

2015

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## Recommended Citation

Zavatkey, Debra, "Social Support and Community College Student Academic Persistence" (2015). *NERA Conference Proceedings 2015*.  
3.  
<http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/nera-2015/3>

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## Social Support and Community College Student Academic Persistence

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship among Connecticut community college students' perceptions of the social support received, its importance, and their academic persistence. Specifically it examined whether the frequency and importance of the types of support (i.e., appraisal support, emotional support, informational support, and instrumental support) and sources of support (i.e., a close friend, family members, professors, classmates, and other people at the college) were correlated to the students being retained.

In general, college can be a stressful time for students. Stressors include balancing studies with other commitments, maintaining the required GPA, or having other typically recognized educational barriers (Nora & Cabrera, 1996). These stressors affect students' ability to persist academically. During times of stress, college students may seek social support from family, friends, classmates, and faculty, and research has shown that perceived social support buffers the deleterious effects of stress.

Community college students experience a different set of stressors than do their four-year counterparts. Community College students tend to be older (American Association of Community Colleges, 2013), work more hours, are more racially diverse, are more likely to be first-generation college students, and are often underprepared academically for college-level coursework (NCES 2012a). This often requires enrollment in remedial courses, causing students stress and reducing the likelihood they will persist (Zhao, 1999). Thus, community college students are more likely to struggle with balancing family, work, and school responsibilities (Nora & Cabrera, 1996). They are also more apt to need tutorial assistance, take remedial coursework, and are less apt to persist to graduation.

### **College Persistence, Retention Theories, and Social Support**

The long-term benefits of attending college are well established. Individuals with a college degree are generally healthier and have longer lives than those without a college degree (National Center for Health Statistics, 2012). A college degree also remains a pathway to employment and financial success despite the recent recession (Grusky, Red Bird, Rodriguez, & Wimer, 2013). At the same time, however, college student retention and graduation rates, as well as the time it takes to complete a degree have raised significant concerns. The five-year degree completion rates for bachelor's degrees at four-year colleges and universities in the United States are 37% for public institutions and 55% for private institutions based on data collected through June 2012 (ACT Institutional Data File, 2012). Degree completion rates are even lower at two-year colleges with associate degree completion in three years at 25% for public institutions and 51% for private institutions (ACT Institutional Data File, 2012).

Equally concerning are first-to-second year retention rates with four-year colleges and universities at 65% for public institutions and 67% for private institutions (ACT Institutional Data File, 2012). The retention rate for two-year institutions (e.g., community colleges) is 55% for both public and private institutions (ACT Institutional Data File, 2012). In Connecticut, where this study was conducted, the fall 2010 to fall 2011 retention rates for community college students were between 49% and 65% with an average of 58% for full time student fall 2010 to fall 2011 retention (Connecticut Board of Regents for Higher Education, 2013). Germane to the focus of this investigation, community colleges are putting considerable effort into better understanding the factors that contribute to students' academic persistence and the supports students believe enable them to progress through their program of study.

Theories of college student retention emerged in the 1970's. Since then, student retention theories have been based primarily in sociology and involve comparing the qualities of students who stay in college and those who depart prior to degree completion. Notable theories that have emerged over the past 40 years include those of Tinto (1975), Astin (1984), Bean and Metzner (1985), and Schlossberg (1989).

Tinto's (1975) model of student departure had perhaps the greatest influence on the understanding of student retention. Tinto posited that persistence occurs when students successfully integrate into the college both socially and academically. Academic integration refers to the attachment to the intellectual life of the college while social integration refers to the connections the student makes outside of the classroom (Tinto, 1975). Those with higher levels of academic and social integration had higher levels of persistence. In other words, students with access to social supports were more likely to be retained.

A second model of student retention also based in sociology is Astin's (1984) theory of involvement. This proposition states that the more physical and psychological energy a student invests in the institution, the more likely the individual will persist. This theory does not fit particularly well with community colleges because they are commuter campuses so efforts to engage the students present unique challenges. Studies (Coley, 2000; Maxwell, 2000) have revealed that community college students are less involved in campus life than are four-year college students. By extension, it could be hypothesized that community college students would have less opportunity to access supports that exist on their campuses.

A third theory emerged in response to this very conundrum. Bean and Metzner (1985) developed a model of student retention for nontraditional students. This theory downplayed the emphasis on social integration given the fact that nontraditional students tended to be older,

worked more hours, and commuted to campus. These characteristics led to less interaction with others on campus than with traditional-aged college students who lived on campus. Instead, this model (Bean & Metzner, 1985) set forth four variables that were viewed as more important for nontraditional students: (a) academic performance, (b) intent to leave, (c) background and defining variables, and (d) environmental variables. The central feature of Bean and Metzner's model is the belief that external environmental variables have a greater influence on the persistence of nontraditional students than they do for traditional students. The notion that the external environment (e.g., the family) has a greater influence on the persistence of students is central to the concept of social support.

In 1989, Schlossberg proposed a new theory to explain how student involvement in college can be achieved. Her theory suggests that students feel marginalized when they perceive that they do not fit in to the college community, leading to negative outcomes such as depression and attrition. Conversely, if students feel they matter, this can lead to positive outcomes such as increased motivation, which can help students attain their goals. Helping students feel that they matter to the institution is a first step toward engaging students and involving them in the college community.

Schlossberg (1989) described five aspects of mattering: (a) attention (the feeling that you are being noticed), (b) importance (the belief that you are cared for), (c) ego-extension (the feeling that someone will be proud of what you do), (d) dependence (the feeling that you are needed), and (e) appreciation (the feeling that others appreciate your efforts). These five aspects of mattering are very similar to House's (1981) description of emotional support. Schlossberg contends that in creating environments that clearly show all students that they matter, institutions

of higher education may engender greater student involvement. This involvement will help students accomplish their goals and thus increase retention.

In sum, the major retention theorists (Astin, 1984; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Schlossberg, 1989; Tinto, 1975) have each emphasized social factors that could affect college student persistence, and these factors encompass various sources and types of social support, in one way or another. Sources of social support internal to the college environment could include classmates, faculty, and other people at the college (Pathways to College Network, n.d.). Conversely, Bean and Metzner's (1985) theory acknowledges the importance of environmental variables external to the college campus. Sources of social support external to the academic setting might encompass close friends, family members, and other people in the student's social network (Pathways to College Network, n.d.).

Similar to the sociological retention theories is the concept of social support. Several researchers identified the positive role that social support plays in buffering the stress inherent in being a college student (Baldwin, Chambliss, & Towler, 2003; Skowron, Wester, & Azen, 2004). Social support has been positively linked with better health, productive personal relationships, and academic achievement (Goldsmith, 2004). Students who perceive they have social supports are less likely to experience academic stress and more likely to successfully navigate college life, persist, and achieve their academic goals (Baldwin et al., 2003; Skowron et al., 2004).

On the one hand, research on the buffering effects of social support on academic stress (Baldwin et al., 2003; Skowron et al., 2004) is quite promising as is the work pointing to a link between perceived social support and academic persistence (Nicpon, Huser, Blanks, Sollenberger, Befort & Robinson Kurpius, 2006; Dixon Rayle, Robinson Kurpius & Arredondo, 2006). On the other hand, studies focused on the relationship between college students'

perceptions of the social support received and academic persistence have been primarily conducted at four-year colleges. Given the vast differences between community college students and four-year college students, generalizing the results of these studies to the community college population should be done with caution. Thus, a study examining these relationships can add to the existing knowledge-base on social support and community college student retention and provide useful information to college personnel as they struggle to support their diverse student body through the first year and on to degree completion

### **Theoretical Framework**

House's (1981) model of social support, which is grounded in a social psychological perspective, serves as the theoretical framework for this study. House put forth that social support describes one or more aspects of patterns of interpersonal relationships. Specifically, House defined social support as a "flow of emotional concern, instrumental aid, information, and/or appraisal . . . between people" (p. 26). Basically, social support answers the question: "Who gives what to whom regarding which problems?" (p. 22). Fundamental to House's conceptualization of social support is the role it plays in reducing stress. Through his research, House identified four types of social support: (a) emotional, (b) instrumental, (c) informational, and (d) appraisal. In their paper "Removing Roadblocks to Rigor", Savitz-Romer, Jager-Hyman, and Coles (2009) stated, "a network of academic and social supports is critical to ensure that all students—regardless of their socio-economic background or previous educational experience—have the opportunity to succeed at high levels" (p. 1). The authors further explained:

Social support builds the networks, connectedness, and motivation which underpin students' willingness and capacity to take advantage of academic strategies such as tutoring, learning communities, and other helpful policies and practices. In other words,



social support provides the foundation on which students are most likely to benefit from academic support strategies. (p. 6)

Savitz-Romer et al. used House's (1981) social support typology to categorize the many and varied types and sources of support that are available to college students. They described informal and formal structures such as academic and social support programs and services, including small learning communities, retention programs, and academic skills centers that provide tutoring and academic support to students (Savitz-Romer et al., 2009). The structures—the people in them—serve as sources of support for college students.

Table 1 contains a list and brief descriptions of the four types of social support that define the social support variables of interest in this study.

Table 1

*Types of Social Support* (House, 1981)

Type	Brief Description
Emotional Support	Demonstrating care, concern, trust, empathy, or love
Instrumental Support	Providing direct aid such as money, time, or assistance
Informational Support	Providing information that people can use to help themselves
Appraisal Support	Providing feedback or affirmation for self-evaluation purposes

House's (1981) four types of social support—emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal—were selected for this study because the prominent theories related to college student retention (Astin, 1984; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Schlossberg, 1989; Tinto, 1975) emphasize the social aspects of persistence. Tinto's (1975), Astin's (1984), and Schlossberg's (1989) theories each center on student involvement and investment in the college campus. Bean and Metzner's (1985) theory acknowledges the importance of the environment external to the college campus. In addition, family members, classmates, friends, and the social environment each have been

found to provide emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal support (Block, 2002; Brittian, Sy, & Stokes, 2009; Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie., 2007). Thus the sources of social support investigated in this study included a close friend, family members, professors, classmates, and other people at the college.

## Research Methods

### Participants

Connecticut's community college system comprises 12 schools of varying size in rural, suburban, and urban locales across the state. Participants in this study included 304 Connecticut community college students from four of the 12 community colleges. The average age of respondents was 25.3 years ( $SD = 9.3$ ). While 77.3% of the respondents indicated they worked at least part-time, 54.3% of them reported earning \$30,000 per year or less. In addition, 36.2% of the respondents indicated they have children who live with them or for whom they care for on a daily basis. A vast majority of the sample was female (78.3%). Comparably, 59% of Connecticut community college students are female and the average for the four colleges participating in this study was 62% female. Additionally, a great majority of the participants self-identified as White (74.7%). This is not surprising because Connecticut's largest racial/ethnic group is White (71.2%). Only 25% of the participants indicated that either their parents or legal guardian have a four-year college degree, meaning 75% of the participants are first-generation college students.

### Variables and Measures

**Social Support.** Social support was evaluated using the College Social Support Survey (CSSS; Harrington, 2011). The CSSS is a modified version of the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS; Malecki, Demaray, & Elliott, 2000). The CASSS is a reliable and

valid measure of social support “with  $\alpha = .96$  for the total score and ranging from .92 to .96 on scale scores” (Malecki & Demaray, 2006, p. 8). In addition, it has shown test-retest ( $r = .78$ ) and interrater reliability. Similarly, in the current study the CSSS (Harrington, 2011) had  $\alpha = .96$  for both the total frequency and total importance scales and scale scores ranged from .86 to .88.

The items on the CSSS align with House’s (1981) conceptualization of social support. Specifically, the items in the CSSS are designed to gather college students’ reports of the frequency and importance of types of social support (i.e., emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal) received from a range of sources (i.e., a close friend, family members, classmates, professors, and other people at the school). Within each section there were 12 statements about the frequency of support that a student might receive from the listed source and 12 identical statements about the importance of the perceived support. First, participants rated how often they received the support described on a 6-point scale. Then, they rated how important the support was to them on a 3-point scale. There were also several survey items that queried students about the school related stress they might experience and items that gathered basic demographic information.

**Academic Persistence.** Participants who were registered in the Fall 2013 semester but not for the Spring 2014 semester were coded with the number “1” to denote that the student was not retained. Students who were registered for both the Fall 2013 semester and the Spring 2014 semester, were coded with the number “2” to denote the student was retained. Students who were not enrolled in courses during the Fall 2013 semester as well as those who graduated prior to the start of the Spring 2014 semester were excluded from the analyses for academic persistence purposes.

## Research Procedures

Permission was granted by the Presidents at the four participating colleges. The students at these colleges were recruited via a series of three emails. In addition, posters were displayed on the campuses and announcements were posted on the colleges' website, student portal, Facebook and/or Twitter accounts all containing the link to the online CSSS (Harrington, 2011) survey. Responses were downloaded into SPSS for analysis. Then data were transformed to compute scores for each of the scales. All survey items were marked required; therefore, there was no missing data. Once the Fall 2013 and Spring 2014 enrollment status of the participants was obtained from the colleges, these data were cleaned and students' names and ID numbers were removed from the SPSS file. Data from the survey was then correlated with spring 2014 semester enrollments. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics.

## Results

Participants' average rating for the frequency of social support perceived approached the anchor score for *most of the time*, while the overall perceived Importance of support fell between the anchor scores for *important* and *very important*. When results were examined by gender, female community college students perceived significantly more frequent social support than did male students, which is similar to previous research (Frey & Rothlisberger, 1996; Rueger, Malecki, & Demaray, 2008). Conversely, there was no significant difference in the mean scores of male and female participants on the total importance scale of social support.

## Stress

The community college students in this study reported they experienced stress related to school and being a college student. Participating students identified stressors that were similar in many ways to those previously identified in the literature. Given that the participants' greatest

source of stress is trying to balance their coursework with their job responsibilities, this confirms prior research findings that community college students in particular, often experience additional stressors specific to their status as students including balancing multiple classes with other commitments such as work or family. In concurrence with the literature, data analysis revealed that perceived social support has been found to buffer the negative effects of stress typically experienced by college students.

### **Sources of Social Support**

Participants' mean scores for frequency of social support perceived were highest for a close friend, followed by professors, family members, other people at the college, and classmates. Regarding the importance of social support perceived, participants' mean score was highest for professors, followed by a close friend, family members, other people at the college, and classmates. When results were examined by gender, female students mean scores were higher than male students for four of the five sources of support. Male students only had a higher mean score for frequency of social support perceived from professors. Similarly, female students' mean scores on the importance scale were also higher for four of the five sources of support than male students. Both male and female students had the same mean score for classmate support. Additionally, female community college students perceived significantly more frequent support from family members and a close friend, and these two sources of support were also significantly more important to female students than to male students.

### **Types of Support**

Participants' highest response mean scores on the total frequency scale was for emotional support, followed by informational support, appraisal support, and instrumental support. The study finding related to emotional support parallels those of other researchers in that emotional

support has been identified as important to the success of college students (Greenbaum, Graham, & Scales, 1995; Skinner, 2004; Troiano, 2003). College students need to be surrounded by adults and peers who care about their academic success in order for them to thrive in college (Savitz-Romer et al., 2009). Furthermore, emotional support helps promote student engagement and is associated with stronger grades and an increased likelihood of student retention (Holder, 2007; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Savitz-Romer et al., 2009).

With reference to the importance scale for types of support, community college students' mean scores were highest for informational support, followed by emotional support, instrumental support, and appraisal support. Informational support, according to House (1981), includes advice, directives, suggestions, and the provision of information during times of stress. For college students, this type of support could include advice on how to improve study skills or providing information on the services available on campus. Informational support for college students could also include orientation programs, academic advising, internship programs, or career exploration programs (Savitz-Romer et al., 2009). Providing students with information about college admissions, college processes, and financial aid is important, especially for first-generation and low-income college students (Savitz-Romer et al., 2009). These types of informational support are vital to the success of college students, so one can see why the participants in this study deemed informational support as the most important type of support.

When data was examined by gender, female students' mean scores on frequency scale of social support perceived were higher than male students' mean scores for all four types of support and were significantly higher for frequency of informational and instrumental support. Similarly, female students' mean scores on the importance scale were also higher than male

students' mean scores for all four types of support and were significantly higher for importance of instrumental support.

### **Types of Support within Sources of Support**

When data were examined by the four types of support (i.e., emotional, informational, appraisal, and instrumental) perceived within each source of support (i.e., family members, professors, classmates, a close friend, and other people at the college), close friend emotional support was the most frequency perceived while professor informational support was the most important to participants. Additionally, female college students perceived emotional support from a close friend as being significantly more important than male college students. The study finding that close friends were an important source of emotional support is similar to the results of a study by Friedlander et al. (2007), which showed that higher levels of social support from friends was predictive of better adjustment to college.

Students' highest mean scores on the importance scale for type of support within source of support were for professor informational support followed by family member emotional support. Interestingly, students placed a higher value on informational support from their professors over that of emotional support from their family members and a close friend. Especially given that a study by Friedlander et al. (2007) found those students who reported higher levels of social support from family also reported higher levels of adjustment to college. Additionally, a study by Robertson and Taylor (2009) found that family emotional support significantly contributed to academic persistence. Lastly, female students in the current study perceived emotional support from family members as being significantly more important than male students. This finding is similar to a study by Valery, O'Connor, and Jennings (1997)

where female participants were more likely than male participants to request and receive emotional support from their parents.

When data were further examined by gender, female students had significantly higher scores for frequency of family member informational support, family member appraisal support, family member instrumental support, close friend emotional support, close friend information support, close friend appraisal support, and close friend instrumental support than male students. Female college students' mean scores on the importance scale were all higher than male college students' mean scores except for emotional support and instrumental support perceived from classmates. Results also showed that family member emotional support, family member informational support, family member appraisal support, family member instrumental support, close friend emotional support, and close friend instrumental support were significantly more important to female community college students than male community college students.

### **Social Support and Academic Persistence**

This study explored the relationship between the overall frequency and importance of social support and academic persistence. The data analysis revealed that the more social supports perceived, the more likely students would be retained, although this relationship is only marginal, and this finding was not significant at the .05 level. Nevertheless, it did approach significance at the .07 level. Despite the results of this study, other researchers have found a link between perceived social support and academic persistence (Dixon Rayle et al., 2006; Nicpon et al., 2006). While the relationship between frequency of social support perceived and academic persistence is marginal and significant at the .07 level, there were several other significant findings related to social support perceived and academic persistence.



**Appraisal support and academic persistence.** Interestingly, while appraisal support was reported to be the second least frequent and the least important type of support for all participants, data analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between the frequency of appraisal support perceived and academic persistence. Thus, the more frequently community college students perceived appraisal support, the more likely they were to be retained. Giving prompt feedback (i.e., appraisal support) is also one of Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. They feel that in the classroom, college students need frequent opportunities to have their performance assessed and receive feedback and suggestions for improvement. Professors who do not assess students often miss an important opportunity to identify and help students who are struggling (Savitz-Romer et al., 2009). Similarly, Getzel and Thomas (2008) discovered that students perceived constructive criticism from family members, professors, and friends as essential to their success in college. Additional research in this area should be pursued as it might inform faculty about best ways to support students and provide effective feedback as they pursue their academic goals.

**Professor support and academic persistence.** Social support perceived from professors was the second most frequent and the most important source of support perceived. Not surprisingly, there was a low positive correlation between the frequency of social support perceived from professors and academic persistence that was significant at the .056 level. Thus, the more social support perceived from professors, the more likely community college students were to persist.

In agreement with these findings, the literature has shown the importance of social support from professors. A study by Campbell and Campbell (1997) found that faculty mentoring (i.e., emotional support) was significantly related to students' academic performance,

GPA, and that mentored students were more likely to persist in college. Additionally, Tinto (1993) found that faculty support promotes academic integration and students who are integrated are more likely to be successful and more likely to persist. College students who feel emotionally supported in the classroom are more likely to expend the effort needed to succeed (Allen & Madden, 2006; Barnett, 2011). Furthermore, Chickering and Gamson (1987) found that contact between students and faculty outside of the classroom is the most important factor in student involvement. Additional research in this area should be pursued to help identify the various kinds of supports that professors can provide to students both in the classroom and outside the classroom, to help them achieve their academic goals.

**Other people at the college support and academic persistence.** Interestingly, participants in this study reported social support perceived from other people at the college as the least frequent and least important source of support. Yet, there was a small positive correlation between the frequency of social support perceived from other people at the college and academic persistence that was significant. Thus, the more support perceived from other people at the college, the more likely community college students were to be retained.

While other people at the college were not specifically defined in the survey instrument, it seems reasonable to suggest that students were considering college counselors and college support service staff such as financial aid office staff, registrar's office staff, cashier/bursar's office staff, library staff, career advisors, academic advisors, and academic support/tutoring staff. Although participants in this study reported these other people at the college as being the least frequent and important source of support, clearly these other people play an important role in student retention as evidenced by the significant correlation with academic persistence. Additional research in this area should be pursued to help inform college officials as to which

specific other people at the college impact student persistence and the best ways they can provide supports to community college students in order to help them reach their academic goals.

### **Educational Significance**

Data analysis revealed that the more social supports perceived, the more likely students would be retained, although this relationship is only marginal, and this finding only approached significance at .07 level. Prior studies have shown a significant relationship between social support and college student retention (Devonport & Lane, 2006; Dixon Rayle et al., 2006; Nicpon et al.). Those studies combined with the results of the current study show the importance of studying social support as a buffer in student retention, especially in the community college setting. Furthermore, the results suggest several recommendations for practice.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

First, community college officials should consider providing both faculty and staff with structured, long-term professional development that helps them to understand how to best address the social support needs of community college students. This study found that professors played an important role in providing social support to community college students. According to Tinto (2012), “the classroom is the building block upon which student retention is built and the pivot point around which institutional action for student retention must be organized” (p. 124). Thus, college officials would do well to take seriously the task of enhancing the skills and knowledge of faculty, especially with regards to providing social support to their students. Long-term professional development strategies to enhance student retention must also include a long-term investment in faculty development (Tinto, 2012).

However, professional development must also extend beyond the classroom. The frequency of social support perceived from other people at the college was also correlated with

the retention of participants in this study. Clearly these other people played an important role in student retention. Therefore, it is critical that structured, long-term professional development include not only the faculty, but include all college employees as well, as it is vital to have the coordination and collaboration of both faculty and staff (Tinto, 2012).

Second, community college officials should attempt to integrate and coordinate academic and social support strategies. College officials need to better align classroom instruction with support services for students in order to ensure that students experience a comprehensive set of supports (Savitz-Romer et al., 2009, Tinto, 2012). While emphasis is often placed on what occurs in the classroom, particularly in the community college setting (Tinto, 2012), it is important to coordinate the classroom experience with social supports. This can be done by mapping resources, identifying what students need, identifying what resources are available to them, and identifying what is most effective (Savitz-Romer et al., 2009). This resource mapping can prevent the duplication of services and increase coordination and integration among them (Savitz-Romer et al., 2009).

Third, community college officials should gather data on students' perceptions of the social supports that help to buffer their school-related stress. The findings of the present investigation provide rich information about the types of support and the sources of support that helped to buffer the school-related stress of community college students. College officials would do well to gather similar data. Such information would assist colleges in supporting students to become part of the college community, stay in college, and achieve their academic goals.

One way to implement this recommendation would be to administer a survey to students at the same time they take placement tests. Importantly, data about the types and sources of support perceived should also be gathered on an ongoing basis. The information could be used to

tailor individual supports through counseling or student services. Collectively, the data could also be used strategically to modify or add student supportive services and activities (e.g., informational workshops for students). The research is clear that when students perceive and value social supports they are more likely to adjust to college life and achieve academic success (Baldwin et al., 2003; Lafrenier & Ledgerwood, 1997; Skowron et al., 2004; Somera & Ellis, 1996).

Finally, community college officials should consider developing programs and strategies to involve the family members of community college students. In this study, participants indicated they perceived social support from family *most of the time* and indicated its importance between the scale anchor scores of *important* and *very important*. Parents and family members can be instrumental in the lives of ethnically diverse and underprepared students (Barbatis, 2010) and first-generation students (Bryan & Simmons, 2009), many of whom attend community colleges. In fact, some studies have suggested that one of the best predictors of college aspirations is family support (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Additionally, studies have also shown that family member emotional support is positively linked to persistence (Robertson & Taylor, 2009; Walker & Satterwhite, 2002).

Colleges have traditionally expected their students to detach from their parents and families once they attend college. Many community college students continue to live at home with family members while they attend college. Therefore, college counselors and personnel need to be aware of the continuing importance of family relationships and the social support provided by family members to students (Dixon Rayle & Chung, 2007). Even if students no longer live at home with family members, they may still have a major impact on college students' academic performance (Smith & Renk, 2007). In order to foster these ongoing familiar

relationships, college personnel can create programs that engage family members in the college-going process (Barbatis, 2010).

Suggestions for involving family members go beyond simply having a special session for parents only during student orientation, especially for community college students. Rather, programs for community college family members should be continuous and be sustained throughout the student's enrollment (Barbatis, 2010). The programs for family members should focus on how to foster support for their student who is attending college (Nicpon et al., 2006). Oftentimes, when a student attends college, regardless of their age, the entire family is involved. Thus, rather than encouraging separation of parents/family members and students, college officials should encourage family involvement in the college going process by creating programs and policies that foster familial participation.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although this study has broken new ground in identifying social supports that are related to the academic persistence of community college students, there are several limitations to consider when interpreting these findings. First, the researcher asked participants to provide their names and student ID numbers for the purpose of tracking retention. Therefore, the potential existed for participants' concerns about confidentiality and this might have limited the number of students that chose to participate.

Second, this study used a single measure of students' perceptions of the social support they received, which represents a limitation. Third, this study used a correlational design and a cross-sectional survey. Data were gathered once, thus providing a snapshot of respondents' self-reports of their perceptions of the social support received. These perceptions can change over time.

Fourth, this study was conducted at four of twelve community colleges in a single state. Thus, the findings from this study may not be generalizable to the larger community college population and to students in other colleges and states. It is up to the reader of this dissertation to determine whether the results are applicable to their particular population of students.

Fifth, this is only the second time that the CSSS (Harrington, 2011) was used. While there are data on the validity and the reliability of the CASSS (Malecki et al., 2000) on which the CSSS is based, there are none for the CSSS. Finally, the purposeful and convenience sampling practice limited the extent to which the results could be generalized to other community college students in Connecticut as well as the nation.

Despite the limitations, this study fills a gap in the literature on social support and academic persistence. While prior studies have focused on the relationship between college students' perceptions of the social support received and academic persistence, those have been primarily conducted at four-year colleges. Given the vast differences between community college students and four-year college students, generalizing the results of these studies to the community college population should be done with caution. Thus, this study adds to the existing knowledge-base on social support and community college student retention and provides useful information to college personnel as they struggle to support their diverse student body through the first year and on to degree completion

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