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Community College Student Completion Rates and Strategies for Improvement

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Abstract

The problem of practice addressed in this qualitative case study was low community college student completion rates. Community college student completion rates for certificate and degree seeking students are consistently approximately 32% compared to approximately 60% for four-year colleges and universities (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017). The lower community college graduation rates represent a structural inequality in the higher education system because community colleges, compared to four-year colleges and universities, serve a disproportionately large percentage of the nation's low-income and underrepresented minority students (Wyner, 2014). In this study, interactive focus groups provided information for an in-depth analysis of practices and factors present in a Community College Medical Assisting Certificate Program that had consistently high completion rates. The intent of the study was to hear directly from the program faculty and students in order to offer community college professionals specific, actionable strategies to increase student persistence to program completion. Focus groups consisted of students who had completed the program and (separately) full-time faculty who had taught in the program. Student participants were asked to share their experiences that impacted their ability to complete the program. Faculty were asked their perspectives on factors that contributed to such high student completion rates. Study results indicated that the cohort model used by the Medical Assisting Program was the most critical factor in the program's high student persistence and completion rates.

Keywords: cohort, community college, retention

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Community College Student Completion Rates and Strategies for Improvement

The problem of practice to be addressed in this study is low community college student completion rates. Community college student completion rates for certificate and degree seeking students are consistently approximately 32% compared to approximately 60% for four-year colleges and universities (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017). The lower community college graduation rates represent a structural inequality in the higher education system because community colleges, compared to four-year colleges and universities, serve a disproportionately large percentage of the nation's low-income and underrepresented minority students (Wyner, 2014).

Improving community college completion rates and closing the inequality gap is important. People with college degrees are more likely to be employed and able to earn a living for themselves and their families (America Association of Community Colleges, 2012).

Background and Context

Wyner (2014) describes community colleges as having a critical role in the American education system. He notes that there are more than 1,200 community colleges, serving more than 13 million students each year. According to Wyner (2014), community colleges have been "the people's college and the Ellis Island of higher education since their inception, more than 100 years ago" (Wyner, 2014, p.1). Millions of low-and middle-income Americans have moved forward in their pursuit of a good life because of their community college education (Wyner, 2014).

Community colleges have complicated missions. They offer traditional, general education, providing a liberal arts foundation to prepare graduates for four-year institutions. In addition, they offer programs designed to develop marketable skills to enter the workforce

(American Association of Community Colleges, 2012). However, students often enter community colleges without college level skills. In a report by Complete College America (2012), a national nonprofit dedicated to eliminating education achievement gaps, more than 50% of students entering two-year colleges are placed into remedial courses, and nearly four in ten do not complete their remedial courses. Fewer than one in ten students graduate from community colleges within three years. Further, students who are African American, Hispanic, or low-income, are more likely to need remediation courses. The report suggests that students should be prepared for college level courses when they graduate from high school, but when students enter colleges, the colleges should be prepared to provide the support needed for students to successfully attain their academic goals.

Workforce Changes

An article by Carneval et al. (2018) notes that there have been changes in the educational requirements of the workforce. During the post-World War II period, people with a high school diploma or less were able to secure jobs in industry that paid a middle-class wage. Today, about 20% of jobs require only a high school diploma or less; 24% require more education than high school, but less than a bachelor's degree, including associate degrees and certificates; and about 56% of the jobs require a bachelor's degree (Carnevale et al., 2018).

In today's workforce, a college education not only means more jobs, but better paying jobs. Median earnings for full-time employees by educational level are: less than high school diploma, $26,200; high school diploma, $36,000; Associate's Degree, $42,600; and Bachelor's Degree, $60,100 (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012). These statistics emphasize the need to improve retention and graduation rates, so students have access to good, high paying jobs.

The Role of Economic and Political Forces

There are economic and political reasons for community colleges to focus on increasing student retention and improving graduation rates. Community colleges need to retain students because they need the enrollments. Their funding, to a large extent, is dependent on enrollments, and the enrollment trend is downward. The downward trend follows several years of increased enrollments that accompanied the economic recession (Juszkiewicz, 2016).

As community college enrollments have decreased, accountability measures have become more important. Retention and graduation rates are accountability measures that are critical to public policy makers (Fike & Fike, 2008). A measure of institutional success is retention, which leads to graduation or to four-year colleges. All of these factors contribute to a nation-wide focus on improving community college graduation rates.

Personal Interests and Positionality

There are many reasons to pursue strategies to improve community college graduation rates. My personal interests are from both a practitioner's perspective and from a personal one. As a community college dean responsible for a large instructional division, I am committed to doing my part to improve student graduation rates. Although I have dedicated my career to serving community college students, it has only been in the last few years that I have become aware of the abysmal student completion rates at the college where I work and at community colleges throughout the country. This awareness has moved me to research how to better serve community college students as they pursue their educational goals.

Another aspect of my interest in this research is that my college has recently joined the Achieving the Dream (ATD) network of colleges focused on student success, specifically graduation rates. Established in 2004, ATD challenges colleges to collect and analyze data

relating to student success, try new and innovative strategies to improve retention and graduation results, and share results with ATD colleagues around the country (Achieving the Dream, n.d.). As an administrator at an ATD member college, I am actively involved in the ATD work at our institution.

Finally, I am a community college graduate and understand from personal experience the positive impact a community college can have on an individual. After graduating high school, I was accepted and planned to attend a major research university but due to personal issues, chose to stay close to home. The only reason I was able to remain in college was because I could attend a local community college. I graduated from the community college, earning my first college degree.

Challenges and Terms

There are challenges with reviewing and comparing community college student completion rates. One problem is that there is no common agreement among community colleges to describe how to compute them. For example, upon entry to a community college, if a student enrolls in a nursing program but later changes their mind and completes a computer information systems program, does the nursing program count the student as a failure to complete nursing? A related issue is that it is difficult for community colleges to track and maintain records of student goals. Students declare majors when they first apply to college but often change their goals many times.

A final example relates to the length of time colleges track students and include them in their statistics. Colleges may include in their completion numbers students who complete their certificates or degrees within two years of enrolling, within three years of enrolling or some other timeframe determined by the institution.

Closely related to the need to clearly define how graduation rates are computed is the need to define terms. For purposes of this research, the following items will be defined within the context of this topic.

Professional technical programs are designed to prepare students for immediate job placement or for job skill enhancements. Although many credits in professional technical programs may transfer to universities, that is not the primary purpose of the programs. Certificate programs are defined as programs requiring fewer credits than a 90-credit degree.

A cohort model means a group of students who enter a specific educational program at the same time and move through to the end as a group. Students enroll in all, or nearly all, the same classes, in the same order.

Student completion rates are based on the number of students who complete certificates or degrees after self-declaring their goals to complete certificates or degrees. This is an important distinction because some students attend community college with a wide range of educational goals that do not include completing certificates or degrees.

The lack of consistent community college protocols for computing completion rates and the different uses of terms make it particularly important for researchers in this field to provide detailed information in their research design. This study will include comprehensive information about the program being studied and the method of reporting completion rates so results can be compared with completion rates of other programs.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks informing this study are adult learning theory and student integration theory. As described by Knowles et al. (2015), andragogy is the concept that adults learn differently than children, and a key component is to focus on the learner and their growth.

"The six principles of andragogy are (1) the learner's need to know, (2) self-concept of the learner, (3) prior experience of the learner, (4) readiness to learn, (5) orientation to learning, (6) motivation to learn" (Knowles et al., 2015, p. 4). These principles describe what the adult learner brings to the learning environment. Knowles offers these principles as a framework but acknowledges there are other factors that affect adult learning.

Like Knowles' adult learning theory, Tinto's seminal work on college persistence (1975), and further refinement in his later work (1993, 1997, 2017) focuses on the student's perspective. He describes the challenges of identifying the different reasons students drop out of college, specifically noting that students leaving college due to academic failure is quite different than leaving for other reasons. Based on his student integration model, some students may be able to integrate into college academics but fail in the social domain, while others are able to integrate socially yet fail in academics. Another aspect of his model that is similar to Knowles is his belief that students bring with them backgrounds and life experiences that influence their likelihood of persisting. Finally, an important feature of his student integration theory is his belief that the quality and quantity of academic and social interactions between students and faculty, students and students, and students and the broader college community, are the critical predictors of student persistence.

Learning theory and student integration theory share some foundational elements. They also recognize the complexities of the issues related to student retention.

Literature Review

The focus of this literature review is to examine the strategies used by researchers and practitioners in their efforts to improve community college student completion rates. The goal is to develop an understanding of approaches that have been tried and to identify potential next

steps for researchers and practitioners to continue to make progress. To synthesize the wide range of literature on the topic, this review is organized into categories of retention strategies: classroom experiences and faculty preparedness, learning communities and the cohort model, first-year experiences, college success courses and orientation, and guided pathways. Although each has unique aspects, they also overlap in some ways. The research makes it clear that the community college retention problem is complicated and what helps some students complete does not necessarily help others.

Classroom Experiences and Faculty Preparedness

As researchers study ways to improve completion rates, many focus on classroom experiences and the critical role of faculty in student retention. This places importance on faculty preparation and training. Community college faculty typically do not receive adequate training to handle the diverse teaching and learning needs of community college students (Murry, 2001). In his study, Murry proposed six circumstances needed to provide comprehensive and effective faculty professional development programs that support student success. These include support of the institution, a formal program, a reward structure, ownership by faculty, colleagues' support for investments in teaching, and a belief that good teaching is valued by administration. Murry surveyed community colleges and concluded that colleges typically did not have faculty professional development programs that met the criteria proposed for being comprehensive and effective.

Perez et al. (2012) also focused on the key role faculty have in student persistence. They proposed that faculty have the most important role in students' academic achievement and that faculty professional development is essential. In his study, community college faculty participated in a semester-long professional development activity called the Gaining Retention

and Achievement for Students Program (GRASP). It offered teaching strategies for student-centered learning designed to foster student retention and academic achievement, with opportunities for classroom observations and feedback from coaches. The results showed that GRASP appeared effective in improving overall student academic achievement.

Finally, Stetson (1993) highlighted the importance of faculty professional development for student learning and achievement. She specifically promoted professional development in the areas of classroom assessment techniques and active learning methods. A similar theme as Perez et al. (2012), Stetson recommended that faculty professional development should be a full semester in duration and that it needed to provide important feedback and support from coaches.

Learning Communities and Cohort Models

Learning communities are based on the belief that students are often unprepared academically and socially for college and they are more likely to persist and graduate when they form relationships with other students and their professors (Bonet & Walters, 2016). To facilitate development of relationships and support, students are placed into groups enrolled in the same courses.

Bonet and Walters (2016) examined learning communities at Kingsborough Community College in New York. Their study compared four regular sections of sociology and psychology classes with four learning communities, consisting of courses in developmental or basic English, study skills, and social or behavioral science. They found that learning communities had a positive impact on student retention, measured by grades and course completion.

The cohort model expands the concept of learning communities from courses to entire programs where students in an area of study start classes together and progress through them together (Lei et al., 2011). There are benefits and drawbacks of the cohort model for students

and faculty. In addition to higher retention rates, benefits to students can include a group culture with supportive learners and common goals, positive peer relationships, and more social networks. He noted that there is often a positive student and faculty relationship enhanced by cooperative learning and student-led discussions. He found that drawbacks can include less flexibility in determining student courses, student cliques can develop, and cohorts can be similar to dysfunctional families. Faculty benefits can include streamlined advising and communication with students, and more positive relationships with students. Faculty drawbacks include less curriculum and scheduling flexibility and sometimes feeling isolated from the student cohort.

Learning communities and cohort models provide structured opportunities for students to connect with their peers and professors. There are both positive and challenging aspects to this approach. First-Year Experiences take a different approach but share the goal of developing relationships and a sense of belonging at the college.

First-Year Experience Programs

First-Year Experience Programs include a wide range of activities designed by colleges to support new student retention and success. The programs generally provide new students with the opportunity to participate in college orientation, to learn about college resources and engage in activities with peers and faculty – similar in many ways to the goals of learning communities.

In a study by Stebleton et al. (2010), the authors described challenges as they prepared and launched a First-Year Experience course designed to engage and retain new students. Taught by three faculty, the multidisciplinary course enrolled 75-80 students who met several hours a week for a semester. Faculty expressed their challenge of keeping students engaged and looked to students to find solutions. They asked students to provide feedback 3-5 times over the session. For example, when asked which parts of the course were most engaging, most students reported

the small group discussions rather than large group lectures. Faculty responded with more interactive discussions and less lecture. They developed and recommended engagement strategies such as visiting a local Farmer's Market, simulating a Town Hall meeting, and individual and group capstone projects.

Acevedo-Gil and Zerwuera (2016) reported on a First-Year Experience program that examined the importance of interactions and support for low-income students. Students were provided individual counseling, supplemental instruction, and cohort-based classes, all with the goal of improving student retention. The study focused on student insights on their First-Year Experience Programs. Students reported they participated because of recommendations of family members and peers. They noted the importance of their relationships with their peers, advisors, and faculty. Participants also found challenges during their first year; some received poor advising and a lack of information about programs. Overall, the study points to the value of First-Year Experience programs and their contributions to retaining students.

Some colleges offer First-Year-Experience programs in the form of specific workshops to support student retention. For example, Jacobs (2016) investigated the impact of pre-semester workshops in retaining nursing students. A series of five workshops were offered to establish a student-to-institution connection and increase confidence to succeed in the nursing program. Students who participated in the workshops completed surveys where they self-reported an increase in their confidence in being successful in their academics, including their expectations of completing the nursing program. Although the study has limitations, such as a low number of participants and no opportunity to follow up to determine persistence of students, the study indicated that the orientation workshop did increase students' confidence in their opportunity to succeed in the nursing program.

First-Year Experience studies offer encouraging results for improving student retention and graduation rates. A broad array of strategies falls in this category and there is overlap with learning community activities.

College Success Courses and Orientation

College success courses and program orientation sessions are often but not always part of First-Year Experience programs. They are designed to support success of students entering college for the first time by teaching strategies like good study habits and organizational routines, as well as providing information about college resources (Coleman et al., 2018). Coleman et al. (2018) investigated the percentages of students who passed and who withdrew from student success courses with respect to their gender, age, and ethnicity. Results indicated that women passed at a higher rate than men and had a lower withdrawal rate; black students passed at a lower rate than other ethnicities and withdrew at a higher rate, and 18-20-year-olds passed at the highest rate. The researchers suggest that study results could assist colleges in planning further investigations to help determine the best methods to support different groups of students (Coleman et al.).

Zeidenberg et al. (2007) also investigated the effectiveness of student success courses. They reviewed records of all students who entered Florida community colleges for the first time in fall 1999 and tracked them for over five years. They compared success of students who enrolled in student success courses with those who did not. Students were considered successful if they completed a certificate or an associate degree, persisted, or transferred to a Florida State University. The study indicated that there was a positive relationship between enrolling in student success courses and the student success indicators proposed. Further research is needed

to study which components of courses are most effective and how courses can be enhanced for specific student populations (Zeidenberg et al., 2007).

Hatch et al. (2018) delved into student success courses in an effort to determine how they get positive outcomes. They used four case studies of colleges that offered student success workshops to examine activities that take place in the classes. They found that an important characteristic of courses was creating a place to practice an identity of being a college student, and to make sense of the experience (Hatch et al., 2018).

Windham et al. (2014) investigated whether or not participation in a study skills class would increase student retention. They tracked a sample of community college students and found that students who successfully completed a study skills course were 64% more likely to retain fall-to-fall than those who did not take the course.

There are a wide range of study skills courses offered. It is a retention strategy used by many colleges, providing more evidence of colleges continuing to seek methods to retain students.

Guided Pathways

The guided pathways model is based on the belief that when students have too many complex choices, they often fail to make steady progress towards graduation. The model, described by Scott-Clayton (2011), advocates for students to enroll in very structured, streamlined paths to graduation; offering students limited course choices. She explains that students must make their way through complex and often unexplained community college processes as they decide what they want to do, plan how to do it, and follow through. Offering them specific pathways provide them a map to completion.

The Community College Research Center (CCRC), affiliated with the Teachers College at Columbia University, a leader in community college research and innovation, is a strong proponent of the guided pathway model. However, the model, as described by the CCRC encompasses much more than clear educational pathways. A CCRC report, (Jenkins at el. 2019) describes a whole-college redesign for effective implementation of guided pathways. Further, the report describes the redesign as a national community college movement with over 300 colleges participating in the reform.

Jenkins et al. (2019) described findings from case studies consisting of eight of the 30 community colleges that implemented guided pathways as participants in the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Pathways Project, launched in 2015. The eight colleges were selected to represent various size, geographic and student demographics. The CCRC research team facilitated interviews and focus groups with 340 administrators, faculty members, advisors, counselors, staff members, and students. All eight colleges had implemented five tenants of guided pathways: educational program mapping, individualized career and college exploration and planning, redesign of advising, improved career and transfer information, and enhanced progress monitoring.

The report described how the colleges began planning for guided pathways with college-wide training on collecting and analyzing student data and learning how organizational structures can impact student outcomes. To be successful, all eight colleges described the importance of changing the college culture which meant getting all parts of the colleges involved as a first step in the process. The five colleges were successful in major college-wide change and preliminary results indicate improvement in student outcomes.

A precursor to the study by Jenkins et al. (2019) is a seminal 2015 book, *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* (Bailey et al., 2015). Authors describe the way community colleges operate in cafeteria style, where students pick courses and programs in a self-service model and find their own educational paths. They advocate for colleges to provide guided, coherent pathways for students. Similar to Tinto's (2017) student perspective framework, they place emphasis on the student experience. A focus is on the need to include specific student experiences like orientation, career assessment, advising, selection of meta-majors, program maps, and prescribed first year sequence of courses. Redesign of many functions of the college are recommended to support the guided pathways model. A key component is to involve the entire organization in a redesign with a focus on student success.

A study conducted by Gardenhire-Crooks et al. (2006), found qualitative support for the concept that structured pathways support student success. Researchers studied six community colleges around the country. Using a random assignment design, some students received regular college classes and services, while others received enhanced support. One group received extra advising and career counseling services to help them progress on their career path and in finding employment related to their career goals. Another group participated in a learning community and received individual advising from their faculty. Students from all groups were interviewed and asked about their experiences and factors that might help or hinder their college progress. Interview answers indicated that students were not homogeneous so to be effective, individual differences need to be considered. However, researchers were encouraged by student responses about the benefits of their individual advising designed to help them avoid pitfalls like taking too many classes, skipping recommended prerequisites and inconvenient schedules.

Jenkins et al. (2018) studied Tennessee community colleges and noted that they may be the furthest along in guided pathways work. Called the Tennessee Completion Practices, all 13 Tennessee community colleges have implemented the guiding pathways model into student experiences. Their strategies are highlighted in four foundational areas, all consistent with the guided pathways model. The first is mapping pathways to student end goals. Specific pathways describe how students will progress to transfer and careers. Secondly, they help students select and enter program pathways. They work to help students understand their options and what they need to do to move forward. They redesigned their student intake, advising and career exploration processes to encourage informed decisions by students. The third area is keeping students on their path. They focus on advising and monitoring student progress and intervening when needed. Ensuring students are learning is the fourth area. The goal is for students to learn what is needed for their success at post-secondary institutions or on the job. This means aligning learning outcomes with assessments and improving teaching and learning by providing active learning strategies that allow students to apply what they are learning. With the overarching goal of improving their student graduation rates, Tennessee community colleges are showing improvements in first term and first year credits earned, encouraging indicators that program completion rates are also improving.

With over 300 community colleges in the United States implementing some aspect of guided pathways as their foundational framework, (Jenkins et al., 2019), the guided pathways model represents a nation-wide community college movement to reform and improve student graduation rates.

Synthesis of Literature

Organizing strategies designed to support student completion into categories is a helpful way to review and analyze the literature. As described in this review, most completion efforts can be grouped into classroom experiences and faculty preparedness, learning communities and the cohort model, first-year experiences, college success courses and orientation, and guided pathways. However, as noted in this review, it is important to recognize there is considerable overlap among these categories.

A synthesis of the literature showed that much of the research and practitioner work done throughout the nation had common themes. Multiple studies discuss the importance of individual student goals, orientation to programs and classes, opportunities for students to develop connections with one another and their faculty, and on curriculum that is relevant and engaging for students. Recently, with the guided pathways model being adopted by so many colleges, developing coherent and streamlined educational pathways is a focus, and alongside it, discussions of complete college redesign that involves all faculty, staff, and administrators.

Moving Forward

The literature demonstrates the importance of community colleges within the higher education system and the critical need to continue to develop strategies to retain students to completion. Community colleges provide a wide range of programs and services to retain students and support their success. Yet students continue to enter community colleges with goals and aspirations to complete their programs and about 60% leave without the credentials and skills needed for today's jobs (National Center for Educational Statistics, n.d.).

It is timely to accelerate the focus on student completion. Student success for the benefit of students is at the forefront of why community college educators are engaged in this work. However, other factors also make this the time to make changes.

Student enrollments have been declining as the nation enjoys a strong economy. Community colleges need students in order to get funding; retaining current students is the most efficient method of enrollment management. Additionally, accountability to legislators and other governing agencies is becoming more critical as funding is beginning to be attached to student success measures.

Future Studies

In future studies, it will be important to isolate which strategies are making the most difference. In the guided pathways model, for example, institutions are often making numerous institutional changes simultaneously, creating a challenge to determine which change are causing specific outcomes. There would be advantages to developing more quantitative studies, so work can be more easily replicated with the reasonable expectation of similar outcomes. Also, qualitative case studies would be valuable to learn about programs that experience high graduation rates so specific strategies can be replicated in other programs. This work would include in depth conversations with program students and faculty along with careful analysis of information.

Moving forward, the overarching research question remains: What can community colleges do to improve student graduation rates? Community colleges need to continue to learn from their experiences and to experiment with new retention strategies. Community colleges are "the people's college" (Wyner, 2014, p. 1) and will continue to work to support student success.

Purpose

The purpose of this case study was to research practices and processes used by the Olympic College Medical Assisting Certificate of Specialization Program (MEDA) that contribute to high student completion rates. The MEDA student graduation rates are exemplary compared to other College programs. Over the past five years, 19 to 34 students enrolled in the MEDA program each fall quarter, and 68% to 87% completed the following summer quarter (Olympic College, 2021). The average graduation rate throughout the College is less than 40% (Olympic College, n-d.).

Data from the 2015-2016 academic year through the 2019-2020 academic year demonstrate that the MEDA student graduation rates have been consistently high.

Table 1

Medical Assistant Five-Year Program Completion Data

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Started the Program	19	31	25	34	28
Completed on Time	9	22	15	27	20
Competed Late	4	4	2	0	0
Completed Early	0	1	0	1	2
Total Complete	13	27	17	28	22
Percent Complete	68%	87%	68%	82%	79%

Note. Data was pulled from internal Olympic College reports. Olympic College (2021). Degrees by Term [CTC_SR_DEGREE_BY_TERM]. Olympic College.

The research was approached from a practitioner's perspective. Results add to the body of knowledge that helps community college faculty and administrators better support students to complete their educational programs.

Methods

In this qualitative case study, interactive focus groups provided information for an in-depth analysis of practices and factors present in the MEDA program. Focus groups consisted of students who had completed the program and (separately) full-time faculty who had taught in the program. Student participants were asked to share their experiences that impacted their ability to complete the certificate program. Faculty were asked their perspectives on factors that contributed to such high student completion rates.

Rationale, Advantages and Disadvantages of the Design

Creswell (2018) described the advantages and disadvantages of various types of qualitative research. He noted that focus groups can contribute historical information, allow the researcher to direct the questioning, and can be used when participants are not available for direct observation. Breen (2006) added to the list of advantages by noting that focus groups can "generate ideas for the purpose of devising recommendations for future change and improvements in student learning" (p. 464).

Four disadvantages of using focus groups were pointed out by Creswell (2018). He noted that participant responses are filtered through participant perspectives, it is not done in a natural setting, responses may be biased by the researcher's presence, and people have various skills and abilities to articulate. Advantages and disadvantages were analyzed to determine the appropriate methodology for this study.

A qualitative case study design using focus groups was selected for this research because the advantages of hearing directly from students and faculty; the people who had intimate, firsthand knowledge of program operations, outweighed any disadvantages. Students shared from personal experiences what helped them successfully complete their program. Faculty provided detailed program information to fully understand how the program operates. They also shared their experiences and insights on the learning environment they created to encourage student completion. Finally, the selected research design would produce actionable strategies for community college practitioners to employ in their efforts to increase completion rates. This is the outcome that is most important to the researcher.

A potential short coming of the study is that only students who successfully completed their programs were included. Students who did not complete, could have potentially provided input about why they dropped out and what the college could have done to help them persist. They were not included in the study because it would have been too difficult to locate them and asking them to participate, months after dropping the program, did not seem reasonable.

Setting

Devers and Frankel (2000) note that in qualitative research, "The research design requires the researcher to understand and consider the unique characteristics of specific research subjects and the setting in which they are located" (p. 264). The setting for this study is Olympic College and specifically the MEDA program.

A large institution, Olympic College serves Kitsap and Mason counties. Its main campus is in Bremerton, with extension campuses in Poulsbo and Shelton, and an apprentice training program at the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard and Intermediate Maintenance Facility (Olympic College. (n.d.).

As a comprehensive community college, the institution offers a wide range of instructional areas including basic education, English as a Second language, continuing education, academic transfer, professional technical programs, and applied bachelor programs. In addition to the MEDA program, there are 20 professional technical programs offered at Olympic College, ranging from computer information systems to culinary arts to welding (Olympic College, 2020)

The MEDA Program

The MEDA program (63 credits) is one of four degree and certificate programs in the medical assisting discipline. In addition to the MEDA program there is an Associate in Applied Science Transfer Degree in Medical Assisting (91-92 credits), a Certificate of Specialization in Medical Billing and Coding (62 credits), and a Certificate of Completion in Medical Receptionist (35 credits). The MEDA program has more enrollments than any of the related programs and it is the only one accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs upon the recommendation of the Medical Assisting Education Review Board.

Designed to prepare graduates for immediate job placement in administrative and clinical positions, the MEDA program graduates typically work at clinics and doctors' offices. Duties involve scheduling appointments, maintaining medical records, taking medical histories, drawing blood, and administering medications as directed by physicians. The average annual salary in Washington State for medical assistants is $43,470 (ONET, 2021).

The MEDA program is open to all students and it is a non-competitive process for entry. Students who meet the college level math and English requirements and complete the Medical Assisting 151 (MEDA 151) course are welcomed into the program. The MEDA 151 course is offered fall quarter and helps students make the final decision about entering MEDA, and to

begin planning for their clinical placement. It is a one-credit course that offers "A discussion of personal attributes, work setting, skills and responsibilities of a Medical Assistant. Investigation of the scope of practice defined by local and national regulations. Introduction to time management theory, therapeutic patient interaction techniques and critical thinking skills" (Olympic, 2020, p. 124). This course is designed as a gateway course where students receive the MEDA Application Packet and learn the requirements for placement into a clinical setting including proof of immunization status, confidentiality statement, criminal background check, and influenza vaccines. If students cannot meet the MEDA 151 course requirements for placement into an extern site, faculty work with them individually to determine if MEDA aligns with student backgrounds and career goals. Once students complete the application process, including MEDA 151, they are part of a student cohort. They enroll in classes with their cohort in the schedule developed by their faculty, fall through summer quarter.

The College has three new, large, modern buildings, but MEDA is in Building 3, an old, small building tucked into the north end of the campus, behind one of the new buildings. The MEDA classes, faculty offices, student study areas, and a small kitchen are all housed together in Building 3.

Role of the Researcher and Research Assistant

The researcher's role in the study was to compile MEDA program information from MEDA faculty and college publications, develop interview questions (see Appendix D and E) and organize and facilitate the focus groups. Program information included MEDA application procedures, entry requirements, course schedules, advising protocols, physical space, faculty credentials, administrative oversight, and student demographics. This information was used to provide a comprehensive understanding of program operations and support, and to develop

meaningful focus group questions. The communication documents included: recruitment communications (see Appendix A), scheduling correspondence and thank you letters (see Appendix F).

Organizing focus groups involved arranging meeting times, inviting participants, and confirming their participation. Although in-person focus groups were preferred, Zoom, an online video conferencing software, was used due to COVID-19 concerns. Students and faculty had used Zoom for their spring and summer classwork, so they were comfortable with the technology. Facilitating the focus groups involved asking predetermined questions and follow up questions when needed to clarify or gather more in-depth participant responses.

The research assistant had numerous important roles in the project. She set up the Zoom sessions, checked-in participants, ensured signed consent forms (see Appendix C) were on file and monitored the session recordings. Using Zoom Recording Transcriptions, she transcribed the focus group recordings, and then listened to the recordings to correct Zoom Recording Transcription errors. Finally, and most essentially, the research assistant conferred with the researcher on an ongoing basis and provided input and confirmation that the researcher findings accurately represent the comments of the focus group participants. The research assistant was a Master's level researcher who brought expertise to the research activities.

Population and Sampling

The total number of MEDA program students each year is small, 19 to 34 over the past five years. The two populations studied were students who completed the MEDA program summer quarter 2020, and fulltime MEDA program faculty. Twenty-eight students enrolled in the program fall quarter 2019, and 22 of them completed summer quarter 2020. Eight of the 22

students, 36%, participated in the study. All three, 100%, of the fulltime faculty who taught in the MEDA program, participated in the study.

Some of the student demographics vary from year to year, but others are relatively constant. The sample population that participated in the study was representative of the larger population. As the Student Gender Table below indicates, MEDA females far outnumber males each year. In the three years reviewed, 72% to 91% of students who specified their gender, were female; college-wide, approximately 52% to 54% who specified their gender, were female.

Table 2

Medical Assistant Student Gender

Gender	2017		2018		2019		Focus Group
	College	MEDA	College	MEDA	College	MEDA	MEDA
female	52%	72%	52%	91%	54%	89%	88%
male	48%	28%	47%	9%	46%	11%	13%
not specified	.40%	0%	0.50%	0%	.50%	0%	0%

Note: Data was pulled from internal Olympic College reports. Olympic College (2021). Unduplicated Headcount [Tableau/Course Grades Outcomes/Course Grades Workbook/Unduplicated Headcount/Gender]. Olympic College.

The age of MEDA students is similar each year, with an average of approximately 32 to 34; slightly older than the college-wide average of 28 to 30. In addition, the table below demonstrates that the MEDA student age range varied widely, from 20 to 62; the collegewide range was 13 to 84. The sample population that participated in the study had an average age of 28, slightly younger than the average of the MEDA students.

Table 3

Medical Assistant Age

Age	2017		2018		2019		Focus Group
	College	MEDA	College	MEDA	College	MEDA	MEDA
mean	30	34	29	32	28	32	28
median	26	32	25	29	24	28.5	25
min	18	22	16	20	13	20	20
max	83	62	83	59	84	56	53

Note. Data was pulled from internal Olympic College reports. Olympic College (2021). *Enrolled Age* [QCS_CC_ENROLLED_AGE]. Olympic College.

The ethnicity of MEDA student was predominantly white, with 56% to 73% over the past five years; compared to college wide averages of 62% to 64%. The study group population was 78% white, higher than the average MEDA students.

Table 4

Medical Assistant Student Ethnicity

Ethnicity	2017		2018		2019		Focus Group
	College	MEDA	College	MEDA	College	MEDA	MEDA
African American	5%	10%	5%	5%	5%	3%	0%
Asian	12%	6%	12%	8%	12%	13%	0%
Latinx	10%	13%	10%	8%	10%	13%	11%
Native America/Alaskan	4%	3%	4%	5%	4%	6%	0%
Not Specified	2%	0%	3%	0%	4%	3%	0%
Pacific Islander	3%	0%	3%	3%	3%	6%	11%
White	64%	68%	63%	73%	62%	56%	78%

Note. Data was pulled from internal Olympic College reports. Olympic College (2021). *Enrolled in Program Plan Grade Ethnicity* [QCS_SR_PROG_PLAN_ENRLL_GRD_ETH]. Olympic College.

Recruitment

The researcher recruited students to participate in the study by sending emails (see Appendix A) to summer quarter 2020 MEDA student completers. The emails briefly described the research project and asked them to participate. Due to limited responses, a second email with similar information was sent to students, but responses continued to be low. A MEDA faculty h helped recruit by posting information about the study on the program's Facebook page and as a result, several additional students volunteered.

The researcher emailed the three fulltime faculty and asked them to participate in the study. They were provided with comprehensive information about the research project and the many steps that were needed to complete it. They agreed to be in the focus group and to provide specific information about the program to the researcher.

As incentives, the researcher provided Target gift cards to students and faculty who participated in the focus groups. Students and faculty signed statements that provided an overview of the study, articulated that participation was voluntary, and noted that the focus groups would be recorded.

Protection of Human Rights

Names of focus group participants were not shared in the focus group sessions and were not included in any of the data or research materials in the study. The researcher has safeguarded the confidentiality of the information by storing it electronically in protected files.

An application to conduct the study was submitted and approved by the College Institutional Research Board (IRB). An application was submitted to the University of Washington to do human subjects research and their decision was to give the study exempt status.

Focus Groups

The researcher prepared for the focus group discussions by following protocols described by Kruegar and Casey (2001) and Breen (2006). They note the importance of the first few minutes of a focus group session. They describe this as a time to establish the tone by offering a welcoming and accepting environment, providing a research and topic overview, describing ground rules, and ensuring confidentiality. The researcher spent several minutes at the beginning of each session introducing herself and the research assistant, making sure the respondents felt

comfortable and covering the logistics including the purpose of the study and the way the session would be facilitated. She also reminded them that participation was voluntary and individual comments were completely confidential. Finally, she confirmed that participants gave permission to be recorded.

Kruegar and Casey (2001) provided specific guidance on developing productive focus groups. They recommended starting with broad, open-ended questions and developing a sequence that moves from general to specific. They also suggested taking notes during the sessions, even if they are recorded. Finally, they highlighted the importance of listening for key points and themes and asking follow-up questions to get clarity on respondent comments.

The researcher asked predetermined questions for both the student and faculty focus groups sessions. Starting with open-ended, general questions, they proceeded with more specific, probing ones.

Both the student and faculty focus group sessions were audio and video recorded so there were complete records of the sessions. The research analysis was completed based on the recordings and researcher and research assistant notes.

Data Analysis

A comprehensive data analysis has been completed. The researcher followed the data process as described by Creswell (2018). He suggested researchers follow specific steps in their analysis of qualitative data. These included first organizing the data. Next, he advised reading and reflecting on all the material collected to get an overall sense of the data. The third step was coding the data, followed by developing a description of the themes. The final step was to determine how to represent the themes in the analysis narrative.

Organizing the Data

For this study, organizing the data included downloading the focus group transcripts from Zoom Transcription into two Excel spreadsheets, one for the faculty responses and one for the student responses. The research assistant reviewed the transcripts and corrected Zoom Transcription errors. Once in an Excel spreadsheet, the data could be easily sorted.

Coding the Data

The first step in the data coding process was for the researcher to read through the focus group transcripts several times and reflect on the overall substance of the responses. There were a combination of expected results and surprises. The students seemed extremely comfortable with one another and exhibited no inhibitions about sharing their personal stories. This was not a surprise since they were in classes together for four college quarters and knew each other well. The comfortable and at times joking comments from faculty during their focus group session was also not surprising. The faculty had worked together for years and functioned well as a team.

An unexpected aspect of participant responses was how completely they agreed with one another. There were no disagreements within either group. There was positive head nodding and murmurs of agreement, documented by the research assistant, as students and faculty shared personal experiences. A final surprise was the similarity of responses between the student group and the faculty group. Each group met separately and had no conversations about the questions, yet their answers were remarkably similar.

Faculty expressed the importance of knowing each student, creating a warm and welcoming learning environment, being accessible to students, creating clear and streamlined academic plans, individual and group advising, and the relationships and collaboration between students. The faculty consensus was that the cohort model was what pulled these activities

together and made them possible. Students used the term cohort model less than faculty, but their descriptions of what supported their persistence to completion were the same. Such similar results from the two separate and unique focus groups offered confidence of the trustworthiness of the study results.

After getting a general understanding of the focus group responses, the next step in the coding process was to label each response with a topic or emerging theme. The researcher did this manually, by writing notes next to each response, and providing a high-level descriptor of one to three words.

To be coded as a particular emerging theme, a response had to include a positive statement about that theme. For example, one prompt in the student session was: Describe your experience being advised by your faculty and other college advisors. For coding answers as a positive response to faculty advising, students needed to specifically respond positively about faculty advising.

Subthemes and Overarching Theme

Four subthemes began to emerge under an overarching main theme of student cohort. The first subtheme was the importance of faculty support, encouragement, and engagement with students. Responses from both faculty and students documented that faculty were a constant presence for students, they were easily accessible and genuinely interested in student success. Seven of the eight students responded that faculty were what they liked best about the program.

Faculty responses throughout the focus group demonstrated their commitment to providing a warm and welcoming learning environment. Their practice was to get to know each student, provide clear and consistent advising, and offer a range of support services. They showed passion for doing everything in their power to help get their students to graduation.

A second subtheme was the student to student relationships that seemed to help students persevere through the program. During the focus group, students spent more time answering this question than any other. They seemed eager to share how much they appreciated their peers, and they described a sense of belongingness with the group. Also, they explained the benefits of the academic support and encouragement they gave and received from one another.

Clear student education plans, the third subtheme, emerged as a critical factor for students and faculty. Both groups acknowledged the importance of planning and keeping their eyes on the end goal of program completion.

The significance of the physical environment was the fourth subtheme. The MEDA space provided a campus home for the students; a place they knew they would be welcome. Overall, students and faculty shared a sense of community that permeated throughout the program.

The overarching student cohort theme provided the foundation of the MEDA student experience. It would be difficult to effectively provide subtheme activities without being in a cohort learning environment.

Faculty shared that the student cohort was the most important factor to student persistence to completion and it was seen as the foundation for program success. Most aspects of the cohort model were described by students; however, students seldom used the terms cohort model.

Findings and Interpretations

The findings and interpretations are based on the experiences of the individual MEDA program students and faculty who participated in the study. Students have a year of first-hand knowledge about being a student in the MEDA program. They answered the focus group

questions from their personal experiences. Faculty who participated in the study have years of involvement facilitating the teaching and learning process for MEDA students. They have developed, revised, and continually enhanced the program with the goal of assisting students in completing and getting employment in the field.

The student and faculty quotations tell a story about the MEDA program, the dedicated faculty, and the students they serve. Many quotations, using pseudo names, are included in the research findings because hearing the words directly from the people who experienced the MEDA program authenticate the findings. The representative quotations are presented in the subthemes categories where they fit best, with the overarching main theme, student cohort, included separately.

Subtheme 1: Faculty Support, Encouragement and Engagement

Throughout their responses, students credit faculty support, encouragement, and engagement as essential to their ability to persist to graduation. Faculty responses aligned with student responses as they described the importance of creating a warm and supportive learning environment and engaging students in learning and planning their careers. They knew each student, their name, skills and often issues outside of classes where students needed support. Faculty were constant advocates for students on issues like facilities, childcare, equipment, and internships in the community.

Student Perspective

Seven of the eight students said faculty were their favorite part of the program. Students also credit faculty with their personal success in completing the MEDA program.

Lilly

“The teachers were supportive and willing to help you in any way possible to succeed in this program [nods of agreement from Star, Taylor and Mia].”

Don

You could tell that the instructors were invested in you, so your success mattered to them. [Nod of agreement from Lily, Star and Becky]. It wasn't like they were just coming to work teaching the class and then collecting their paycheck I mean they were actually, like Lilly said, really engaged in your success at getting those things done.

Madeline

“I’ve never been in a program or schooling, where I was getting so much support from the teachers and the students too… just amazing.”

Don

The patience of the instructors is what blew me away. I had never been in college before and I was expecting very little…The instructors were just patient [nod of agreement from Star], even if you had to ask a question three times you know they were willing to work with you.

Star

The faculty, they will go like beyond and above for each and every one of us. It's crazy how they like will sit there if you have any questions. Asking too many questions for them is not asking too many questions. They want you to know [nod of agreement from Lily]. They want to make sure that you know the information and if they have to repeat it again, they'll repeat it again the same way, and then they'll probably repeat it again a different way for you to answer, but it's definitely the faculty they'll go above and beyond for you, no matter what.

Sally

Yeah, I agree with everybody, and I think it was a like a program that you truly felt like they wanted you to finish it out and like see you succeed [nod of agreement from Taylor] and like go on to that next step in your life...I feel like, if I were to run into like Joel or Barbara or Doreen or anyone like in public. It would be almost like a family member, like a good family friend you're seeing again just like with all my classmates [nod of agreement from Taylor, Star, and Don].

Taylor

"…you weren't just another student they had, it was like they wanted us to succeed and move on and graduate the program and stuff [nod of agreement from Mia].

Madeline

For me it was the support of not only the students, but the faculty. I mean if you were feeling down about something or, like you, you know weren't doing as well as you wanted to your classmates and your faculty were available for you to talk to and try and

motivate you and push you through it and that really helped me with having the confidence to do it [Nod of agreement from Don].

Faculty Perspective

Faculty demonstrated their commitment to supporting, encouraging, and engaging their students throughout their comments. Below are three faculty quotes that represented this commitment.

Faculty 2

We used to hear that talking to other colleagues on campus and some of the programs are just so inflexible and I think that's a turnoff to the students. It's just like, why can't you do that… is it against your moral, ethics? To me it seems like some programs are very inflexible and for no good reason.

Faculty 1

I think the faculty need to be really good listeners and pay attention to what their students are saying, because very often they're saying something different with their body language than they are with their words. I agree with the flexibility. I think being transparent and honest about things. When something goes wrong, I say oh you think that won't ever go wrong at work? I use a lot of real work examples…they have to know that you really care, and you can't do that unless you have conversations with them. I have a checkoff list of all my students and if I haven't checked off a name, at the end of the week, that means I haven't had a one-on-one interaction with them. Even if it's just meeting them at the door and saying oh it's so wonderful to see you back today… I think being a good listener, being fair, and being flexible when it's reasonable are important.

Faculty 1

> I think engagement. And, like Faculty 2 said, it starts with the Info session, then it goes into the advising then it goes into I'm so happy to see you in class, to you know I'm happy you just got your first blood draw that's so exciting. And be there for them. I think that they know you care, you know that old saying "they don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." I think they care, and they know we care…,

Subtheme 2: Student to Student Support, Encouragement and Engagement

The importance of student to student support, encouragement and engagement was expressed by students throughout the focus group conversation. Students described an environment where the relationship with their peers was dear to them and often was critical for both social and academic support to succeeding in a rigorous training program. They described studying together, reminding one another about upcoming assignments, practicing on one another for hands-on practical exams, and friendly academic competition among themselves.

Student Perspective

Students shared numerous stories and anecdotes about their student-to-student relationships. They seemed to want to share indefinitely the value of proceeding through the program with their peers.

Don

> I think once you start building up that camaraderie among the students, because you're working together to complete assignments and competencies you naturally develop a relationship and whether or not it's a good motive or not, you just like going to school and see your friends [nods of agreement from Taylor and Becky], you know, to see what's going on, and that kind of drove me to want to be in class every day.

Becky

I think the fact that we were all in this thing. Like we saw the same people every day, we were all in this group, taking the same classes going through the same things really made it like we could really relate to each other and like be good friends [nod of agreement from Taylor].

Mia

Having so many people to go through the entire thing from like almost start to finish with, I think was really helpful because you always had somebody to remind you, hey don't forget this assignment and don't forget this test, you've got this coming up… and I found that really helpful because then there was literally no way for you to forget like an assignment or a test or competency coming up. We built a good friendship among all of us [nod of agreement from Taylor, Lily, Star, Sally and Don]. We all got really close, which was really great like community that we've built.

Sally

We would never say it out loud, but it was almost like we were always in competition with each other [nods of agreement from Taylor, Lily, Star, Mia, and Don]. I feel like that is probably a huge reason to why the success rate or you know our test scores are so good, and like our national exam scores are so good, or the pass rate for that so high, because we were constantly like competing with each other. We were just you know, motivated to get through the program and that type of thing.

Lilly

I think being with each other in the very beginning of the program to the very end, like you know, like everybody else just said, like we make friends and I've had numerous

> conversations just you know over text or whatever like hey did you understand this question or can you put it like in a different way, for me, because I don't understand it, or vice versa….[nod of agreement from Sally, Star, Don] Also, like Sally said, you know in our minds we're like in competition with everybody. But the same time, we're willing to help somebody succeed as well as ourselves [nod of agreement from Sally, Don], and they know that I'll have friendships from everybody for a while [nod of agreement from Taylor, Sally, Star, Don], so I'm just grateful for this program.

Becky

"We were there we were studying all day you know… just the camaraderie of everything and just being able to see everyone that kind of keeps you going."

Madeline

"I think it makes for a really good and cohesive mixture of people and community when everybody wants it and wants to work for it just as hard as you do, and you can help one another."

Faculty Perspective

Faculty expressed their interest in fostering student to student relationships to support finishing their program. They also noted the need to work successfully in teams in the healthcare field, and part of this was recognizing and valuing the differences that individuals brought to the group. They encouraged students to reach out to one another for support and assistance.

Faculty 1

"They [students] make friends, they partner with people who have different strengths than they do, it really is wonderful."

Subtheme 3: Clear and Streamlined Student Education Plans

The faculty and student comments related to streamlined student education plans were similar. Both groups shared the high value they place on the early and comprehensive planning process that MEDA faculty have developed and successfully implement.

Student Perspective

Two of the student focus group questions elicited positive responses about the importance of clear and streamlined student education plans. Question eight specifically asked about faculty advising and received all positive responses about the advice students received from their faculty. Question four asked students to describe the program application process and how it impacted their decisions and commitment to the program. The application process was seen by students as a planning tool. Their answers to this question were mainly about the value of the application packet given to them by faculty. Students noted how helpful the packet was because it provided a clear list of requirements, and activities they needed to finish in order to complete the program. These included items like a list of immunizations that were required to be up to date before they could begin their internships at an employer's site, required college assessment scores for entry into some courses, transcripts from other colleges, and statements of responsibility and confidentiality.

Becky

> I like just kind of knowing what was expected of me in the beginning of the program and so that application really laid out like you're going to need to do this, this this and this. This is what's expected by this date, and that was super helpful to just have it all laid out for me to see [nods of agreement from Lily, Star, Don, and Sally].

Star

> It [program application] was actually pretty nice. Like when we all started at the beginning of the program. How they gave you like a rundown of what's going to happen and what to look forward to [nod of agreement from Becky], and when we got into the last couple of semesters, they gave it to you again when it was intern time. It was perfect because they gave it to you at the beginning of the program of what you need to look forward to. Then, when internships came around, they gave you the same thing, and it was like crunch time, so I believe, when they do stuff like that it's like so helpful and they just kept me on track.

Taylor

> From the very beginning of joining the program he's [faculty] like we need to make a meeting. A specific time, and he lays out all your classes for the whole program and makes sure you have the right class at the right time to get in and get everything done in time.

Sally

> They [faculty] would just tell you straight up like you need this grade to get into this class and if you don't do that then you're gonna have to wait and start over [nod of agreement from Taylor, Lily, and Star]…it's was like this is what you need to do this quarter, you're doing it, and just get it done and you'll be fine [nod of agreement from Don].

Taylor

"He'd [faculty] make it so it all worked out and was always willing to help figure it out for you [nod of agreement from Don and Becky]."

Madeline

> It wasn't this, you know, mix match thing, and if one of them [faculty] didn't know they would just say okay well, you need to go talk to… [nod of agreement from Don, and Star] and so it made getting the instructions so much easier.

Star

> "So, having [faculty two] as our advisor and our professor all at once, I feel was the best experience ever."

Faculty Perspective

All three-faculty expressed strong opinions about the importance of having a streamlined student education plan. Their comments demonstrate a commitment to a clear educational path to program completion and the importance of continually reminding students of their goals. Their advising roles went beyond academic advising; they helped students with issues outside of class that could interrupt education. Faculty offered resources like childcare referrals, donated lab cloths, scholarship opportunities, and often a reassuring ear to listen.

Faculty 3

> We have a great plan. I'm a planner and when students get advised, they come out with a plan. I'm going to be able to do A, B, and C and then I'm done and I can work. At the end I'm going to do an externship where I could potentially get a job… they know that every quarter they're getting closer and closer to that big goal of theirs.

Faculty 3

> Advising the students, you're actually teaching is important. Also, it is important to have an open and welcoming demeanor about your classroom. There are students that, for one reason or another, can't come to class – their kids are sick, somebody that they work with

is sick or whatever. I think being open and honest with them and providing them with that flexibility and knowing that you know they don't have to panic if something comes up. It keeps them coming back, keeps them in.

Faculty 1

We do the advising and so we know the students. We try to tailor their plans to them [students] and we touch base with them. We touch base with them the next quarter and we can tell, Gee, it looks like you struggled a lot, maybe you don't need to do the program in one year, maybe you need a two-year plan.

So, I think when people get advice from other people, I don't think it works as well. I mean, I had people [students]…when I said you're going to learn to draw blood and give injections, they just went, "I don't want to draw blood I hate blood" so I said, "well then maybe you don't want to be a medical assistant." I think that the personal advising from their instructors is critical.

Faculty 3

We have a student right now who is having a really hard time with the physical skills, she is super intelligent. The fact that I'm her advisor and her instructor, allows me to talk with her, not only about how she's doing in that class, but how she's feeling about the program as a whole.

Faculty 2

It's an issue [factors outside the classroom] you know, childcare or something beyond the student's direct control. Things that have nothing to do with a relationship with the school, but something personal that's going on. It could be something such as a

relationship ending, and you know they, they suddenly have to live off of one or no income...

Faculty 1

“Money, (Faculty 2 confirmed] not enough money, I have students who are living in a car on their children's property. How do they even come with clean clothes? And we have a lot of resources on campus.”

Faculty 3

At the end of the year last year, I had a lot of students who were having trouble because they lost their jobs due to Covid and then they weren't able to get to their externships…a couple of them we sent to SING (Student in Need Group) and they gave them gas cards, and they were able to get to externships and finish. So I feel like we have some resources, but just making them available without over burdening the students with lots of information.

Faculty 2

It goes back to advising. We know when they're struggling because we are talking with them more than somebody who's taking an English class. But, we're talking with them as advisors, and we are talking with them when we see them in multiple classes. We are much more aware of what's going on personally outside of the academic environment.

Faculty 3

We have an application [for the MEDA program], but it's not really an application. We have a trigger course that's what really starts them in the program and the application happens in the trigger course. Our application isn't to get them into the program it is to get them into externships. So everything within that application, the vaccines and the TB

tests and the background check all prepares them for an extern site, so that they can successfully finish the program. It’s not an application to get into the program but it's an application to finish the program.

Faculty 2

More commonly it's a drug conviction or something that is questionable [for entry into the program] and that [the application] gives us a chance to counsel the students and say look we don't control state licenses. You can ask the state to give you an opinion, they never do it seems like, but just so you know that going forward you're gambling that you're going to complete a whole year of classes and the state's going to say, "We don't want you." This is one side benefit of the application process.

Faculty 1

I think that's true, and the background checks are probably the most critical because you can talk to them about how they can sell themselves. Some extern sites won't take them without that positive background check, others might. We make it really clear to them in the initial information sessions. And, I think our information sessions are really critical to the success of our programs as well, because if we tell them they're going to have an issue with a background check, usually they come and ask us individually about their particular issue and we're just honest. You can complete the program, we won't stop you.

Subtheme Four: The Importance of Physical Space

Students and faculty shared many comments throughout the conversations that related to the importance of having their own MEDA program space.

Student Perspective

Students were asked how they felt about having their classes, study spaces and faculty offices in one small building. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive about the value and comfort of the physical space.

Lilly

> So easy. I liked it that we were all in the same building, instead of having to walk in different parts of the campuses. That way I knew how long until I had to come back from like eating lunch or something…for me it was super easy for one building I really appreciated that one.

Becky

> Well, it was great because if I was studying or whatever, and I just had a question for [faculty name] I could just go straight to her… and she just answered me and then I could go back and continue what I'm doing [nod of agreement from Don] and it's only like a five minute you know quickie. You know it's not, I have to go email her and wait for a response, or any of that it's just instant which was great.

Taylor

> It was also nice because we had like breaks between classes, but no other people would be going into the classes [nod of agreement from Becky and Don], so we had all the equipment to ourselves if we wanted to do blood pressures or practice rooming patients or anything, it was all still available, because no one else was using the rooms.

Star

> I felt like it was like perfect in our little Building Three when it comes to studying, because then you'll see people studying in a room together and then you just like pop

> your head and they're like hey what are you studying or what homework are you working on or with this? Or can I fit in here, and you know do some homework so actually pretty nice. It was all of our space, and we all shared it so well, and we just helped each other so well [nod of agreement from Mia], so I feel like being in one space for all the MEDA students and faculty was by far the best thing ever.

Faculty Perspective

When asked to describe the teaching and learning environment they tried to create, faculty shared their vision for a friendly, student focused environment. They provided specific examples of what this meant to them. Many of the quotes referred to the environment in the past tense as they referred to pre-COVID-19, and current tense, as they worked to create a similar environment with COVID-19 social distancing requirements.

Faculty 1

> We have lots of bulletin boards, one for every major program... last year we started putting positive affirmations up. So, as they [students] walk down the halls they're getting positive feedback… instead of just walking down and looking at empty halls they look at things that pertain to them. The physical environment I would say is really important.

Faculty 2

> I just wanted to add the bulletin boards were also more of an informative thing, we had a little job section there. Faculty 1 was always putting little quizzes about medical billing. You know, like describe this term. They were fun but informative things that the students would have on their national exam.

Faculty 1

> We always fought to have the front room as a conference room, and we had a microwave in there and students actually studied a lot in the conference room... They would be in that conference room and they would cook their food and they would quiz each other. We tried to recreate that in the new room [during COVID-19].
>
> So, just having physical adequate spaces is hugely important for our program. We need it to do things like exams and group activities.

Faculty 3

"When we were on campus [pre-COVD-19] there were offices that were for MEDA students. They had computers, printers, and phones for them to practice. We had students in there all the time."

Faculty 1

"We almost thought we were going to have to schedule them. For those students that don't have good Internet at home, they could come in and use the equipment."

Faculty 1

> I think prior to that, [COVID-19] we always had welcoming classrooms. A lot of times we walked in, we acknowledge all the students when they come in with hi it's nice to see you.
>
> So, we try to make it [the building] warm inside. I have an open door policy. If my door is open, they could come in.

Faculty 3

> And that [MEDA Facebook page] isn't just for me to give them job opportunities. I've had students and graduates post that their clinic is hiring. There are years' worth of

> graduates. I'm hoping to grow it [Facebook] with this cohort and it can continue to help each other with resources and job opportunities and everything else.

Faculty 3

> "What we're doing this year is just trying to make it [the environment] really welcoming."

Overarching Theme: Cohort Model

Student and faculty quotations discussed aspects of a cohort model throughout their focus group discussions. However, when faculty were asked to share the single most important factor that impacts student persistence to completion, they agreed that offering the program as a student cohort was the most important factor. They also noted student engagement with one another, their faculty and the program were essential. Examples of student engagement were also demonstrated throughout the student and faculty comments,

Students did not offer many quotes specifically using the cohort model term. Their quotations related to this main theme are integrated throughout the subtheme responses.

Faculty Perspective

Faculty 2

> The cohort is hugely important. It keeps the students in and it keeps them moving forward. They are working with the same group of students and they develop a sense of camaraderie, a common purpose that keeps them more centered and more focused and more willing to stay in the program despite some adversities like a bad test, a bad clinical assessment, something like that. Because they've seen other students have those experiences and move on, they think the same thing so that's huge in my mind.

Faculty 1

> It can have its challenges we kind of have to keep our ears open for those who are a little clique, and they won't let someone else in. When you have a group as big as ours, it's really difficult to control that. I think the other thing is, and it kind of piggybacks to what Faculty 2 said about the instructors, I think we all care about student success, that's our bottom line, we're here to help them succeed, not to fail them. I think that many times we bend over backwards. Sometimes not with a good outcome, but most of the time with a good outcome to let them know we care. And, you know, to encourage them. And, sometimes you just have to sit down and have that honest conversation which you can't do if you don't have a cohort because you don't know your students.

Faculty 3

> "I think they [cohort and faculty engagement] go hand in hand."

Cohort Model Challenges

When asked about the most challenging aspects of the cohort model, faculty had specific experiences to share.

Faculty Perspectives

Faculty 2

> You can't start students anytime. Coming from my previous college, where we started a new cohort every month, it was great. Now somebody who may have an interest has to wait 11 months or 10 months or nine months before they can really start. We can fit them into some classes, but they aren't considered part of the medical assistant program. Offering multiple cohorts, I think, is better than just having one.

Faculty 1

> I think that [cohorts starting once a year] is a huge challenge. You don't want to lose those students that come winter quarter or spring quarter. The other challenge is that when you start in September, almost all of our programs have between 18 and 20 credits the first quarter. If they need to do math and English, they're already automatically not in the cohort because they have to do those first. So, it does have some challenges. Faculty 2 and I used to talk about and play with it and think about maybe we could do a staggered start and start one group in the fall and maybe one group in winter.

Covid-19 Environment Impact

This study was completed winter quarter 2021, at a time when the world was in the throes of the COVID-19 epidemic. Olympic College, like other Washington State community colleges had closed their campuses and transitioned most classes to online. Some faculty, including MEDA faculty, felt their clinical skills courses needed face-to-face instruction so they worked diligently to follow state guidelines and protocols to offer some instruction face-to-face. This required a detailed plan of operations to meet the state guidelines and special approval from the College's Executive team. Faculty and students were required to maintain six-feet social distancing, wear personal protective equipment, and clean and disinfect all classroom furniture and equipment regularly.

Students and faculty who participated in the study experienced two quarters of instruction before the pandemic, fall 2019 and winter 2020; and two quarters during COVID-19, spring 2020 and summer 2020. The student and faculty focus groups were held winter 2021, two quarters after the cohort completed the program and still during the pandemic. It is impossible to know the impact of the COVID-19 environment on the results of the study. Both students and

faculty often responded to questions by noting activities that occurred before and after COVID-19. However, overall, they did not express any major differences in their answers related to program support before or during the pandemic. The exception is that both groups were clearly challenged by some of the restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 environment.

Summary of Findings

The student and faculty stories offer insight into the enter sanctum of MEDA, a program that successfully retains most students through to completion. The four subthemes were described by both students and faculty as critically important to student persistence and completion. The four subthemes: Faculty Support, Encouragement and Engagement; Student to Student Support, Encouragement and Engagement; Clear and Streamlined Student Education Plans and Physical Space were interconnected and reliant on the overarching student cohort main theme.

Discussion

Theoretical Framework Discussion

Discussing the study findings within the theoretical framework of adult learning theory (Knowles et al., 2015) and student integration theory (Tinto, 1975, 1993, 1997, 2017), helps to understand why the MEDA program has been so successful in retaining students through to completion. The MEDA faculty applied many components of adult learning theory to the learning environment they created for their students. This is most notable during the program's initial introduction and orientation process. Before entering the program, faculty met with students individually and in groups to provide program information, answer questions and offer advice. Students were required to enroll in MEDA 151, Professional Preparation 1, a course designed to clearly articulate the program curriculum, education path and career opportunities.

Faculty shared with students not only what they would learn in the program, but why it was important to learn what they would learn, applying an important adult learning theory concept. And, the faculty consistently applied the program learning topics and objectives to medical assistant employment requirements, so student would understand the value of what they were learning, also applying an important adult learning theory concept. Offering students a range of group projects in their classes where each student's knowledge, experience and interests were recognized and valued, demonstrated the importance of what each adult learner brought to the learning environment, a key aspect of adult learning theory.

In addition to an adult learning theory framework, the MEDA faculty created a learning environment that aligned with Tinto's integration theory. One foundational aspect of the theory was that student success was dependent on how well students were socially and academically integrated into the college. A component of this is how the students perceived their integration into the college. Also, important to the theory were student to student, and student to faculty relationships. Although MEDA faculty and students did not provide comments specifically about the student integration theory, they did share numerous examples of the importance of the cohort model in facilitating a positive, welcoming social environment as well as one where academic support is available all along the educational path. Finally, both MEDA faculty and students noted the critical importance of the student to student and student to faculty relationships, again in alignment with the student integration theoretical approach.

The MEDA program and support systems were developed, over time, by faculty. They did not discuss any commitment to follow adult learning theory concepts nor the integration theory. However, focusing on student needs, they created a teaching and learning environment

that applied the two theoretical frameworks. As the discussion moves to a general dialog about study results, there are more examples of this.

Study Results Discussion

An important aspect of the study results, as described in the analysis section, is that feedback from each of the eight student focus group participants, was remarkedly similar to one another. Their total agreement on the factors that impacted their ability to persist to completion of their program was prominent. Faculty agreement was also a highlight. As the three faculty shared their experiences, activities, and input related to student persistence, they not only agreed with one another, on most issues, but their responses were also similar to those of students. This consistency in responses directly from students and faculty will be important when sharing the results with colleagues.

The oral comments from the two focus groups, once transcribed, translated to over 100 pages of input, creating a detailed record of the conversations. Grouping this magnitude of data into four subthemes and one overarching main theme provided a framework for discussing and potentially implementing strategies in other Olympic College programs and in programs at other colleges. It also provided a way to compare the findings to the literature. For these reasons, the discussion is organized by the four subthemes and the main theme.

Subtheme 1: Faculty Support, Encouragement and Engagement

Faculty support, encouragement, and engagement was the most prevalent sub-theme in the study results. It encompassed the wide range of activities that faculty facilitated to assist their students in completing the program. The comments from both students and faculty demonstrate that faculty offered a combination of very specific, consistent retention and completion strategies, like providing program application packets that helps students prepare early for their

extern placements; and flexibly meeting individual, unique student needs, like listening and recommending resources when students have problems outside of school.

Faculty and students concurred that constant faculty presence and engagement with students was critical to student persistence and completion. As practitioners review this data, one question that may arise is: Why do MEDA faculty engage so completely with their students? Basically, questioning what makes them unique. Answering this question may offer indications of how to replicate this commitment. A closer look at MEDA faculty credentials and interests, faculty full-time to part-time ratios, and the MEDA accreditation requirements provided insights.

Faculty Credentials

Community college faculty credentials must meet the requirements of the Washington Administrative Code (WAC) 131-16-091. The WAC requires that faculty who teach in areas where advanced degrees are common should have Master's Degrees in their field or a related area. However, for professional technical programs, like MEDA, when Bachelor's and Master's degrees are not common in the field, the WAC does not require these degrees. It only requires professional technical faculty to have sufficient training, industry certification when available, and relevant work experience.

The qualifications of the three full-time faculty who taught in the MEDA program far exceed the qualifications required by the WAC. One of the MEDA faculty had a Bachelor of Science in Education and years of experience in the field. She was lead faculty in a professional development program, called Faculty Bootcamp, designed to share best teaching practices with new professional technical faculty throughout Washington state. She was an expert on the topic of student focused teaching and learning. The second faculty had an Associate's Degree in General Studies and his professional background included experience as a Clinic Manager where

he successfully led a variety of medical professional teams. The third faculty was a registered nurse with a Master's Degree in Nursing Education and years of progressive experience in the medical field.

Each of the MEDA fulltime faculty clearly possess the credentials to be highly sought after in the medical community and to earn higher incomes. However, they made the choice to teach community college students. During their focus groups, faculty voiced their dedication to their students and their love of teaching. They attributed high completion rates partly to their commitment to student success and their engagement with their students.

Full-time to Part-time Faculty Ratios

Most MEDA program classes were taught by full-time faculty. For example, in 2020-2021, more than 70% of classes were taught by full-time faculty. This included faculty's fulltime load plus extra MEDA classes they chose to teach. Throughout the College approximately 50% of classes were taught by adjunct faculty (Olympic, 2021b).

This high percentage of classes taught by full-time faculty may contribute to the program's high completion rate. Although part-time faculty are valued members of community college teaching teams, there are challenges with relying so heavy on part-time faculty.

The community college system's dependence on part-time faculty is well known. In some situations, faculty are hired as part-time faculty to maintain flexibility in programming and to manage fluctuations in student enrollments. However, the main reason community college hire so many part-time faculty is lack of budget to hire full-time faculty.

Adjunct faculty make up two-thirds of the instructional force and teach more than 50 percent of classes at community and technical colleges (Hurlburt, 2016). However, their contingent status often results in isolated, limited, and/or inconsistent exposure to institutional

activities and its culture. For example, it is not unusual for institutions to hire part-time instructors days before the term begins. Once hired, adjuncts may receive, if any, quick orientation and have limited opportunities to interact with their full-time peers. They typically do not have ready access to professional development about high-impact practices nor are they regularly included in discussions about departmental or institutional reform changes. They are less informed about the curriculum they teach; less knowledgeable about institutional resources designed to promote student success; and may not be aware of data that drives institutional efforts to improve student performance and progression (CCCSE, 2014).

Disengagement from institutional work also occurs due to inconsistent availability of office space, resulting in limited contact with students outside of the classroom (CCCSE, 2014). These and other conditions that contributed to adjunct faculty isolation negatively impact efforts to improve student outcomes (ATD, 2018). Based on the potential negative impacts on student completion when community colleges rely so heavily on part-time faculty, the MEDA program, with the majority of classes taught by full-time tenured faculty, is better positioned to support students than most community college programs.

Accreditation and Data-Based Decisions

The MEDA program is one of only a few College programs accredited by profession specific accrediting bodies. Accreditation requirements may positively impact MEDA student persistence and completion.

The College is accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. The MEDA program is also accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs upon the recommendation of the Medical Education Review Board. Maintaining accreditation requires time and commitment. The lead MEDA faculty receives one

course per quarter release time from teaching, mainly to ensure completion of a wide range of reporting and documentation specified by the accreditors. Due to accreditation requirements the MEDA faculty not only track completion data and Medical Assistant certification pass rates, but review, analyze and make program improvements based on the data. The MEDA faculty share the data on their College program website, with their students, and with their Community Advisory Committee. The MEDA faculty are College leaders in focusing on evidenced-based decisions, one of the key retention strategies advocated by ATD.

As a relatively new member of ATD, the College has made progress over the past few years to improve and use data to inform decisions related to student persistence and completion. However, the MEDA program and the few other programs that maintain profession-based accreditation, are ahead of the rest of the College in these efforts.

Subtheme 2: Student to Student Support, Encouragement and Engagement

Student to student support, encouragement and engagement is the second most prominent subtheme. Students enthusiastically described the importance of the daily communication and camaraderie they felt with their peers. They knew their peers and their peers knew them. Some noted that one reason to go to class was to see their friends; they wanted to be in class so they wouldn't miss out. Also, they expressed the benefits of studying together and helping one another through the academic rigor of the program.

The strong bonds the students described appear to be a result of students being together each day throughout their one-year program, sharing common classes, and common goals. Faculty shared their beliefs that student to student collaboration on assignments and skill building were positive and could foster a team approach that would be useful when they become employed.

The important sense of belonging seems to be a result of the way the MEDA program was designed. Tinto's (2017. p 262) described this as he noted, "… institutions can also promote students' sense of belonging by promoting those forms of activity that require shared academic and social experiences. In the academic realm, this can take the form of cohort programs, learning communities…"

Subtheme 3: Clear and Streamlined Student Pathway and Education Plans

The Community College Research Center (2017) shared how colleges are approaching guided pathways reform. The publication described four main practices that relate to clear and streamlined student pathway and education plans: mapping pathways to students and goals, helping students choose and enter a program pathway, keeping students on path, and ensuring that students are learning. Comments from MEDA faculty and students described a learning environment that closely follows all four components of the Pathway Model. This is particularly notable because the MEDA faculty developed and continually revised their processes before the College as an institution joined ATD and began transitioning to the pathways model.

Pathways were described briefly in the literature review; a more detailed discussion is provided here because of the significance of how closely MEDA program applied the major components. The following is an overview of the practices described by the Community College Research Center (2017) along with a description of how MEDA processes are aligned with them.

Mapping Pathways to Student and Goals

In the pathways model, mapping refers to providing a clear pathway for students to plan their education. Each program has a list of course requirements and a class schedule that indicates the sequence they will be taken. Milestones unique to each program are documented.

Information about pathways to employment opportunities and Bachelor's Degree programs are also provided.

The MEDA curriculum is clearly mapped. Students know which courses are required, the sequence of courses, and the quarters they are offered. There is little flexibility; students follow the predetermined map. An important milestone for students is participating in their externships. They gain confidence as they practice being medical assistants at employers' sites in the community.

Helping Students Choose and Enter a Program Pathway

The pathways model offers career exploration classes and activities along with opportunities to learn about College programs. Once they select a broad area of study, the pathways Model calls meta-majors, they learn about the range of career and educational possibilities in that field. Students develop an educational plan that includes support for math and English coursework. Overall, new students choose a program pathway after thoroughly investigating options and program expectations.

As described earlier, the first step for MEDA students was to enroll in MEDA 151, Medical Assisting Professional Preparation. The one-credit course provided information to help students finalize their decision to enter the MEDA program. In this course, students explored career and education requirements, and advancement opportunities. They learned College requirements for externships and completing the program. Students make informed choices after comprehensive study of what to expect if they pursued the MEDA program and career path.

Keeping Students on Path

Advisors have key roles in the pathway model. They monitor student progress, ensure they are progressing, and provide intervention and support when students get off track. Students

also can refer to their detailed education plan and determine when they need extra support. Finally, advisors help students when they are unlikely to meet specific program admission requirements by assisting them in considering pathways where they are more likely to succeed.

In the MEDA program, full-time MEDA faculty are the student advisors. MEDA students have access to campus counselors and advisors, but the MEDA faculty advisors have daily contact with their students and know quickly if there are issues that could prevent students from completing the program. Program faculty providing the advising function was a different organizational structure than the pathways model of campus-wide advisors, sometimes called coaches. However, it was consistent with the pathways intent of keeping close oversight of student progress and helping them to stay on their path to completion.

Ensuring Students are Learning

Faculty assessment of learning outcomes is an important aspect of the pathways model because it is critical to student success. Learning outcomes are aligned with employment requirements in their fields and with furthering their education. Assessment of learning outcomes are used to continually improve program effectiveness.

The MEDA faculty ensure students are learning the required outcomes by systematically assessing student progress. Assessment of hands-on practical skills is done routinely in the lab portions of classes. Assessment of content knowledge and ability to apply the knowledge to work-like situations is done during class time discussions and through written exams. Overall program assessment is accomplished when students work at externship sites and when completers take the state Medical Assisting Certification Exam. Supervisors and faculty worked together to develop specific externship duties and evaluation methods to determine if students demonstrated achievement of learning outcomes. Tracking the Washington State Medical

Assistant Certification exam student pass rates provided important assessment data to be reviewed and analyzed. It was an ongoing process of continual teaching and learning changes and improvements based on how students performed in classes, at their externship sites, and as they tested to become certified.

Subtheme 4: The Importance of Physical Space

In their focus group conversations, faculty and students shared how much they valued having a space on campus that they felt was their own. Students were particularly verbose as they described their space. The building was old, small, and located at the edge of campus, far from the Student Center and other College gathering areas. The comments were clearly not about the building structure itself, but about the warm, welcoming place on campus where people knew their name and where they could always find their friends and faculty. The physical space seemed to facilitate student to faculty and student to student interactions, factors that were deemed by faculty and students, so important to student retention and completion. A comment from one student summed up responses from students, "Honestly, the building felt like a second home. I was going to go see all my classmates and friends… it just felt like another home."

Overarching Theme: Cohort Model

The main theme in this study was the cohort model, it emerged as the most important contributor to the MEDA programs' exemplar student persistence and completion rates. The MEDA program represented a comprehensive cohort model where students started the program together, took all the same classes and completed at the same time. This full cohort model had common components and expectations as learning communities, a model in which many educators are familiar. "Learning communities are small groups of students who take thematically linked classes together in order to enhance their engagement with school, increase

their understanding of interdisciplinary connections, and strengthen their cognitive skills" (Visher et al., 2010, p. xi).

As MEDA faculty and students were asked what contributed to student success, nearly everything they identified was either an aspect of the cohort model, or in some way positively supported or influenced by the cohort structure. Discussing the four subthemes as they aligned with the main theme demonstrated the importance of how components of the MEDA program integrated for a comprehensive student-focused environment where most MEDA students completed the program.

Faculty support, encouragement and engagement, the factors described by MEDA students and faculty as a critically important contributor to students' completing their program, was strongly influenced by the cohort model. The MEDA faculty shared that they knew each student as an individual and were able to provide them with the unique support they needed partly because they had the same students in classes each quarter for a year.

The level of student to student support, encouragement and engagement, the factors that students and faculty described as being almost as important as faculty to student relationships, is a direct result of the cohort model. The MEDA cohort students attended all classes together and quickly got to know one another and enjoyed a built-in friend group that supported, encouraged, and engaged them academically and socially.

The third subtheme, clear and streamlined student pathways and education plans, could be offered without a cohort structure. As noted earlier, this is an important aspect of the pathways model and has benefits to student persistence and completion in a cohort or non-cohort program. However, being part of a cohort was ideally suited for students to start the program in

a specific quarter and move through the program together in a set schedule developed by faculty, with little flexibility.

The final subtheme was the importance of physical space to persistence to program completion. According to students, space dedicated to MEDA students and faculty, was an especially important part of the cohort experience. They discussed the ease of finding cohort members to study together for class assignments and exams they all had in common. A place where students could call their second home seemed to bring them a sense of belonging and enthusiasm for going to campus. In addition, because the building was dedicated to the MEDA program, faculty could determine how to use and decorate the building to best support students.

Faculty shared that they worked to create a space for the MEDA cohort that was warm and welcoming; a place students wanted to enter. They also offered important information to cohort members by posting announcements on bulletin boards specifically pertaining to them, like coursework deadlines, upcoming exam topics and new externship sites.

Although there are many advantages to the cohort mode, there were also challenges. The MEDA faculty noted the problem of only allowing students to enter the program fall quarter. Although it streamlined course scheduling, prospective students might wait nearly a year to enroll if they missed the fall entry. Faculty also noted that student cohorts could form small cliques and exclude some students if not monitored carefully by faculty.

Overall, the MEDA faculty have demonstrated that the cohort model provides a framework to facilitate exceptionally high student persistence and completion rates. The MEDA faculty have also adopted many components of the pathways model, an approach designed specifically to improve student completions.

Recommendations

The intent of this qualitative, case study was to offer community college professionals specific, actionable strategies to increase student persistence to program completion. The strategies recommended are informed by conversations with MEDA students and faculty who have direct experience with the program, spanning at least one year for students and up to12 years for faculty. The combination of relying on student and faculty input along with exceedingly high MEDA program completion rates, will be meaningful when sharing results with community college colleagues.

The study indicates that the cohort model used by MEDA is the most critical factor in the program's high student persistence and completion rates. According to Lei et al. (2011) the MEDA program has achieved exactly what cohorts are designed to do, "The goals of cohort education are to promote retention graduation, and success rates of students" (p.1). It also seems clear that although the cohort model is the foundation for their success, MEDA faculty used many other student-focused strategies to facilitate the high completion rates; most prominent were the pathway strategies recommended by ACT schools. For this reason, although the first and principal recommendation from this study is for community colleges to transition professional technical programs to the cohort model when feasible, the recommendation is more complex. It seems likely that it is the combination of using the cohort model with the other pathways practices that offer the winning combination.

Adopting the cohort and pathways model requires planning and commitment. Developing a schedule where all new program students enroll in classes the same quarter and move through each quarter together, requires a course map that incorporates prerequisites, appropriate sequencing, faculty teaching load and classroom availability. Decisions related to these activities

require not only faculty involvement, but a commitment from the institution. For example, if students can enter the program only one quarter during the year, there would likely be a reduction in enrollments, at least temporarily as the program moved to the new schedule. Institutions would need to support and understand the issues related to the transition.

The study identified pathways that influence student retention and completion. Although pathways strategies are separate from the cohort model, a program that uses the cohort model is more conducive to components of the pathway structure. For example, faculty support, encouragement and engagement are essential for the cohort model to succeed. The MEDA faculty demonstrated their commitment to students throughout their responses to focus group questions. Students agreed that faculty were the most essential factor for them to complete their programs. To embrace the critical role of faculty, colleges need to prioritize hiring more full-time faculty or provide comprehensive professional development and inclusive practices for part-time faculty.

Based on MEDA student and faculty conversations, student to student support, encouragement, and engagement, were a close second in importance to student persistence and completion. At the heart of the cohort model was the ease in which students can establish close peer relationships and support. However, the warm and welcoming physical space MEDA students and faculty shared, contributed to an environment for MEDA student relationships to thrive. It is not always possible for colleges to offer spaces dedicated to single programs, but it seems clear from MEDA students that this could be a positive factor in student retention.

The last recommendation, consistent with pathways, is to ensure students are learning. Documented assessment of students' achievement of learning outcomes is a separate issue from

the cohort delivery model, but essential to ensuring students are learning the program outcomes, which in turn, is essential for students to be successful when they are employed in their field.

The unique aspect of these recommendations is that they combine using a cohort model along with pathways retention and completion strategies. To summarize, below are study-informed recommendations.

- Transition programs to the cohort model when possible.
- Provide comprehensive information for students so they can make informed decisions about programs they are considering pursuing.
- Develop clear, streamlined program maps that incorporate prerequisites, sequencing, and class schedules.
- Utilize program faculty as student advisors.
- Hire dedicated fulltime faculty and provide adjunct faculty with comprehensive professional development and inclusive practices.
- Identify campus space where program students feel they belong, including faculty offices and student gathering areas.
- Assess learning to ensure program learning outcomes are achieved and to inform teaching and learning enhancements.

Future Research

The MEDA program has unique attributes that suggest future studies are needed to strengthen the findings of this study. The MEDA program is a one-year professional technical program in the healthcare field. It would contribute to a better understanding of the value of cohort models combined with pathways strategies if similar studies were done on additional professional technical programs, perhaps outside of the medical field. For example, case studies

where the researcher hears directly from students and faculty in programs like, Business Management, Computer Information Systems and Technical Design. Additionally, it would be beneficial to investigate if students who enrolled in general education and transfer degrees would benefit from the cohort model as much as students in professional technical programs. Students pursuing professional technical programs may relate well to the cohort model partly because they have common career interests. Finally, this study only involved students who completed the MEDA program. Hearing directly from students who dropped out of the program before completing could provide valuable insights. Hearing why students did not finish seems just as relevant as hearing why students persisted.

Conclusion

I selected community college student persistence and completion for my research topic the first quarter in my doctoral program. I recognized it was a complex problem with no easy solutions, but it is the problem in the community college system, all other issues and concerns pale in comparison. We have been working on this for years and are making slow progress. We must provide the environment and support our students need so that most of our students successfully complete their desired certificate and degrees.

After hearing such convincing stories directly from students and faculty, it seems straight forward to embrace the benefits of the cohort model combined with the practical strategies of pathways. Students enter our colleges with such diverse backgrounds, we need to offer them diverse and comprehensive support.

Our United States president is currently proposing free community college tuition. If he is successful, this will make community colleges more accessible that ever. It also will shine the

public light on our work. Perhaps this is the opportunity to finally make the sweeping changes required to provide our students with what they need to realize their educational goals.

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Appendix A

Student Focus Group Recruitment Letter

OLYMPIC COLLEGE
1600 Chester Avenue, Bremerton, WA 98337-1699
Tel 360-792-6050 ~ Fax 360-475-7151 ~ www.olympic.edu

January 27, 2021
Dear Medical Assisting Program 2020 Graduate:

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study designed to improve community college student completion rates. All students who successfully completed the Olympic College Medical Assisting (MEDA) Program Certificate of Specialization in August 2020 are being asked to voluntarily participate. The research study goal is to identify specific factors that help students complete their programs and factors that hinder completion. I want to hear directly from MEDA students.
Participation in the study is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate, you will be part of a small group of your classmates who will share your experiences and ideas in a Zoom group discussion, that will last no more than one hour and thirty minutes. I will ask you questions about your Olympic College experiences. An example of one question I will ask you is: Describe the most important factors that contributed to you staying in the MEDA program to completion.

There are two discussions darted form which to choose.

- Tuesday, Feb 9, 6:30PM
- Thursday, February 11, 10:00AM

If you decide to participate, in the discussion you will receive a $30 Target gift card. I will mail it to you within a week of you participating in a discussion group. Please complete the enclosed scheduling form and return it to me at normawhitacre@olympic.edu or call me (253.219.9488). If you do not want to participate, I would appreciate you letting me know by sending me an email declining this opportunity.

I am a doctoral student at the University of Washington Tacoma and the Dean for the Business and Technology Division at Olympic College. This research study is important to me as I am committed to working to improve student completion rates. I would appreciate your assistance.
Sincerely,

Norma B. Whitacre
University of Washington Tacoma Doctoral Student
Olympic College Dean, Business and Technology Division

Appendix B

Focus Group Scheduling Letter

Hello:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in a research study designed to improve community college student completion rates. Below are the schedule details for your discussion group.

Discussion group date and time: _____

Discussion group Zoom link: _____

If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at normawhitacre@comcast.net or 253.219.988.

Sincerely,

Norma B. Whitacre

Olympic College Dean, Business and Technology Division

University of Washington Tacoma Doctoral Student

Appendix C

Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study

Title of Study
Community College Student Retention Rates and Strategies for Improvement

Researcher
Norma B. Whitacre

Research Study Overview
The problem to be studied is community college student program completion rates. The goal is to identify actionable strategies to increase student completion rates in community college programs. This will be a case study of the Olympic College Medical Assisting Program (MEDA), a one-year certificate program with consistently high student completion rates.

Voluntary Participation
I understand that my participation is completely voluntary.

Description of Study Group
I agree to voluntarily participate in a one-time small group discussion that will last no more than two hours. I will participate using Zoom video conferencing from a location other than Olympic College.

Benefits and Risks
There are no benefits or direct risks for participating in this research study.

Confidentiality
I understand that my responses in the small group discussion will not be linked to my name at any point in the research study. During the discussion group, I will use a pseudo name.

I will keep confidential what other members of the discussion group share during the research study group discussion. However, I understand that confidentiality cannot be completely assured because a group format is being used for the discussion.

Other Information
You may refuse to participate, and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you have questions, you can contact the study group researcher, Norma B. Whitacre, at 253.219.9488 or normawhitacre@comcast.net If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you can call the UW Human Subjects Division at 206.543.0098.

Please print) _____

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Appendix D

M**edical Assistant Faculty Focus Group Questions**

1. Describe the teaching and learning environment you strive to create for your students. Include, the physical Building 3 environment as well as support services.

2. What are the most positive aspects of the Medical Assistant Program that assists students in persisting to graduation?

3. What are the most critical challenges to students graduating?

4. You require students to complete an application to participate in the Medical Assistant Program. As you know, most Olympic College professional technical programs do not require an application. Please describe your intent behind the application process and any impacts to students that you have experienced.

5. As you know, you have created a student cohort model, so your students generally start in the program at the same time and stay together to graduation. What are the positive aspects of a student cohort model?

6. What are the most challenging aspects of a student cohort model?

7. Your program requires students to complete an application process to enter the program. Describe the benefits and challenges of this practice.

8. The Medial Assisting Program has extremely high student graduation rates. What aspects of your program do you think would help other programs increase their graduation rates?

9. Of all the topics we discussed, what do you think is the most important to student persistence to graduation?

Appendix E

M**edical Assistant Student Focus Group Questions**

1. Describe your overall student experiences at Olympic College.

2. Can you provide examples of what you liked best about the Medical Assisting Program?

3. Can you provide examples of your least favorite parts of the program?

4. You were required to complete an application to participate in the Medical Assistant Program. Please describe the application process you experienced. Did it impact your decision and/or commitment to the program? If so, please describe.

5. You were part of a student cohort which is a group of students who generally started in the program at the same time and stayed together to graduation. What were the positive aspects of being part of a student cohort that helped you stay in school through graduation?

6. What were the most challenging aspects of being part of a student cohort that made it difficult to stay in school through graduation?

7. Most of your Medical Assisting Program courses were taught in Building 3 (HOC), your faculty had offices in the building, and some students studied in the building. Describe how having these in one space made you feel.

8. Describe your experiences being advised by your faculty and other college advisors.

9. Describe the most important factors that contributed to you staying in the program to graduation.

10. Describe factors that presented the most challenges to graduating?

11. Are there questions related to factors that contributed to you graduating or presented obstacles to you graduating that I did not ask, and you think we need to discuss?

12. Of all the topics we discussed, what do you think is the most important to students?

Appendix F

Thank You Letter

Hello:

Thank you so much for participating in the research study designed to improve community college student completion rates. I am very appreciative of your contributions to the study.

Enclosed is a Target gift card as a small token of appreciation.

Sincerely,

Norma B. Whitacre
Olympic College Dean, Business and Technology Division
University of Washington Tacoma Doctoral Student