Krause Innovation Studio. Brief profiles of the participants follow. Each description is prefaced with a quote pulled from participant’s transcribed interview to orient the reader to the individual’s overall experience of academic probation, expressed in his own words (van Manen, 1990). The co-researcher vignettes that follow were written as textural and structural descriptions for each co-researcher during the analysis of the transcripts.

**Brad**

“No one really explained it to me (college life and study). I was just up here trying to do my best and trying to get the degree I wanted.”

*Textural Description*

Brad was a 22-year-old senior petroleum-engineering student from suburban Pittsburgh who spoke in somber tones throughout his interview. Brad earned a high grade
point average of 3.5 in high school, and he enjoyed the collegiality of the Penn State satellite campus he attended near home for two years while living with his parents before enrolling in University Park. Brad explained he wound up on academic probation because he put too much time into a personal romantic relationship with a woman from his hometown and in the process neglected his studies.

*Structural Description*

From Brad’s account of his experience of academic probation at Penn State University, Park, he brought with him prior experience of academic excellence at a Penn State Satellite campus. From this experience he expected more camaraderie and close relationships with other students and faculty. However, throughout Brad’s narrative he emphasized that many of the difficulties he confronted were brought on by large class sizes, weak interpersonal relationships with his professors, and a lack of strong social relationships, especially with his peer group. Brad felt his experience of academic probation was amplified by the relationships he lost by coming to University Park, especially a broken relationship with a girlfriend he left back home and the loss of familiarity of his life as a student on the Penn State satellite campus near his hometown and life in his parents’ home.

**Dick**

“For both the Army and here. You’re always trying to be the alpha male. Be the top dog for the guys...”
Textural Description

Dick was a 22-year-old graduate from a suburban Pennsylvania high school about two hours southeast of University Park, Pennsylvania, and said he never intended to go to college and never made plans for it. Dick’s sole motivation was to join the Army and he did, winding up on three years of active duty jumping out of planes, during which he says he saw combat overseas. After receiving an honorable discharge, Dick enrolled in Penn State on the GI Bill and was surprised when he was admitted without completing much paperwork. Twenty days after his discharge, he found himself in University Park, making a challenging transition to student life on campus.

Structural Description

Dick’s transition to Penn State left him feeling disconnected from other students and professors, who lionized him due to his military service and war experience. The soldier-side of his identity never turned off, so that is what people reacted to. The culture of the university didn’t allow him to leave his soldiering experience behind and become a student. By his own admission, Dick was never strong academically, and so he continued to rely on his command presence to remain “tough” in the face of his difficulties with school. Throughout his narrative, Dick emphasized how different he felt from the other students and how he could never get used to being on a civilian campus totally unlike the Army where students are responsible for their actions and are not given orders or told “to do their homework.” Though he experienced a strong sense of isolation, Dick remained optimistic that he could overcome his academic struggles and indicated that as time passed, he was getting better at finding his way around campus and at reaching out to others.
Harry

“I just tried to chug through it and then I would get like Cs and I would be like, it’s fine; I can still do it but in the back of my head I knew that, I did know that I really could not keep this up. I was just really stubborn to the people around me and like to myself.”

Textural Description

Harry was a 19-year-old student majoring in engineering who grew up in a suburb of Washington, DC. Unwilling to follow his peer group to schools such as UVA, VA Tech and George Mason University, Harry opted for Penn State, where none of the people he knew planned to attend school. Harry’s first love was music, and he played several instruments, composed songs, and led an ensemble in his Christian fellowship group. However, Harry explained that his family’s cultural values and those of his friends led him to study a career field that would lead to a profession but was one he did not enjoy.

Structural Description

Harry truly never wanted to study engineering and did so only because of cultural and parental pressures. The joy he found in music flourished at Penn State, but it setup a difficult balancing act that forced Harry to choose daily between what he loved and what he felt he needed to do to be true to his parents and his culture. The delicate balancing act was toppled as long unvented feelings connected with his mother’s death to cancer two years earlier bubbled to the surface after he enrolled at Penn State University Park. The transition proved difficult, and the struggle and boredom he felt in large lecture halls contributed to his academic struggles and ultimate placement on academic probation.
Yu

“I thought I could do it. It's kind of like a culture thing. Um, like, I guess in Chinese college there's um, like I was taught there's, there's nothing you can't do. And if you work hard but uh, yeah. That's what I thought.”

**Textural Description**

Yu was a 20-year-old junior and education policy major of Asian heritage. He was born and raised in China, immigrated to another Southeast Asian country and lived there about 10 years with his parents, then finally landed in the United States. He always maintained an interest in Engineering, but after a couple years at Penn State learned it was not his forte. He enrolled in Penn State after finding it on the Internet. After comparing it to other schools, he applied and was accepted. Yu’s choice of engineering seemed at odds with his personality and level of interest.

**Structural Description**

Yu’s transition to a foreign culture created a tremendous barrier to achieving academic success in engineering. The teaching style and the need to study on his own were revelations to him. Because he did not reach out early and often to other students and staff, he suffered invisibly with the shame and burden of his personal academic failures. Yu also lacked the familiarity of the close relationship he enjoyed with his parents over the years because they were thousands of miles away in another hemisphere on another continent. Unable to figure out his academic foibles and doing the same things that brought him success in the Asian educational experience context, his scores and motivation plummeted, ultimately driving him to change majors.
Reed

“I knew that coming to college was going to be like a big transition and it was going to be hard for me, but I didn’t think it was going to be as hard as it turned out to be.”

Textural Description

Reed was a sophomore criminology major who identified as African American, not Hispanic or Latino. Reed settled on Penn State after looking into historically black colleges and universities because it offered the most generous scholarship award. Wilson was quite knowledgeable about the institution through participation in an on-campus summer program between grades 9-12 for high school students known as Upward Bound, which serves high school students from low-income families and high school students from families in which neither parent holds a bachelor's degree. The goal of Upward Bound is to increase the rate at which participants complete secondary education and enroll in and graduate from institutions of postsecondary education. Reed entered Penn State with the feeling that it was going to be a big challenge, one he was unprepared to tackle despite four years of college preparation in Upward Bound.

Structural Description

Reed entered Penn State with lower self-efficacy, and he expected an academic struggle because of his self-described poor educational background. Reed did the things he was supposed to do, like talking to advisers and his parents, but it was not enough. His limited support network failed to provide pertinent advice in a timely fashion, and so he floundered. Much of the system at Penn provided cursory advice or suggestions, though he did ultimately connect with an adviser who guided him more thoroughly, but only after he had already fallen into academic difficulty. Reed’s experiences that led him to be on
academic probation included low self-efficacy, not reaching out for help, distractions caused by social media technology, and being academically underprepared.

**Ignatius**

“As a migrating student (he means international student, I think) my English is not too better [sic], and first semester I have to took [sic] like very low grade classes like ESL for all those things. And not to be understanding English clearly, I didn't understand some of the lecture at first.”

*Textural Description*

Ignatius was a 23-year-old first generation college junior majoring in nutritional science who immigrated to the United States from an Asian country. Loquacious, Ignatius spoke proudly about his journey to the United States from Nepal, the first person in his family to go to college. Although he was a hard worker, financial troubles forced Ignatius to work three jobs while enrolled in school: one as a tutor to other immigrant students and two jobs at two different grocery store chains as a bagger. Ignatius was working 30 hours a week due to financial problems, but he said the biggest reason he experienced academic probation was his poor English because he could not understand his instructors during lectures.

*Structural Description*

Working many hours and not knowing English well were the biggest experiences for Ignatius that led to academic probation. He needed extra attention during the transition to Penn State and spent hours enrolled in basic ESL courses to bring his English language ability up to speed. Initially shy about reaching out, Ignatius retreated and became, in his
words, “a lonely guy.” His campus job tutoring other migrant students and his off-campus work in supermarkets gave him many opportunities to improve his language ability while having success integrating into the work environment thanks to his very strong work ethic and motivation. This structure allowed him to maintain a high-level of self-efficacy even as he endured academic probation and the isolation of not speaking the language and not knowing the culture.

**Grayson**

“There was nothing life threatening in my entire life and like nothing ever made me step up to the plate like that where I had to like take charge and help out the family in that sense.”

**Textural Description**

Grayson Chung was a 19-year-old third semester sophomore, Asian, who grew up in a Washington, DC, suburb and majored in Information Science and Technology. Grayson chose Penn State as way to make a fresh start at a “big name school” with great academics and a major college athletic program. Grayson wanted to avoid following his academically competitive friends to UVA, Virginia Tech, and George Mason University. Bright and articulate, Grayson saw his life turned upside down when his father fell critically ill with a life-threatening illness and had to be hospitalized. Grayson felt obligated to help his family during the crisis, and his studies suffered as a result.

**Structural Description**

The family medical crisis became the dominant issue in Grayson’s descent into academic probation. Long hours spent on the road between suburban Washington, DC and
University Park made study a virtual impossibility, and when Grayson was on campus, the distractions of dorm life got the better of him. Given the enormous stress he was under and the pain he felt, it is no wonder his grades suffered. Unfortunately, university policy regarding cars on campus contributed to an already immensely difficult situation, and for personal reasons he did not reach out to the resources available to him on campus. Grayson’s father survived his critical illness, and he is now attempting to repair his academic record through the process of review.

William

“My psyche says I would rather fail a test because that impacts me than fail you know, getting a project done for this organization cause that impacts everyone (coughs).”

Textural Description

William was a 21-year-old seventh-semester senior telecommunications major who was raised in Pennsylvania and took Advanced Placement courses in high school, courses in which he admits making excellent grades without studying much. William was a first generation college student in his family, and he grew up knowing Penn State’s strong football program and academic reputation, yet he never set foot on the campus or attended a football game before enrolling at the school. From the beginning, William struggled academically.

Structural Description

William entered college and found difficulty nailing down an academic major. Nothing grabbed his interest the way student government did, so when he found it, that is where he put the majority of his time. Being a smart and capable student in high school,
William thought he could pass difficult coursework without much study, something he admits he did not do much. When William did reach out for help, he often found obstacles in his path, for example, sitting in a professor's office for help and not being able to make progress in his thinking on the assignment in question. The same thing happened when William attempted to choose a major. After reaching out to his adviser, William got the run-around, shuttling back and forth between his DUS adviser and the program adviser in the new department where he sought to major. William described this shuttle advising as very frustrating, so he simply stopped seeking out this help. His refuge turned out to be student government where William embraced his passion for helping people as a student political leader who worked to raise awareness of campus sexual assault issues. This practical, informal experience of learning the political process on an important national issue engaged William in a way his studies did not. William’s articulate and thoughtful voice found a way to express itself in a meaningful way working on this and other important issues confronting students and the university. Structurally, William found it difficult to make appropriate choices because he lacked the motivation and the support to make them. His unanchored wanderings through various academic majors compounded the problem. William ultimately had a sit-down intervention with his parents, and together they developed a structured plan to help William finish school, a plan he believed was working.

Eli

“I’d say it feels pretty good. It’s been a good two years. I could have done better. There are definitely some rough patches but I’ve made some great fun. Made some great friends, had a lot of fun.”
Textural Description

Eli was an easygoing 20-year-old, non-Hispanic or Latino White, first-semester sophomore mechanical engineering major. Eli grew up familiar with Penn State thanks to his babysitter, a close family friend and a Penn State alumnus who was also an engineer with a great job. Eli saw this friend’s rise in the profession, and because he liked math and science in high school, engineering was a perfect fit. In addition, as a big sports fan, it made sense for Eli to attend Penn State, and so he applied and was accepted. Eli hails from suburban Pittsburgh. The transition to college life was a challenge.

Structural Description

The structural nature of Eli’s experience is that the transition from high school to college was difficult academically since he felt unprepared, something he discovered upon receiving his first test grades back in engineering courses. Eli’s stubbornness and resistance to reaching out for help meant he floundered and did not talk to anyone about his academic issues. Turmoil erupted in Eli’s life when he received an underage drinking citation, and his life entered a downward spiral, with flagging motivation and long hours spent in his dorm room “black hole” doing nothing except shooting the breeze with his friends. Eli chalked up his academic probation and underage drinking as trial and error, something he was destined to learn on his own. He was doing better in school and had a new peer group of friends with whom he studied engineering.

Juan

“I’m too young and too sad. Like, I don’t know. I feel like I feel like coming to college should be different. You know. Like more enjoyable sometimes.”
Textural Description

Juan was 18 years old and self-identified as a person of mixed-race heritage who had used a class assignment to trace his roots to Mexico and Cuba. Juan enjoyed music, composed on the piano, played lacrosse, wrote creatively, and said he was mechanically inclined and chose to study engineering. He had two sisters and a younger brother and grew up in the New York City area. He is multilingual, speaking Hindi, Spanish, and English, and he traveled extensively around the world with his father, who had recently pulled him out of school to travel.

Structural Description

Juan described himself as fundamentally unhappy in school at Penn State. The unhappiness stemmed from his interactions with teachers he found to be antagonistic rather than supportive. His self-efficacy was low, and he said this was driven by chronic depression he labeled dysthymia, for which he was receiving psychological counseling from a therapist once a week. When his professors were demanding in class—Juan said he was often singled to answer questions, perhaps due to instructors’ Socratic teaching style—he took it personally and resisted that attention. For this reason he often skipped class and ostensibly used the time to get caught up on other schoolwork. This created a vicious cycle in which he was always behind in his coursework and playing catch-up. This issue was important in Juan’s academic struggles because he said the whole process beat him down emotionally. Juan also found difficulty managing his time. Juan also did not consistently reach out for help with his studies.
Donald

“This semester has been very difficult. I started working in the beginning of the semester. And I would get up at 5 O’clock in the morning Monday through Thursday. So I would be doing that and then I would have a full set of classes throughout the day.”

Textural Description

Donald was a 20-year-old junior taking classes toward a degree in security and risk analysis. African American, Donald comes from a family of educated people, including aunts and uncles who hold graduate degrees. Donald’s passion is to become an Air Force pilot, and his father’s own service in the Army and his uncle’s military service figures prominently in his vision of the future. An outgoing and articulate student, Donald’s demanding work schedule and active social life created obstacles to his academic success.

Structural Description

Too much time spent working different jobs to support himself and running an entrepreneurial business, coupled with an active social life, created a huge time deficit for Donald that contributed to his being on academic probation. Donald spent a lot of time on non-academic, work-related projects. When he did make time for school, he struggled to balance his coursework and get it done on time. This was largely a time-management and choice opportunity issue related to his decision-making abilities. Though Donald maintained high levels of self-efficacy and did have some academic successes, the structure of his experiences suggested on-going difficulties with academics as he continued to prioritize other aspects of his life before his schoolwork.
Hugh

“Trying to be social and being rejected over and over again like it’s all just a huge downward spiral and yeah, that’s pretty much the biggest reason is ‘cause once you’re down, low with your GPA it’s hard to climb back out.”

Textural Description

Hugh Abbey was a junior, 21-year-old student from suburban Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania majoring in electrical engineering who self-identified as a non-Hispanic, non-Latino White male. Hugh’s interest in engineering began early in life when in eighth grade, he used to fix broken iPods by pulling them apart, diagnosing the problem, and rebuilding the unit, selling it or keeping the iPod for his own use. He even re-engineered a Nintendo 64 to run on batteries, which earned him a trip to a Washington, DC science competition. Hugh found it a challenge to make the transition from his small town high school to Penn State.

Structural Description

Hugh’s issues centered on his transition to a major university from his small, suburban high school. Trying to fit in and make friends led to consistent rejection by other students, and this caused feelings he described as a “downward spiral.” In addition, Hugh struggled with juggling his courses and keeping up with the workload that put demands on his time and energy. To him, it was all about adjusting to his new life in University Park.

Analytical Process

This portion of the research analysis reviews steps for the phenomenological reduction employed in this research. First, I collected verbal data from the participants by conducting interviews with 12 undergraduate male students over a period of
approximately three weeks in October and November 2014. Interviews were conducted face-to-face on the main campus in ergonomically constructed conference rooms in the university library or in Krause Innovation Studio. Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and one hour. I then transcribed each interview for analysis using the software program InqScribe. In the second step, I read all of the transcripts to get an overall feel for the experiences of academic probation described by the participants. “The phenomenological approach is holistic, and so one would have to read all the data before beginning any analysis” (Giorgi, 1997, p. 245). At this stage, I made no effort to thematize any portion of the descriptions. MAXQDA 11 software for qualitative data analysis was used to support the analysis of the 12 transcripts. My next step was to read all the transcripts to gain an overall impression of the experiences reported by the students using the selective reading approach (van Manen, 1990, p. 93). After the selective reading, I chose one essential quote from each student transcript and used it as an overall description of that student’s experience. In the third step, I began dividing the data into meaning units using MAXQDA 11. ‘Meaning unit’ is Giorgi’s term (1997) to describe a certain meaning identified with sensitivity to the phenomenon of academic probation and my disciplinary knowledge of learning, design, and technology and student development and advising in higher education. I then described these meaning units using Husserl’s process of free imaginative variation as described by Giorgi (1997) and began labeling them. In free imaginative variation, I changed aspects or parts of the phenomenon to see if the phenomenon, the experience of academic probation, remained identifiable or not. If the experience remained identifiable, I included it as a theme and excluded it if it did not. The invariant meaning units were then translated and interpreted through the disciplinary lenses and language of
learning, design, technology, and higher education. Through the process of phenomenological reduction, fundamental meanings without which the phenomenon could not exist were revealed. These fundamental meanings become constants for the experience the participants underwent, the essences of the experiences that provided invariant meaning for the context of at-risk undergraduate men’s experiences of academic probation. During this process, I read and re-read each transcript five times while choosing meaning units and developing codes.

![Invariant meaning codes emerging during free imaginative variation (n = 12).](image)

In the next phase, I organized the codes that emerged from the student interview transcripts into the disciplinary labels for learner contexts and learners (Dick & Carey, 2006) that include knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSAs). These codes were organized into a matrix shown in Figure 2.
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<th>Code System</th>
<th>Hugh</th>
<th>Ignatius</th>
<th>Juan</th>
<th>Reed</th>
<th>William</th>
<th>Harry</th>
<th>Yu</th>
<th>Gray</th>
<th>Eli</th>
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*Figure 2. Coding matrix showing themes organized as Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes.*
Knowledge relates to learning and mental or related internal structures of the brain and mind and consciousness. Skills are the application of knowledge and behaviors to the performance of a task such as writing a term paper or performing a math calculation on an engineering exam. Attitude refers to emotional or mental states that influence, inhibit, or promote the acquisition of knowledge and skills. In the final phase, I synthesized the data into narrative textural and structural descriptions of each student’s experiences that led them to be on academic probation.

Table 1. Essential Themes and Their Qualities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essential Themes</th>
<th>Qualities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>Disconnected from social and academic settings; lacking authentic presence intersubjectivity is curtailed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making Choices</td>
<td>Lacking a well-developed ability to make essential choices; immaturity; distractions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weakened Discipline/Motivation</td>
<td>Discouraged about school performance; distractions; dislike for field of study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitioning to College</td>
<td>Difficulty adjusting to campus life; homesickness; money problems; living conditions that do not support academic work (dorms).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom/campus environment</td>
<td>Class size, fraternity culture; campus drinking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging coursework</td>
<td>Major choices outside a student’s ability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding help</td>
<td>Not seeking academic advice and support; I can do it myself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health &amp; Wellness</td>
<td>Time consuming personal or family medical issues or crisis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduling/Time Management</td>
<td>Inability to prioritize academic work to meet deadlines; juggling course work; procrastination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interacting with Others</td>
<td>Conversations and relationships with significant others, parents, relatives, or family members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions Running High</td>
<td>Anxiousness, depression, anger, embarrassment, humiliation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Lowered self-efficacy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working</td>
<td>On and off campus employment that interfered with school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Language barrier</td>
<td>Poor communication skills due to a lack of native English fluency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack awareness of academic support services</td>
<td>Student who said they did not know about the extensive array of free and paid academic support services available to undergraduates.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
**Knowledge Category**

This section discusses the category Knowledge and its sub-themes finding help, identity/gender, and lack awareness of academic [help resources]. Knowledge as used here refers to “the metaprocesses that we use to manage the way that we think about things and ensure our own learning” (Dick et al., 2005, p. 43). In Figure 3, columns show individual students’ experiences of the phenomenon identified under the heading Code System (e.g., finding help, identity, gender, lack awareness of academic help resources), while rows depict the experiences of the phenomenon by the entire group (e.g., finding help).³ Compared to all the other codes, the **Knowledge** category was notable because it contained the fewest overall number of experiences that led to academic probation as reported by students, especially the sub-theme *Lack awareness of academic [help resources]*. Students had the knowledge, but it was their inability to use it or access it that prevented them from leveraging their strengths in this area. On the last line of Figure 3, Lack Awareness, only 4 of the 12 students reported experiences related to not knowing about academic help resources; however, in the first row of Figure 3, finding help, 7 of 12 students characterized their experiences when seeking help for academic difficulties from more knowledgeable others as negative. These negative experiences included but were not limited to feeling frustrated, feeling stupid or embarrassed in front of help providers, or getting what some described as the run-around from would-be help providers.

³ A code matrix is used to depict thematic categories that emerged in the interviews and relationships between thematic elements.
Figure 3 shows that Hugh, William and Dick all described more negative experiences than other students in the *Knowledge* category in three of the four sub-themes. Hugh recognized the help resources available to him on campus because he described his own participation in a first-year student orientation program; however, when he began to struggle with engineering courses and sought out those resources, the experience left him feeling uncomfortable, so he stopped asking for help.

**Hugh:** Going to office hours or emailing the professor is like embarrassing almost to show up and ask for help and like oh, aren't you the student that you never show up or like isn't getting it or whatever um, especially because I had a class with my--with the professor who is my adviser, um, which is odd, which is still kind of tough too, so you know going to my adviser for help with, you know, how to handle doing poorly in a class didn't really work because it was the same guy.

William also sought help and after a few attempts at it, shifted his focus from academics and studying to his role as a student government leader.

**William:** It was very much helpless. And it was very discouraging too. I distinctly remember there was one time I went and my professor, I cannot tell you his name; he was a
tall guy, balding, and he looked like Arwin, who was the custodian on *The Suite Life of Erb, Zack and Cody*, the hotel show [sic]. Spitting image. I cannot tell you but his office is in the life science bridge. Walked in and you know and I have like three bullet points. You know, three concepts I wasn’t understanding. And you know, could you help me? And he would always tout, please come to office hours; I’d love to help. Um. And went over them. And he explained it. And I didn’t get it. And I you know said could you say it a different way. He said it a different way and I still didn’t get it, um, and it was kind of like nothing was working and at that point I didn’t want to go back to office hours because it didn’t help. And it, you know, not necessarily embarrassed you but it wasn’t a fun experience. You know sitting there trying to learn or understand something that you just couldn’t comprehend, that no matter what he was doing, you know, and maybe it was him. Maybe it was me. He certainly wasn’t the best teacher; a lot of people dropped that class. That was part of it when I was... but it was not something that I wanted to put myself in that scenario again to reach out for help.

I would much rather do work with, for you know the UPUA for the student government for my role there. And at least me personally and I trust on this a little bit with the talking about majors and how I got here, um, my psyche says I would rather fail a test because that impacts me than fail you know, getting a project done for this organization ‘cause that impacts everyone (coughs).

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The second most reported sub-theme in Knowledge category was “self”, with 14 mentions. Self refers to the “core of one’s being” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 280), defined by integrative theories on student development that account for “transition, the individual, and the environment” such as Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 212). Dick, a top physical specimen thanks to his service training, felt other students in his courses never allowed him to shed his identity as a recently returned combat veteran, a sore point because he usually felt put on the spot and thrust into an academic leadership role he did not seek and one that made him feel uncomfortable, given his weak academic history in high school.

**Dick:** For both the Army and here. You’re always trying to be the alpha male. Be the top dog for the guys. Yeah...

So during some of those little debates like if like no one was talking they’d all just like look at me like let’s hear a story from Dick or let’s hear what Dick has to say, he’s got experience in all these things. I don’t know (laughs). I feel like people will just look to me for things and sometimes I had stuff to say other times I didn’t.

And then I think in my head. Like you know, they know Army stuff or they wondering like, what does he do in the Army. Maybe he did something like that in the Army. Let’s see what he has to say about it.

Two responses were coded in the sex/gender sub-theme for Knowledge, both for Harry. Gender as used here refers to students’ specific references to their gender role, the “behaviors, expectations, and roles defined by society as masculine or feminine, which are embodied in the behavior of the individual (Basow, 1986); for purposes of clarity these are referred to as societal gender roles” (Mintz & O’Neil, 1990, p. 381). During his interview,
Harry expressed soft-spoken thoughtfulness about the expectations he felt people heaped on him because of his gender.

**Harry:** You know how I said I going [through]... like depression stuff? Being a male I feel like I'm not allowed to do that. Whereas um, it is depression affects everyone and it doesn't matter like gender or race or whatever, depression affects everyone but I feel like just being a male, um, like the whole, like I can't be sad, you know, or like in the moment; you can’t cry for no reason. If you do you're considered as weak, you're perceived as this. People may not perceive it; it's just that I feel like it's just so embedded in culture now, or may have been just how I grew up. But just embedded. You're not allowed to do this; you should be okay with it. You have to be tough. And you have to have this certain image.

**Skills**

As defined for this research, skills refer to intellectual abilities that “require the learner to do some unique cognitive activity-unique in the sense that the learner must be able to solve a problem or perform an activity with previously un-encountered information or examples” (Dick et al., 2005, p. 41). Struggle defined the essential experience in the skills thematic category. Figure 4 shows the themes and sub-themes that emerged. Viewing the top line of Figure 4 from left to right, 9 of the 12 students interviewed described 15 experiences linked to *challenging course work/study habits* that led them to be on academic probation. This theme was assigned to more passages than any other in the *Skills* category.
Table: Figure 4. Ranking of student experiences coded as Skills.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code System</th>
<th>Hugh</th>
<th>Ignatius</th>
<th>Juan</th>
<th>Reed</th>
<th>William</th>
<th>Harry</th>
<th>Yu</th>
<th>Gray</th>
<th>Eli</th>
<th>Donald</th>
<th>Dick</th>
<th>Brad</th>
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<td>Transitioning to College</td>
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<td>Challenging course work/Study habits</td>
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<td>Impact of time management</td>
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<td>Managing health, wellness, medical issues</td>
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Students described feeling out of their depth in courses more rigorous than any they had taken previously, especially in introductory engineering and science courses such as physics and chemistry:

**Yu:** It was during the engineering mechanics class, EMAC, I was, I didn't really understand anything in the class like um, it was really complicated. And I just figured like I was failing like the class. It was a four credit, five-credit class and uh, I did really poorly on my first two exams and then I didn't understand anything.

**Reed:** I remember my, one of my core classes, my first intro to Kinense class, I um, I get a D on the first test and then after that I just kept getting like low grades on those tests, and I had to end up, I ended up failing that class. And it got dropped off of my first semester grades, causing my GPA to drop, of course. And second semester, I took a biology class and I
didn’t do well in that class as well, so that’s when I decided that I don’t think this is the major for me and I started to look into different options.

There was also uncertainty about assignments. Juan, for example, a bright and loquacious liberal arts undergraduate who could speak three languages, struggled with completing homework assignments online:

**Juan:** I was confused on how to use the technology in the class. And that’s another thing, too. In my sosh [Sociology] class, we have to do these two flip grid videos a week and I haven’t done a single one because every time I sit down to do it I just can’t, and then like I get really frustrated and I start like getting more frustrated about the time I am wasting and that adds to the anxiety and it just like spirals and snowballs and stuff, um, but after like two or three weeks of not going, uh, she sent me like an e-mail saying you should really drop the class like, and that was kind of like shitty to hear.

Confronting such issues compelled students to re-evaluate their identities as capable students while wrestling with the specter of academic failure:

**Eli:** I’m in the engineering major, like the prerequisites get pretty challenging so it was like uh, the Chem 110 and Math 141, so calculus, so they were both, like when I first got the first test back I kind of realized I was in for a struggle.

**Brad:** You always tell yourself you know like you should have started studying earlier; you should have studied more whenever you don’t do well on something. It’s usually that (laughs).

The next most frequent theme was *transitioning to college*, in which 8 out of 12 students cited challenges transitioning to college in 23 coded segments as essential to
experiences that led them to be on academic probation. In a reflective moment during his interview, Hugh summed up his overall transition from high school to college.

**Hugh:** It definitely puts all of your um, your academic and independent living and taking care of yourself skills to the test all at the same time. Everything is just kind of stepped up a notch? (wondering). And that can be like a big shock for a lot of people. Especially people that didn't have to like try very hard in high school or people that had to try very hard in high school, so I definitely think it is like a big step up from public education that I experienced back home...

... So coming here was, you know, I enjoy my studies and I am super interested and grateful for the opportunity to learn all these things but I definitely, I’m still kind of conditioning myself to be, like to perform in this kind of environment (laughs).

Dick, the veteran with combat experience in Afghanistan, articulated a sense of wonder about being admitted to Penn State since he never planned on attending college.

**Dick:** I did absolutely terrible in school. In high school, that is. I had a pretty low GPA. I just was not a fan about it... I just wanted to get a diploma. ‘Cause probably since the eighth grade, that’s when I found out that I was like, gonna join the military. That’s what I want to do. And what do I have to do to join the military? You need a high school diploma, and that’s it...

I sent them [Penn State] my high school transcripts, didn’t have to send in the SATs, and then I had a little one-line biography, a little summary about yourself, and I gave that and I got in really quick, so I was just very, I was very surprised.

Dick’s rapid transition left him feeling disoriented with newfound freedoms and no one constantly giving orders about what to do and when.
Dick: Well it was definitely, really weird, first coming back. ‘Cause I got out of the military and I left Alaska... and then I had 20 days at home then boom, I'm back in school, which I haven’t done for it was like three and a half years, so I didn’t really know what to expect. I didn't know how hard classes were going to be. How easy they were going to be. How much time I had to put into it.

It was a little bit hard because once I left the military it was just like, people were always forcing you to do things. And giving you orders. And here everyone’s it’s kind of. Here’s what you need to do. You have all this time to do it. Um. That’s one of the moments I was surprised. Um. Yeah, just the whole transition.

I can think of moments uh, cause my friends were seniors at the time, so they go out to house parties and the bars and stuff and I was like good friends with them. One of the guys I went to high school with and the other one was from the same county as I was so like I knew them but they would see other people they knew at the bars or wherever, they could be you know at a cafe or something. But they’d see them. They’d start talking to them about schoolwork and stuff and I would be just like that guy on the sideline like I have nothing, I have no input here, I've only been in school for like two weeks now. I don't know all these classes, what you know, what sosh [Sociology] 103 or any of those numbers mean (coughs). It was just odd. It's a very just weird transition to try to get used to.

Students’ management of health, wellness, and medical issues figured prominently in the experiences of half the group (6) of 12 students, with 28 coded segments. Depression, anxiety, substance abuse, or caring for a critically ill parent produced stress that compounded their academic challenges in severe ways even as they continued to struggle to keep up with coursework:
Juan: Recently I’ve been uh, spending a lot of time at the library trying to get work done, and what happens to me and it’s very frustrating ‘cause I don’t know, I don’t really want it to happen, but, I get like these anxiety attacks from like the work that I have to do I guess, and um, and I don’t know. I feel like maybe that’s like psychologically linked, so I think that like, I’ve never like really believed in myself in terms of academia, and like, I guess that’s something that like continued. Maybe worsened.

Reed: I thought I was the only one who was like doing horribly, and it really took a toll on me. I was like I wasn’t eating as well as I usually do, um, like, it was pretty bad. But I didn’t talk to anybody about it, so that was another issue. And I feel like those moments were just like they were dragging me behind, you know slowing me down. And I was just like, there was nothing that I did about it. So like I was just living in those moments being sad for myself and it didn’t have any positive effect.

While the issues confronting students were often emotional and psychological, at other times they were not. Eli’s grades suffered after he landed in the hospital with alcohol poisoning and lied to his parents about it until they received a letter from the police containing a citation in their son’s name.

Eli: I got an underage, which was like one of my first nights here. I went out with one of my best friends from high school who came here. Went to a couple of frat parties and I blacked out and woke up in the hospital so, that kind of like threw me off for a little while.

They were pretty upset at first ‘cause I, at first I tried to hide it from them. Which wasn’t the greatest idea, but then they found out and they were upset with me but I mean they understood that I was in college and things happen, but they were just glad that I was okay.
Students in this thematic category also experienced the deaths of loved ones and family medical crises in which they felt compelled to turn their attention from school to their families, often without telling their teachers or staff.

**Grayson:** One major issue was like last year I had some issues with my dad being in the hospital and what not, and I was constantly coming in and out of school and that really hindered with my academic success ‘cause like I was never really around here to really study because I was constantly worrying. Stress was a big factor.

I mean like most Fridays, I’d constantly have to like, I mean my mom would constantly want me to go home ‘cause there was a big language barrier ‘cause like my dad was like completely out and like my mom she, there was a big language barrier so I would constantly have to like find a ride back home or take a bus and go to the hospital and help out with everything and get all the paperwork done and what not.

But Harry's poignant and heartbreaking story of his mother’s death due to lung cancer may best describe the lingering emotional impact the critical illness of a loved one brings while wreaking havoc with students’ emotional wellbeing and derailing their academic careers.

**Harry:** My mom was diagnosed with lung cancer and then she passed away two years ago. So me coming to college, it was, I saw it as a way to escape all the drama I saw at home but I still had that with me and um, I guess I also went through depression especially in my second semester because of all that but then I saw that as me being lazy instead of actually diagnosing myself with depression so I just even, if I saw myself like just lying down just nothing motivated. I would be like, it’s my fault. So I would like constantly push myself to like, I have to do this. But in the end I end up hurting me in a lot of ways and one
of the ways was academically and then after that I was just like, I can’t do this anymore and that’s when I realized that too, dropped all of the engineering and go somewhere else.

I didn’t necessarily have someone to like really guide me other than my sisters. We kind of like shared um, we shared that pain together and it was hard because when my like, when my dad found out he kind of just like crumbled. Like he, he really, it really hurt him the most. And so, and my other, my second little sister was in college. My little sister was working she stopped working to help, and I felt kind of like helpless (voice lowers), like couldn’t really do anything.

That’s like my whole first freshman year. And a little bit of this year, it still affects me. Um, it’s really again, it frustrates me. I’m a little stubborn ‘cause I feel like I should be over it by now ‘cause it has been two years but it’s something that still lingers and I went through a period of time where I would constantly have nightmares about the stuff so like I, I kind of went through some disorders of like I wouldn’t sleep just because I don’t want to dream about this stuff and um, I would like no motivation to eat a lot of times, which worried a lot of my friends and family. But it wasn’t like I was anorexic or bulimic or any of that, it was just I didn’t find motivation to like do any of this stuff.

The themes scheduling and time management reflect transition experiences in which students found difficulty managing their personal schedules, especially where it concerned time allotted to academic course work or study that must be balanced with other aspects of college life. This theme was linked to only four research participants, who described 15 experiences. As such, it is a lesser theme in the transition category. Additionally, this code also refers to student experiences linked to the inefficient use of time due to the demands of juggling schoolwork with employment schedules or a social calendar. Hugh’s experience
captures the essence of how the other students who identified this theme struggled with juggling course work:

I’m taking five independent courses, independent of each other rather, so you know, there’s no um, motivation for them [instructors] to treat you any differently based on your other work, so there can be weeks where you just get several projects or big labs or big homework assignments all at once, and you kind of have to be tackling these things as you go. Um, you know, there’s gonna be weeks where you don’t have a lot of work and you can just kind of do a little bit every day and be done with it, or there are days where you have to plan hour by hour how your whole week is going to go, um, in order to get all these things done, so you have to be able to even like perceive sometimes when it’s like on a syllabus uh, write ups and when you’re going to have like tough weeks and prepare for that and follow through and actually do the work as it comes to you in a timely manner or else you’ll be left behind, basically (laughs).

Under the working sub-theme of time management, three students were gainfully employed and there were 14 coded responses based on jobs they held on or off campus and sometimes both. Because work formed a part of some students’ financial aid packages, this theme was coded under time management and not making choices. While time spent at work provided necessary income to pay school-related and personal bills, it also added complexity to students’ lives, taking away valuable time necessary to study, rest, or simply be on one’s own. Donald’s experience working two jobs captures this complexity best:

I get up at five o’clock in the morning, and I get on the bus because I live off campus, and I come down here to campus and I work in the HUB [student center].. And I work for (company name omitted to protect student privacy) food production, so I make the salads
and the wraps and the salads for (company name omitted to protect student privacy) and the HUB dining area, that's Monday and Wednesday, and Tuesday and Thursday I do the same thing in the morning except from 10 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. I switch over to (company name omitted to protect student privacy), and I work there until 1 p.m. from Tuesdays to Thursdays...

I gave them my availability and they said okay, well you're okay with working in the morning so we'll give you the morning shifts, and I thought that that would be a great plan because of the fact that I would have the rest of the day to myself, but eventually it got tiresome and exhausting so eventually I just told them I wouldn't be able to do it.

The making choices thematic category describes students’ choice opportunities, or the degree to which they showed an ability to discriminate between what they should do--typically study and attend class--and what they wanted to do, such as socialize with friends or engage in student organizations, clubs, or sporting activities. Nine of twelve research participants experienced challenges with making decisions regarding their studies in ways that negatively impacted their studies. There was significant overlap of this theme with time management because students’ inability to properly schedule their time often led to poor choices based on students’ perceived lack of or abundance of time. Army veteran Dick was surprised by the large amounts of free time he experienced on campus, time he often spent on his friends instead of studying:

You always have friends who are asking you to come out and drink, you know, quit being a wuss about it. Like why don’t you, you know you can do your schoolwork whenever else. And I mean I definitely go do it sometimes. I definitely--I like going out and I don’t want to disappoint my friends. I don’t want to let them go out alone; I’d like to go out with
them, so I get pulled out in to that sometimes and it does take away from my schoolwork a lot of times.

Juan explained that he often skipped classes to get caught up on work he’d missed skipping class:

There’s one thing that I do do; it’s uh, (laughs), it’s a big vice of mine. If I feel underprepared or let’s say there's an assignment due in that class, and I've fallen behind or I’m really behind, I feel I feel like it wouldn't be productive for me to go until I’m ready for that class I guess, and it's really; it's really counterintuitive and I know it is. But it’s just like a tendency I find myself falling into... If I’m cutting class, I usually try and do work instead.

Finding the balance between studying and other aspects of campus life was a challenge for both Harry and William, who often decided to get deeply involved in student organizations rather than devoting themselves to study.

**William:** I’ll just do a student government thing instead. I don't really need to study that much anyway because you know I had never had to previously, and so it was kind of a combination of all the wrong things.

I don’t go to every class. I wasn’t going to every class. You know, no, I didn't buy the book for that class. I would try to find readings online. Um, you know, no, I didn’t really study for that exam. I didn’t go to office hours.

**Harry:** In my fellowship, like, my faith means a lot to me. So I can pour a lot of my time and work into my fellowship but sometimes I would have to pull myself back and be like I’m a student here first. So that’s like a daily thing I have to always remind myself in my head, that I’m a student here first cause it’s so easy for me to slip away because you walk
around and you go into the HUB, there's so many, there are always like clubs and like hey, join this, support this. And you're just like I believe in that cause, yes I do.

In the final thematic category for Skills, only one student, Ignatius, shared experiences in which his lack of native English fluency created obstacles to his academic success:

My psychology class um, professor was explaining. He talked very fast. And I didn't catch all the real materials in this speed and I need to ask him what is that? And while I ask him, uh, he doesn't understand what I was asking. So I need to repeat again and again and I repeat for three times, so that's really um, challenge, like you know. I challenged many things [he was challenged]. That's really the problem. I didn't understand what they are talking [about], and they don't understand what I was talking about, so, and in other class, too, that has happened. Like in chem, economics class...the professor was, like um, he is from Australia, so his tone is kind of different, and I didn't understand the lecture for a whole semester.

In the last overarching category, Attitudes, a definition will help clarify the meaning of this word from a learning, design, and technology or instructional systems perspective. Attitudes “are usually described as the tendency to make particular choices or decisions” (Dick et al., 2005, p. 43). In this category, there were 121 coded segments from the 12 interviews. Figure 5 depicts the themes that emerged in the Attitudes category, arranged in descending order from the most numerous thematic code to the least numerous thematic code, followed by a description of each code and the student voices that aligned with that code.
Figure 5. Ranking of student experiences coded as Attitudes.

The first thematic code, classroom and campus environment, refers to ecological contexts for student experiences linked to campus instructional or formal environments and less formal social environments. Twenty-four coded segments emerged from the transcripts of 11 students in this category. Eli, for example, found his fun social life in a freshman dormitory incompatible with studying:

The friends I made were all on my floor in my building, so we would all just kind of tend to congregate in the one room and just, we called it a black hole. We would just get nothing done for hours upon end and now like this year there's still a lot of the same people but like we've kind of realized we need to do better things... mostly we're just talking like, shoot the breeze.... we would hang out almost constantly which it was great, but at the same time it didn't leave me much time to like do work like study homework, whatever.

Interacting with others, the second most occurring theme, had 20 coded segments from 8 students. Interactions with others occurred when students enrolled in courses and
experienced the formal academic instructional environment composed of peers, professors, and occasionally advisers. Students characterized the quality of their interactions with these individuals as poor and lacking that left them feeling disconnected from others, particularly faculty:

**Harry:** My very first lecture was in a class of 700 students... Sometimes I’d just sit in class and be like what was the point of some of these classes. Um, like knowing that I’m nowhere interested in these and I’m just forcing myself to conform to this ‘cause I can feel myself trying to be like, wow, this is interesting, when I know I’m actually not that interested in it...

Like sometimes I’ll be like what’s the point of me going to class, like no, I feel like I'm not gaining it but then I feel guilty and I'll be like okay I should go to class. I’ll go to class and I’ll try to pay attention and I’m just writing the notes down but I don’t necessarily feel like I’m retaining as much in those larger settings...

I’m in Econ 104 and it’s about 500 students and it’s almost exact same thing. And I like when I go there I don’t I don’t really feel like I am learning as much. I feel like I’m learning more by just reading the textbook, sometimes and just like the students around me--they’re, it really depends on where you sit. And if you don’t get to class on time and you don’t get in a good spot necessarily, and you’re in the place where almost everyone around you are taking notes ["quote unquote"] on the laptops when in reality they are on Facebook. They're playing games, and it’s such an easy temptation to just... okay I’ll do that too ‘cause no one seems like they are paying attention.

**Brad:** It seemed like the professor was more there to do their research rather than to teach their students. And like at Penn State Beaver with having such a small amount of
kids like you could really get to know your professors one on one compared to up here with 5 hundred people in your lecture: you can’t really do that... sometimes the classes were just canceled all together, and sometimes a different professor would come in, but he wouldn’t teach us the same way as like the normal professor would. So it throws, like throw me off sometimes. And it would just be like, yeah just frustrating at times...

It was usually read the material come in, we’ll take, you’ll do like clicker questions... on the material you read which you might not understand and just go into doing example problems that you still might not even understand and like I ended up last year, last year I ended up late-dropping Physics 212 because of that reason. I didn’t like the setup.

Motivation/discipline refers to students’ willingness to meet goals and objectives. Intrinsically motivated individuals typically maintain high levels of self-efficacy and set goals because of the inherent value in attaining them, for example, going to college and putting in the requisite amount of time and effort to earn a degree can be a source of intrinsic motivation. The source of motivation can also be external to the individual, and this is known as extrinsic motivation. Keller’s (1983, 1987) ARCS model (Attention, Relevance, Confidence, and Satisfaction) framework describes a pathway to develop and improve instruction to motivate learners (Small, 1997). Research participants for this theme described demotivating experiences in both academic and social settings. For example, for Juan, a trilingual student in Eastern and Western languages, formal language study was emotionally trying and demotivating, and he often skipped class:

Another example would be my English teacher for this essay I had been really working hard on it, and it had been uh, and it was really interesting, it was like rap is a form of protest literature. I had all like the sources. I was using like really good sources but uh, it
was a day late and she wouldn't accept it. So I couldn't even hand it in. And that was like, kind of shitty. I mean, sorry, uh, (laughs).”

“...it’s not that I was being singled out in (name omitted to protect student privacy) class, she was throwing out questions to everyone. It’s just like, um, because I didn’t know the script and I had fallen behind already, it just felt like every time she would ask me I would be like I really don’t know and she would sit there like waiting, trying to get, like push me to get it. You know how it is. And it’s like frustrating. It’s a little embarrassing too, it’s uh, it just like didn’t make me want to go to class.

Bandura’s (1999) social cognitive theory provided the perspective for defining self-efficacy and its sub-theme emotions running high, used in this research as students’ level of belief in what they can accomplish by overcoming obstacles to reach goals. Eighteen coded segments emerged from eight student interviews for this theme, tying it with the closely related theme motivation/discipline. Students’ experiences coded for this theme reflected the convergence of “cognitive, affective and biological events, behavioral patterns and environmental events (Bandura, 1990, p. 21) that led students to academic probation:

Juan: I get really frustrated and I start like getting more frustrated about the time I am wasting and that adds to the anxiety and it just like spirals and snowballs and stuff.

Reed: I had the mind state that I needed to work harder, but when I was working harder I didn’t see any results. I was starting to think that it was something that was wrong with like me as a person. And that I was doing something wrong in school.

Harry: I felt kind of like helpless (voice lowers), like couldn’t really do anything…

I guess I kept hearing, not from him but from other people around me like those people. It just hurt me just ‘cause I felt that, it was like my pride was being hurt saying like
you can’t do it. And like don’t even bother trying. So, that kind of built up my stubbornness saying like, hey, I can do this. And I, I couldn’t (laughs).

**Grayson:** Like overwhelming stress that’s just hanging over my head. I just couldn’t think much about school.

**Yu:** It was kind of miserable I’d say. I didn’t feel college was, uh, I just not really enjoying the college life, I’d say. I struggled a lot. Um...

For the *isolation* theme and the sub-themes *personal connections with staff* and *social hierarchy*, there were 31 coded segments that represented the experiences of 8 students. Isolation occurred when students blocked, truncated, or perceived curtailed relationships with other students, friends, advisers, and professors in social or formal settings on campus. These experiences lowered intersubjectivity (Stein, 1989), described by Gillespie and Cornish as the “variety of possible relations between people’s perspectives” (1990, p. 19); therefore, lowered or divergent intersubjectivity reduced these relations between the students and individuals or groups to which they were linked and contributed to experiences that led them to be on academic probation. In one case, Hugh described how he was barred at the door from entering a fraternity party early in his freshman year on campus while a female friend was welcomed inside:

...Though I’m 21, I don’t really drink or like take drugs or anything um, but so I was um like, all right, I’ll go to a party, and kind of you know stand around. I don’t want to do anything like super crazy. And she took me to this party, and like this big... I’ll like always remember it... it was like this big hulking dude opened the door and basically like, all right you all can come in, like YOU can’t [clearly Hugh is indicating he couldn’t come into the party]. And I was like, okay (laughs). So I had never been like kind of like very
straightforward excluded before so I didn't know how to deal with that, so that was like my first experience going to some sort of social event here, and then uh, I tried joining a bunch of clubs too, and they were all kind of more exclusive too. I joined the rowing club because I rowed back at home, and they all kind of picked on me because I like took it too seriously. I joined the chorus here, university choir, and um, I don’t know. I always felt kind of ostracized for some reason...

Dick found it difficult to relate to others in both formal academic settings on campus and in social settings off campus:

I definitely started to miss the, like the military personnel in the platoon that I was with, like you could relate to them on so many different things, 'cause you went on training events with them. You deployed with them. You had things to talk about but now like this whole college thing which I've never done before, I just felt different. I even do today, at times I definitely feel just different than everyone else.

In the academic context of the isolation theme, Brad complained that he found it hard to develop relationships with faculty:

I've had professors up here like in my (course name omitted to protect student privacy) classes that just they say oh, I'm going to be leaving for these next weeks, or this next week or this next two weeks and I'm going to be over in Iceland like doing research and it's like, well what are we supposed to do then like. Are you just going to give someone your notes and like have them basically read off a paper what we could have learned online or you could have given us a PowerPoint for? That's kind of frustrating.
When some students with issues such as a critically ill parent did reach out for help, the interaction left students like Grayson feeling alone in the wake of responses by faculty he characterized as insensitive:

It just involved me going to the professor and saying I’m sorry I’ve been missing so much class but I’ve been having a family medical emergency and that’s just how it ended. And he said all right, well you’re responsible for all makeup work and what not and that’s just how it really went down. ‘Cause like they weren’t actually interested. I was going to go in it like to detail about what's actually going on with my life and how hectic it is; they just shrugged it off as oh he’s probably just going out and drinking or just finding excuses but I don’t take attendance in my class so you're just responsible for any missed work.

After coding of the interview responses into themes, textural and structural descriptions were composed for each research participant. A synthesis of these narratives is discussed next in Chapter 5.
Chapter 5
Discussion

This chapter synthesizes the structural and narrative elements of the student’s experiences into a unified picture of the experiences of male undergraduates at Penn State leading to academic probation. Ten major themes emerged from the research participant interviews, with 12 sub-themes, for a total of 290 coded segments from 12 interview transcripts (see Figure 2). These themes were organized into three major categories: Knowledge, Skills, or Attitudes—well-defined terms in the instructional systems literature (Dick et al., 2005). Thematically, undergraduate men’s Attitudes ranked most important as an influencer of student experiences leading to academic probation followed second by Skills and third by Knowledge.

In Attitudes, 11 of 12 students shared personal stories about the bad attitudes they developed toward large lecture halls identified under the subheading, classroom/campus environment theme. Compared to their much smaller high school and Penn State satellite campus classrooms in which students said they got to know their classmates and professors, the men described as intimidating and depersonalizing experiences their attendance in the courses with hundreds of other students that bored them to distraction. Large lecture hall courses lowered the intersubjectivity potential between students in large lecture halls and between students and their instructors. The structure of these courses deterred students from forming authentic relationships with faculty members, teaching assistants, and other students. Since only marginalized and truncated personal relationships existed in the courses with peers and faculty, students’ ability to address their negative feelings about their relationship with their coursework became diminished. With
intersubjectivity weakened or non-existent between instructors and students in such courses, the bored and turned off students filled the vacuum by using Internet communications technology (ICT) to log on to social media sites during class time, or they simply chose to skip class with the intention of using the resulting free time to study or catch up on work in other courses; this strategy backfired as students fell even further behind in the courses they skipped. Kober (2015) cited large undergraduate lecture courses in the science and technology fields as particularly problematic for the current college going generation in *Reaching Students: What Research Says About Effective Instruction in Undergraduate Science and Engineering*:

> For too many students, the undergraduate years are the turnoff point. A single course with poorly designed instruction or curriculum can stop a student who was considering a science or engineering major in her tracks. More than half of the students who start out in science or engineering switch to other majors or do not finish college at all. Maybe they failed a crucial prerequisite course, or found little to engage their interest in their introductory courses, or failed to see the relevance of what they were being taught. For non-majors, an introductory course that confirms their preconception that they are “bad at science” may be the last science course they ever take. Evidence from research on learning and teaching in science and engineering suggests that a large part of the problem lies in the way these courses are traditionally taught—through lectures and reading assignments, note-taking and memorization, and laboratories with specific instructions and a predetermined result. (p. xi)

The research participants’ attitudes toward the *classroom/campus environment* became the anchor of a vicious cycle in which students were constantly behind in their
coursework and compelled to play catch up. Since they skipped many classes, their interactions with classmates in the difficult courses evaporated, leading to disconnect and a further decline in motivation/discipline to meet the demands of the courses in which they were struggling. All the students experienced an extended period of declining motivation in which effort and self-efficacy plummeted in a downward spiral as students withdrew further and further from other students, staff, and faculty into isolation, the sub-theme that captures students’ responses to painful and emotional experiences associated with not making the grade while trying to learn difficult material. Feelings of isolation also played an important role in the participants’ experience in less formal settings on and off campus. Hugh described feeling left out after he was excluded from a fraternity party due to his gender and explained that the experience demonstrated how females were more valued on campus than males at social gatherings sponsored by some fraternities; this student’s experience emerged as one of the few in which gendered patterns of social interaction on campus were explicitly reported. Continuing with the theme of isolation, Dick felt differently from everyone else and “weird” because his identity as a solider with overseas combat experience attracted attention he did not seek or desire from teachers and students. These experiences portray the isolation Dick and others often felt as they navigated formal academic and informal social settings. If a metaphor were used to describe the students’ actions and behaviors leading to academic probation, it would be that of several men drowning in the ocean after their boat capsized who ignore would-be rescuers’ who toss life preservers and go underwater only to drown. As preposterous as it sounds, these were the experiences students described. The threat of losing financial aid or parental support, or possible expulsion from the university, characterized by the students
as a “wakeup call” prompted them to action. The wakeup call arrived when students received notice of their placement on academic probation. This moment of waking up is consistent with transition theory (Evans et al., 2010) and with integrated theories of student development discussed earlier (Baxter Magolda, 2005).

When students did have strong connections with others, they were typically in work, volunteer, religious, or social settings that served as refuges that supported students’ emotional and social health but did little to support their academic success; however, the time students devoted to extracurricular activities and employment robbed them of valuable time that could have been used for study and coursework. Choosing work, extracurricular activities, and social experiences over their study time was a key student experience linked to the impact of poor time management and making poor choices and decisions that led students toward academic probation. The experiences analyzed in this study support Tinto’s (1975) exploration of students’ early departure from campus when either their academic work or social experiences prove deficient in some way and do not integrate in holistic fashion. Without an anchor in the complex environmental context of modern student life on and off campus, students’ academic and social lives splintered without the familiar guideposts, relationships, and contexts in which they lived before going away to school. However, students internalized their lack of success as a personal problem rather than one influenced by the academic and social ecological systems on campus. Their fallback position response was to “pull themselves up by their boot straps”, to quote an engineering student. Unanchored in an unfamiliar social and academic context, and with an attitude of rugged male individualism in their heads, students literally and metaphorically wandered and tried to figure the transition out on their own through trial
and error. As explained in follow-up interview questions designed to prompt self-reflection by the participants (Seidman, 2006), students brought a self-help, “bootstrap”\(^5\) approach to campus as prior knowledge gleaned from parental, school, and cultural teachings. This attitude expressed by the male undergraduates was consistent with the harmful side effects of the masculine norms enforced on young men in the United States that is a cornerstone of hegemonic masculinity.

Thematic elements or themes are discussed from a systemic, holistic perspective (Hutchins, 1996). The themes described here should be considered not as silos or discrete categories; rather, they are descriptions of overlapping and messy experiential events in dialectical relationships described by students that have been given social science labels relevant to the field of learning, design, and technology. At its core, the discussion illuminated the learners and the contexts in which phenomena evidence themselves. The thematic labels provided useful tools to describe the complex system of “hierarchies” (Hutchins, 1996, p. 29) that structure students’ university experience. This intricate and messy interaction of experiences in the complex university sociocultural ecosystem that is Penn State University Park contributed mightily to students’ experiences, giving rise to the gendered patterns of student success in which twice as many male as female students wind

\(^5\) The Oxford English Dictionary defines “bootstrap” as “[t]o make use of existing resources or capabilities to raise (oneself) to a new situation or state; to modify or improve by making use of what is already present.”
up on academic probation. As in any complex social system, no single causative agent produces the effect; it is the interaction between the individuals in the ecology of the interactions within and between the hierarchy of systems, both internal and external.

Figure 6 depicts the system that contributed to the gendered pattern of student success that prompted this study on the University Park campus of Penn State. A note about this figure is in order. Abstractions such as ecological system maps are not generally part of phenomenological research, professionals in the field of learning, design, and technology routinely use maps and schematics routinely during front-end analysis as part of the overall systematic development of instructional programs or learning designs. Therefore, Figure 6 is included as an aid to instructional designers or researchers who might utilize this research to improve learning outcomes for at-risk male undergraduates. Structural hierarchies in ecological systems at Penn State prevented, attenuated, or diminished undergraduate men’s learning and transfer, defined as “the ability to extend what has been learned in one context to new contexts” (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000, p. 51) for the undergraduate men as they transitioned to university life from other college, the military, or work (Evans et al., 2010). In other words, the men failed to adapt to, improvise in and overcome their challenging new environment, and it was not until they landed on academic probation that things began to change for many of the students. At the time the students were interviewed, all were making efforts to engage with tutors, family members, advisers, or professors regarding their course work and anticipated working through their academic difficulties. Some of the students who were enrolled in STEM fields, particularly engineering, explained in the interviews their decision to change majors. In each case, students characterized as a wakeup call their new situational awareness about the
academic jeopardy in which they found themselves as a wakeup call. Therefore, this study answered the following research question:

How do at-risk male undergraduates at Penn State University Park describe the experiences that put them at risk for dropping out or failing? In the category with the fewest number of coded themes, Knowledge, students explained that they did not reach out to others for help as a common experience that put them at risk for failing or dropping out. Use of the term knowledge here bears further explanation. First, the approach to phenomenology used for this research articulated by Giorgi (1987) indicated that thematic codes be articulated using disciplinary language for the field in which the research is conducted. Since this research was also a front-end analysis, instructional design language (Dick et al., 2005) was used to name the themes and also the overarching categories. Second, extensive research literature on measurement and validity of knowledge, skills, and attitudes exists to guide designers in the establishment or use of learning outcomes statements, criteria, testing, and validation of test results (Angelo & Cross, 1993; Cross & Steadman, 1996; Huba & Freed, 2000; O'Donovan, Price, & Rust, 2001; Rust, 2002; Kirkpatrick, 1994; Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006; Faxon-Mills, Hamilton, Rudnick, & Stecher, 2013). However, the terms knowledge, skills, and attitudes as used here function as thematic labels for a phenomenological analysis (Giorgi, 1995) in the field of learning, design, and technology rather than as measurable competencies or taxonomies (Bloom, 1956) subject to positivist validity and reliability studies; they are subjective labels. The term trustworthiness is applied to represent data validity and reliability in naturalistic or qualitative inquiries through the process of vetting multiple data sources known as triangulation (Golafshani, 2003). They exhibited this behavior aware of the availability of
help resources from orientation sessions or conversations with their friends. Some reported feeling embarrassed about asking for help or said they felt they could do it on their own, in the words of one undergraduate man, “pulling himself up by his bootstraps” or by “bootstrapping it,” a term used as a metaphor for going it alone in school. Even when students had supportive parents and friends, they cloaked their troubles once again due to embarrassment or because they found it difficult to articulate their feelings to the people within their support network. On the occasions when students did visit faculty members or advisers or teaching assistants, those experiences were described as unproductive or humiliating, or students were simply discouraged that the help they received was not productive.
Invisible hegemonic masculinity (Kimmel, 1983) shrouded in a culture of silence, stress and emotional suffering existed for these students who behaved as they were acculturated to behave or perform masculinity without question, and no amount of urging from teachers or advisers changed the behaviors harmful to their academic careers. In the men’s gender role identity, help-seeking behaviors can be interpreted as evidence of weakness or unmanliness and lacking self-reliance (Levant, 1992; Edwards, 2006; Edwards...
& Jones, 2009), and so many men do not ask for help. The culture of silence phenomena this research identified by this research proved consistent with Kimmel’s (1993) description of hegemonic masculinity as an influential but invisible cultural presence:

The quest for manhood—the effort to achieve, to demonstrate, to prove their masculinity—is one of the animating experiences in the lives of American men. That men remain unaware of the centrality of gender in their lives perpetuates the inequalities based on gender in our society, and keeps in place the power of men over women, and the power some men hold over other men, which are among the central mechanisms of power in society. Invisibility reproduced inequality. And the invisibility of gender to those privileged by it reproduces the inequalities that are circumscribed by gender. (p. 30)

What this means, Kimmel would suggest, is that even as the young men in the study experienced hardship, hegemonic masculinity contributed toward their building a pathway toward academic probation:

American men have come to think of themselves as genderless, in part because they can afford the luxury of ignoring the centrality of gender. So military, political, scientific, or literary figures are treated as if their gender, their masculinity, had nothing to do with their military exploits, policy decisions, scientific experiments, or writing styles and subjects… and the disenfranchised and oppressed are those whose manhood is not considered to be equal. (p. 30)

As social capital brought to campus by male undergraduates transitioning to college life, manliness amounts to flawed prior knowledge that these undergraduate men transferred to the university environment and applied to the complex problems they encountered with limited or no success. Unfortunately, their efforts to correct this flawed
prior knowledge did not gain traction until it was too late. Students and sometimes parents received alerts from the school about the men being placed on academic probation, and this compelled conversations on many fronts including the possible loss of financial aid and whether college was the right choice. In the wake of all this, the experiences students described also reflected a loss of status among their peers because of their academic deficiencies and called into question their identities as strong men who won admission to a winning admission to the most competitive campus in the Pennsylvania State system, University Park.

The gendered pattern of student success investigated on the University Park campus exists throughout The Pennsylvania State University system. According to the Penn State University Budget Office (2015), the 6-year graduation rate for the 2008 cohort of undergraduate men at the University Park of 83.2% exceeds the 54.5% graduation rate on the Commonwealth campuses, a difference of 28.7%. For the same 2008 cohort, the graduation rate for undergraduate women at University Park was 89.3% compared to 56.8% at the Commonwealth campuses. The four-year graduation rate presents an even starker contrast in the gendered pattern of degree completion with the 2010 cohort of men showing a four year graduation rate of 59.6% for University Park compared to a 76.7% graduation rate for women. On the commonwealth campuses, the four-year male graduation rate is 29% compared to 36.7% for women. In 2007, 58% of students who began seeking a bachelor’s degree at a four year public institution earned that degree within 6 years with a 60% graduation rate for females and a 55% graduation rate for males (Kena et al., 2015).
The *Skills* category contained the second highest number of coded themes, or 126 coded segments for the 12 interviews. Whether it was confronting depression, the critical illness of a parent or loved one, or the legal ramifications of alcohol abuse and underage drinking, the time and energy students devoted to addressing these and related issues wreaked havoc with their academic, social, and personal lives and were key experiences that led students to be on academic probation. In this category, *transitioning to college* theme was dominant, with 81 coded themes that adversely impacted all 12 men. As defined by Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006), transition is “any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 33). Transition was coded under *Skills* because of the men’s inability to improvise, adapt and overcome obstacles and challenges created when they chose to leave their old lives behind for new lives as university students, the essence of an anticipated transition. Transitions may be further subdivided into three types: a) anticipated transitions, which means the transition was predictable and planned; b) unanticipated, which describes an unpredictable transition; c) nonevents, which are transitions that are expected to occur but do not” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 215). Goodman et al. (2006) describe four major factors that influence one’s ability to cope with transition as situation, self, support, and strategies. How one copes with a transition varies based on an individual’s “assets or liabilities” in the four areas (Evans et al., 2010, p. 216).

All 12 students in the study experienced anticipated transitions because applying to college is a measured, time-consuming process with numerous steps to be completed successfully in order to gain admittance and remain enrolled. In this they were successful because of ample assets; however, once on campus, unanticipated or unpredictable
transitions occurred for students and became liabilities. In this category, students described significant unanticipated transition experiences related to managing health, wellness, and medical issues. For example, Hugh wrestled with depression that worsened after he enrolled, so he sought out a licensed therapist to help him cope with the daily stresses of college life. Harry's poignant story about dealing with his mother's fatal cancer throughout his freshman year was all the more heart wrenching because he did so without telling anyone at the university in a position to help over concern that people would feel sorry for him. Both Harry and Grayson suffered from depression after their family members became critically ill; however, these students took on the responsibility of their loved ones' medical care, meeting regularly with physicians about treatments, signing insurance documents, and taking care of siblings and family business, all while enrolled as full-time students. Harry and Grayson often spent days away from campus and hours on the road traveling to and from hospitals where their loved ones were being treated. This kind of unanticipated transition wreaked havoc not only with these student's lives but also with their studies. Once again, the men took on the responsibilities without complaint and generally did not seek help or share their experiences with anyone on campus in a position to help.

Another important transition sub-theme was challenging course work/study habits. Students did not anticipate the challenges of their courses, especially in science, technology, engineering, and math, and they stumbled early on. Students, all with full-time credit loads, were ill prepared for the academic rigor and pace of their courses, even when they had backgrounds as standout students in high school. Students characterized these courses as harder and more complex than anything they had experienced before, and some
expressed the opinion that the courses made them realize for the first time that they weren’t as smart as they thought they were. Coupled with weak or inefficient study habits, the sub-theme time management emerged as a critical issue. Unable to manage the sheer volume of complex material dispensed to students in what some called the undergraduate “weed out” courses in science, technology, engineering, and math, students fell behind quickly and many simply gave up and chose to change to a new major. Schraeder and Brown (2008) emphasized that in addition to the on-campus experiences that led students to academic probation, socioeconomic status, academic preparation, family background, and social involvement on campus all exerted an influence on students’ academic success as they transitioned from high school to university.

When it comes to transitioning to university life, Penn State and academic departments address students’ academic challenges by offering significant resources and programs devoted to helping them succeed. While there are too many programs to list here, the university’s offerings in this area include but are not limited to administrative resources, procedures, and rules designed to assist students in special circumstances (i.e., student petitions for exceptions to academic policies and procedures, early progress reports, the undergraduate advising handbook, academic support, etc.), and the information is accessible via university Web sites (“Undergraduate Advising Handbook,” 2015). Additionally, the university’s Office for Student Orientation and Transition Programs operates an expanded New Student Orientation program for incoming freshman and their parents or guardians that specifically addresses academic support, substance abuse and use, personal responsibility and more before students start their courses (“New Student Orientation at University Park,” 2015; “Academic Support,” 2015).
Students' inability to exercise good judgment emerged in the *making choices* theme and its sub-theme *non-participation in class*. Studying and the discipline it requires came in second or third place for these students, who chose social time with friends, student government activities, employment, or simple procrastination. Often, students simply chose not to attend class. Some students like Harry pursued rigorous courses of study in engineering even though he preferred music, propelled forward by in his words, “Asian American culture” that put pressure on him to pursue the security of a degree that would earn him a job after graduation. Both Donald and Ignatius worked multiple jobs as one of several funding mechanisms to pay their way through school. It is difficult to second-guess this particular decision because it is increasingly important for students to be creative about how they pay for school, yet the decision added another layer of complexity to students’ delicate balancing act between work and school. It is important to note that even as students struggled through experiences that pushed them toward academic probation, they were learning about themselves as students and as individuals. Integrated theories of student development emphasized strong personal decision making frameworks and identity for students realized through the concept of emergent self-authorship, planning, and self-determination (Baxter Magolda, 2005). However, this development process for male undergraduates was short-circuited. Students were adrift early in their college experiences, without strong personal decision making frameworks, little planning (time management) experience and undeveloped reserves of self-determination and self-authorship, the inner voice that speaks to a person’s self-identity, confidence, and self-direction in the face of challenges and peer pressure (Borrego & Manning, 2007).
Significance, Limitations, and Implications

This study relied on a critical view of male students who are at risk for early departure from Penn State’s University Park campus due to academic probation. Because the analysis and results can only apply to Penn State’s University Park campus, the study was limited to this context and only transferability rather than generalizability applies (Lincoln & Guba, 1990). Generalizability is usually the term used for quantitative research in which “the extension of research findings and conclusions from a study conducted on a sample population” is extended to the population at large; transferability does not involve broad claims, but invites readers of research to make connections between elements of a study and their own experience (“Generalizability and Transferability,” 2015). Building on prior survey research and data analysis, this study was also limited by the phenomenological nature of the exploration, including the limitations of the researcher as instrument; therefore, it is bounded by the sociological and cultural limitations of the time and culture in which it was embedded. The reality of experiences for men in universities is changing rapidly, but it remains this researcher’s hope that this work has illuminated some of the critical issues confronting men on their journey through the experience of academic probation during a period of record enrollments for women in higher education who earn degrees with men continuing to lag behind (Diprete & Buchman, 2013). Heisserer (2002) offered five recommendations for advising at-risk students modified here for use in this research project:
1) Develop a comprehensive and coordinated plan to target at-risk undergraduate men.

2) Train faculty and advisers on how to address the needs of at-risk male students.

3) Build social media and other ICT infrastructure for male undergraduate students at risk for academic failure. The site would be introduced to students at orientation and could be developed in coordination with a Penn State instructional designer, Division of Undergraduate Studies, and The Office for Student Orientation and Transition Programs.

4) Review and modify data collection efforts with undergraduate male students and maintain a database for institutional planning purposes. Develop sensitive questionnaire(s).

5) Conduct longitudinal research related to the implementation of the plan for undergraduate men at risk for academic failure, its assessment, and improvement.

6) The learning technologies field offers a viable pathway to examine student success and retention issues. The burgeoning field of learning analytics (Gasevic & Siemens, 2015) makes use of data points captured by digital technology on real-time student learning experiences and researchers subject them to analysis for use by administrators and faculty in making better data-informed decisions about ways to improve student learning. The relentless rise of technology continues to push the boundaries of what is possible and includes big private investments in distance education, home schooling, competency-based learning, and workplace learning initiatives to name a few (Collins & Halverson, 2009).
Conclusion

The analysis revealed both structural and personality and behavior driven issues that contributed to the men’s lack of academic success. Especially relevant to the men’s lack of success were large undergraduate lecture courses in which the men often felt adrift and disengaged. These classroom spaces contributed to student’s perceptions that attending class didn’t matter because for them, no learning was happening in class. This resulted in lowered expectations for the students about what could be accomplished toward meeting their learning and degree goals, and it led to already questionable decision making on the part of the students who acted unilaterally by cutting class. Because relationships with other students in classes were truncated given the large lecture format and the lack of meaningful peer-to-peer and student to professor interactions, the environment exacerbated these student’s issues. This lack of engagement in the academic portion of study at a college is a hallmark of student early departure from campus as described by Tinto (1975).

The research made clear that students live complex lives in multiple contexts that extend far beyond the campus (Baxter Magolda, 2005). Penn State was a well-equipped setting for the analysis of the students. The co-researcher population was identified through secondary database analysis of undergraduate student records that revealed a 2:1 ratio of male to female students on academic probation. Although the population of at-risk students at Penn State is a small percentage of the overall undergraduate student population and graduation rates reach 86% for undergraduate students ("Undergraduate Advising Handbook," 2015), academic probation disproportionately affects men. The theoretical focus of this dissertation surmised that hegemonic masculinity could be an
underlying issue in the male student success rate. With other universities wrestling with this gendered pattern of student success, Penn State used its considerable research resources for a self-assessment. It is my hope that the results of this phenomenological study will aid Penn State University Park advisers in addressing important issues concerning male students who are at risk to drop out and will raise awareness of the issue and perhaps lead to new preventative programs tailored to the needs of undergraduate men.

Higher education finds itself in a dramatic time of transition. Technology, rising costs, and increasing demands by students and parents for choices and options are placing demands on a change-resistant system more than a hundred years old. It is time to accept change and manage it through the careful design of experiences that help all students succeed.
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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Research Question

Semi-structured Questions Interview Guide

How do male undergraduates at Penn State University Park describe the experiences that put them at risk for dropping out or failing?

Student Interview Questions

1) Tell me about yourself. What brought you to Penn State?

2) How do you feel about being in college? Does the experience match your expectations?

3) Describe some of the biggest challenges you have faced as a Penn State student.

4) What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of being at risk?

5) How have you experienced being on academic probation?

6) What experiences do you believe led you to be on academic probation?

7) What do you know now that might help turn the situation around that you did not know when you arrived on campus?

8) Which of these issues do you think might be related to expectations regarding your gender? Why?

9) Do you feel there are certain expectations of you at Penn State because you are a man? If so, what are those expectations? What about expectations from other college men? College women? Professors? Advisers?

10) How do you feel about these expectations? How do you meet or not meet them?
11) How might these expectations contribute to your academic success?

12) What are your feelings about how this might hinder your academic success?

13) What factors contributed to any academic struggles you have experienced?

14) Where do you turn for help with personal or academic issues?

15) Is there anything you would like to add that I did not ask?

16) What would you like to add related to your academic performance at Penn State?
Appendix B

Observations Sample

Sample of Adviser-Student Interaction Observation Field Notes

18 November 2014

*Names have been replaced with letters to protect privacy

DUS Observation 3: Advising with “Q”:

Today's advisees are all female undergraduates. The lone male (scheduled) has not shown up, a no show.

Q has been advising students for years at Penn State. The day begins with a female undergraduate who wants to become a PA. The student is not Q's advisee but belongs to a retiring adviser. Q is filling in. They spend about 40 minutes getting to know each other and speaking about options. The student has a very strong math and science background and is being advised on her spring schedule. The student has questions about the field of behavioral biology. Q spends the first part of the interview getting to know the student a bit better. After some talk about the student's interest mentioned above, the pair moves to the advising matrix. The advising matrix allows student and adviser to see the required courses for particular majors. They spend about 20 minutes on the advising screen and matrix, eLion.

Q makes several suggestions about volunteer opportunities to work overseas, and then to volunteer in student health services where she can ride in the ambulance. The student Q sees is probably 18-19 years old, something like that. As Q makes notes, she enters information into the eLion system. All the student responses are coded with two letter codes in eLion. This record then becomes available for any other adviser using the
system--a case file, so to speak. As part of the advising process, Q looks at the student’s high school transcript and can see all the information on a student at a particular time. In this case, the student mostly listens and there is no further advising input. The woman is swiftly on her way.

Before we can really talk, another adviser walks in, A, with word of a student to whom she has been speaking about his parents’ failing health. The student is under great stress, is seeing someone in CAPS, and the mom wants to know how he is doing. Q is given a sheet of paper from the other adviser so she can follow up with this distressed student.

A leaves after about 10 minutes, and then another student walks in, female, with questions about switching from veterinary science to education. This student says she is suffering from depression, and this explains her bad grades the previous semester. She is a petite blonde with a nose ring and blue eyes. The student is very happy with her ed psych courses and her volunteer work and wants to pursue a degree in ed. A recommends her to the advisers at the college of education but also pulls up her transcript to look over what she has done well, and there are several courses. Q recommends the student look into the petition program so she can get her bad grades listed as Ws. This will make it far easier to catch up. Helping people see connections... this is Q’s take on advising. So a female student walks in, and she is an undergraduate. Advising on behavioral health. Pretty typical, we have someone walk in.

(Doug’s Reflection) This is an interesting take on the advising process. Q is dealing with a host of different issues.
Appendix C

Sample Transcript with Codes6

Harry is a pseudonym.
VITA
DOUG WILSON
dougwilson3@gmail.com

EDUCATION AND CREDENTIALS

**PhD, Learning, Design, & Technology**, expected 2015 – The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.
*Minor in higher education with particular focus on student success*
*Completing program on four-year, full-ride Puksar-Holmes and Bunton-Waller scholarships*

**MS, Journalism**, 1986 – Columbia University, New York, NY.

**BS, Microbiology**, 1983 – Xavier University, New Orleans, LA.

**Summer Teacher Institute**, 2008 – Ashland University, Ashland, OH.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY, University Park, PA.

**Graduate Research Assistant / Instructor**, 2011 to 2015

RICHLAND COLLEGE, Dallas, TX.

**Faculty Coordinator - Journalism & Student Media / Developmental Writing**, 2003 to 2011

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS


Wilson, D. & Wu. Y. (2013). *Student Success Application (SSA) Software for iPhone in Xcode*. [Instructional Material]

AWARDS


Digital Badges in Higher Education Portfolio (including Competency-Based Learning, Teaching & Learning with Technology, Understanding MOOCs), 2014.

Learning Technology Innovation of The Year Award, Dallas County Community College District, 2009.